

ANALYSIS

BUILDING AN ONLINE PORTAL

AN ESSENTIAL CHECKLIST

APRIL 2021





contents

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Introduction

The pace of change is unrelenting and always accelerating; new technologies emerge and then mature at a faster rate than ever before. Some of these improvements are rather limited, but others have completely changed the ways that people communicate, do business, and live their lives. In today's digital world, it's difficult to imagine any company successfully operating without some sort of online presence. Even so, it is sadly quite common to see businesses in all sectors failing to live up to their true digital potential. This was an issue even before COVID-19 hit, but the pandemic has served as an accelerator—many shifts that were expected to take years suddenly occurred in a matter of months.

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, a website is "a group of World Wide Web pages usually containing hyperlinks to each other and made available online by an individual, company, educational institution, government, or organization." Most of today's print service providers (PSPs) have websites that provide corporate information, highlight products and services, and are hopefully tailored to benefit consumers. At the same time, however, it is no longer enough for a PSP to have a website, and Merriam-Webster's definition calls attention to the one-sided communicational nature of many websites. These websites serve as digital brochures, but not much more. Visitors can view, read, and absorb information on a website, but there is very little back-and-forth communication. The online experience often falls short to what would occur in a physical location, where a customer could interact with a service provider, discuss his/her specific needs, and hopefully generate a mutually beneficial transaction.

What Is an Online Sales Portal?

An online portal, also called a web portal, can be described as a digital platform that is designed to draw data from various sources—including e-mails, search engines, and even online forums—together into one cohesive package. Yahoo! is an example of a popular online portal. Despite having a built-in search engine, Yahoo! presents its information and features on one centralized webpage, thus enabling easy navigation from function to function (news, e-mail, sports information, etc.). Web portals often request user information so they can collect data on their users much like the users collect data from them. The differences between a website and a web portal are outlined in the Table below.

Table 1: Websites vs. Web Portals

	Website	Portal
Solution Construction	Simple	Modular
Aim	To provide information	To inform and collect information
Approach to Users	Equal	Identification of user groups
Content	Covers a comparatively small range of topics	Offers extended content, with many topics covered



Access to Content	No login required	Logging in may be required
Type of Content	The same for all users	Adjusts to different user groups
Interactions	Simple (e.g., subscriptions to newsletters)	Complex (e.g., checkboxes, forms, applications)
Admin Panel	One admin team	Multiple admin teams with multi-level access
Security Mechanisms	Comparatively simple	Complex

Source: Emerline

The Importance of e-Commerce

Prior to COVID-19, a document of this type would likely seem irrelevant to many PSPs. After all, how much does digital jargon matter when a robust in-person sales team can already get the job done? In today's environment, however, intimate in-person sales negotiations have become difficult at best. Even before the COVID-19 outbreak, e-commerce (or the practice of doing business digitally) was already on the rise. Online business platform Oberlo estimated that there were over 200 million online shoppers in the US alone during 2020—a figure that increased by a further 30 million in 2021.¹ Despite this, data compiled by Devrix² suggests that roughly a third of small businesses still didn't have company websites as of 2018. Given the global pandemic, one would hope that this number has changed—and it probably has. It is difficult to imagine any firm surviving 2020 without a digital presence, although as we have stated, simply having a website is not enough.

Before the onset of the pandemic, e-commerce was already gaining popularity based on convenience alone. Even as COVID-19 hopefully slides away from relevance and into our history books, consumers will remain increasingly health- and safety-conscious for years to come. What this means is that much of what has become digital will likely stay digital. In-person shopping will continue, but e-commerce accounts for an ever larger piece of the pie. The Figure below outlines consumers' top reasons for choosing to shop online.

¹ <https://www.oberlo.com/statistics/how-many-people-shop-online>

² <https://devrix.com/tutorial/small-business-marketing-statistics-trends/>



Figure 1: Reasons for Shopping Online



Sources: Oberlo; Global Web Index

Know the Portal's Function

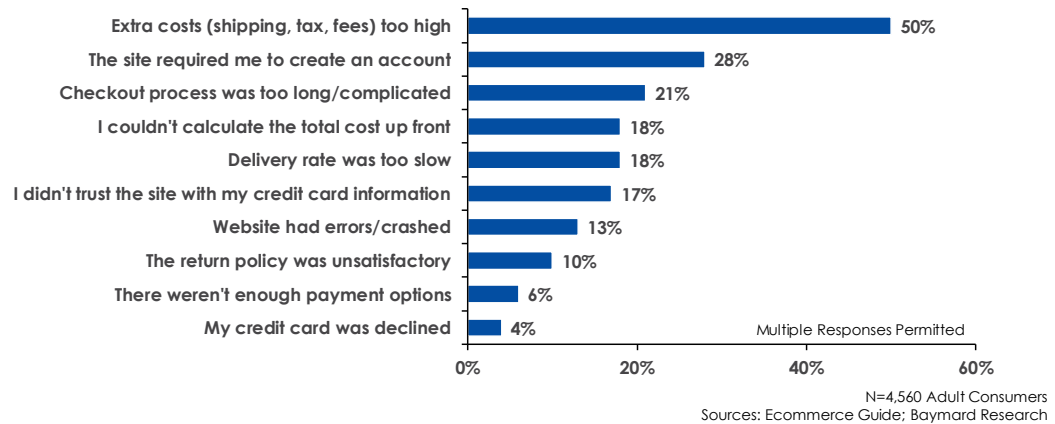
Now that the need for an online portal has been established, it's important for companies to evaluate what they want their portals to do before investing resources. Online portals can achieve a variety of interactive functions—and no single software product is right for all solutions. It's easy for those without a substantive technical background to get lost in the hypothetical possibilities of online portals. Although good managers want their teams to shoot for the moon, they will also have a list of clear and actionable objectives that can be accomplished in various timeframes. Designing an online portal is no different.

It goes without saying that most PSPs will want an online sales portal through which to conduct e-commerce. Many companies will also want to collect at least some customer data so that they can better understand who is purchasing what and when. Convenience and ease of use should not be overlooked, and these components must be factored in starting at the design level. This must be true for every stage of the journey, from customer discovery to purchase. For instance, any web portal that is designed without Google in mind risks alienating the wildly popular search engine when it comes to prioritization and search engine optimization (SEO). If new customers can't easily discover a portal, its potential will be greatly reduced because only those with prior knowledge of its existence will be shoppers.

Once the customer is onboard and browsing a website, they should be able to quickly find any products of interest, or easily access a human being for more complex queries. Any required tech support can take many forms (video chat, phone call, text messages) as companies must be prepared for varied consumer communication preferences. Even at checkout, there are a multitude of factors that can ruin a sale before it is completed. According to a Baymard Institute survey, hidden shipping costs, requirements for account creation, or overly complex checkout processes may cause consumers to terminate a purchase even in the midst of its completion.



Figure 2: Reasons for Abandoning Orders at Checkout



As PSPs implement more comprehensive online portals to boost their e-commerce potential, they should always be asking themselves a very basic question: “How easy is it for customers to find what they are looking for and buy it?”

Know the Audience

In addition to function, the needs of your audience should dictate the functionality and layout of your online portal. For example, a smaller PSP may not need a web portal that offers six different language options. In all cases, though, customers' communication preferences must be acknowledged and respected. In many cases, this means prioritizing mobile development. Mobile e-commerce is its own subset of the greater e-commerce space and is growing in popularity and usage right alongside the former. According to an article by Business Insider, mobile e-commerce might even eclipse regular e-commerce as (what else?) convenience propels it forward.³ The fact that many consumers have their smartphones with them at all times makes the platform ideal for business and personal interactions. Computers, even small ones like laptops and tablets, are bulkier and harder to carry. PSPs that do not optimize their online portals for mobile interaction may be leaving money on the table. It should also be noted that Google tends to prioritize those sites that are optimized for mobile in its search results. So even if customers are not using their smartphones to interact with a website, it can still pay to invest in mobile optimization.

Choosing the Right Software

After conducting research and outlining a clear plan for the online portal's purpose and objective, it's time to build the platform. Like anything online, a custom, in-house solution is fully possible—but it will likely be more expensive and/or time-consuming. In response to the great need for e-commerce and other online functionality, a great many online portal

³ <https://www.businessinsider.com/mobile-commerce-shopping-trends-stats#:~:text=Insider%20Intelligence%20forecasts%20that%20m,by%20the%20end%20of%202020.>



software providers exist. Some are less expensive than others, but then again, they aren't all created equally. There is no perfect solution. Each will have its own positives and negatives, and a lot will depend on what the company intends to use the portal for. Many large retailers, for instance, use Shopify to help build their portals since it has features to help manage and sell large, diverse product inventories. Smaller stores, by contrast, often turn to Wix, which is known for offering ease of use without sacrificing feature availability and customization. Once PSPs understand what they need from their online portal, they can have much stronger conversations with software providers around building an effective, intuitive solution.

As noted earlier, there are many software options available. In this document, we will highlight eight, as selected by Website Builder Expert:⁴

- ◆ **BigCommerce:** Robust e-commerce tool, often used by retailers. Well rated for recently launched businesses or organizations trying to grow.
- ◆ **GoDaddy:** A simple solution that can work out well for those new to online portals. Might not have the same level of support as some other providers, however.
- ◆ **Shopify:** Has many tools that are useful to PSPs with a wide array of products to sell.
- ◆ **SquareSpace:** An industry leader (with all the associated notoriety) that offers numerous templates from which to build from. Most have been optimized to be visually pleasing.
- ◆ **Square Online:** A robust platform that offers a good value for the price.
- ◆ **Volusion:** A platform with numerous and complex analytics features. Perfect for those PSPs that want to know more about their customer base.
- ◆ **Weebly:** An up-and-coming platform creation tool. Website Builder Expert lists this option as one to pay attention to.
- ◆ **Wix:** Well-suited for smaller businesses and rated (by Website Builder Expert) as the best all-around e-commerce platform.

These platforms, and most other online portal solutions, are available as a software as a service (SaaS) package, typically ranging from \$16 to \$30 a month. These solutions are also, unsurprisingly, cloud-based, meaning they do not require on-premises servers or other equipment for installation/activation. There are numerous security advantages to utilizing cloud servers in general, but Keypoint Intelligence cautions that PSPs should carefully review their needs and their own cybersecurity requirements/investments before choosing an online portal partner.

⁴ <https://www.websitebuilderexpert.com/ecommerce-website-builders/platforms/>



Opinion

The continued rise of e-commerce and mobile e-commerce will not end with COVID-19. Due largely to its convenience, e-commerce has become a new shopping staple that might one day permanently surpass in-person transactions. PSPs cannot afford to be limited by the traditional business methods of the past. While there will always be a place for a personal touch and human interactions, most consumers and businesses are now comfortable with purchasing goods and negotiating deals solely through digital channels. Having a robust online portal is key to not only attracting business but continually engaging and re-engaging clients.

PSPs that properly invest and build robust online platforms to manage sales while collecting actionable consumer data will likely be at an advantage going forward. Innovation has always been a sign of leadership in any industry, and for print, the time to embrace digital as the new normal has already come. Moving forward, companies that don't invest in capable online solutions, including a web portal, run the risk of losing out to the competition at a time when the economy is still in the midst of recovery.



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