

# The Retailer's Guide to **Starting an Online Store**

Omnichannel retail—it’s not just the future, it’s what your customers expect now.

A well-made online store adds an extra revenue stream to your business and helps you connect with customers who can’t visit you in person. While selling online is vital, getting set up can be a frustrating process with many moving parts if you’re not sure how to do it yourself.

We’re here to help. Follow these nine steps and you’ll be selling online in no time.

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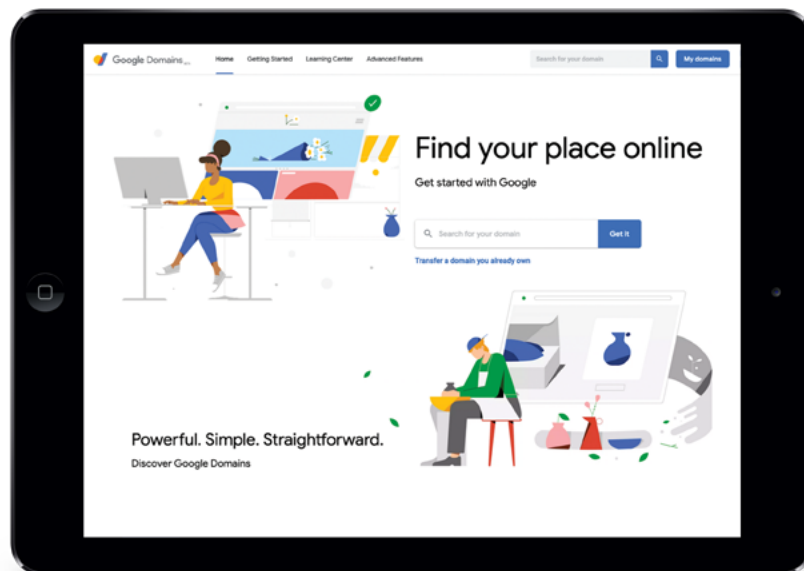
# Step 1:

## Purchase a domain

Every website needs a domain name, that is, your website's address. When selecting your domain name, you'll need to think about the second-level domain (SLD) and the top-level domain (TLD).

A **SLD** is the name of a website. When you look at [www.lightspeedhq.com](http://www.lightspeedhq.com), you can see that the *lightspeedhq* section is the SLD. Your SLD should reflect your business and not be too hard to spell. Avoid hyphens and shortening words to single letters or numerals (unless they're part of your brand name).

A **TLD** is the part of your domain that reads *.com* or one of a number of alternatives, such as *.net*, *.io* or *.co.uk*. While most stores will be fine with *.com*, you can get clever and use your TLD creatively. A bike store may decide to ditch the *.com* and register themselves under *.bike*, for example.



Google does not rank sites by TLD<sup>1</sup>, so feel free to experiment if you'd like—but again, keep in mind your web address shouldn't be too hard to remember or spell. As *.com* is a relatively saturated TLD, you may find your desired SLD is taken under it. By choosing a different TLD than *.com*, you have a better chance that your first pick for your SLD will be available.

Once you have an idea of what kind of domain name you want, you need to purchase it and register it as your own through services like [Google Domains](#) or [GoDaddy](#).

<sup>1</sup><https://webmasters.googleblog.com/2015/07/googles-handling-of-new-top-level.html>

# Domain forwarding

Think about the last time you typed a URL into your browser—you probably didn't add the `www.` subdomain at the beginning, right?

This is because domain forwarding directs you from a bare domain (your SLD and TLD, i.e. `lightspeedhq.com`) to a full domain with your subdomain (i.e., `www.lightspeedhq.com`). While the registrars we recommend include this by default, less reputable providers may not. Always be sure your registrar provides domain forwarding.



## Step 2:

# Select a hosting provider

Now that you have your domain, you'll need a hosting provider. While you have the option to host your site on premise with your own servers, cloud hosting is the way to go for most companies. That way, you don't have to worry about doing your own IT in case of any server hiccups.

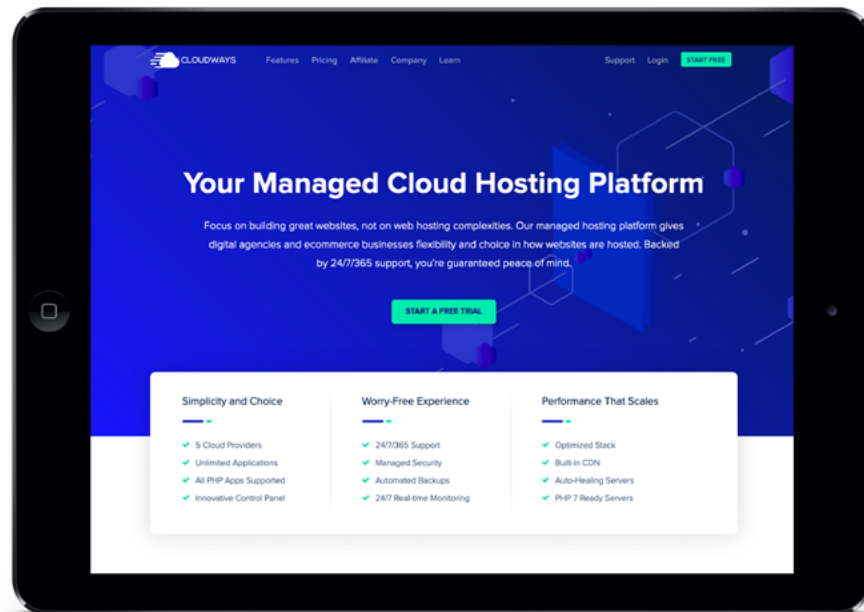
## Managing hosting through your eCom platform

Ecommerce platforms, such as Lightspeed, will act as your hosting provider. In this case, you don't need to think about this step much, as considerations such as bandwidth, uptime and security will be taken care of for you.



# Managing hosting through a hosting provider

If your ecommerce platform provider does not include website hosting in your subscription, you'll need to look into compatible hosting providers like [Cloudways](#) or [A2hosting](#). Make a list of your anticipated needs and shop around, making sure to speak with the sales teams of each hosting provider. A cheap host may not have everything you need!



Bandwidth is particularly important. If your site loads slowly, you'll be punished by Google and your customers may abandon their carts, resulting in fewer total sales. A host and plan that can handle high amounts of traffic will likely be better than one that saves you money each month in exchange for less bandwidth and slower load times.

Uptime is also key. Before you commit to a host, research their record with uptime. Things happen, and no host will ever have a 100% uptime record, but if your entire site is inaccessible regularly, your customers can't shop with you and you can see significant loss of sales.

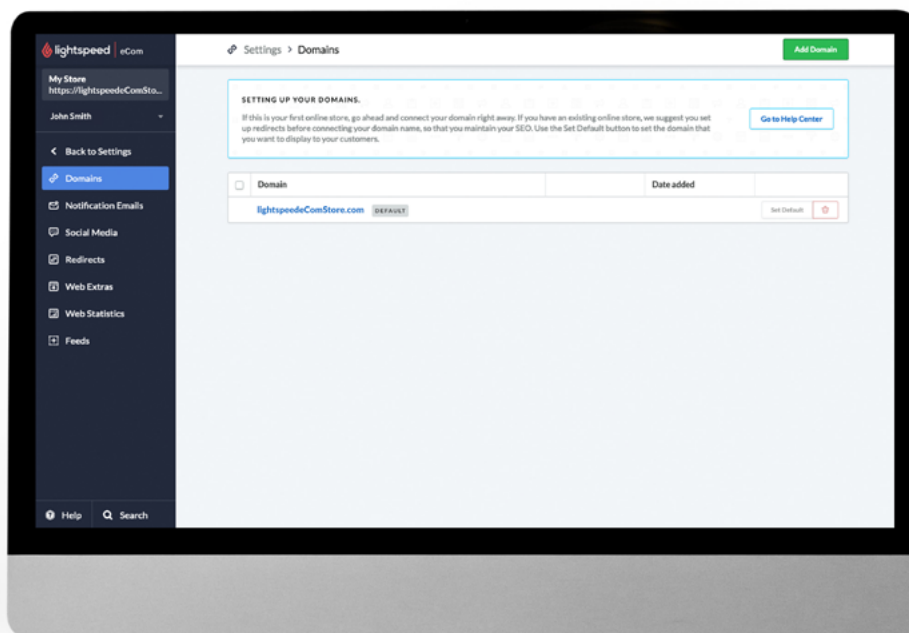
Finally, you need to think about security. Do some research on your chosen host—do they offer DDoS protection, SSL security certificates and other security measures? Do they offer data backups? Pick a host that takes this seriously.

# Step 3:

## Connect your domain to your online store

Time to connect the pieces of the puzzle: connecting your domain to your online store.

How exactly this process will work for you will depend on the platform you're hosting your ecommerce site on. Find the domain section—in Lightspeed eCom, this is under Settings > Domains, for example—and find the setting to connect a domain you own. The platform should walk you through the process; check for documentation in your platform's help centre if you're unsure of a step. Save any DNS information you're given in a secure location.



## Step 4:

# Choose a theme

Once you have a domain name and a hosting provider, your store will need a layout. You can code one yourself from scratch, hire someone to do it for you or use an easily customizable, professionally-designed premade theme.



Your hosting provider may have a theme store with free and premium themes. You can save a lot of time by choosing one of these themes instead of trying to make one yourself. They're optimized for ecommerce with conversion-focused navigation, so you know you'll be getting a theme made to please customers.



Whether you're using a theme or coding your own, ensure your online store follows these best practices:

**Respect negative space:** there should be plenty of white space between elements in your design so that pages are easy to skim without being visually overloaded.

**Streamline choices:** your homepage should showcase your top products, not all your products. Too many products and choices can overwhelm customers through analysis paralysis.<sup>2</sup>

**Create clear categorization:** customers should be able to find your high-level categories quickly. You need a theme that categorizes inventory in a logical manner while not exceeding more than 10 top-level categories, if possible.

**Use color harmoniously:** unless you have a particularly colorful brand, pick neutral colors accented with carefully curated splashes of color.

**Make it accessible:** colorblind customers will have a hard time with red and green as differentiators, and low-vision customers will have a hard time navigating a low-contrast site. Pick high-contrast colour schemes that don't rely on red and green alone.

**Keep mobile in mind:** whatever theme you choose should be responsive for mobile devices as well. Business Insider predicts that mobile commerce will make up 44% of ecommerce by 2024, so keep this market in mind.<sup>3</sup>



<sup>2</sup><https://boagworld.com/design/analysis-paralysis>

<sup>3</sup><https://www.businessinsider.com/mobile-commerce-shopping-trends-stats>

# Step 5:

## Create your main pages

In addition to your homepage and product pages, you'll need to flesh out your online store with pages that contextualize who you are, your policies and your contact information. These pages contain crucial information that helps customers verify your legitimacy.

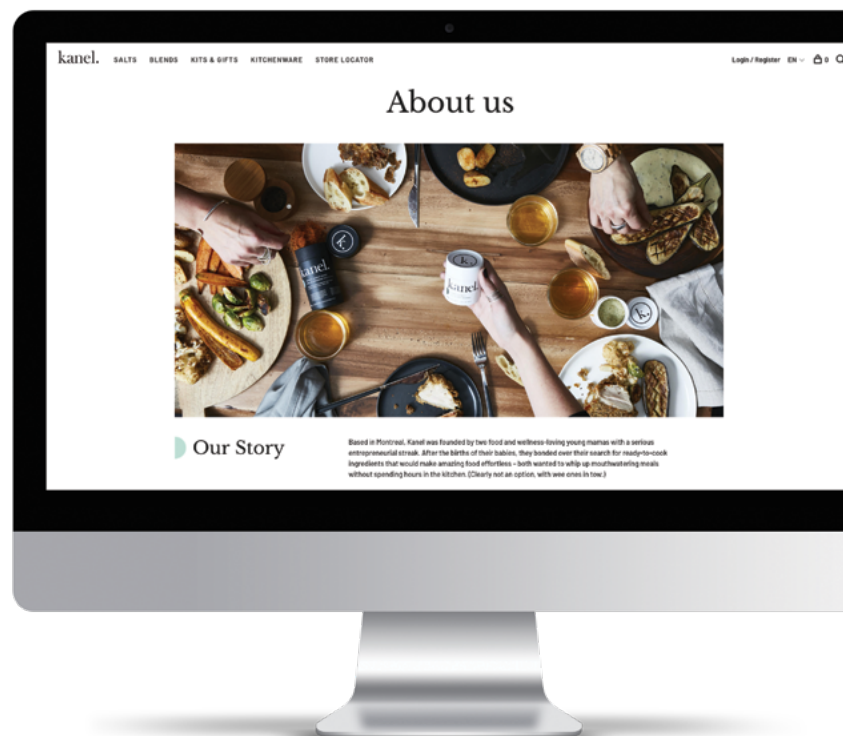
### About us

Tell your story. Who are you? Why did you start your business? What is your commitment to your customers?

This is your chance to capture their imaginations and help customers get to know your business.

### Terms and conditions

This is where you get into the legal nitty gritty. Your terms and conditions establish legally enforceable proper use of your site, which protects you in cases of malfunction or customer dispute.



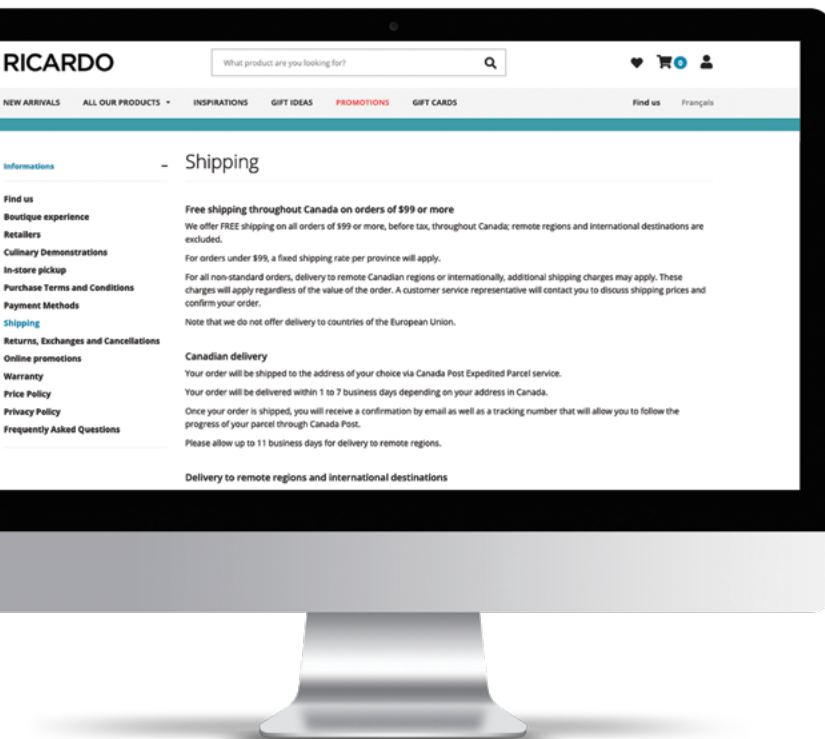
Your terms and conditions should include:

- ✓ **Limitation of liability:** clauses that establish when your business is not legally responsible for injury or harm, such as in the case of 3rd-party theft of user information.
- ✓ **Trademark information:** clauses that declare what is your intellectual property and what rules there are for using and accessing your intellectual property.
- ✓ **Payment terms:** clauses that establish the payment types you take.
- ✓ **Pricing terms:** clauses that establish your right to change the price of products at any time.
- ✓ **Dispute resolutions:** clauses that establish how disputes with customers will be settled.

# Privacy and returns policy

This page will detail your customer's rights. **Your privacy policy should establish how you collect and use customer information**, the cookies used on your site and your right to change your privacy policy. It should also address privacy laws like the CCPA and GDPR.

**Your returns policy should establish how your business handles returns and refunds.** While generators such as Termly can help you out here, you should consider writing this from scratch. Keep in mind timelines—how long customers have to request a refund—and clearly establish how customers will be refunded.



## Shipping

This page will serve to answer any customer questions about your shipping policies, so be sure to be as thorough as possible.

Include information on the carriers you use and their average shipping times. You should also include your handling times—how long it takes you to get an order in the mail—and where you'll be shipping orders from.

As customers may find your site from anywhere in the world, be sure you clearly state shipping fees for the countries you ship to.

## Contact us

Finally, this page will point customers toward your contact information.

If you include an **email address**, check it daily and let customers know the timeframe in which they can expect a response. If you include a **phone number**, clearly state your opening hours and time zone. In addition to an email address and/or phone number, also include **links to any social media** sites you're active on.

This page should also list your physical contact information. List the **address(es) of your store(s)** and consider embedding a Google maps link so customers can plan out their route to visit you in person.

# Step 6:

## Choose a payment gateway

**A payment gateway allows your customers to pay for their purchases.**

Picking a reliable payment gateway helps protect you and your customers from fraud, so take the time to research all your options.

No matter what option you choose, you'll need to know where you stand on PCI compliance. Because there are different levels of PCI compliance, the requirements for your business may be different than another merchant.<sup>4</sup>

### Hosted payment gateways

This type of payment gateway directs customers off your site and to your payment gateway provider's own site. Your provider oversees security, PCI compliance and setup; you don't need to integrate anything to your site.

However, you also do not have control over your customer's experience and some customers may find it off-putting to be redirected from your site to pay. These redirections can be the target of man-in-the-middle attacks, potentially making them less secure than an integrated gateway.

[PayPal](#) is the most prominent example of a hosted payment gateway.<sup>5</sup>



<sup>4</sup><https://www.pcicomplianceguide.org/the-pci-basicsquick-guide-what-do-small-merchants-need-to-do-to-achieve-pci-compliance/>

<sup>5</sup><https://us.norton.com/internetsecurity-wifi-what-is-a-man-in-the-middle-attack.html>

## Integrated payment gateways

This kind of payment gateway keeps your customers on your site as they pay for their orders. You have full control over your customer's experience and are significantly reducing the risk of cyber attacks.

With integrated payment gateways, you may be responsible for PCI compliance, and so you'll need to know what your PCI compliance level requires to avoid fees. When you're selecting your gateway provider, ask them what falls under your responsibility and what they take care of.

[Lightspeed Payments](#) is an example of an integrated payment gateway.



## Payment options

Consider what payment options you'd like your customers to have, such as credit, gift cards and PayPal or monthly installments.

By supporting multiple payment options—both hosted and integrated—merchants give customers the flexibility to pay however they want, which decreases the possibility of them abandoning their shopping cart.

### Payment flexibility for better customer relationships

Giving your customers the flexibility to choose how they want to pay for their order increases the chance they'll order from you again. You can manage multiple payment options easier by integrating a payment services partner into your ecommerce platform.

Canadian retailers going online could elect to use [PayBright](#) to this end, which helps you implement buy now, pay later financing programs for big ticket items, reducing friction at checkout and better guaranteeing a sale for you.

Systems like this are a win-win for you and your customer. They help you optimize the online shopping experience while decreasing shopping cart abandonment. By working with a partner like to manage these payment options, you remove the risk involved—you still get paid upfront.

# Step 7:

## Determine how you want to handle shipping

After customers pay, they'll expect to receive their items quickly. You need a low-cost, high-speed shipping solution for your customers that doesn't cost you too much on the other end.

### Manual vs. integrated shipping

**Manual shipping** means you handle everything yourself, and do not use a partner to calculate rates, generate labels or track tracking codes.



**Integrated shipping** means you use an integration partner compatible with your eCom platform provider, such as [OrderCup](#) or [ShipStation](#). These partners can help calculate rates, automatically generate shipping labels and apply tracking codes to orders for you. While you may need to pay a small subscription fee, you'll save a lot of time. We highly recommend retailers use integrated shipping when moving their business online.

With an integrated shipping partner, all you need to do is print the label and hand it off to the carrier. This means you can process high volumes of orders in much less time. You also only need to pay one company instead of managing invoices for all the different carriers you use.

With manual shipping, you need to do this all yourself. *Integrated shipping turns your ecommerce operation's shipping process into a well-oiled machine.*

## Free shipping

In this scenario, you don't charge anything for shipping. It requires very little setup, as your customers don't pick the carrier, you do. If this is how you plan to ship all your orders, you just need to offer a single shipping method with no cost.

This can be a very expensive method for your business unless you're consistently offsetting shipping costs with high average order values. As you start out with ecommerce, this shipping method should be reserved for promotional efforts, such as special events and carts over a certain monetary value. Once you've gathered more sales data, you may find that you can afford to offer your customers [free shipping](#) without hurting your bottom line.



## Flat rate shipping

In this scenario, you charge a flat rate for shipping. You may choose to offer a number of different shipping speeds at different flat rates so your customers can choose what speed they're willing to pay for. It is generally easy to set up once you've selected the carriers and speeds you want to offer.

This can be seen as a best-of-both-worlds shipping method for you and your customer. Unless a customer happens to place an order for a particularly heavy cart with a cheap flat rate, you'll generally recover shipping costs while customers will still get their order quickly.

## Weight-based shipping

In this scenario, shipping rates depend on the weight of a customer's order.

This shipping method can be complicated to set up without an integrated shipping partner. It also means you'll recover 100% of your shipping costs every time, but it may cause churn for customers unwilling to pay high rates for heavy carts.

If you choose this method, you'll need to weigh and measure all of your products and input that information into your eCom platform. If you change suppliers and an item becomes lighter due to material or packaging changes, you'll need to update the weight and size information ASAP.



## In-store pickup

Rather than a shipping method all its own, you should offer this alongside whatever fee structure you choose. Some customers prefer to pick up their purchases in store, which gives you a chance to make a personal connection and even cross-sell them related purchases.



# Step 8:

## Import your inventory

The exact specifics of this step will depend on your POS and eCom platform. An integrated POS system that centralizes both your physical and ecommerce inventory can save you time here; Lightspeed Retail users can import their inventory to Lightspeed eCom with the press of a button, for example.

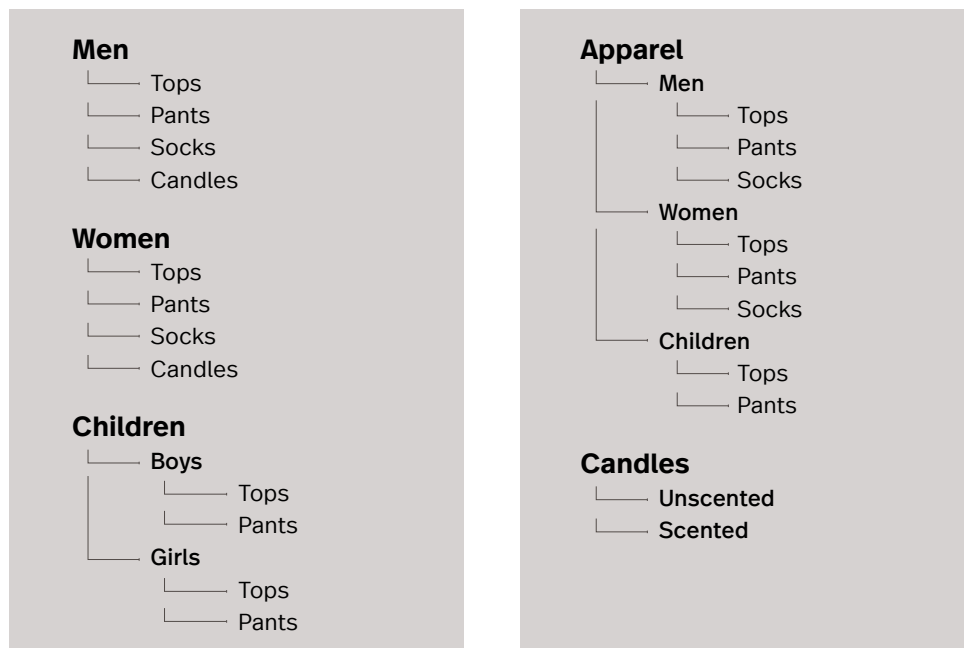
Start small at first—pick your 20 best-selling products and make sure you have sufficient stock of each, and slowly add more from there as you ease into selling online.

## Categorize inventory

Customer-facing categories need to be logically organized and not overwhelming.

[Get the full guide: 8 tips for an optimized inventory management setup](#)

Let's say, for example, you're opening an ecommerce store for a business that sells apparel, accessories and candles. Which category system do you think makes more sense for your customers?



Picked the second option? Then you're right! If your products do not currently follow a similar hierarchical style of organization as the second column, take the time to reorganize your inventory.

## Fill in product details

As you populate your products, keep your product imagery in mind. Consult your theme guide for recommended resolutions.

Each product should have clear, high-definition [product photos](#) that you either took yourself or received from the vendor (with permission to use). If possible, include shots from multiple angles. Consider photos of clothing in more than one size and images of products in action.

Once you have your imagery, you'll need a description. Don't just copy the descriptions from your vendor catalogue—search engines reward unique content, so it's worth it to spend some time making your own descriptions.

**What are the benefits of the product? When might someone use this product? What is it made of? Ensure that product descriptions help shoppers learn about the product, but keep them short. Lengthy descriptions will be tough for people to read on a mobile device.**

Finally, check your product information. Important details such as a size chart, dimensions, weight, SKU, brand and compatibility can be the deciding factor for a purchase, so make sure the information is clearly available.



# Step 9:

## Get the word out that you're online

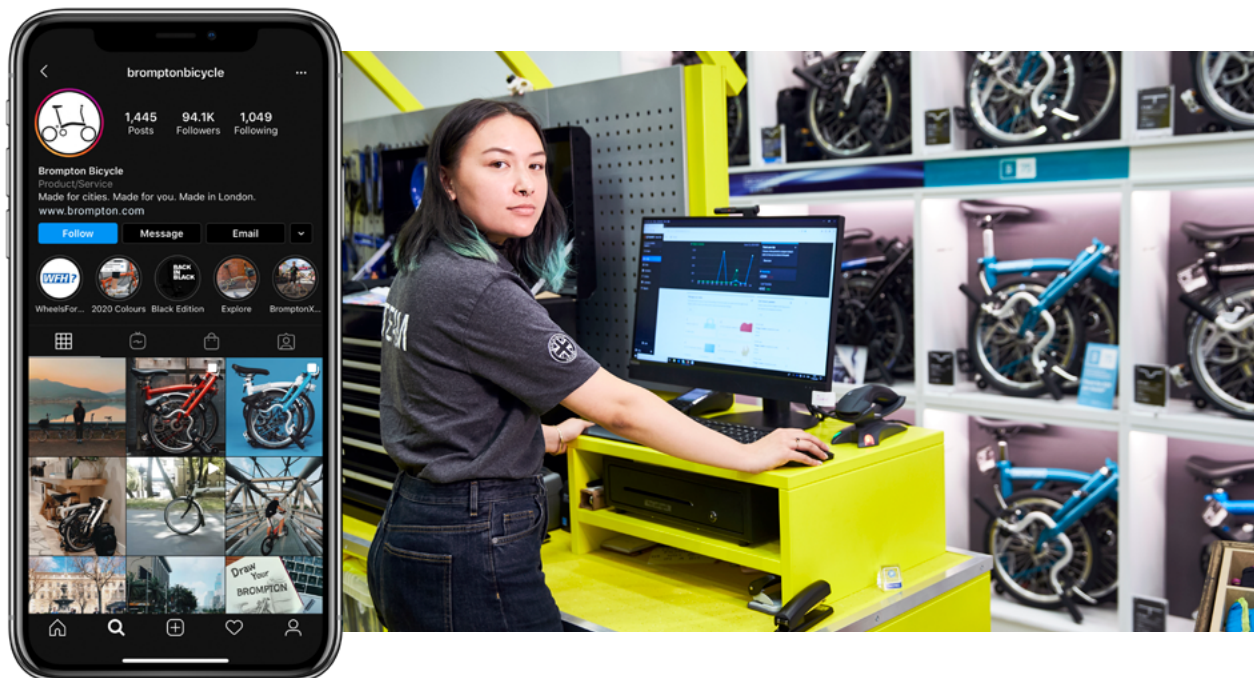
If you haven't done so already, claim and verify your Google My Business listing. Include photos that represent your brand and write a clear description of your store, then add your contact information, including a link to your online store.

Next, make some noise on social media. You should update your social media accounts regularly, so pick the sites you want to be active on carefully. Study [social media demographics](#) and go to where your customers are. If you're not sure, Facebook and Instagram are good go-tos.

Add a link to your ecommerce site to your profile and start promoting yourself. Try to post at least 3 times a week with a healthy mix of product content, user-generated content and lifestyle/inspirational stories.

[Get the full guide: Build the right social media strategy for your store](#)

In addition, consider crafting an email to send out to customers that have given you permission to email them. Make the email easy to skim and cleanly designed, and consider including a discount code to entice them to click through and visit your store.

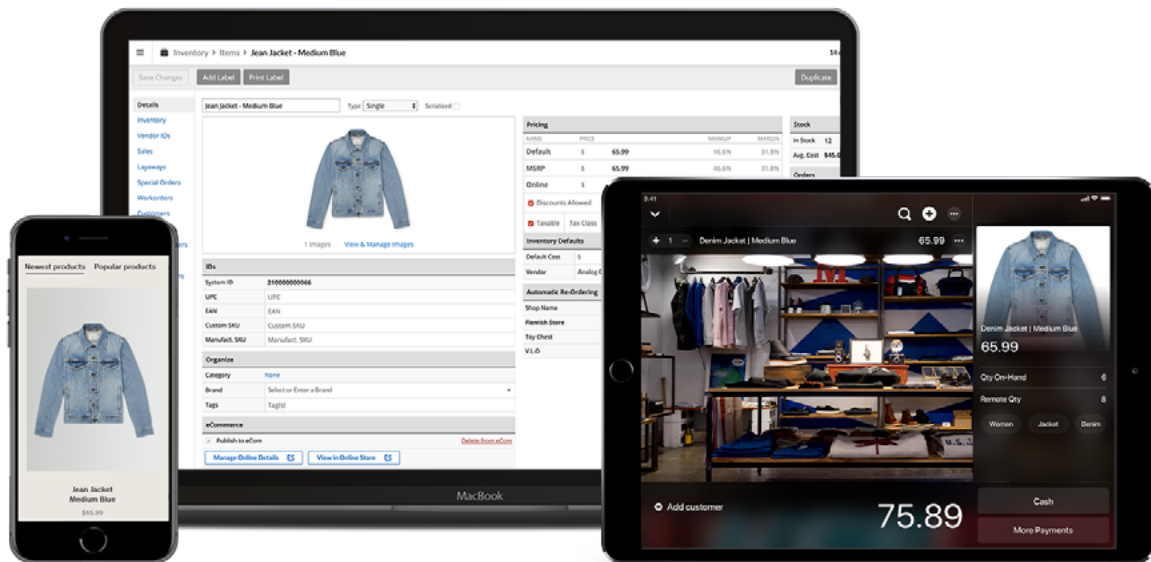


## Future-proof your retail business

COVID-19 exposed how vulnerable businesses without an online presence truly are. Once you're online, you can scale into new markets much faster than you can physically. If you ever experience business interruptions, such as heavy construction on your street, you can still meet customer needs as long as you can ship out orders.

Bringing your store online means being able to meet your customers where they are, at any time, anywhere in the world. Today's shopper expects that level of convenience—and it's a powerful way to future-proof your retail business.





## About Lightspeed

Lightspeed (TSX: LSPD) is a cloud-based commerce platform powering small and medium-sized businesses in approximately **100 countries** around the world. With smart, scalable, and dependable point of sale systems, it's an all-in-one solution that helps restaurants and retailers sell across channels, manage operations, engage with consumers, accept payments, and grow their business.






Headquartered in Montréal, Canada, Lightspeed is trusted by favorite local businesses, where the community goes to shop and dine. Lightspeed has grown to over **1000 employees**, with offices in Canada, USA, Europe, and Australia.

**Start your free trial at**  
[lightspeedhq.com](https://lightspeedhq.com)

### Questions?

Call us at **1 (866) 932-1801**  
 or **1 (514) 907-1801**

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