

How to Sell T-Shirts Online: A Step-by-Step Guide to Success



Everyone loves a good [T-shirt](#) — or 10 of them.

From humor to art, inspiring messages, company swag, fan merch and more, T-shirts provide a powerful form of personal expression. In many ways, T-shirts are blank canvases for art. No matter how many T-shirt products are out there, there's always opportunity for reinvention and innovation. Some T-shirts even withstand the test of time as vintage collectibles.

Even more importantly, the T-shirt market is one that the world will never outgrow. People will always want T-shirts as a fashion staple. And as our world moves into a new era of sustainably-minded business, the T-shirt industry [has the potential to become more environmentally friendly](#).

Because the T-shirt industry is so diverse, it's tough to develop a holistic, quantitative picture of how much the [global market](#) is worth. That's good news — the absence of a defined market means that there's room for everyone who wants to sell T-shirts online, from beginners to seasoned experts.

The barrier to [building your own online store](#) is low, as anyone can spin up unique and high-quality products. This guide equips you with clear steps to get started in bringing your creative idea to market, whether you're an entrepreneur or part of a larger business.

7 Steps for Selling T-Shirts Online

Whether you're launching a new store or [growing an established company](#), selling online can be a smart business decision. Simply put, people love T-shirts. They're just as fun for shoppers to browse as they are to wear.

Finding success in this market is up to your sense of creativity. Here are some steps to help you make your vision a reality:

1. Find the perfect niche.

Having a niche is important for the success of any business. When people shop online, they are often driven by a process of exploration in that they're [looking for information related to products or otherwise](#).

Even if people are just window shopping, people are stumbling upon your T-shirt business from a variety of channels that include blog articles, search engine results, social media posts or advertisements.

To align with what shoppers are seeking out, it's important to know your niche. Do you sell [custom T-shirts](#) related to music or art? Are you looking to make a fashion statement? What does your brand do differently than the countless other T-shirt companies out there?

Here are some steps you can take to build a unique and memorable brand identity for your products.

Identify your passion and interests.

As humans, we are [hardwired to seek out meaning in our lives](#). So if you're putting in the effort to build a T-shirt business, it makes sense to focus on what you enjoy, even if it's a side hustle.

When you love what you do, work won't feel like work — and you'll find the creative inspiration you need to do things like launch a blog, maintain a social media account, write compelling copy, capture interesting product photography and everything else that you need for your business to be successful.

Do your research.

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Most likely, you'll be conducting research throughout the lifespan of your business. Your goal is to make sure that you always have a clear perspective on what your customers want and need. You'll also benefit from an understanding of peer and competitor companies.

Example research tools include online surveys, message boards, social media hashtags on Twitter or Instagram, online communities and published consumer research. You can also see what products are trending on Etsy and pay close attention to trends in the media.

Figure out a problem you can solve with your product.

Some T-shirts are “just for fun.” Others have a clear purpose to simplify a pain point that shoppers may be navigating. As an example, [check out this story from Thompson Tee](#).

The store's two co-founders both have a condition called hyperhidrosis that affects at least five percent of the population. People with a hyperhidrosis diagnosis tend to sweat a lot. Thompson Tee was founded as a solution for people who sweat excessively from their underarms.

2. Determine your product materials and printers.

With an understanding of your niche and prospective customers, you'll have an understanding of what shoppers will want to wear. With this baseline understanding, you can seek out partners to help with production and printing.

Narrow down the T-shirt type.

Some stores are able to partner with wholesale T-shirt manufacturers to make their products. Others, depending on their value proposition, may need to work with a custom textile manufacturer.

Every business will have different considerations. For instance, Thompson Tee determined the best material and designed shirts that were comfortable and incredibly effective at blocking sweat before launching in 2012.

“We are the only true sweat proof undershirt brand, backed by a patent from the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office.” [writes the company's website](#).

When choosing T-shirt types, there are several considerations to work through. What will your customer enjoy wearing? Will you offer hoodies, tank tops and sweatshirts as well? Can you use an existing T-shirt material? How is your store thinking about its environmental impact?

If you're not sure where to get started, take a look at product descriptions from other T-shirt companies. This perspective will help you see the diversity of options available.

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Decide on the print method.

After you identify your T-shirt material and style(s), you're ready to create a strategy for printing your own designs. In general, there are three methods to consider.

A direct-to-garment printer is an industrial solution for printing a design onto the textile — the process is similar in concept to printing on paper. DTG printing allows extensive color options in designs and offers great precision in details.

Screen printing involves pushing ink through a woven mesh stencil onto fabric, one color at a time. The more colors your design has, the longer it will take to print it.

Sublimation printing infuses a layer of ink directly onto the fabric, which means that the T-shirt print area is significantly bigger. This type of printing works best with patterns, photographs (especially landscapes) and abstract designs.

Unless you have T-shirt printing experience, you will likely be working with a professional printer. Your partner of choice can help you determine the right approach for your company based on your budget as well as the quality you're looking to deliver. Printers can often charge by volume, which means the more T-shirts you need to print, the more cost-effective your project will be. Printers can also arrange for you to receive samples, so you can compare different options for your product.

Several companies also [offer dropshipping solutions](#), in that they print items to order and ship products directly to your customers. That means as an ecommerce seller, you may not need to store or ship your products, nor will you have to worry about upfront costs.

Make sustainable choices when possible.

There's a growing movement of shoppers, [led by Gen Z](#), who are making more conscious decisions about how they spend their money. McKinsey, one of the world's most highly regarded management consulting firms, has found that [willingness to pay for more sustainable products](#) is rising across geographies.

People around the world are still figuring out what a perfect sustainability equation looks like. As a T-shirt entrepreneur, it will be important to tune into ongoing discussions regarding ethical supply chains, [sustainable production](#) and fabric selection.

If sustainability goals seem overwhelming or challenging to achieve, don't worry — you're not alone in this thinking. Sustainability is a puzzle that many different people and organizations are tackling. The best way to find your footing is to simply talk to your vendors and partners. Ask questions about strategies for carbon offsets, production efficiency, green energy and materials selection. It's okay to not have all the answers off the bat.

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3. Create your T-shirt designs.

A T-shirt is, in many ways, an artistic canvas for creative expression. Designing a product can be as simple or complex as you'd like it to be, depending on your skill level or personal objectives. Here are a few options to help you create your designs:

Do it yourself (DIY).

For many T-shirt merchants, a great design is about bringing a creative vision to life. [Consider the story of The Mountain](#), as an example. In the early 1970s, two friends from New Jersey moved to New Hampshire with a dream to sell belts and buckles at local fairs and festivals.

The duo was so successful that they were able to quickly grow The Mountain into a popular retail chain with more than 30 retail locations across the mid-Atlantic states. The business gained recognition for its hand-dyed and printed tees.

This story is a timeless one — it doesn't matter how many decades have passed. The tools are out there for you to create your own t-shirt designs.

If you're an artist, you can use software to create illustrations and drawings. Free tools such as [Canva](#) make it easy to create graphic designs using transparent PNG files, download fonts and build off of free templates.

You could even start sketching out designs using non-digital design tools and printing techniques. If that's your creative style, why not?

Hire designers, artists and/or illustrators.

If you don't have an interest in T-shirt design, there's no problem. You can always hire someone to help execute your vision. Even if you started your business with the DIY approach, you may decide that it's worth it to invest in working with a professional design partner.

There are a few ways to source and hire the right visual strategists. Here are a few suggestions to help inspire your search:

- **Instagram.** Browse hashtags to discover accounts from artists around the world. Start following individuals whose art that you appreciate. Reach out to people whose style you admire.
- **Twitter.** Browse conversations among designers and artists, so that you're discovering talent. Over time, Twitter will begin recommending accounts and hashtags for you to follow, so you can discover interesting content.

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- **Freelance Platforms.** Many creative professionals are choosing to join the self-employed workforce in starting their own consulting practices. Platforms such as [Advisable](#), [Upwork](#), [Fiverr](#) and [99Designs](#) can help you discover talent.
- **Blogs and Online Courses.** Many top creatives are known and respected teachers in their crafts. You'll find interesting people teaching workshops or writing.

4. Get feedback on your T-shirt concepts.

So you have an idea for a T-shirt, and maybe you've created some mockup designs. You may be happy with what you've created, but are you sure that your vision will translate well into a business? It doesn't make sense to invest resources in creating a product that does not sell.

One step you can take, before investing in production, is to get feedback on your design idea. Reach out to people who represent your potential customer base. Collect their insights to improve upon your concept and creation. Here are a few ideas for ways that you can get authentic feedback.

Work with influencers.

By working with influencers, you can gain exposure in front of potential audiences who will be eventual customers. You can find influencers on Twitter and Instagram. You can work with influencers to host polls, conduct surveys and collect comments. A contest or sweepstakes may also make sense.

Tap into Facebook Groups.

Facebook is a powerful platform for people to connect and self-organize. One way to reach people is by joining groups related to your particular area of focus or interest. Entrepreneurs will often use Facebook Groups to collect feedback on their ideas. Be sure; however, to check each Group's policy before posting content about your business — some communities won't allow this practice.

Join online communities.

Mainstream social media networks aren't the only online communities out there. Many communities are popping up. Find and join relevant niche networks to share your designs and source ideas.

Pre-sell your T-shirts.

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If your company already has an online marketing presence and established customer base, you're in a strong position to run a presale campaign. Communicate to your customers that you're testing out a new T-shirt concept and making limited sales. Make sure that you're transparent that you'll need to reach a minimum threshold to fulfill each order. Be clear that customers will receive refunds if you decide not to mail out the T-shirts. Remember to be honest at every step of the way to avoid misleading your most loyal audience.

Poll your email list.

If you have a marketing list and email subscriber base, you can tap into this channel to collect feedback. One straightforward approach is to set up a simple survey or conduct a poll. The idea is to gather input in a compelling, interesting or engaging way.

Run a paid channel advertising campaign.

If you have a budget for running ads on Facebook, Instagram, or Amazon, you can set up a portion of your spend to test out designs. The key is to set up ad units that showcase your design. You can use campaign performance metrics like click-through rates (CTRs) to see which of your designs were most attractive to your target audience. This data can help you fine-tune your strategy.

5. Set up your ecommerce store.

Once you're feeling confident in your product concept, you'll be ready to commercialize and sell it. By setting up an ecommerce storefront and acquiring a domain name, even if you're also selling your T-shirts in a physical retail location, you can expand the reach of your business to connect with customers all over the world.

There are a few foundations that you'll need to get in place:

Choosing ecommerce software.

You can think of your ecommerce platform as your business's home base. It will function as a command center for you to manage your operations. When choosing technology, it's important to choose a solution that delivers a positive end-user experience while also equipping your business with a strong technical foundation to grow.

For instance, you'll want to keep an eye out for integration partners so that you can automate processes in your business, off the bat. As your T-shirt empire grows, your software needs to be able to pace you.

Developing a security and compliance foundation.

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These days, the topics of cybersecurity, risk, and compliance are getting a lot of attention. Businesses of all sizes could be prone to breaches, so it's important to make sure that you have your bases covered when transacting with customers online. It's a good idea for all businesses to work with a legal team to understand their security and compliance requirements. From there, you can customize your technology to your needs.

Determining your shipping locations.

Your ecommerce store will be integrated with your fulfillment providers. For this reason, it is important to think through where you'll be shipping — before choosing your website infrastructure. When you know your shipping locations, you'll have a strong, baseline understanding of your legal, compliance and tax requirements.

Building your payments infrastructure.

With a clear understanding of where you'll be accepting customers (and shipping your product), you can build your online payments infrastructure and determine your profit margins.

Your ecommerce software should make it easy for you to accept credit cards (and other sources of payment) on your website. You may even make it possible for your customers to pay for products in installments, based on their personal credit histories, through solutions like [Affirm](#) and Klarna.

The key is to make it as easy and accessible as possible for shoppers to complete their transactions. Your payment infrastructure should also integrate with your accounting software and support the ability to collect region-specific sales tax.

When setting up your ecommerce store, it is important to choose software that makes it as easy as possible to get up and running. All the features you need to make your first sale should be readily available, right off the bat.

6. Establish your printing and fulfillment operation.

Before you make your first sale, it is important to have a plan for how you are going to fulfill your orders. When just starting out and validating their business ideas, first-time merchants tend to take care of printing fulfillment manually. But over time, as your operations scale, you'll need to create fulfillment infrastructure for your business. Otherwise, it will be a hassle for your business to meet the demands of your market.

Ideally, your fulfillment operations will integrate with your ecommerce software off the bat — the goal is to invest in technology that can easily scale up and evolve with your company. It should be easy for your customers to receive status updates, learn about order delays and monitor shipping

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details. These points of communication are crucial to ensuring operational efficiencies for your business.

Keep in mind that the more you DIY, the more you'll be paying for inefficiencies. Handling your own fulfillment comes at a price and can cost a lot of money. You'll have to invest in a printer and inks, or find a reliable local printer who'd take care of the printing for you. You'll also need to keep the stock of the T-shirts as well as your packaging materials. All of this will require not only the physical space to do all the work, but your time too.

Another option is to partner with a print-on-demand service. These third-party services print and ship your products on your behalf.

So, if you don't want to worry about keeping your printers in top shape, bulk-printing the stock, and making endless visits to the post office, this option might be right for you.

As your business scales, it's a good idea to bring in expertise from a consultant that works with multiple ecommerce companies. Printing, order fulfillment, and shipping are processes that have the potential to become more complex, costly and challenging as your business grows.

The flip side of these challenges is that larger companies often benefit from bulk discounts, in addition to working with specialized third-party solutions. As a result, a company's per-unit shipping and fulfillment costs have the potential to decrease as the brand grows.

For this reason, you'll want to stay ahead of your shipping and fulfillment operation.

7. Make your first T-shirt sales.

With your business model in place, you'll be ready to start generating sales from the product that you've worked hard to build. Here are some simple yet powerful pathways to help you kickstart your customer acquisition engine:

Work with social media influencers.

To run a successful campaign you need to have a clear idea of what you want to achieve, then find relevant influencers and agree on collaboration structure. Base your partnership around the creation of useful content instead of ads.

Run retargeting campaigns.

Once more people start visiting your store, you'll face the inevitable: shoppers will browse your product catalogs, maybe add a product or two to the cart and leave without taking the most important action – buying from you. You can get that shopper back by running retargeting campaigns on platforms like Instagram.

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Host a giveaway or contest.

One way to get attention to your T-shirts is to host a contest. You can create a fun social media campaign in collaboration with an influencer of your choice or rely on your own channels.

Publish multimedia content.

Right now, people are spending a lot more time online than in times past. One way to reach potential shoppers is through digital content and multimedia. Who says that your T-shirt store can't also create multimedia experiences like podcasts, mobile apps, interesting articles and artwork? People love engaging digital experiences.

Start a brand newsletter.

People who discover your store may not be ready to make a purchase, off-the-bat. One way to keep audiences engaged is to launch a regular (weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly) newsletter. In addition to keeping subscribers aware of promotional offers, be sure to send out interesting content that's engaging to read.

Once you start generating consistent T-shirt sales, you'll gain a clear understanding of your most valuable growth channels. The key is to keep investing time and energy into building predictable pipelines of traffic.

The Final Word

When running or expanding your online T-shirt business, regardless of whether you're just a startup or expanding an existing company, it's important to keep your passion and creativity alive. The beauty of a T-shirt business is that you can continue to add new product lines and discover new customer segments around the world.

Remember that the T-shirt industry is vast, which means that there's a lot of opportunity to bring new products into the market. Success is built on maintaining a clear line of communication with your customers, influencer partners, and fans.

Your ecommerce foundation matters in building a business that keeps shoppers close to heart.

FAQs about how to sell t-shirts online

How do I design t-shirts that sell?

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To create t-shirts that sell, start by understanding your target audience and what resonates with them. Research current trends in your niche and use design tools such as Canva or Adobe Illustrator to bring your ideas to life. Keep your designs clean, simple, and readable, avoiding complicated graphics. Make sure to test your concepts. You can achieve this by using social media or through surveys to gather feedback before finalising your design. Finally, choose high-quality materials that offer both comfort and durability, as this can influence repeat sales and customer satisfaction.

What is the most effective way to market t-shirts online?

Marketing t-shirts online requires a combination of strategies. You can start by leveraging social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook and TikTok to showcase your designs with engaging visuals and promote your store. Focus on having a strong SEO strategy to ensure your ecommerce site ranks well for key terms such as “graphic tees” or “custom t-shirts”, anything that is relevant to your store and your designs. Paid advertising through Facebook and Google Ads can target specific audiences, while email marketing will help convert visitors into buyers with personalised offers and abandoned cart recovery. Additionally, collaborating with influencers in your niche can boost brand visibility, and offering promotions like bundle deals and discounts can create urgency and drive sales.

Do I need inventory to start selling t-shirts online?

No, you don't need to hold inventory to start selling t-shirts online. With a print-on-demand (POD) service, you can sell custom t-shirts without buying stock upfront. When a customer orders a t-shirt, the POD provider prints and ships it directly to them. By using this business model, you can avoid upfront costs and reduce the risk of unsold inventory, making it a great option for new ecommerce entrepreneurs. You can focus on your product design and marketing strategy while the POD service handles production and fulfillment. This is a great way to test designs and grow your business with minimal financial risk.

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