

e-commerce

The Internet is a convenient and cost-effective tool that allows you to run your small business more effectively, potentially increasing your sales. For an affordable monthly fee and no Web site development costs, you can establish an electronic storefront capable of doing the following:

- Reaching new customers and markets.
- Improving your service to existing customers by allowing them access to your storefront 24 hours a day, seven days a week—enabling them to keep up-to-date on new products and services or special offers.

The basic definition of "e-commerce" is the process of publishing a Web site to market or sell your products and services online. This can refer to a Web site with a toll-free telephone number for calling in orders. However, online ordering is often the most expedient way to make a sale because it makes purchasing more convenient for your customers.

Benefits of E-Commerce

The primary benefits of using e-commerce are that it extends the reach of your small business and enables you to better serve your customers. By gaining access to new customers and markets worldwide, you can increase your revenues with a relatively minimal investment. It is relatively convenient and affordable for small businesses to take advantage of easy-to-use e-commerce solutions.

Getting Started

One way of getting started using the Internet is to create and publish your own Web site. Today's off-the-shelf PC software makes it straightforward to create a site in relatively little time. Easy-to-use templates mean that you do not have to be a technical or design expert. Your Web site can be hosted by an Internet Service Provider (ISP).

Another way is to take advantage of convenient e-commerce solutions. These solutions, many of which are available on the Internet, allow your small business to get started selling your products and services online. Such solutions typically fall into three major categories:

- [Internet Yellow Pages](#) for convenient directory listings and advertising.
- ["Simple" e-commerce solutions](#) that allow you to build a Web site in a few hours and have it hosted complete with payment processing.
- ["Complete" e-commerce solutions](#) for businesses wanting to put together an extensive catalogue with the ability to have online orders processed, tracked and incorporated into existing fulfillment processes.

E-Commerce Solutions for Small Business

- **Internet Yellow Pages.** These allow your small business to create online versions of the awareness ads typically placed in print publications. As the number of Web sites multiplies, it becomes increasingly difficult for customers to locate specific businesses. Internet Yellow Pages are an easy and inexpensive way for you to announce your small business to the world. Features can include everything from a map and directions to your business to having a static ad showcasing your products and services. OnVillage Communications* is one example of an Internet Yellow Page solution provider. Some others include BigBook*, Four11*, WhoWhere?* and your local phone company's online listings.
- **Simple e-commerce solutions.** These solutions enable you to design an online catalog and receive online orders—all without the assistance of professional Web site developers. Simple solutions are designed for small businesses who want to implement e-commerce, but lack the time, resources or knowledge to make it happen in-house. You do not need specialized hardware or software to create a Web site capable of receiving online orders. A fully functional site can be created in just a few hours (depending on the format of the site). Examples of some simple e-commerce solution providers include Viaweb* and CommerceWave* as well as local ISPs.
- **Complete e-commerce solutions.** These allow small businesses to design online catalogs with the ability not only to receive, but also process online orders. Complete solutions incorporate similar front-end features as simple solutions, while also allowing for back-end processing. This enables you to integrate your online catalog and order processing with enterprise databases. Many routine operations, such as tax calculations

and inventory management, can also be automated. INTERSHOP Communications* is an example of a complete e-commerce solution provider. Some others include iCat*, Broadvision*, Mercantec* and solutions developed by your local Web agency.

Improve Your Business with E-Commerce

Today it is relatively easy and cost-effective for you to get started using e-commerce. Given the rapid growth of worldwide Internet usage, this is becoming a valuable marketing and sales tool for small businesses. Although e-commerce may not be appropriate for every small business, you should consider taking advantage of e-commerce solutions to sell your products and services on the Internet.