48

GREAT
ECOMMERCE
IDEAS

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Introduction

A single idea can change a business. It could increase revenue, lower expenses, or find new customers. In *48 Great Ecommerce Ideas*, we asked industry insiders — experts in all facets of online selling — to share compelling, innovative ideas that could help ecommerce businesses.

We thank our panel for sharing their knowledge with us. To learn more about them, see their profiles at the end of the ebook.

Kerry Murdock
Publisher
Practical Ecommerce

Track Profit-and-loss Data for Each SKU

" To be successful on Amazon, look at each SKU you sell under its own profit-and-loss microscope. Competition, pricing, and demand fluctuate so much among SKUs that, without this perspective, you can easily lose your way, selling too many unprofitable products.

- James Thomson, Prosper Show

Compare Credit-card-processing Offers with the Gross Annual Revenue for Each Provider

" For credit card processing, one of the many reasons why merchants should insist on true interchange-plus pricing is because it is easy to calculate the provider's gross annual revenue. This is the best method for comparing offers from different providers. Say a merchant processes $1 million per year with a $100 average ticket. Provider A offers interchange-plus rate of 0.10% + $0.10 and $15 per month in fees. Provider B offers 0.08% + $0.20 and a $10 monthly fee. Provider A will earn $440 ($2,620 -$2,180) less per year than Provider B, thus saving the merchant $440.

- Phil Hinke, MerchantFeeSavers

There's More to Carrier Discounts than Base Rates

" In negotiating discounts with FedEx and UPS, keep in mind that obtaining discounts on accessorial fees, dimensional-weight divisors, and fuel surcharges are often just as important — if not more important — than base-rate reductions.

- Jordan Lindberg, Ecommerce merchant, Stardust Memorials

Market Near Your Warehouse

" In the Amazon Prime era, shoppers expect quick, free shipping. Small online merchants can offer just this sort of service when they ship to addresses nearby. So, market to shoppers near your operations.

- Armando Roggio, Senior Contributing Editor, Practical Ecommerce

Quantify Your Social Advertising

❝ Before you spend heavily with social media advertising, make sure it's a good fit for your business. Develop goals that you can track, to understand if your advertising efforts are actually making a meaningful lift to your bottom line.

- Michael Stancil, Ecommerce merchant, WeddingWire

Focus on Multi-unit Sales

❝ When an ecommerce sale includes multiple units, that sale is generally more profitable than a single-item order, as the added product margin is typically greater than the added order fulfillment and shipping expense. Therefore, to maximize profitability, find ways to generate more multi-unit sales. This can be done with free shipping minimums, coupons with minimum purchase amounts, promoting add-on products, and by selling multi-packs with a discount.

- Stephen Bulger, eFulfillment Service

For Mobile Shoppers, Emphasize Categories and Checkout

❝ Pay special attention to product categories that might attract more mobile users, like flash sales and consumable items. Make not only the checkout process seamless across devices, but also the returns process. Omitting the returns process on mobile is common, frequently resulting in loss of customers.

- Gagan Mehra, Ecommerce Consultant

For Drop Shipping, Inventory Visibility Is Key

❝ For retailers that utilize drop shipping, having visibility to your supplier's inventory is what links all of the virtual descriptive data about products to actual items that you can offer for sale to your customer. This creates the expectation and confidence that if a customer order is created, the product will then be able to be fulfilled and drop shipped to your customer. Inventory data is the key link between product catalog and order fulfillment.

- Jeremy Hanks, DropShip Commerce

For Website Analysis, Always Ask 'Why?'

66   A key to website analysis is to keep asking "why?" when there's a change to a key metric, such as traffic or conversions. If the metric is down, look for other metrics that are following the same trend. A few layers below could be closer to the root cause. The classic method is to ask "why?" five times.

- Steve Hammer, RankHammer

Learn to Delegate

66   Many entrepreneurs are not good at delegating. Hard work does not necessarily equal better results. Leverage your time to grow your ecommerce company to whatever size you want. If time is your most scarce resource, how you invest it must be your top priority. Learn to delegate.

- David Sasson, Ecommerce merchant, overstockArt.com

Consider a User-experience Designer

66   Although it can be a hefty investment, especially when hiring a full-time employee, a user-experience designer can be well worth the money. A good UX designer sees the world differently, always testing and probing to optimize the digital experience. UX designers use analytical and testing tools to determine the most successful layout of page elements, navigation, taxonomy, and even cart and checkout pages. A UX designer can integrate into your company's operations and optimize conversions.

- Richard Sexton, Former ecommerce merchant, Carolina Rustica

Consider Collaborations with Other Companies

66   Entrepreneurs tend to focus on their own companies and how to build them from within. While this focus is a major factor in growing a business, don't overlook the benefits of collaborations with other firms. With collaborations, you can get in front of new prospects, show your current customers that you work well with others, and introduce your customers to new and cool brands.

- Eric Bandholz, Ecommerce merchant, Beardbrand

Be Wary of Terms of Use

"   Never use the terms-of-use agreement or privacy policy provided by your cart company. If you do, you may find yourself subject to a lawsuit in a foreign jurisdiction or worse.

- John Di Giacomo, Revision Legal

Research Ecommerce Platforms before Committing

"   Take a 360-degree view of the various ecommerce platforms before committing. This is so important today, as the barrier to entry for new platforms is so low. Half of them, seemingly, fail in the first year. The last thing you want is to commit to a new ecommerce platform and have it go under, taking your store with it.

- Kenny Kane, Ecommerce merchant, Testicular Cancer Foundation

Use Shortcuts in Google Analytics

"   Google Analytics' shortcuts are very helpful. Not only do they save the report you want, but they also include any Advanced Segments you applied to the report or filters or sorting you applied. Create the report you want, then click "Shortcut" to save it. It will then be available in your list of Shortcuts on the left-hand menu.

- Morgan Jones, eComIQ

Create an Integrated Social Media Experience

"   There are many ways to integrate social media with an ecommerce site: social logins, ratings and reviews, comments, video embeds, and much more. Use social media as part of the overall shopping experience. This is the best way to use social channels to convert and to keep customers coming back. To give shoppers reasons to connect with your business across networks, leverage the power of social, to always be on shoppers' minds.

- Pamela Hazelton, Ecommerce Consultant, Author, and Speaker

Use Incentives to Keep Affiliates Engaged

" Affiliate marketing is not about the number of affiliates you have. It's about the number that drives traffic. Keep affiliates engaged by running regular activation promotions that pay them to drive relevant traffic, and by communicating with them regularly.

- Carolyn Kmet, Loyola University Chicago

For SEO: Links Are Gold

" Great content is linked to, and in turn links out to the rest of the site — as a valuable resource. When content lacks links, no matter how great that content is, it lacks the authority signals that Google requires to rank pages in search results. To improve your search engine optimization efforts, create compelling content that consumers will link to.

- Jill Kocher, Resource Ammirati

Do Not Be a Busy Fool

" Many new sellers equate success with the number of orders. They assume that if they are sending out many daily parcels, they must be successful. The true measure of success, however, is how much profit you made. Know your true costs, including postage, packaging, electricity, and staff, and know exactly how much it costs to fulfill each order.

- Richard Stubbings, Ecommerce merchant, Kulture Shock

Respond to Reviews

" Certainly it is important for local businesses to encourage reviews. But it's also important that the business responds to existing ones. If the review is positive, thank the customer for leaving it. If the review is negative, respond in a positive manner and encourage the reviewer to take the matter offline, to address the issue directly.

- Bill Hartzer, Advice Interactive Group

Aim for Emotion with Pay-per-click Ads

" Pay-per-click ads are most effective when they evoke emotion, which can be accomplished with images or text. For example, consider the words "deserve" or "entitled." Both produce strong emotions. Moreover, consider a phrase like "Email is dead." Most people strongly agree or disagree to such a statement. Those reactions help advertisers win the click and eventually get the sale.

- Robert Brady, Clix Marketing

Keep Emails Fresh to Retain Subscribers

" Keeping your emails relevant and fresh is vital to keeping subscribers. Growing, progressive retailers consistently change email artwork, layout, and basic design, as well as general marketing creative, such as logos. Small tweaks in design and messaging, in other words, can nudge conversion rates up and make a large revenue difference.

- Carolyn Nye, Acxiom Corp.

Use Site Search to Determine Popular Products

" Use Google Analytics site-search tracking to determine what visitors are searching for. Then focus on the most-searched items. Consider utilizing a robust, third-party search platform — e.g., SearchSpring, Nextopia, Monetate, SLI Systems, many others — to power your search. Ask a potential search provider to show you how it will pay for itself.

- Lori McDonald, Brilliance Business Solutions

Make Website Changes Gradually

" There are thousands of failed software projects. To prevent your ecommerce site from becoming one of them, don't implement a big rewrite. Make major changes to your store and platform incrementally, to receive the benefits a little at a time. This will reduce the risk and give your project a better chance of success.

- Eric Davis, Little Stream Software

For PPC Ads, Separate Top Performing Keywords and Products

" For pay-per-ads on Google, Bing, and other search engines, your top performing keywords and products should be in their own, separate ad group. Isolating in this manner pushes reporting front-and-center and allows fine-tune control over ad features and bidding.

- Denis Coombes, ROI Revolution

Beware: There Are No Enforced Pricing Standards in Credit Card Industry

" Two card-card-processing providers can offer *tiered pricing* with the same rates and fees and the cost between the two can vary by hundreds or even thousands per year. And two providers can offer *interchange-plus pricing* at the same rates and fees and the cost can vary by hundreds or thousands. In other words, there are no enforced standards defining these pricing plans. Stay away from tiered pricing plans and insist that offer be based on "true" interchange-plus pricing — i.e., the rates and fees are based on the published interchange rates and the actual pass-through fees" charged by Visa, MasterCard, and other card companies.

- Phil Hinke, MerchantFeeSavers

Repeat Shoppers Are Worth More

" A loyal, repeat customer may spend as much as five times more on every order than a new shopper. A loyal customer is therefore worth a lot more than a new one. Focus on earning repeat sales and your ecommerce business will be a success.

- Armando Roggio, Senior Contributing Editor, Practical Ecommerce

To Grow Conversions, Remember the Shopper

" Shoppers are intelligent, if not always rational. By shopping with merchants, shoppers are attempting to solve a problem. All conversion optimization efforts should therefore start with the shopper in mind, not an arbitrary testing of elements and colors.

- David Sasson, Ecommerce Merchant, overstockArt.com

Reevaluate Shipping Boxes and Packaging

" A one-inch difference in the size of your shipping box could potentially save you more than $1 in shipping. Shipping carriers, including FedEx, UPS, and the U.S. Postal Service, have their own dimensional weight rules. It is therefore critical to understand when dimensional weight is triggered with each carrier, what your dimensional weight divisor is with each carrier, and then compare that to the box sizes you're using to see if adjustments can be made to decrease dimensional weight.

- Stephen Bulger, eFulfillment Service

For Drop Shipping Success, Curation Is Critical

" Be wary of the idea of an "endless aisle of infinite products." Successful drop-shipping retailers don't just take a data feed of thousands of products from their suppliers and blast it unchecked to their ecommerce storefronts. Think "less limited" as opposed to "endless." If you hope to find several big distributors with hundreds of thousands of products and push all of that out to Amazon, you are just wasting your time.

- Jeremy Hanks, DropShip Commerce

Develop Custom Products

" If you're not constantly developing and rolling out new products, you're likely to get stagnant in your customers' minds, creating opportunities for your competitors. New products mean new demographics and new opportunities. But beyond that, your customers know that you're interested in a long-term journey instead of a quick buck.

- Eric Bandholz, Ecommerce merchant, Beardbrand

Consider SMS Marketing

" While email is still a popular way to inform consumers of news and sales, SMS has the advantage of reaching those people instantly, and potentially during times when they're waiting in lines and need something to pass the time. Consider SMS (text) messages to engage shoppers.

- Pamela Hazelton, Ecommerce Consultant, Author, and Speaker

To Improve Sales from SEO, Remember That Every Page Is an Entry Page

" Every page on your ecommerce site is an entry page for visitors that arrive from organic search results. Visitors that come from search engines are a special breed of shoppers. They may not enter your site — and navigate tidily through it — at the point you plan, to consume your marketing messages en route to a purchase. Make it easy for searchers to orient themselves and find the path to purchase — no matter what page they entered your site on.

- Jill Kocher, Resource Ammirati

Set Up Your Google Business Profile

" To respond to Google reviews, you must verify the information that Google has on your business. Google obtains, for Maps, basic information — business name, phone number, address — from public sources. But it's up to the business owner to verify that the information is correct, and to provide additional data, such as hours, the website URL, and more.

- Bill Hartzer, Advice Interactive Group

Clean Email Lists

" Email campaigns are only as strong as the subscriber database. Email databases need cleaning and reorganization to keep the clutter down, and to identify potential opportunities. Go through your database periodically to remove unresponsive subscribers, assign new segments, and otherwise optimize the list. It will help with deliverability — Gmail, Yahoo, and others penalize senders with lower open and click rates — and streamline your email marketing efforts.

- Carolyn Nye, Acxiom Corp.

Design for Mobile First

" When designing a new website or a new feature on a site, start with the mobile version first. It's much easier to start with the small version and then add components for larger devices than to start with a larger design and try to remove components. You might even realize that you don't need to add everything for the larger version and a cleaner, simple store is better for you.

- Eric Davis, Little Stream Software

Track Call Performance in AdWords

66   Take advantage of Google AdWords' ability to dynamically generate forwarding numbers for call extensions on mobile. Track call details and analyze metrics, such as call duration, to assign value.

- Denis Coombes, ROI Revolution

Let Sales Reps Place Online Orders, Use Website

66   Does your business have sales reps? If so, allow them to log in to your ecommerce site to (a) place orders on a customer's behalf, (b) check a customer's order status, (c) check inventory, and (d) order samples of products for customers. Also, make it easy for salespeople to use your website to share product specifications and supporting literature.

- Lori McDonald, Brilliance Business Solutions

Check Your Pay-per-click Settings

66   With most pay-per-click platforms, default settings for new campaigns will almost always encourage more ad spending. Take the time to understand what the settings do and choose the option that aligns the campaign's behavior with your desired outcome. That understanding pays off repeatedly over the life of your campaigns.

- Robert Brady, Clix Marketing

Determine Your Expected Income Per 100 Visitors

66   Know how many people visit your site, how many leave straight away, and how many pages are viewed by those who stay. Know, especially, the conversion rate — the percentage of visitors who buy something — and your average profit per order. This determines the income to expect per 100 visitors. When advertising, never pay more than this expected income to get these visitors.

- Richard Stubbings, Ecommerce merchant, Kulture Shock

Educate Affiliates about Your Business

" Give affiliates the tools they need to promote your business. Teach them your seasonality, your bestsellers, and different ways to position your products. Provide them with product data feeds, solid creative, and advance notice of your promotions so that they have enough time to prepare their marketing campaigns.

- Carolyn Kmet, Loyola University Chicago

Use Annotations in Google Analytics to Track Major Site Changes

" Annotations in Google Analytics will help identify when a big change was made to your website, such as a redesign or mobile rollout, or when a new advertising campaign was launched. Monitor key metrics, such as ecommerce conversion rates, after the update to determine the impact.

- Morgan Jones, eComIQ

Make Sure You Can Enforce Judgments Abroad

" If you work with suppliers outside of the United States, make sure that the choice-of-laws clause contained within your contract specifies that all disputes will be resolved by arbitration consistent with the New York Convention. This ensures that you will be able to enforce a judgment abroad.

- John Di Giacomo, Revision Legal

Don't Forget Visual Commerce

" The attention span of shoppers is getting shorter. They consume visual data because of the speed and ease of processing. Ecommerce companies would be amiss to not execute some element of visual commerce, such as a "trending wall," which is a page or "wall" of the most shared or recently viewed products on your site. The other type of visual commerce is user-generated, uploaded to either your site directly, or to social channels, and curated by a hashtag identifier.

- Richard Sexton, Former ecommerce merchant, Carolina Rustica

Use Enhanced Ecommerce in Google Analytics

" Google Analytics offers a report called Enhanced Ecommerce that can identify all the steps in the checkout and purchase process. This can help identify the key friction points and ease checkout abandonment. It can help determine, for example, if design changes to product detail pages result in increased additions to cart. For merchants, Enhanced Ecommerce is very useful as it presents the conversion percentages along the entire customer journey.

- Steve Hammer, RankHammer

Track Social Conversions in Your Ecommerce Platform

" If you're selling products online and promoting them via social media ads, implement conversion tracking. It may seem daunting, but most major ecommerce platforms let you enter your social-media account details. The platforms will do the rest, providing you the true return on ad spend.

- Michael Stancil, Ecommerce merchant, WeddingWire

Consider Accepting PayPal

" Offering PayPal and PayPal Credit as an alternative to traditional credit cards can set you apart from other sellers. Ebay users, in particular, often have funds in their PayPal accounts that they would prefer to use for online purchases.

- Jordan Lindberg, Ecommerce merchant, Stardust Memorials

To Sell an Amazon Seller Account, Build the Right Assets

" Too many sellers on the Amazon marketplace never build meaningful assets that would make the seller business worth exiting at a decent price. For a high-performance seller account, focus on developing exclusive sourcing relationships, enlisting and nurturing large numbers of social media followers, building decent-selling private label brands, and have a large number of product reviews and feedback counts.

- James Thomson, Prosper Show

About the Authors

Practical Ecommerce was founded in 2005. Its mission is to deliver down-to-earth articles, tutorials, and videos that help smaller businesses succeed online. Twenty-three ecommerce experts — listed below — contributed to *48 Great Ecommerce Ideas*.

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Prior to moving to Norwich, England, Richard Stubbings had 20 years IT experience — designing and building major computer applications. He then set up a bookshop concentrating on science fiction, crime, and horror. He soon started selling horror and movie-related figures alongside the books. The shop — Kulture Shock — went online in 2000.
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