How to Set Up an E-commerce Store and Raise Money for Your Nonprofit

Posted on August 8, 2017

This post originally appeared on the TechSoup Canada blog.

The days where selling online meant owning a huge warehouse, holding lots of stock, and dealing with endless product manufacturers are over. Of course, it works in some instances, but there is no longer a need to go about e-commerce in this way if it doesn't work for your needs.

If you're looking to raise some extra capital for your nonprofit, selling online can be a great way to go - generating publicity as well as funds for your cause. Here's how to make the most of e-commerce for your nonprofit in 2017.

Try Different Channels

A good way to start in e-commerce and get a feel for what sells and what doesn't is to begin with online marketplaces such as Amazon or eBay. Whatever the mission behind your nonprofit, it's a good idea to sell items that resonate with that cause, rather than something unrelated.

You should also consider the values behind the product, and whether there could be any kind of PR backlash. Imagine if Greenpeace started selling products that were affiliated with poaching, whaling, or pollution, for example. The media would go bananas.

Signing up for AmazonSmile is a good way to earn donations from your supporters while they shop - plus it's easy and hassle-free to get involved. Make sure you promote that fact as much as possible, so that lots of people sign up. You might also want to add a banner to your website that explains how it all works.
The other option is to go to your own online store, which removes reliance on marketplaces and allows you to build some brand equity for your nonprofit. It's easy to set one up using an out-of-the-box, **customizable online store builder**. Lots of charities do very well through their online stores, selling branded items like t-shirts, clothing, mugs, phone cases, and toys. How could you make this work for your nonprofit?

**Tell a Compelling Story**

As humans, we are brought to action through stories. Stories resonate with our emotions, far more than the latest facts and figures ever will. To make those all important conversions, your nonprofit e-commerce website needs to tell a compelling story. And it needs to be one that will make your visitors care enough about your cause to donate or make a purchase. Supporting graphics, images, and animations are also a nice touch that will help to bring the story to life - much more than a simple page of text would.

Think about how you can make your brand story and website experience more engaging, while highlighting the personality and values of your nonprofit. Running a blog alongside the store that shares useful content, resources, and guides can be a good way to share all the good work you do, without coming across as too promotional. Above all, always aim to keep things interesting and inspirational for your readers.

**Indulge in Some Digital PR**

To generate quality traffic to your nonprofit's e-commerce store, you will need to pay attention to SEO - both on- and off-page. Here are some actionable on-page SEO fixes that can significantly improve your site's traffic. On top of that, links and brand mentions are a core SEO metric that you can't afford to ignore.

As a nonprofit website owner, you're in a favorable position, as others are generally more willing to link back to your site than they would to a commercial business. This means you have a great opportunity to build some powerful links that will boost your domain authority and trust rating.

Take advantage of regional press, national publications, and local sites to draw attention to your charity e-commerce campaign. Ensure that you cultivate good relationships with journalists and media outlets to get them on your side.

And know what they're looking for. The media loves a good success story, so be sure to offer them valuable content that is insightful or inspirational. Knowing how to write a solid press release is a must.

**Embrace Video and Visuals**

You've heard the saying, "A picture is worth a thousand words." Although written content is immensely valuable to your e-commerce store, it's important not to neglect your visuals - be that graphics, photography, or video. Images are engaging and will help to bring the website to life. Could videos be a viable accompaniment to your nonprofit's content strategy?
Start by creating an official YouTube channel for your nonprofit store. You can optimize videos for SEO by making sure you use your primary keywords in the video title and description. Those keywords help interested parties to find you more easily. Videos have been the driving force behind so many successful charity campaigns, because they’re great for social media sharing.

Consider the right tone for your videos and imagery. Would it be more effective to aim to be serious and hard-hitting, or light and entertaining? Think about which would be more likely to motivate your target audience to action. At the outset, you can experiment with different angles to find what works well for you, tracking the views and shares to see what is capturing people's attention.

For some inspiration, check out the **Baking Bad campaign** by the British Heart Foundation and the **First World Problems Anthem** from The Gift of Water.

**Be All over Social Media**

Social media is a super important marketing strategy for nonprofits. We all hope to be the one to start an online video challenge that goes viral, or create an amazing ad that gets picked up in every roundup article.

Whether your nonprofit is a vast enterprise or a smaller outfit, ensure that your social media channels are driving people to your e-commerce store - and vice versa. It's easy to integrate your social media presence using simple apps or plugins, depending on which CMS (content management system) you're using.

Of course, no one is likely to share your content on social media unless it's compelling. For a nonprofit, it's all about raising awareness by making sure your content is shareworthy. To get lots of shares, make it as easy and digestible as possible to do so.

Quotes, facts, videos, and images can be shared with one click - so users don't have to think too much about it. But they're free to comment if they want.

The key is to help people to feel involved. Treat your online customers like the VIPs they are by engaging with them publicly online. Depending on what sector you're in, you may find certain social channels work better for you than others. Instagram is ideal for visual content, whereas LinkedIn is great for corporate sponsorship. Check out this [strategic guide to social media for nonprofits](https://grantspace.org/resources/blog/how-to-set-up-an-e-commerce-store-and-raise-money-for-your-nonprofit/).

In short, remember to ensure that all of your nonprofit e-commerce content, design, and strategy is geared towards engagement. Your website is your home on the Internet, so make sure it says all the right things about you. A lot of nonprofits are turning to digital means of building awareness and generating income - in short, it's the future of fundraising. How will you get the most out of e-commerce in 2017?
Patrick Foster is a freelance e-commerce consultant and contributor to multiple marketing and e-commerce blogs. Patrick is passionate about business, nonprofits, and all things social.