



Offline to
Online

How Small Businesses Can Take the Big Leap

What you will find inside —

The Data-Backed Reasons to Move Your Business Online Now

1

Key Benefits of Taking the Leap

5

Get Inspired: Industries that Successfully Moved Online

8

6 Practical Steps to Move Your Traditional Business Online

18

Time to Take Action

31

Introduction

We're living in a time like never before. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought changes big and small to everyone.

Some businesses have shut their doors indefinitely. Others are thriving because they've always served their customers remotely and are needed now more than ever.

Here's the thing: no one saw this coming.

Many companies have been operating predominantly offline for years and even decades and been very successful in doing it. But right now, everything is at a standstill, and many traditional businesses don't have a strategy to keep their head above water.

If that's you, you're in the right place. In this guide, we're taking you through reasons to move your business online and the actionable steps to make it happen.

You got this. We're in this together. Let's dive in!



Why should you move your business online?

The data-backed reasons

As per the **U.S Small Business Administration**, there are around 30.7 million small businesses in the U.S., each competing to get the attention of their prospects. But with the current pandemic at large, a recent report by **Mckinsey** states that around 47% of these businesses fear that the ongoing economic crisis will impact their revenue. With uncertainty about their business on the rise, the primary challenges for most of these businesses include a decline in demand from existing customers and quickly depleting cash reserves owing to rent, employee payouts, etc. In fact, 52% of small businesses have already laid off their employees.

As anxiety and stress build, some businesses have identified the way to sail past this storm and steady their ship—by operating online. A recent report by **Facebook and Small Business Roundtable** says 35% of personal businesses have started offering services online. As for how well online tools are serving them, 56% of businesses using online tools make at least half of their sales digitally.

Here's why you should get into action right now.

Uncertainty around COVID-19 restrictions

Restrictions due to COVID-19 took slightly different forms between countries and across states, but in all of them, the movement has been hugely limited. While it started with a few weeks of lockdown, some countries, like the UK, announced that it may last for **up to six months**. They also warned that even when the lockdown is lifted, **things won't go back to normal right away**.

If you aren't a part of this transformation yet, here's the thing - you can move your business online at any point.

So you might be wondering why we're suggesting you do it now. In other words: If you haven't moved your business online until now, why aren't we suggesting you wait until the current crisis is over?



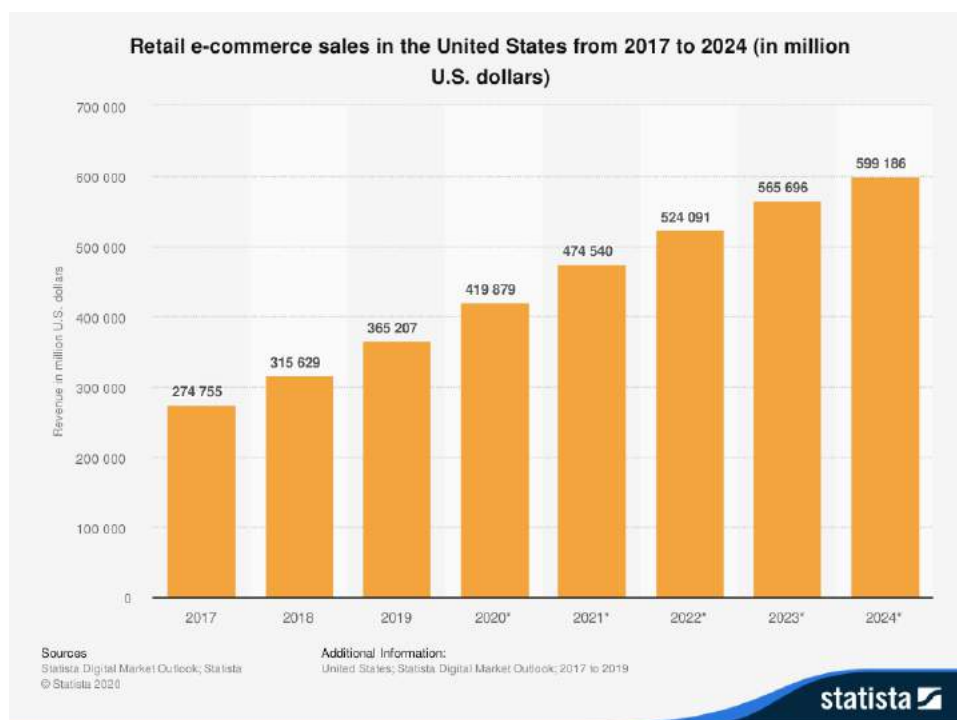
Customers might avoid physical stores longer than expected

Back in March, **eMarketer** gathered various research reports around customer behavior changes caused by the pandemic. One of the reports found that the majority of people across all age groups are likely to avoid going to shopping centers if the outbreak worsens and it already did. It's not a stretch to assume that even after the lockdown, people may avoid going to shopping centers.

Brick-and-mortar stores make up 85% of US retail sales (and **McKinsey forecasted** it will still stand true in despite the ecommerce boom).

Businesses that only rely on physical footfall will suffer the most if the shop-avoiding prediction becomes true.

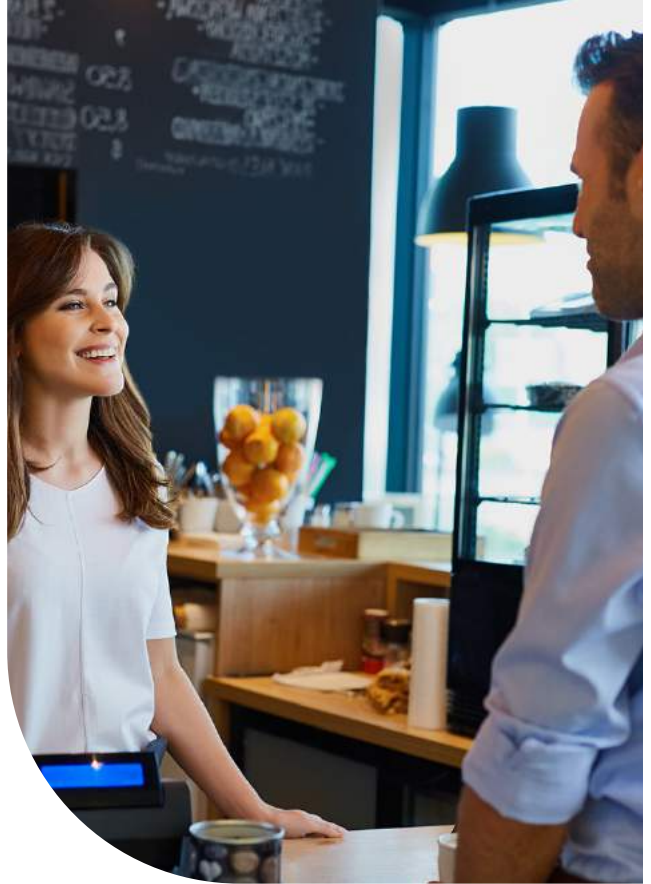
That's the bad news. The good news is that you can prepare for it by taking deliberate steps in the right direction. **According to Statista**, retail ecommerce is likely to double in 2022 compared to 2017 figures:



The sooner you transform your business to operate online, the better your chance of grabbing a slice of that ecommerce cake in 2022.

You'll learn about your customers in-depth

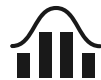
When you sell your products or services online, you can get a much deeper overview of your customers.



You'll learn insights such as:



How often your customers purchase from you



Average order values



Trends and patterns between seasons



Your customer lifetime value (LTV)

These benefits are true always, not just now. However, there's a particular advantage during the current situation: you can use this data to quickly adjust to any new shifts, especially since they happen so often, such as increasing stocks of a popular product in real-time.

By serving your customers this way, you'll also show them you care about what they're looking for at any time and build deeper loyalty. As a result, many will remain your customers even months and years from now.

Benefits of moving your business online

If you need more convincing that running your business online is a good idea at any point in time, consider these benefits.

Your potential customers already expect you to be online

Even if you have loyal brick-and-mortar customers, they're using the internet to look for products. So do your potential customers.

87%

*Data shows that as many as **87% of shoppers** now begin product searches on digital channels. This number has increased compared to previous years.*



You can better serve your local market

Even if you never plan to expand into other cities or countries, building a strong online presence is essential. As it turns out, **91% of consumers** use the internet to research products and services in their local area. To top that off, **46% of all Google searches** are local.

In other words, moving your business online is beneficial regardless of your geographic expansion goals.

You'll have less overhead

If you were to completely move your operations online, your entire company can become much leaner. It's because you get rid of expenses such as:



Rent



Electricity and water bills



Cleaning services



Decor



Equipment maintenance

This overhead can be detrimental to physical businesses. During this crisis, **many have decided not to pay rent** as part of their financial measures to cope with the loss of cash flow that came after closing their stores.

With a fully online business, you can be much more resilient and flexible when it comes to challenges like this one.

You can scale with less risk or huge investments

If you're shooting for international or even global growth, the earlier mentioned overhead costs could multiply.

But if you focus on serving international audiences online, this isn't an issue. Instead of opening new physical stores and hiring teams at those locations, you can use your existing online presence to connect with your target audience at new locations.



You can experiment with a new product idea or test a new market simply by offering international shipping. Because you aren't opening traditional stores, there are no massive financial risks involved.

Online ads are more precise and cost-effective than traditional advertising

Finally, you can spark growth in any location you want with the help of online advertising.

Research has shown that marketers feel traditional advertising:



Lacks interaction with their audience



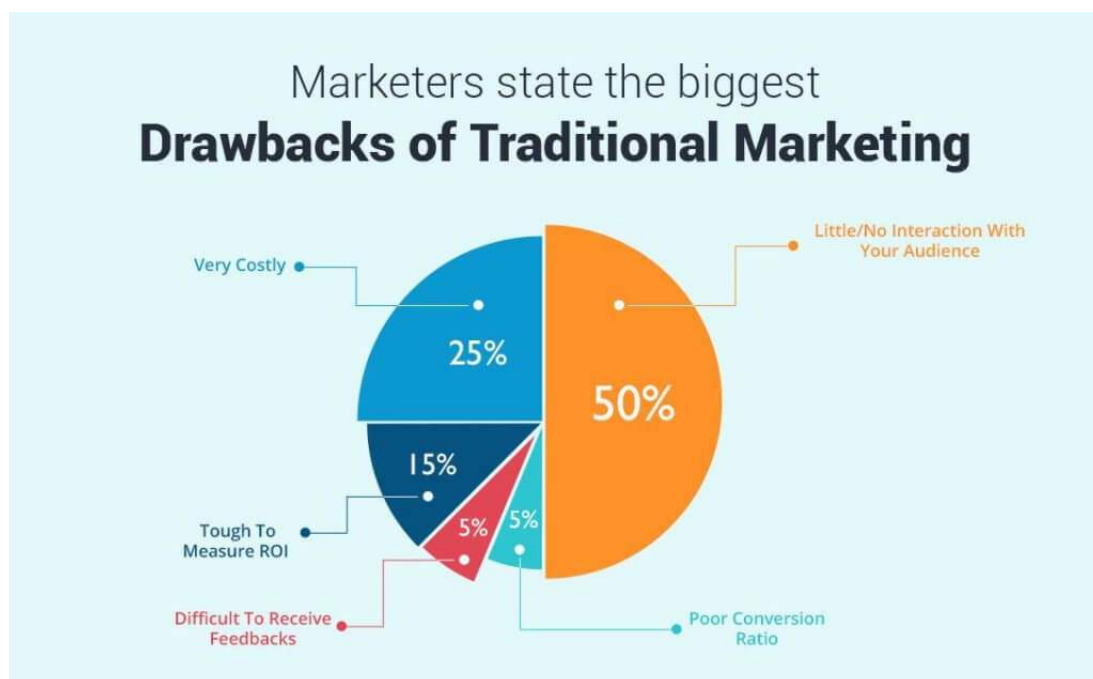
Converts poorly



Makes it hard to measure ROI



Costs a lot

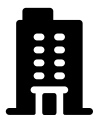


With the targeting, affordability, and variety of online ads, you'll be able to reach existing and new customers and keep them in your online ecosystem easier and at a larger scale compared to traditional advertising.

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Get inspired: industries that successfully moved online

Even the industries that have been around the longest and are inherently traditional have been growing digitally in the recent years. Take these facts:



In real estate, some companies offer online bidding, virtual tours, and more



In healthcare, the number of patients that used virtual consultations with medical professionals **increased seven-fold** in just a few years



In legal, there's everything from online legal services to fully virtual law firms

Company Name: **Redfin**

Take Redfin, a real estate brokerage. In 2019, **they started accepting unrepresented online bids** (i.e. bids from buyers without an agent) on listings in the Boston area. Glenn Kelman, Redfin's chief executive, said: "The response in Boston convinced me that the program was worth rolling out nationally. We're going to expand one market at a time."



The consumer electronics industry has also seen a shift to online platforms. It has seen a significant increase in demand as most people staying at home want to improve their home-work space. Most businesses in the electronics industry quickly pivoted to online services by



Engaging with their leads using chatbots



Contactless deliveries.



Providing video consultations

Company Name: **Starpower**

Take Starpower, for example, a family-owned business based out of Texas. Before the crisis, they were mostly operating out of their showrooms. They made house visits to understand their prospects' space and guide them towards perfecting it. Despite having a website, their primary mode of sales was through prospects who walk into their stores.

All that changed when the pandemic started to spread. They quickly found alternative ways for their customers to reach them. They began by including multiple CTAs on their website through which prospects could contact them and leveraged the chatbots on their websites.

Starpower has also adopted video conferencing walkthroughs around the prospects' house to analyze and understand their space. They have also laid out options to consult via Zoom, Facetime, Skype, etc.

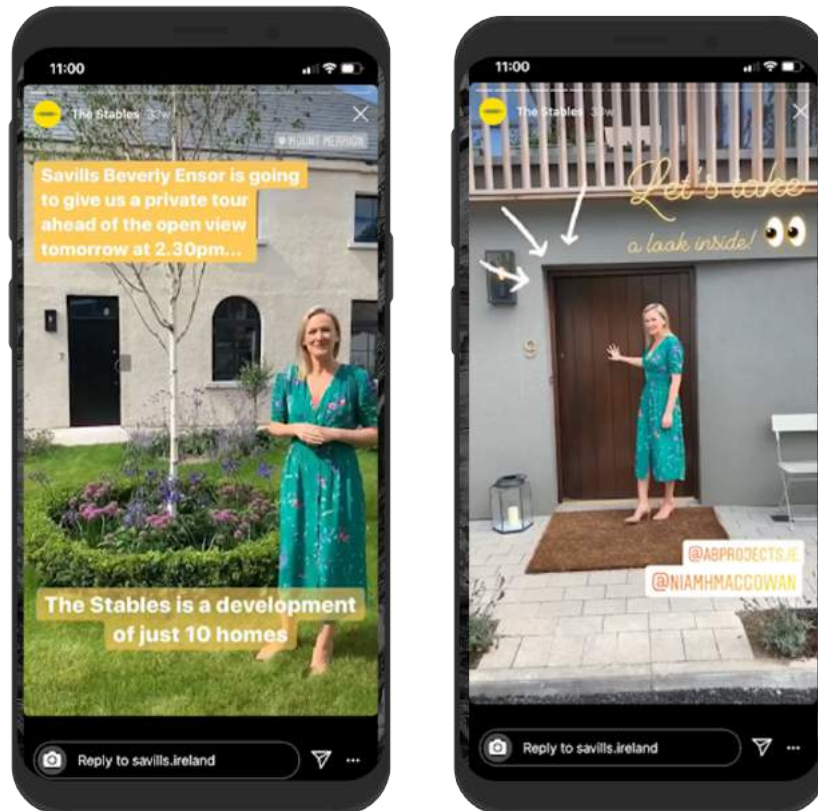
Prior to the lockdown, there used to be days when they had no chat conversations, but today, they have at least 6 to 7 a day. Now, their prospects are able to book online consultation appointments and request quotes with ease.

In addition, Starpower changed its messaging to suit the work from home scenarios. Their website and outreach emails reflect the same messaging as it is the current challenge for most potential customers.

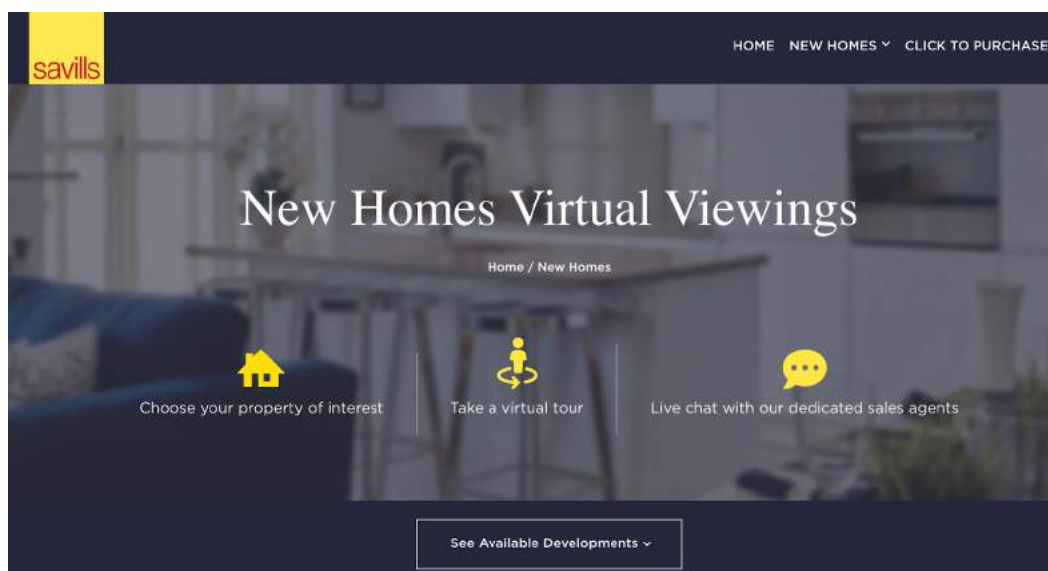
“Brandi Thompson, Director of VIP Services at Starpower, tells Freshworks, Transition from in-person meetings to video conferencing worked well for us. We saw a 200% increase in consultations per week and we were able to give a personalized walkthrough of our solutions. Now that the meetings are online, we are able to save a lot of time spent traveling/visiting prospects. With video conferencing, we’ve almost tripled our consultations per week which in turn has resulted in a significant increase in sales. With an updated website, we’re able to attract the right audience and keep them engaged. From almost no chats to bustling with chats, our salespeople are happy about being flooded with appointments,”

Company Name: **Savills**

Savills, a real estate agency, has been offering and promoting virtual tours for a long time now:



And on their website, you can have a live chat along with your virtual tour:



One thing is for sure: industries old and new are primed to make the most of operating online. Recent weeks have been an incredible proof of what can be done online, no matter how much we're used to in-person shopping and services. Let's dive into some more examples.

We've seen fitness trainers, gyms, and yoga studios offer:



Online live classes



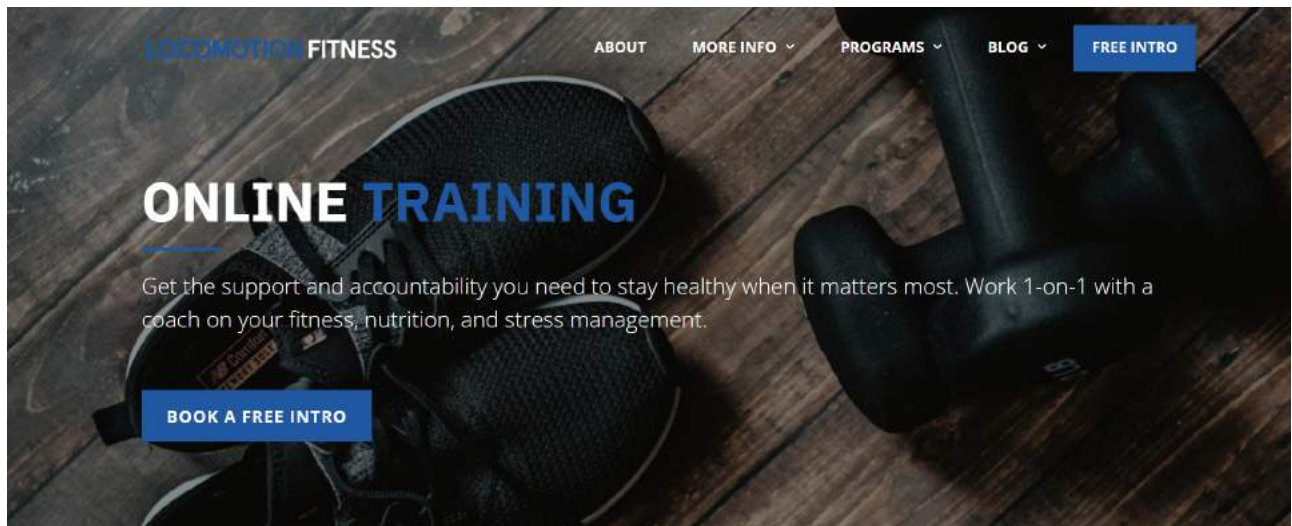
Pre-recorded individual exercise videos that customers can assemble into a full workout



Memberships and subscriptions

Company Name: **Locomotion Fitness**

One of the most inspiring examples of this is **Locomotion Fitness**, who made their pivot online within 48 hours. As Jay Cohen, the gym's owner, said to Freshworks, "we had a much longer timeline planned, then it felt like everything shifted overnight and we made the call to shut up shop to keep our members safe."



All of their classes are now on Zoom. They've started a Facebook group to share workouts and tips and loaned out their equipment so members can continue working out.

They're also:



Running a habits challenge using webinars



Running PE classes for kids on Zoom



Live streaming yoga classes

In other words, they're continuing to serve their paying members (and their families!) despite having to keep a distance.



Another big field that took a hard hit is the conference industry and all types of in-person training events. They've adapted quickly to facilitate both the learning and the networking aspects of in-person events online:



Paid subscription to industry-specific communities, e.g. on Slack



Learning materials, templates, etc. that complement live talks or training



Virtual conferences with talks and workshops over video calls

Then there are examples like specialty retailers (think candle shops) and in-person experiences (think escape rooms). Here are some ways they've adapted:



Ecommerce



Subscription boxes



Learning resources for DIY

Company Name: **Apothekary**

Take the example of **Apothekary**, a DC-based store for herbal supplements, spices, and teas. Even before this crisis, they were starting to focus on their digital outlet as they wanted to personalize their customer experience using a mix of data and their expertise.

Their founder and CEO, Shizu Okusa, told it took them over a year to engineer an online quiz experience that would feel as personal as a pharmacist in a store.

“

“We’re becoming the first true apothecary to live online with this breadth and depth of products. We’re currently growing +1162% y/y, and we’re looking to expand globally this year,” she concluded.

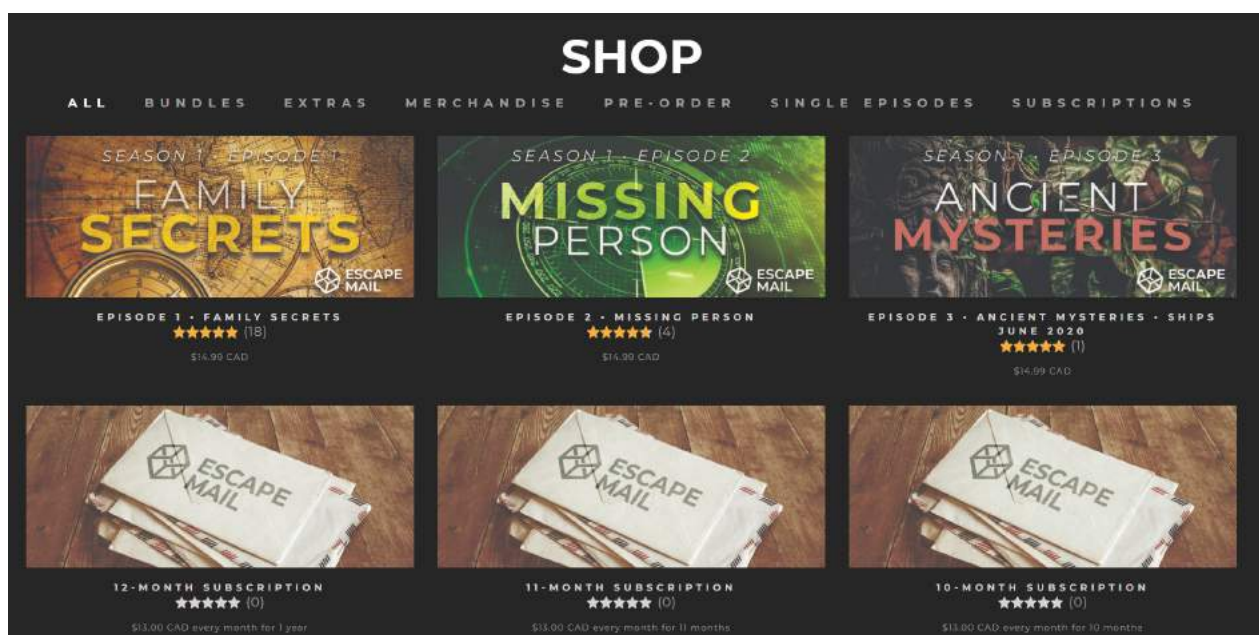
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“Especially now in a COVID-19 world of social distancing, people are looking for personalized self-care and wellness. This transition to a digital apothecary has been extremely well received. We’ve now doubled down on our quiz experience with personalized results and an educational series of emails.”

Company Name: **Mobile Escape**

Another positive story comes from Mobile Escape, a Canadian company that offers on-site escape room experiences. Their primary customers are schools, so school closures have brought their business to a grinding halt. All of their events were canceled until further notice.

They knew they needed to pivot fast, so **they created Escape Mail**—a puzzle that can be solved from the safety of their customers' homes, with a new one released every month. Escape Mail has become an instant hit and will keep going for at least a full year, with subscription options available.



“We know that we get a kick out of making puzzles, we like teaching kids, and we love to tell stories. Escape Mail combined these passions into something that entertains, educates, and captures the imagination,” added Michael Finnerty, the manager of their Alberta South location.

Tutors and educators of all kinds have also had to shift the way they work. For example, music instructors and language teachers have transitioned online by offering:



Live one-on-one lessons



Prerecorded courses and instructions



Paid resource libraries like ebooks and cheat sheets

Company Name: **Meter Music School**

A great example is **Meter Music School**, a local music school in Seattle. First, they’ve moved all their group classes online and made them free of charge for the month of April. Then, they continued offering them at a “pay what you can” rate.



Remember that physical businesses big and small are going through the same challenges right now. It’s up to everyone to gauge their best way forward as quickly as they can.

For a giant like Walmart, it could be doubling down on its mobile app functionality (it saw a **460% growth** in daily downloads). For others, it may be as simple as kicking off ecommerce or an online version of in-person service.

If you’re not yet set up for the latter, the next sections will give you the steps and resources to do that.

How to move your traditional business online: Practical steps

If the majority of your business operates offline and face-to-face, the steps below will help you get set up.

Some of them may not apply to you (for example, you already have a domain and a basic website), so feel free to skip those and get to the most actionable steps for you.

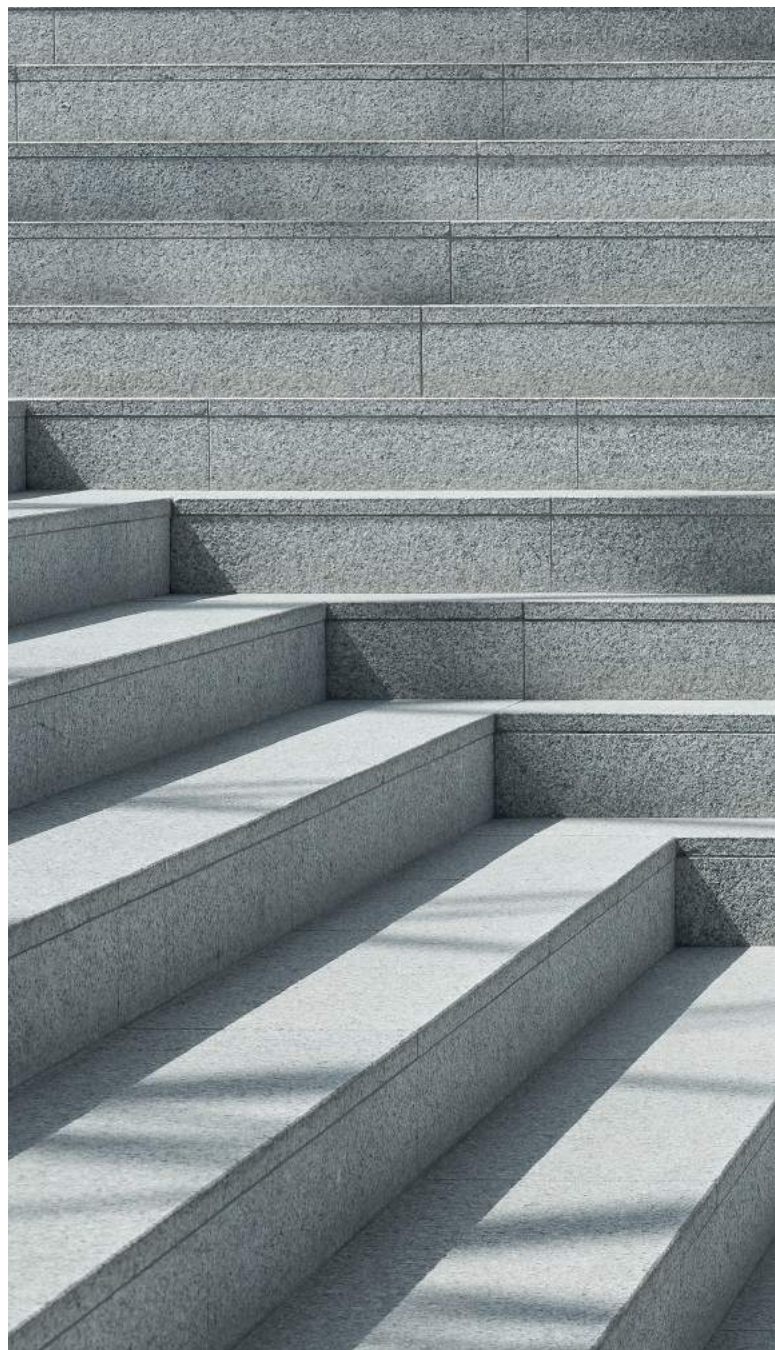
STEP 0

Set up your website—your online storefront

If you already have a website, you can definitely skip this. In that case, you may also presume that everyone has a website today, but according to **data from 2019**, over a third of small businesses still don't have a website.

So before we get to making the most of your website and your online store, let's make sure you have one.

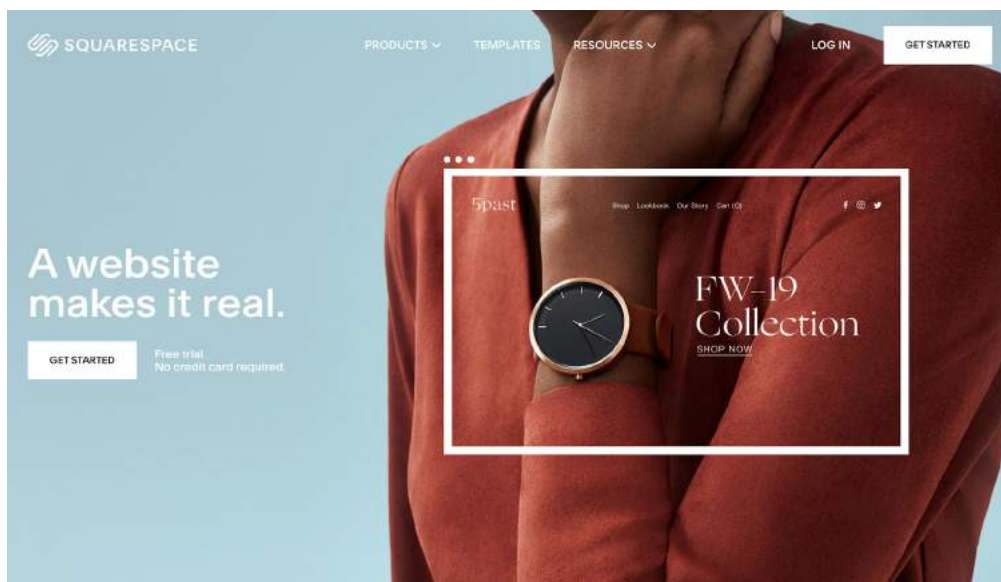
First, you need a domain. Ideally, this will be your businessname.com (or .ca, .co.uk, and so on based on where you're primarily based). Use a service like **GoDaddy** or **Namecheap** to buy your domain, as well as the hosting for your website.



If a domain is already taken, these services will suggest alternative options. Here's an example:

Results			Explore More +
candleworld.xyz	ONLY \$7.99 2 YEARS	€0.92/yr Retail €9.99/yr	Add to cart
candleworld.io		€26.52/yr Retail €30.20/yr	Add to cart
candleworld.live	SPECIAL	€2.57/yr Retail €19.18/yr	Add to cart
candleworld.online	86% OFF 2 YEARS	€1.18/yr Retail €30.20/yr	Add to cart
candleworld.club	SPECIAL	€1.44/yr Retail €10.91/yr	Add to cart
candleworld.shop	HURRY! ENDS APRIL 22	€2.65/yr Retail €28.36/yr	Add to cart
candleworld.store	60% OFF 2 YEARS	€1.73/yr Retail €44.89/yr	Add to cart

Then you need a content management system (CMS). Two of the most widely used ones and easiest to start with are **WordPress** and **Squarespace**. Both will guide you through the setup process step by step.



Their guidance will help you connect your domain and hosting to it. You'll also be able to choose from different themes and layouts.

This foundational step won't take you long, but it will hugely help every next step and increase your chances of successfully selling online.

STEP 1

Make all your online channels consistent

Beyond your website, there are two more organic ways you'll show up in people's online environments: social media and search engines.

It's important to make these channels consistent with your website and how you communicate with your potential and existing customers. Here are some ways to make that happen.

On your social media channels, make sure you have a consistent:



Name and handle



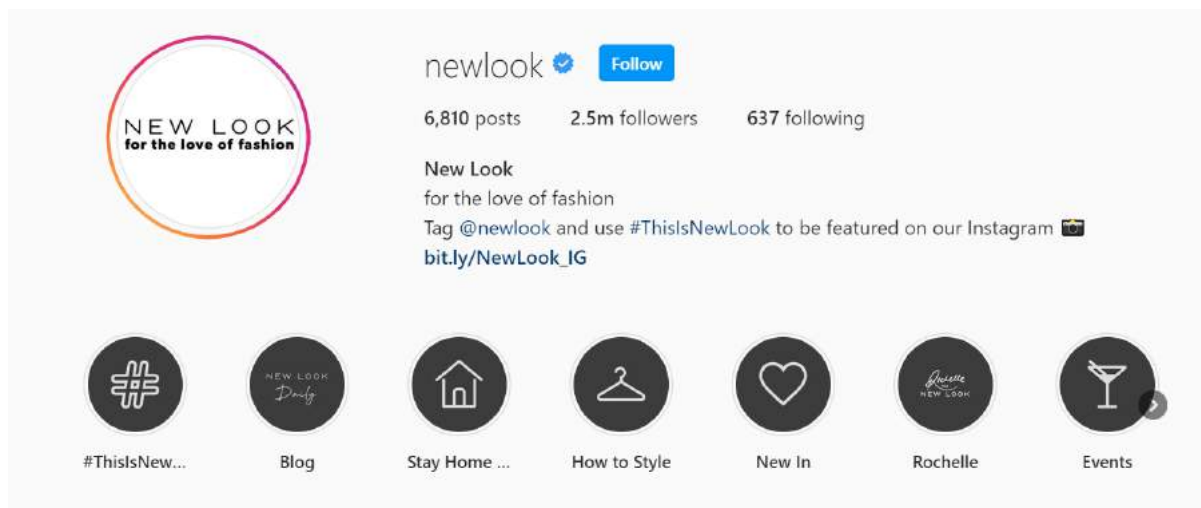
Profile picture (ideally your logo) and other imagery



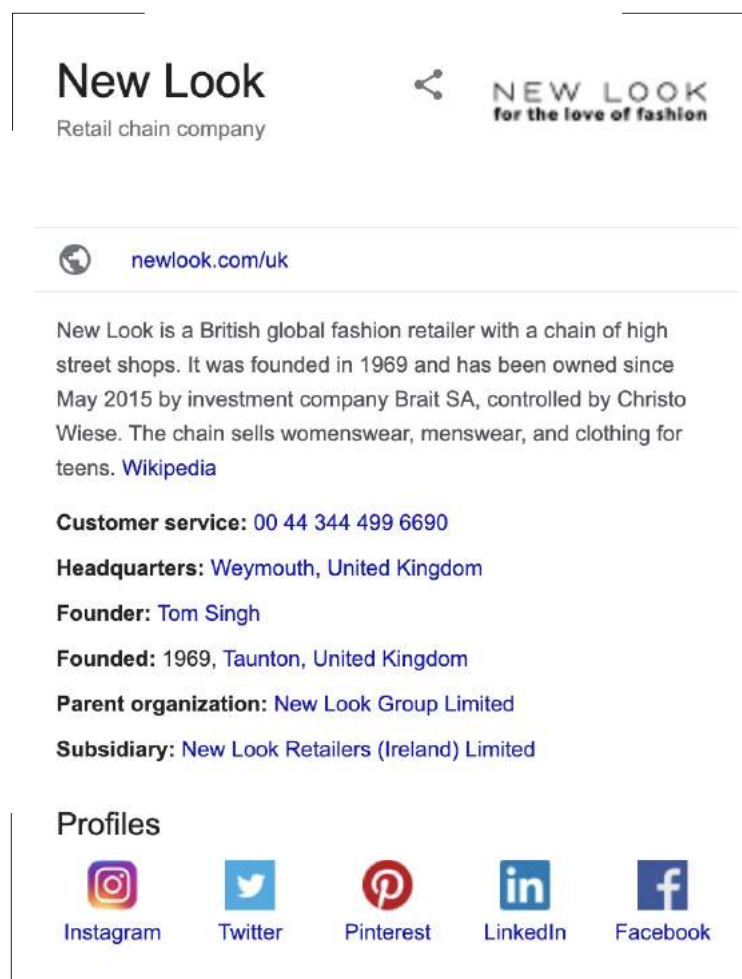
Profile descriptions

This will help you be recognizable no matter where your customers run into you online here's an example from New Look:

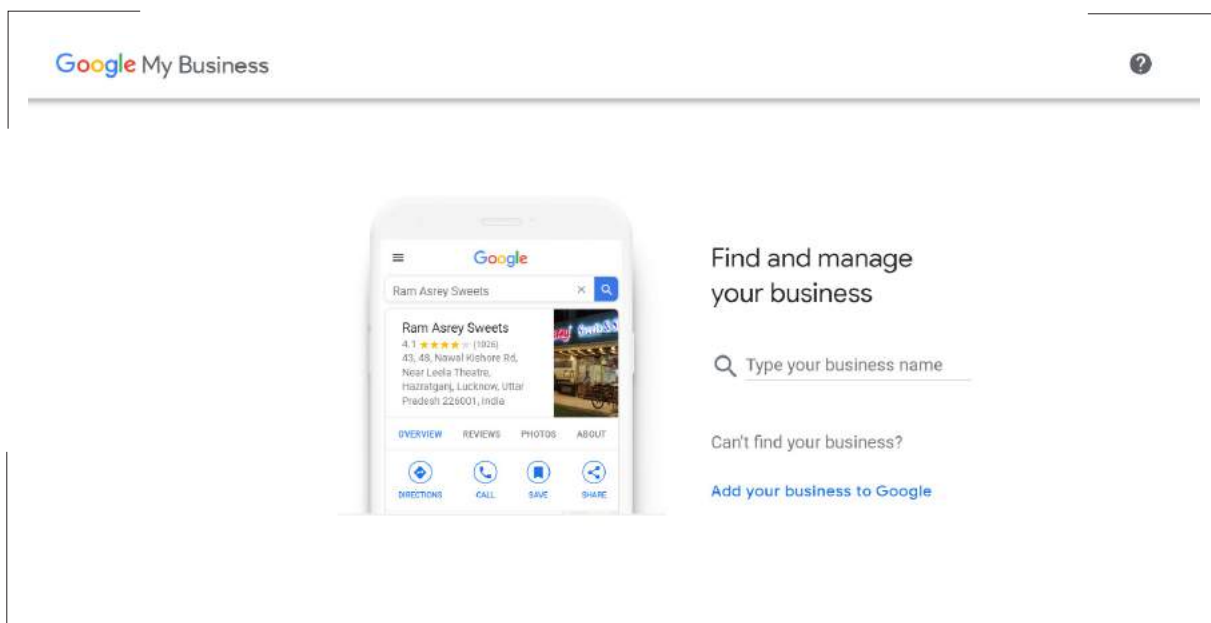




The second part of this step is setting up your Google My Business listing, which helps you show up on the right-hand side of the search results like this:



To set this up, head to **Google My Business portal** and follow the setup instructions.



STEP 2

Create an easy-to-reference educational hub

When you serve your customers largely online, they will rely on your website and other resources to learn from you and about you to make the best purchase decision they can.

This is why it's important to talk about you and your craft in a way your customers would want to read or watch. Great ways you can do this is through your:



About us/our team
website pages



Video library (on the
website or YouTube)



Blog

Your 'About' page is often one of the most visited pages on a website, so make sure it shows your visitors who you are and what you're good at. This should replace the feeling they'd get if they walked into your physical space.

This is an excellent example from the **Brooklyn Candle Studio**:

OUR STORY

Here's to dreamy days and cozy,
candlelit nights...

We are Brooklyn Candle Studio. Our mission is simple: to create candles with captivating scents, beautiful minimalist design, and the best ingredients. Essentially, everything we love about luxury candles, but at accessible prices. Our dreamy scents are inspired by nature and travel, moments and memories.

We use 100% soy wax derived from American-grown soy beans for an eco-friendly, clean burn and lead-free cotton wicks.

Our candles are
petroleum-free, cruelty-free,
phthalate-free, and
100% vegan.



On your blog and in your videos, you can start simple by answering questions you often hear from your customers. These pieces of content will typically be titled “How to...” and will do a double duty of helping your potential customers with a pain point and showcase you as the expert.

Beyond this simple idea, you can also:



Create tutorials that include your product(s)



Interview a loyal customer



Create product demonstrations



Show behind-the-scenes of your work, your team, etc.

These pieces of content will work together to help you build awareness first, and trust and loyalty later.

STEP 3

Boost your trust signals with customer reviews

Because your business has already seen success offline, you're in a great position to take the trust you've already built into the online space. All it takes is a simple strategy: feature your happy customers' reviews.

Some reports have shown that:

40%

40% of consumers only take into account reviews written within the past 2 weeks

70%

70% of consumers that are asked to leave a review go on to write one

270%

Purchase of a product with five reviews is 270% more likely than of a product with 0 reviews

86%

86% of consumers read reviews for local businesses

In other words, no matter what other marketing strategies you adopt, reviews will fuel each one of them because it's what customers rely on when making their purchase decisions.



The easiest thing you can do is to contact your best customers (those that have been with you the longest, spent the most money with you, etc.) and ask them to share their experience. You can use a simple email like this:

Hi [Name],

We're so thankful for having you as a loyal customer all these [months/years].

As you probably know, many people like you rely on online reviews to make sure they get the best products possible. With that said, we'd love it if you could leave us a testimonial on our Google listing.

You can [click this link](#) to leave your feedback and help other people like you get exactly what they're looking for in [customer pain point].

Thank you for taking time out of your day. We really appreciate it!

Best,

[Your Name]

In this email, link to your Google My Business page where they can leave their review. As you collect testimonials, you can feature them on your website homepage, product pages, social media, and so on.

STEP 4

Enable email signups and automate your marketing

On average, **only 4% of website visitors** are ready to buy. What about everyone else? If they leave your website without leaving any trace, there's a chance they'll never find their way back.

This is where email signups come in handy. Your potential customer's email inbox is their most protected online space, so if you can convince them to give you their email address, it means they really want to hear from you.

Use any of these ideas to drive email signups:



% discount or free shipping
on first order



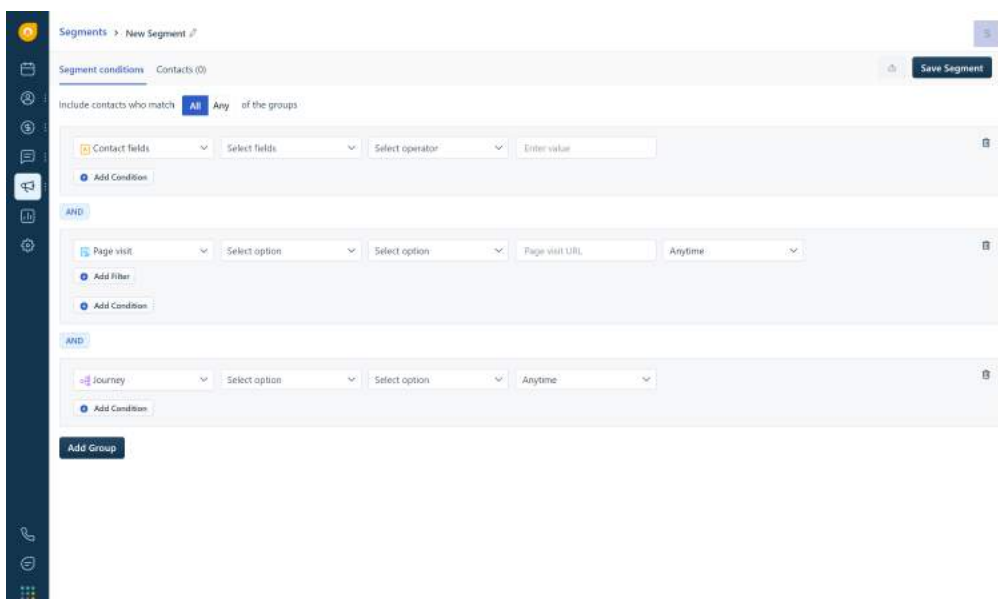
Exclusive content



Announcements of limited
editions of products

Once you've started building your email list, you can nurture these relationships by sending relevant, valuable emails. As you get deeper into this process, you can also use marketing automation to segment your email list based on their activity on your website and in your emails.

Here's how segmentation looks like in Freshmarketer:



This way, they'll always get highly personalized emails from you so you can delight them and turn them into long-term customers and brand advocates.

STEP 5

Make it easy to buy from you

We showed you what to do if your customers aren't ready to buy yet. But if they are, you need to make it as easy as possible for them to do that from wherever they are at that moment.

If they have to go through dozens of pages and a complicated form just to make a purchase, they'll give up and look for other options—so don't give them a reason to do that.

Services like **Shopify** and **BigCommerce** make it easy to build an entire online store or integrate it with your existing website. They'll help you do things such as:

- **Building your entire online business on their platform**
- **Adding a shop to your existing website through 'Buy now' buttons or by linking to it in your main website menu**
- **Checkout customization**
- **Coupons and discounts**
- **Using digital wallets**
- **Selling through Instagram, Facebook Shop, Facebook Messenger, etc.**

The second part of making buying easy is publishing stellar product pages. To make your product pages (or any sales pages in general) convert well, remember to:

- **Use high-resolution images, from multiple angles if possible**
- **Add a clear, main call to action**
- **Describe the product in a way that appeals to your target customer. Answer questions such as: Who is the product for?**
- **What is the product used for? What sets it apart? How does the product work?**
- **Add video of the product if it's relevant**
- **Feature customer reviews**

STEP 6

Support your customers efficiently

Finally, remember that your customers might need your service in a different way than you're used to.

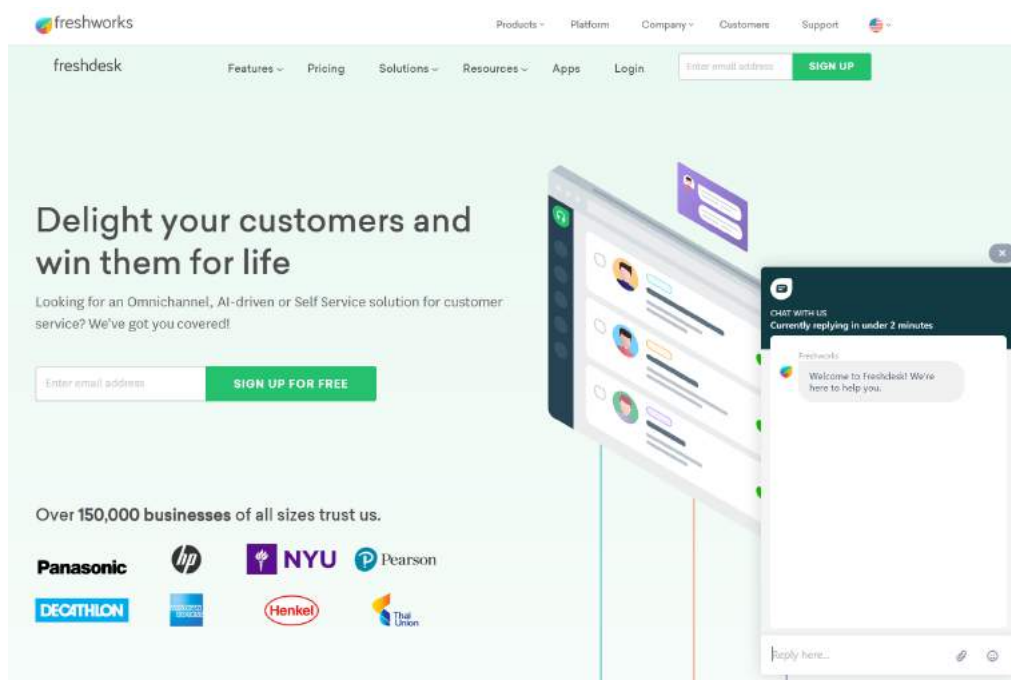
If they can't find the answers themselves, they'll look for ways to ask you for these answers.

Maybe you're used to just answering their phone calls and answering their questions in-person. But as they browse what you offer on your website and in your online store, they may have questions about pricing, features, shipping, and many other areas.

There are two main things you should do about this:

- **Promptly display your phone number and contact email**
- **Offer the option to contact you through live chat on your website**

This means you'll be able to get back to your customers quicker, create personalized engagement, and increase your conversion rate. Check out **this case study** to see how it works!



Get your business online: your toolkit

With all the steps we've given you, here's a list of tools you'll need to set yourself and your business up for success. Use this list to review the best tools in each category!

- Domain name and website hosting: **GoDaddy, Namecheap**
- Content management system: **WordPress, Squarespace**
- Website templates and builder: **WordPress themes, Squarespace templates, Beaver Builder, StudioPress**
- Email service provider: **Mailchimp, AWeber, Constant Contact**
- Marketing automation: **Freshmarketer**
- Social media scheduling: **Buffer, Hootsuite, Later**
- Ecommerce software: **Shopify, BigCommerce**
- Customer relationship management: **Freshworks CRM**
- Live chat and customer support: **Freshchat, Freshdesk**
- Ads: **Google Ads, Facebook Ads Manager**
- Analytics: **Google Analytics, Heap, Hotjar**



It's time to take action

The best time to turn your offline company into a thriving online business is now. Remember:

- **The crisis that came with the pandemic won't be over quickly**
- **People need your expertise, your products, your help with a range of challenges**
- **Being online means you can be more specific, relevant, and bring more value to your audience**

Use the real-life examples and actionable steps we laid out to start moving online now. Your future self will be grateful you did. We're here to support you on this journey let us know what other resources we can provide you to help!





Freshworks provides customer engagement software to businesses of all sizes, making customer support, sales, and marketing professionals easy to communicate with customers and deliver moments of wow. Freshworks has helped over 150,000 small and medium businesses worldwide build customers for life by letting companies share a 360-degree view of relevant customer information internally and creating compelling customer experiences.

Founded in October 2010, Freshworks Inc. is backed by Accel, Tiger Global Management, CapitalG, and Sequoia Capital India. Freshworks is a 2,000+ team headquartered in San Mateo, California, with global offices in India, UK, Australia, and Germany. Over 150,000 businesses widely use the company's cloud-based suite around the world, including the NHS, Honda, Rightmove, Hugo Boss, Citizens Advice, Toshiba, and Cisco.

For more information, please visit www.freshworks.com