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Planning for ecommerce

Section one

The importance of planning for successful implementation

The Six Step Plan to help you decide if e-commerce will work for your museum

E-commerce can be a useful addition to the way in which your museum does business. However, it is important that you do not approach the introduction of e-commerce solutions without looking at the broader aspirations and plans you might be considering for your museum.

Successful marketing, whether it be via e-commerce solutions or a more traditional approach, is always about how you plan to better meet your customers needs and grow your business and customer base.

Before you consider utilising e-commerce solutions to improve the marketing of your museum the following steps should be taken. They do not have to take lots of time, in fact they should save you time as you move forward with your ideas because you will have considered all the important aspects of your plans and be much clearer about why e-commerce can help your business.

Step One - Where are we now?

This will involve an analysis of your **strengths and weaknesses** (and opportunities and threats (often called a SWOT analysis). It does not have to be a detailed exercise (an example of a completed SWOT can be found [at the end of this section](#)). You will probably already know what your strengths and weaknesses are but it is really useful to write them down and reflect on them either as a group of staff or volunteers. It's also interesting to see how your strengths may offer opportunities but can also be vulnerable to threats. (The same applies to weaknesses in reverse).

It is also useful to consider who your **competitors** are i.e. who is offering a similar visitor experience to you? This is because you need to be sure that an e-commerce solution will add value to what your museum offers. If your competitors are already using e-commerce you will need to either match their offer or ideally want to do it better than them!

You should spend time looking at your competitors/peers' websites to see what they're up to, what you like, what you dislike. It can also be useful to get a few people involved in the process, and perhaps use a template for making notes about what you find so there's a consistent pattern - (an example [at the end of this section](#))

Next it is useful to consider your **customers**. How do you relate to your customers at present? Are you clear who your main target audiences are? Eg; a single site will have multiple audiences, whose needs are different: e.g. funders, children, people with specialist interest, etc. Also, customers on the net may be different from the current customer-base

e.g. Australians with an interest in family heritage might visit the website. Will your customers respond positively to an e-commerce offer?

Finally, you need to consider your **staff (paid or volunteers)**. Do they have the necessary skills and time to be able to manage an e-commerce solution? If not, how will you support them to be able to make the most of the new ways of working?

Step Two - Where do you want to be?

This is about being clear about what **direction** your organisation is heading. If you have a clear mission about what you are trying to achieve then maybe a quick review of your mission would be useful to find out if e-commerce will help you better achieve your objectives. If you are unclear what your **mission** is then it is important that you formulate a clear idea about the purpose of your museum and what you are trying to achieve.

The next element is to consider where you want to **position** yourself within the museum sector i.e. are you a museum, are you a visitor attraction, are you wanting to offer a fun or serious experience? Once you have reviewed this and are clear about your future direction you can move on to consider the benefits of e-commerce for you.

How will e-commerce help you to get to where you want to be? For example, will the introduction of an online retail shop improve your presence and let more potential customers know what you offer? Will an improved, interactive website be worth the extra cost and resources by bringing in more customers?

Step Three - How might you get there?

You have many **choices** within e-commerce to consider.

You need to look at your **main product or service**. **How** much do you charge and how do you currently promote what you offer. How does it need to change? How will e-commerce help you to do things differently? Can you afford the time and resource e-commerce will demand?

Step Four - Which e-commerce solution is best?

See sections xx and xx of the guidelines that cover the ecommerce in detail.

Once you have considered the various options you need to decide which one or more **solutions** is the best one for you? What **criteria** will you use to make your choice? How much will it **cost**? (both in terms of technical support and staff expertise).

What will be the **benefits**?

How will you know whether you have been successful (**measuring outcomes**)?

Step Five - How can we make sure we get where we want to be?

What are the **problems to overcome**?

It is best that you are honest with yourself and your colleagues as to what you think the problems might be at an early stage. This allows you all to share your concerns and hopefully come up with solutions early on in the process. If you bury your head in the sand about what difficulties you think you might have they will only be worse when they happen.

Where/who will you go to for **support**? No-one wants to venture into e-commerce on their own. There are many people and organisations who are there to help you and it is important you do some research and are not afraid of asking for help and support. Most

popular ecommerce products/services have an active user community that will help with ideas and suggestions. (see technical section xx for more details)

Do you have the support of your line manager or **Board of Trustees/Management Committee?** It is very important that everyone in the organisation approves and is supportive of an e-commerce venture. It may well be the start of you doing a lot of things very differently within your museum and it's important that everyone understands this and feels happy and comfortable with your ideas and the implications.

Step Six - How will you know if your e-commerce venture has been a success?

It is important that you are clear from the beginning what you want to achieve from any e-commerce solution. Once you have this, you can use it at every stage of the process to check that you are on course and that you are not veering too much from your original intentions. If your main outcome of your chosen e-commerce venture is more customers or increased income or more hits on your website, these are **hard outcomes** that you can easily measure. If however your main outcome is a better visitor experience this is a **soft outcome** and is a lot harder to measure or prove success.

Section Two

What makes a good website from a business perspective?

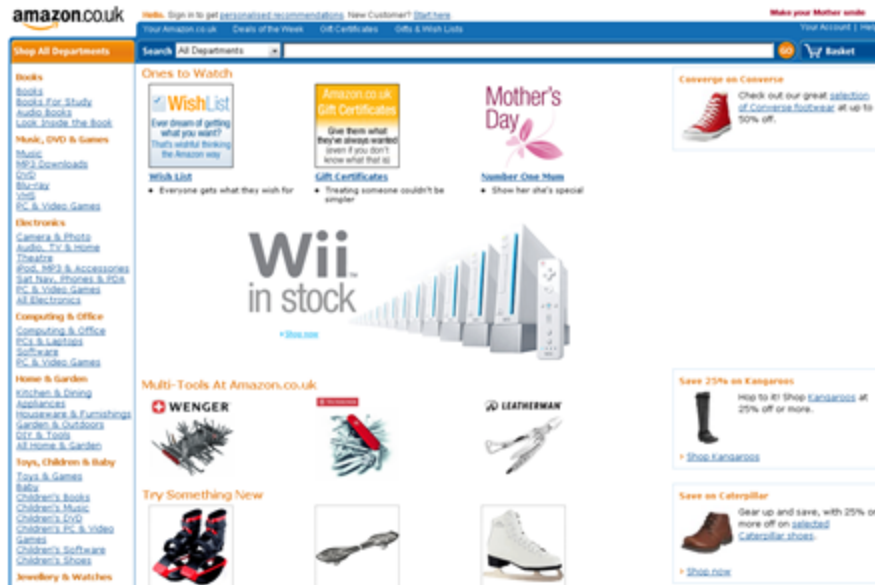
The ten step plan to a great e-commerce website

To succeed at e-commerce you need to do more than bring existing and new customers to your website and entice them to buy or access the services or products your museum has to offer. You have to ensure that these customers keep coming back to continually see what services/offers you have and, if you have products to sell, that they buy them. In other words, you must create **customer loyalty**. The message is clear if you want new and repeat custom you must give the customer an **excellent e-buying experience** and, when they visit your museum, follow this up with an excellent customer experience.

Doing business by means of e-commerce is no different than doing business generally - you must ensure **excellent customer service**. However, using a website as your main customer interface brings its own set of 'best practice' rules. Below are the ten steps most experts say make a good website from a business perspective. You may not need to observe all the steps in the process it depends on what you are trying to 'sell' on your website ie are you selling a defined product or a service. Whatever you are doing the following steps should provide you with some hints and tips for your museum to use:

Step One - Make it fast

Create a fast loading site to show that you respect that your customers are short of time and it has the added benefit of encouraging your customers to browse. You do this by **minimising the use of graphics** on each page. Use small photos with links to enlarged photos. This gives the customer the option of spending more time downloading larger photos of those products/services they are most interested in. Here's an example from the Amazon website with lots of thumbnails that you can select to go to particular site sections or see particular products. The message that Amazon sells a huge range of different things comes through loud and clear:



Step Two - Minimise clicks

Design your site so that the number of clicks to find and buy your products and services is minimised. For example, Amazon encourages you to register and login to the website, and once you have done that you can do one click purchasing so it is really easy to make impulse purchases. You have already provided contact information and your standard credit card so all you need to do is press one button and the process is done.



Step Three - Get rid of flashy visuals

Customers dislike flash/splash screens, popups and all moving or blinking images that they can't control. They are perceived as annoying and time-wasting so don't use them! Also, they're usually only interesting the first time at best.

Step Four - Disclose prices and any additional cost early

Some sites withhold extra costs, like postage, until far into the buying process, hoping that the customer will not balk at this last minute disclosure the closer they are to buying. Today's web savvy customer is not like this, they know what to check for and they will most likely abandon their interest in your offer if you do this. It will create annoyance so be upfront and disclose all pricing and related charges early in the e-commerce activity.

Step Five - Keep the customer in the loop

Confirm each step of the customer buying experience. If the customer is unsure if their purchase of exhibition tickets has been confirmed they will be left feeling lost and uncomfortable and may well call your museum, adding to the price of your customer service and adding to a negative customer experience before they even step into your museum. You need to ensure all customers feel secure and valued and you must strive to reduce the number of customer service calls related to your website that your museum receives.

Always answer emails from customers as soon as you can, set up an automatic 'holding' email to acknowledge your customer enquiry giving a timescale for when their enquiry will be actioned. Make sure you meet these service standards.

Step Six - Deliver the service/product efficiently

Customers hate to wait. To be competitive you have to post any products purchased within two days of receipt of the order. If the item is out of stock, or an exhibition is cancelled, let the customer know before they make their purchase or as soon as you can thereafter. If unexpected delays arise, contact the customer and check if they are prepared to wait or if they wish to cancel. For long-term profitability, it's better to lose the sale and maintain the customer's goodwill.

Step Seven - Make communication easy

Provide as many ways as you can for customers to contact you (email, fax, telephone number, on-line enquiry facilities). Strive to reply as soon as possible, set yourself service standards so you can monitor your ability to respond effectively. Research shows that over half of all customer emails go unanswered, don't let your organisation fall into this trap. Make sure that staff are allocated to check emails regularly and properly trained to be able to provide the right answer/response. This will quickly distinguish your museum from your competitors.

If a customer has a complaint, deal with it cheerfully and promptly. Most people will forgive mistakes but they don't forgive being ignored or treated badly. **Empower your staff** to do whatever it takes to resolve customer complaints on the spot.

Section Eight - Use incentives productively

Everyone loves a deal. Handled properly, the creative use of 'buy one get one free'/'freebies' or family deals will help to cement customer loyalty. Research shows that people really appreciate a tangible, physical reward for their loyalty. So why not think about offering a half price return again ticket especially if it encourages people to come to see exhibitions or do an activity that they may never have considered trying? Many museums offer members special incentives/privileges so why not try it for new/repeat customers?

Step Nine - Make returns easy

The average returns rate for e-commerce purchases is 25-35% (this is not the case for ticket purchases). The easier you make this process the more likely you will have repeat custom. If you make the returns process difficult or costly then the customer will go elsewhere next time.

Step Ten - Show your legitimacy and security

Be very clear about your terms and conditions particularly about returns, postage, and insurance

For people to buy from you on-line, they must believe two things:

- That their credit information is safe
- That you will send them the merchandise and not disappear with their money

Later in these guidelines we take a more detailed look at the alternative methods available to you for taking money.

Summary

In e-commerce, as in any business, **excellent customer service** is the only differentiating factor. Anyone can compete with you by offering a similar museum experience, compete with you on price or offer a similar service. Only superior customer service can ensure you get new and repeat business that will lead to you long-term success for your museum.

Section Three

Defining the costs and benefits of implementing e-commerce

The Ten Step Plan to successful e-commerce activity

E-commerce is simply doing business over the internet. It can be using a website to interact with your customers in a more dynamic and immediate way, or attracting new and different customers from those that have traditionally accessed your services or products. For museums it offers an opportunity to open up your offer to a new and different audience. It offers the potential to make money by selling more of your services or expanding your current offer to new markets and customers.

However, it is acknowledged that selling your services or products over the internet is a radically new playing field for many museums. It does not require a different approach to customer service from that already on offer. On the contrary, it means that e-commerce should use established business knowledge and best practice as this has been proven to work.

E-commerce is more than a having a good website and increasing the number of visitors to your website. It also depends on getting the back end right. In simple terms this is knowing what you are doing, why you are doing it and having a long term plan to ensure you don't just do it well but that you do it better and more efficiently than your competitors.

Here are 10 steps to help your museum achieve what you want from your chosen e-commerce activity. Again you may not need to follow all the steps, it depends on what you are using an e-commerce solution for, but they provide a useful checklist for any e-commerce activity you may choose to undertake :

Step One - Have a clear vision and goal

Know exactly what it is you want to achieve. This is likely to be different in year one to what you want to achieve by year three or five. Share this with staff and other stakeholders on a 'need to know' basis. This will ensure you cement an unshakeable conviction and dedication to building a successful online e-commerce presence for your museum. An example of a year one goal could be 'to establish a user-friendly website' whereas a year three goal could be 'to undertake at least 50% of our customer purchasing interaction on-line'.

Step Two - Have patience and take a long term view

You cannot deliver excellence through e-commerce quickly. You have to ensure that you are clear what you want to achieve, have the resources in place to deliver and be able to monitor your activity and change direction if necessary over time. You also need to undertake regulator monitoring to review what's happened and to check whether your initial goals are working and if not maybe you need to adjust.

Step Three - Take calculated risks

Taking some risks and being prepared to invest resources is key. Choosing where to spend your money and spending it wisely is critical. Successful websites invest money in activities that generate growth or make them more efficient. You will ideally do both at the same time. You will need to undertake a **cost benefit exercise** which basically shows you how much you are willing to spend on the e-commerce activity and what you expect to gain from that activity. This gives you the process by which you can measure impact over time and show your staff and trustees that the investment was worth it.

Step Four - Ensure commitment to continuous improvement

Your web presence cannot remain static. This does not mean whole re-design but making changes to ensure continued interest in what you are offering or selling. Good websites and e-commerce activities continuously update their offer and look to ensure continued interest in their service or product offer. As an added benefit, search engines love changed websites so if you want to optimise your site for search engines like Google then this is the way to go!

Step Five - Successful sites use good advisors

No one can be expert at everything and having specialist advisors or partners you can trust and follow is essential. E-commerce does not get simpler as time goes by. It is continually changing and re-inventing itself. Excellent museums using e-commerce will need to pay for the best advice when it comes to delivering excellent e-commerce.

Step Six - Make decisions quickly and change your mind slowly

In the world of e-commerce 3 months is a long time! It is too long for inaction. In general, to keep ahead of the game in e-commerce, you will need to make decisions quickly but measure your results and adjust your offer accordingly. All improvements to your business are based on measured results against agreed targets, even if your targets are regularly revised and updated.

Step Seven - Your customer is King or Queen

Any changes have to show a direct benefit to your customer and in doing so convert more museum enthusiasts into actual customers and existing customers into bigger spenders and more frequent visitors. Elegant design may be satisfying but frequent and multiple site enhancements whose effectiveness shows on the bottom line ie increased visitor numbers, is even more gratifying and should remain your primary focus.

Step Eight - Successful sites embrace technology and change

Keeping abreast of developments online is key to successful e-commerce activity. Changes in online marketing, shifts in online culture and understanding how customers use websites is critical to developing your ongoing understanding of the e-commerce trade and how it could positively impact on your museums' business. It is unlikely you will be able to do this alone. Talking to colleagues across the museum sector and seeing what they are doing is essential. Sharing, benchmarking and developing of best practice in e-commerce should continue be a critical service offered by development agencies across the sector such as the Museums Libraries and Archives Council. Also use your online community. It is really important to overcome your fear of looking stupid and keep asking questions.

Step Nine - Be fair and honest with your customers

Building a well loved and respected museum is key. Real business is created over the long term through repeat visitors and word of mouth referrals. So by offering excellent customer service and being honest about what you can and cannot offer or sell is imperative in ensuring your museum will flourish. New customers, via investment in new e-commerce activity, may take some time to get but can be lost in an instant through poor customer service or not delivering what you promise on your website.

Step Ten - There is no such thing as easy custom or easy money

There may be many museums considering using e-commerce to develop their offer to existing and new visitors. It will not be easy and merely putting your current offer onto the web without thinking through how this should change, how you describe you offer or what you may be able to offer in the future is naïve. E-commerce is like any other business. To do it well and get it right for your museum takes hard work, focus, a commitment to appropriate levels of resource and continuous improvement by setting and monitoring targets. However, learning about e-commerce and trying out new ways of doing business can be fun! Remember, you're not alone. Talk to people, take the advice and support on offer and be willing to open your mind to new ideas and new ways of working. Overall, be willing to make mistakes, learn from them and keep innovating.

Appendix to part one

As explained earlier in this document, it's really important to analyze other websites when you are planning your own because this will help to clarify what you like, and what works. Here are a couple of analysis grids that you can use when carrying out this process so that you have a consistent basis for making comparisons.

Web Site Analysis

Suggested scoring system: 3 = impressive, 2 = adequate, 1 = poor

Address/URL of Site	Score
What is the mission / purpose of Site?	
Audience (who is it aimed at?)	
Quality of Content (Accuracy, usefulness)	
Ease of use (Is it easy to move about in, find information, etc)	
Technical efficiency (does it work?)	
Up to Date (any sign of when it was last updated?)	
How does it look?	
Interactivity (what can you do with the Site apart from reading?)	

Added Value (Does the World Wide Web add something as the communication medium?)	
Stickiness (Would you want to bookmark it, and come back?)	

SWOT Analysis

A classic business tool that can be used both for analyzing your own plans and evaluating other Websites is the SWOT analysis. What do you think is really strong about a particular site (e.g. really good help when shopping). Interestingly, where you find weaknesses, these may suggest opportunities. A classic weakness in some old sites is that you have to print out a booking form for an event, leading to the obvious opportunity of having an online form that also takes payment there and then.

Strengths	Weaknesses
Opportunities	Threats

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