

Essential Integrations for Your Ecommerce Site

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Let's start by stating the obvious: What consumers see on the front end of your ecommerce site is just the tip of the business iceberg. *They* click around a bit to browse your offerings and view your products, and enter data into a few form fields at checkout. But on the *back end*, there's a [whole set of complex processes](#) that have to happen to keep those discover-browse-buy-repeat wheels in motion. We're talking payment, order management, order fulfillment, shipping, inventory, accounting, finance, email correspondence, customer accounts... and *that's* just to process a single order.

The strongest ecommerce businesses don't approach these processes as separate events. They recognize that, ultimately, there's only *one unified* "event": their ongoing relationship with their customers. And if you want a seamless relationship, you need a seamless set of processes supporting it.

Thanks to powerful ecommerce platforms, many businesses will begin with something *approaching* an integrated system. With [Commerce Plus](#), for example, not only are [payment gateways](#), [shipping carriers](#), and [analytics](#) already integrated; but [inventory](#), [accounting](#), [email marketing automation](#), [live chat](#), and more are at your fingertips for deeper integrations if you choose.

But regardless of your commerce platform, you'll want these solutions in place before you open the virtual front doors of your business. The more tasks you can manage from a single platform—from order management, to customer support, to product marketing—and the more powerful your back-end operations are, the more successful your business is going to be. After all, when the platform takes care of itself, you can focus on the two things that matter most: your products and your customers.

The Benefits of an Integrated Ecommerce Platform

By "integrated platform," we mean one in which your back-end applications (CRM, accounting, inventory, etc.) are in constant conversation with your front end (the part your customers interact with). If you offer an opt-in form for your newsletter, for example, visitors will opt in on your website. But that data will be automatically transferred from your server to your email marketing tool—which will automatically segment each visitor based on demographics, browsing behavior, and buying behavior. (The key word there, of course, is "automatically.")

All integrations you implement in your online store will function similarly: Data will get passed between applications and processes will automatically *happen*—right under your nose, as you take

care of other important things. In *that* sense, the benefits of integration may seem obvious. But just to spell them out:

- **It reduces errors.** Non-integrated systems force you to manually re-key *every* piece of data for *every* transaction: quantities, order numbers, shipping addresses, emails, and so on. Manual data entry is not only *tedious*; it's also inherently prone to human error. Errors get significantly reduced through integration.
- **It saves costs.** By dispensing with manual entry, you *also* dispense with those extra hours of manual work. Orders placed on your site are auto-transferred between applications in real time: Inventory is updated; confirmation emails are sent; customer details are transferred to the CRM; sales data is sent to your accounting platform. No human oversight; no resources to drain. You'll reduce both labor and operational costs, and increase your bottom line.
- **It shortens order cycle time.** The time savings you'll accrue by eliminating manual entry will naturally get passed on to customers. Orders will get processed, labels will get printed, and products will get shipped more quickly. The outcome? A satisfied—and increasingly loyal—customer base.
- **It improves customer service.** Businesses don't only sell *products*; they sell *experiences*. Indeed, [brand differentiation](#) occurs at the level of user experience—powerful site features and performance, superior marketing strategies, personalization—all of which integration can assist. We're talking package tracking, live chat, knowledge base integration, personalized recommendations and upsells, and more relevant messaging. We're talking never having to refund a customer's order because that product was out of stock after all. And so on.
- **It's scalable.** You'll want to prepare your business for growth from the get-go. Integrations allow you to handle increased consumer demand *without* hiring or acquiring extra resources to fulfill orders. What's more, you can add online marketplaces ([Amazon](#), [Etsy](#), or [Pinterest](#), for example) to increase brand visibility and sales opportunities—*without* risking operational efficiency. Integration will streamline orders from all your sales channels into a single platform.

Maximized operational efficiencies, reduced operating costs, increased revenue, delighted customers. Not to mention the fundamental reality of competition: ecommerce businesses *have to* offer seamless experiences today—both on- and off-site. Consumers expect no less. Luckily, ecommerce integration is neither complicated nor expensive... or at least, it doesn't *have to* be.

What Do I Need to Integrate with My Online Store?

Here are the essential integrations you'll need to run a successful online store:

Payment integrations

We've already discussed [how to choose the best payment gateway for your store](#); so if you've been following along with us, you've integrated a payment processing system already—whether PayPal, Square, Stripe, Braintree, or another. If you offer a subscription for any of your products, choose a gateway that offers [subscription management](#): recurring billing, automated payment reminders, retry schedules for failed payments, editable billing cycles, and so on.

Shipping integrations

Remember, your online store is competing with expectations set by Amazon. You'll need to offer the best possible delivery experience if you want to stand out. We've already discussed [how to choose your shipping carriers](#); but *integrating* shipping into your shopping cart allows you to auto-calculate rates, generate shipping labels with customer-provided information, customize packing slips, track shipments along their journeys, and send email or text notifications about delivery... *everything*, that is, from the moment of sale to the moment the parcel arrives at the customer's door.

Some shipping software lets you compare rates across carriers, saving you time-consuming research and allowing you to offer the most competitive rates based on location. On the other hand, integrating with *one* carrier (FedEx or UPS, for example) will allow you to access real-time shipping rates from that carrier.

Analytics integrations

This is the last of the topics we've already covered at length; so if you're wondering [what ecommerce metrics to track](#), we've got a resource for you. Hopefully, your commerce platform comes with some basic analytics out-of-the-box; and each of the software integrations we list here will come with *some* analytics built in. But you'll want ever more intelligence as your business grows—whether through an A/B testing and conversion rate optimization (CRO) platform like [Zoho PageSense](#) or a platform like [Google Analytics](#) for rich audience insights.

The nuances of user and consumer psychology are such that the most seemingly insignificant of elements—[the color of a CTA button](#), one changed word in a marketing email—can impact sales. Serve up different versions of a web page or email and see which one consumers respond better to. Uncover where users experience the most friction on your website. Knowing these things—what pages users bounce from, what products they're adding to the cart but not *buying*—allows you to make changes to your site and your messaging that optimize their experience and positively impact your numbers. After all, the more insights, the better: [74% of businesses that take a structured approach to CRO](#) see sales improvements.

Inventory integrations

[Inventory management software](#) is a valuable integration for ecommerce businesses of any size—but especially so for businesses that have larger product ranges or that sell on multiple platforms, like third-party marketplaces or social media stores.

Syncing your inventory ensures that orders will always be fulfilled, because when an item runs out of stock, the system auto-updates before the next prospect tries to purchase it. Naturally, this eliminates back orders and refunds, safeguarding your business' reputation. (Of course, the likelihood you'll run out of stock of a given item *also* substantially decreases, since the platform will either send a re-order reminder or automatically re-order *for* you when your inventory hits a predetermined level. No need to hire a purchasing manager!) Inventory integrations mean omni-channel inventory visibility, no overstocking (which can be costly overhead if you use a warehouse), automatic updates on inventory levels when customers request product returns and refunds, and more.

A good inventory management solution will perform order management across the board, including generating and managing purchase orders, sales orders, invoices, and bills. It will track the real-time quantity of available, committed, and ordered inventory. It will use historical data to forecast consumer demand. And as you grow—from storing inventory in your garage, to storing it in a warehouse, to storing it in *multiple* warehouses—it will track that data in a centralized database. This will allow you to change product prices or offer promotions *across* channels from a single location, or to offer channel-*specific* pricing or promotions based on how well a product is selling on each channel.

Accounting integrations

Regardless of the scale of your ecommerce business, you'll need an [accounting solution](#) for bookkeeping, payroll, budgeting, cash flow statements, purchase-and-sales charts, profit-and-loss charts, and so on. And you'll need that accounting solution to interoperate seamlessly with your commerce storefront. Without an integration, you'll essentially be keeping two sets of books—manually entering numbers every time there's a sale, an order change, or a refund—which means time, overhead, and an increased likelihood of errors.

Of course, a good accounting solution will do more than sync your site's sales and order data with your financial data. It will generate [customized invoices and statements in multiple currencies](#). It will perform bank reconciliations. It will let you enter documents [by scanning them](#) rather than manually entering them. It will [keep your tax rates current](#) and calculate your sales tax returns and 1099s. And more.

Email and marketing automation integrations

As your customer base grows and you start organizing your marketing strategy, you'll begin sending out nurturing emails—the ones that keep your brand top-of-mind by offering special deals, letting customers know about new products, and so on. [Personalized and targeted email marketing](#) is one of the most powerful tools your business has access to—you may be surprised at the degree to which emails help you build a brand following and pave the way for growth.

But the key words there are "personalized" and "targeted": These emails need to be well-timed and relevant... which they *will be* if they're determined by customer data. Your integrated email platform will pull data such as purchase history, lifetime spend, location, and browsing history from your commerce platform, segment visitors into groups, and send only the most relevant email messages based on that intelligence. (Mailchimp has found that "[segmented campaigns result in 21% higher open rates and 55% higher click rates](#) than unsegmented campaigns.") Some customers will receive personalized product suggestions based on previous searches. Lapsed customers might receive special offers to re-engage them. New customers might receive a sequence of emails as part of a drip campaign that contains lessons on how to use your product. And so on.

A strong email marketing platform (if you're using [Commerce Plus](#), you can integrate with either [Zoho Campaigns](#) or [Mailchimp](#)) will track open rates and click-through rates, allow you to A/B test your emails (subject lines or send times, for example), automatically pull product images and descriptions from your store and insert them into emails, auto-send reminders a set number of hours after a cart has been abandoned, and more. (Remember, nearly [77% of visitors will abandon their carts](#) on your ecommerce site; [abandoned cart emails generate 12% more revenue](#) on average for businesses.)

CRM integration

The goal of CRM software is to help create, nurture, and strengthen your relationships with your customers. Think of your CRM as the powerhouse that holds *all* imaginable information about your customers—from contact information, to transaction history, to service and support history (what questions or problems have they contacted your business about in the past?), to customer sentiment (how are they talking about you on social media?), and more. It's your address book on steroids; and it lets you see the entire life of your relationship with each customer. Know where you left off with a customer the next time they call you. Know who's most likely to make that next purchase based on [your CRM's analytics](#). And more. (Indeed, integrating an email marketing automation platform *with* a CRM gives your marketing automation platform *even more* data... so you can generate *even more* personalized campaigns.)

Customer support integrations: Live chat and help desk

No matter *how* few visitors you have early in your ecommerce journey, you'll want to let those prospects know that you're there for them. This is where [live chat](#) and [help desk software](#) will come in.

As we've mentioned, [over 2/3 of your ecommerce site visitors](#) will put an item in their shopping cart but fail to follow through on the purchase. Cart abandonment emails are certainly one way to catch these nearly-lost sales... but why not catch visitors *while they're still on your site* so you can allay concerns about your product, your checkout process, or your returns policy? (There's a double benefit to doing so: Not only can quick answers mean the difference between a site exit and a sale; but you'll also get real-time insights about how to improve UX on a given page.)

Live chat software isn't limited to checkout; it'll improve user experience on the whole. It offers visitors a direct channel to your team—*without* having to leave the page or pick up their smartphones. ([Live chat surpassed the phone as consumers' favorite service channel](#) a few years ago. Indeed, our favorite study revealed that a third of Millennials [would rather clean a toilet than talk to customer service.](#))

Chats can be "answered" by an automated bot or a member of your customer service team; but good chat software will automate responses to the most frequently-asked questions regardless of whether the chat is "manned." It'll work seamlessly on any device. It'll trigger conversations based on user behavior on your site—[offering answers before visitors even ask](#). It'll let visitors attach documents to clarify what they're writing about. It'll have a user-friendly interface, and will categorize and prioritize support tickets according to question type, visitor, product, order of contact, and more. If you have a larger service team, it will assign tickets to match questions with the best team member to answer them.

You might pair live chat with a [help desk integration](#) so that consumers can answer their *own* questions before contacting you. This gives visitors a self-service option if they don't want to wait for a response—or if they simply have a common question with an easy answer that you've prepared for them.

Social integrations

As you may be aware, social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook have APIs that allow you to display social proof on your ecommerce site to confirm your business's credibility and your products' desirability: glowing comments about your company pulled from Twitter, photo feeds from Instagram of customers using your product, and so on. This is called "user-generated content"; and we probably don't have to tell you why content from third-party platforms has more force behind it than "native reviews" (the ones customers post directly to your website, which your business can review, edit, and control). Site users will naturally see embedded Twitter comments as more authentic because they can't be modified. And if [73% of consumers trust a business more](#) after reading a positive review, you might as well offer those positive reviews directly on your site.

Of course, a powerful [social media management platform](#) is a great tool to have on its own: It allows you to create, schedule, and review posts on all your social media channels and monitor activity from a single dashboard. But *integrations* allow you to stream social feeds directly to your

homepage or product pages. They allow site visitors to share the products they just purchased from you on social *without* leaving your website. They allow consumers to subscribe to your email list from your social pages. And if you plan on engaging in social commerce—selling your products directly on social media platforms without asking consumers to go through your website—you'll absolutely want this integration.

Additional integrations

As with so much of this content, the list above is hardly exhaustive: There's probably an integration for just about every ecommerce case you can imagine. For example, hopefully your commerce platform comes with built-in **SEO and blog** capabilities. If it doesn't, you'll want integrations for these. [Business blogs](#) are crucial for your [content marketing efforts](#), audience engagement, [branding](#), and [storytelling](#). So don't offer an ecommerce experience without an accompanying blog.

You might look for a **personalization API**, which will match your website to the preferences of every visitor. [Personalization and recommendation software](#) promotes content on your ecommerce site based on a user's prior visits and purchase history. It also matches site content to customers' interests based on their behavior on social media and elsewhere on the web. This behavior determines which of your products get recommended the next time that person visits your online store.

Price comparison integrations allow you to monitor competitors' pricing. The software extracts price data from various sites, saving you the time and hassle of perpetually checking in on seasonal fluctuations in product prices: You'll get notified in the event of fluctuations in time to adjust your prices competitively. (This integration is most valuable for businesses that sell standardized and highly competitive products.)

Site search software (which is great for retailers with extensive product catalogues) offers more sophisticated search features, allowing users to search according to keywords, categories, product types, and more. These integrations have the advantage of showing visitors items they wouldn't otherwise discover (through "dynamic reordering" or discovery in a category list). What's more, they support auto-complete search and spelling corrections. They personalize visitors' search results based on demographics. They direct users to similar products if your site doesn't offer the items they're searching for. And they'll offer up their own set of analytics, which may help you determine what products you *should* start selling.

Ratings and feedback software allows you to leverage product reviews and testimonials on your website. These integrations let users rate and review products *on* their respective product pages—without your having to reach out and ask for them. A good ratings integration will allow you to moderate users and reviews, automatically cross-post comments in your social networks, allow *other* users to rank how helpful each review is, and surface the most "helpful" reviews to the top.

Notifications come in a few forms. You can integrate with push notification software, which allows alerts to pop up in visitors' browser windows, informing them of discounts, sales, or special offers. These push notifications can be personalized by criteria such as location, browser language, visitor history (reminding returning users about items on their wish lists, for example), and more. You might also consider integrating a "back in stock" notification. This lets prospects opt in to receive an email when a product is back in stock, instead of sending them off your site to find it with your competitors.

The list goes on. Of course, you'll add these "additional integrations" over time—and only as you see fit. But that *initial* list we offered you (payment, shipping, analytics, inventory, accounting, marketing automation, CRM, customer support, social)... well, if you can find a way to integrate these as early as possible, you'll have an effective, efficient ecommerce machine.

It's a lot to take in, we know; and finding the right integrations can feel like a daunting task. That's why [Zoho's created an ecommerce platform](#) that allows you to integrate each of our software applications with our offering. This way, you can be sure your apps "play nice" with each other. Because the more smoothly the *back* end of your business runs, the more *you* can focus on what matters. And the more smoothly the *front* end runs, the more satisfied your customers will be. And when *both* run smoothly? You've created a virtuous cycle in which everyone wins.