



## How to Navigate Online Stores

What apparel decorators must know about creating and elevating their e-commerce platforms.



By **Luke Gardner**,  
Content Creator, Printavo

The pent-up economic and creative energy of the pandemic has been channeled through the online store. The world turned to Amazon, Instacart, and a glut of other online services like never before. While these businesses were already poised to consume an ever-larger part of the retail economy, the pandemic hastened their rise.

It's an old cliché to claim that a stunning shift in the custom printing industry is brewing. Every marketer and technology company claims to have the next “big thing.” But the historic shift that's occurred through the entire custom printing industry is genuinely unparalleled. The turbulence in the economy has created tremendous distress, but there are still more wallets ready to spend than one might imagine.

The modern print shop in 2021 is more akin to

a technology company than the print shop of 40 years ago. Many shops still operate with a business model that's 40-plus years old: simply find customers and sell them large printed orders. The technology they use can reflect that mentality, too. In contrast, the modern print shop has mastered online communication, employs fewer people because they invest heavily in software and automation, and aspires to become an always-available direct-to-consumer brand.

Because of the pressure that coronavirus exerted on the industry, screen-printing shops have turned into “partners for fulfillment” versus “T-shirt printers.” This is a different role than the print shop of 40-plus years ago, as well. The most competitive shops have been forced to mature as organizations. They handle inventory, design, and actual



Wesendol, Getty

fulfillment on top of traditional customer service.

At the center of this is the online store. Its power is akin to the printing press in the 1400s: it is the most effective and profitable way to reach an impossibly broad audience. By virtualizing their businesses, hundreds of print shops across the U.S. have seen their margins grow significantly despite the economic downturn and disruption to daily life. The way forward was (and still is) through online store sales.

### Why Use Online Stores?

In late March 2020, print shops were desperate for revenue. Events had been shuttered, businesses shut down, and the country held still as it buckled under an uncertain future. At Printavo, we held our breath. Would print shops, which are so

dependent on large gatherings and events, be able to survive this kind of extended pause? Margins in the printing industry are notoriously low. Worse yet, cash flow is a well-known sticking point for many shops that are stretched to their limits.

We were amazed by the creativity, energy, and positivity that print shops managed to muster, and we were fortunate, because we had invested in our own online store platform, Printavo Merch. Across the U.S. (and internationally), print shops of all sizes stepped up to the plate and started campaigns to help small businesses hurt by the pandemic. From breweries to churches to restaurants, print shops connected to Printavo raised more than \$1 million for their communities, and dozens of other platforms raised significant amounts during the same period. Online

stores became a must-have for print shops (and virtually every other business) almost overnight. There was simply no other way to do business.

This “forced breakthrough” is really notable for two reasons. On the most basic level, it’s a tremendous shift in how business is done with print shops. After this shift, online sales are the norm for custom-printed apparel. The online store, once a weird niche, or simply a “nice to have,” is as necessary as the ink on the shirt. Any shop that doesn’t have the technology (or a partner shop) to fill that new online space misses out on an entire segment of the market.

Second, these fundraising campaigns facilitated a shift to print shops becoming community hubs instead of service-oriented businesses. This second point is worth elaborating on, because the most successful print shops tend to have something in common: they are deeply integrated into their communities. That doesn’t necessarily mean that these shops are tied to the town they’re in — some, like Rockford, Ill.’s Rockford Art Deli, definitely are — but instead means that they’ve pursued a community-based strategy for building their business.

Communities and subcultures form around interests: cars, music, beer, gaming, and so much more. Print shops have, remarkably, become intertwined with these subcultures. The most successful foster the success of those subcultures, like Aurora, Ill.’s The Yetee and their partnership with the multimillion-dollar Games Done Quick charity.

### What’s Required to Make an Online Store?

Diving into most new software or technology is not like diving into online stores. Why? Because online stores have been made so much easier. The developers and engineers behind the software have been forced to make it accessible to more people than ever.

And, in addition to being easier than ever, making an online store is the most affordable it’s ever been. Shops really only need good-quality mockups of the products they want to sell (or product photos, if they prefer). Developers leave the specifics ▶

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to the shops, and instead arm them with the most powerful principles for success once the store is live.

The customers print shops pick for online stores are just as important as the stores themselves. Without customers, a store is purely ornamental. So, who are good customers for online stores? There are two distinct segments that could be pursued first. The first segment is simple — shops go to the good customers they already have. The odds are great that an online store suits something they already do with them, even if it's just an easy way for

them to reorder popular products. The second segment to pursue are customers (or designs) that meet “The Grandma Rule.” This rule is easy to understand: would someone's grandma want to purchase this product, too? Products with broad appeal and reach have the most potential in an online store setting. Think along the lines of items that celebrate an achievement, community, business, or holiday.

Next, communication is the lynchpin for successful stores. Print shops should require customers to sign terms and conditions if they're

executing online sales on a customer's behalf. Spell out exactly what will happen with the online stores. How will cash be dispersed? When will products ship? What are the minimums to fulfill orders? What about refunds and exchanges? A suggestion is setting a 24-piece minimum, taking a \$50-\$100 refundable deposit, not accepting refunds or exchanges, and being very transparent about the process involved with administering the store.

### Marketing and Fulfilling Stores

With the right customer selected, the store built, and the agreed-upon clear terms and conditions that work for both parties, now comes the heavy lifting: marketing and fulfilling the store. Don't be scared off — this is where print shops see the rubber meet the road and watch

**Shops don't need to be Amazon to get started. Rockford Art Deli has a modest and functional fulfillment area.**

Courtesy of Printavo.



the sales start to pour in (if they get it right).

When it comes to marketing stores, the customers shops partner with have to help them. For instance, Chicago's Lucky Prints ran a fundraiser for a local brewery. While Lucky Prints has thousands of followers on Instagram, its reach is limited. The brewery it partnered with, however, has ten times Lucky Prints' reach. By furnishing the brewery with mockups and prewritten social media captions, Lucky Prints piggybacked off the brewery's success and reached its engaged audience.

It's unrealistic to expect a print shop to reach another business's audience; that business's help is mandatory for success. Ask the customer to utilize social media, its newsletter or email list, and even its website to help generate traffic and sales to the online store.

The way offered products are priced is also a type of marketing. A suggestion is offering product tiers on any online store. Offer something cheap (think \$10 or less), something mid-range (\$20 or so), and something high-end (\$50-plus). This allows a customer just enough choice without introducing analysis paralysis into the equation. Somewhat counterintuitively, fewer products promotes more sales. In Printavo Merch's experience, stores with fewer than 10 products account for 85% of the stores that have achieved more than \$10,000 in sales.

Urgency is another element of marketing online stores that shouldn't be overlooked. Stores that utilize a timer, or simply note that the store closes on a certain date, demonstrate significantly higher sales. While the offer may not actually be a limited-time offer, it's important to maintain the urgency that the customer can't wait to get this product. The same effect can be achieved with limited-time discounts and coupons.

Once print shops have finished selling and closed the store, they'll have to fulfill the orders. This is a challenging task that requires a keen sense of organization, but it's also fairly straightforward. If there is one theme for advice in fulfillment, it's



An example of a simple, community-oriented fundraising model, as used by Lucky Prints early in the pandemic. Courtesy of Lucky Prints.

to keep it simple. Designs should be as simple as possible, ideally utilizing black ink or only a handful of screens. Products and sizes should be streamlined. This makes the printing easy, and fulfillment much easier.

One strategy, however, puts the fulfillment on steroids: bagging and tagging. Every print shop that offers online sales should implement mandatory bagging and tagging. The ideal fulfillment strategy centers around bagging and tagging as a quality- and quantity-control mechanism. Merchandise is arranged on tables by sizes, then sorted into orders. Each order has a receipt that is placed on the order. This is the first layer of control. The second layer of control comes when the order is actually placed into the bags. It is checked against a master list and then packaged for shipping. This

strategy goes one step beyond just putting the shirts into polymailers and sending them out, as the bagging and tagging introduces an additional layer of security to ensure every order is perfect.

### The Real Power of Online Stores

Like the invention of the printing press, online stores not only unlock a kind of exponential capability for print shops, but their scaling capacity is unmatched by any other type of technology.

First, online stores allow for marketing to a national audience from a local stage. Fundraisers for a beloved local business suddenly reach far beyond the boundaries of one's town. People who have left, family members, tourists, and more have instant and easy access to that fundraiser now. ▶



While Lucky Prints has a healthy social media follower count, the brewery it served has significantly more, and sales took off once the latter promoted the online store.

**The Yetee has made a big business of daily online store sales (and fulfillment for its partners).**

Courtesy of Printavo.



Second, online stores are simply less work and overall administration than traditional sales. The learning curve is intimidating, but once a print shop achieves efficiency with online stores, it never looks back. While bagging and tagging and other fulfillment activities can be labor-intensive, the overall administrative burden is much less. Customers place orders at their leisure, shops print and fulfill on the

deadlines they set, and a significant amount of the sales burden is lifted. This really means that a shop can offer more customers a better service once it has established its workflow.

Third, online stores are a premium service that's low risk and high reward. It costs virtually nothing to make mockups and set up an online store. Many shops create a store to pitch to customers before customers have even mentioned

an online store; simply showing them a store with their products is often enough to convince them to make the leap. Customers place a heavy premium on the convenience and professionalism that online stores offer, allowing print shops to leverage them as a top-tier service (even if they're simple to create).

Finally, every customer that an online store touches is a potential repeat customer. Always include a "thank you" card with orders that has the shop's information. Bagging and tagging is another opportunity for shops reaching customers that may not know they exist, particularly if they're running an online store for another business or organization. When those customers need custom merchandise, they'll remember the nice package that was sent to them and think of the shop right away. This exact strategy has paid off for Campus Ink, a Champaign, Ill.-based print shop that has focused heavily on executing online stores during the past year.

### The Shop of the Future?

What does the future of the custom printing industry look like? It's obvious: print shops are becoming miniature tech companies. They're adept at using the internet not just to run their shops, but to make sales. Many shops will automate

**Campus Ink's bags have proven to be a formidable marketing tool for its online stores.**

Courtesy of Steven Farag.



the vast majority of their customer interaction.

Retail and online fulfillment will exist in the same spaces as actively managed brand fulfillment. Shops will invest heavily in technology like hybrid and digital printing to meet the demand that online stores place on them. Events will begin to come back, and traditional wholesale orders will emerge — albeit in an altered state. Technology like M&R's Digital Squeegee and ROQ's Hybrid will change concert and event merchandising from a mass-merchandising game to something totally different: every shirt could be a little different and a little-bit custom, even if purchased at the same event.

This shift isn't happening — it has happened. It will not reverse. It has been forced. For those who might be panicked and feel like it's too late, rest assured that it's still very early in the game. Invest in



An example of an online store's countdown timer. Creating this sense of urgency boosts sales significantly.

technology and software, but stay curious. For those who aren't "natural techies," set aside an hour or two every other week to explore new tools, software, and technology.

Online stores are a gift for this industry. Start now, start small. It's easier than ever to iterate, learn, and grow a business through online stores. ■

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