Create A Profitable Online Store In 5 Easy Steps

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If you're tired of devoting the majority of your time to your day job and you'd rather set your own hours and be your own boss, the best way to escape from the rat race is to start your own business online.

When my wife became pregnant with our first child and decided that she was quitting her job, we managed to create a profitable online store that generated 100K in profits in just over a year. Today, my wife stays at home with the kids and works just several hours a day on our online business from home!

The following guide will provide you with the basics on how to get started with your own online store.

Starting A Store Or Business Online Is Ideal Because...

1. You don't have to be physically present to make money. Your computer can take orders for you even while you sleep.
2. There is little or no overhead to maintain your website.
3. Most if not all of the backend software is already written for you. All you have to do is to set things up and customize it.

These days, opening up your own online business is easier than ever thanks to the many services and free software available on the internet. In fact, you can start an online business completely from scratch for as low as 5 dollars a month!

In order to make money online, you have to have goods to sell to the end customer. And to sell goods, you have to have a storefront. I'm going to show you just how easy it is to open your own online store in 5 easy steps and I will cover these 5 steps in detail in this ebook. In the meantime, I thought that I'd first go over the different online store options.

What Are My Options?

When most people think of owning a store, selling and delivering physical goods is usually the first thing that comes to mind. However, shipping physical goods is only one of the many ways to make money with an online store.

Did you know that you can setup up your store such that all you have to do is take orders and have the manufacturer fulfill them for you? Have you ever stopped to consider selling informational products that require no shipping whatsoever?

I've outlined below the various ways to make money with an online store along with the pros and cons of each.

Drop Shipping

Drop shipping is one of the easiest ways to start an online store without ever having to worry about carrying inventory. Once you have set up an arrangement with a drop ship distributor, all you have to do is set up your online store and take orders. As orders are received, you simply pass the customer information along to the distributor who is then responsible for delivering the actual goods to the end customer. The profit you make is the difference between your selling price and the wholesale price you've negotiated with the vendor.

Drop shipping is one of the easiest ways to make money with very little physical effort on your part. Once you have your store setup, it can almost run on its own. The negative aspect of drop shipping is that the profit margins are fairly low compared to some of the other store options. The other disadvantage is that you are responsible for making the customer happy even though you have no control over order fulfillment. Managing customer support is one of the biggest challenges with drop shipping which is why it is essential to choose reliable manufacturers to work with.

Selling Physical Goods With Inventory

This is the most traditional way of making money via an online store. You purchase physical goods from the manufacturer at a wholesale price, stock inventory and ship the goods directly to the end customer. It sounds like a

hassle and it definitely can be troublesome at times, but the profit margins are extremely high compared to drop shipping.

It is because of the high margins that opening up a traditional online store is one of the fastest ways to make a meaningful amount of money in a short period of time. The negative aspect of opening a traditional store though is that it involves greater risk because you have to put some of your own money up front to purchase inventory.

Opening up a traditional online store has been an extremely profitable venture for my wife and I. We chose to open a traditional online store because we needed to supplant my wife's salary in a very short time frame when she quit her job. In the span of a year, we were able make a 100K in profits from our online wedding linens store and our business continues to grow every year.

Selling Your Own Goods

Not everyone has the intelligence, creativity and aptitude to sell their own goods created from scratch, but those that do so successfully make the most profits of them all. The hot ticket items to sell online these days are informational goods. Why? It's because you don't have to ship anything physical. You can deliver informational products with a simple download once payment is received.

If you have a special talent or possess knowledge that is scarce, selling your own goods is definitely the way to go. Best of all, you get to keep all of the profits.

Selling as an Affiliate

Becoming an affiliate is very similar to being a drop shipper except that you carry no responsibility whatsoever. All you have to do is to refer someone to a product or service. If that person makes a purchase, then you get a cut of the sale. Once the sale is made, you are out of the picture altogether. Being an affiliate is by far the lowest energy way to make money. Unfortunately, it also carries the lowest profit percentage.

If I were to evaluate the different types of stores based on effort and profitability using a table, here's what it would look like.

Store Type	Effort Level 1-10 (easiest)	Profitability Scale 1-10 (best)
Dropshipping	7	3
Traditional Store	4	7
Selling Your Own Goods	1	10
Affiliate Sales	10	1

As with all things, there's a direct correlation between effort level and the amount of profit that you can make. With greater risk carries greater rewards and your decision should be based on your own situation. You also want to consider future scalability of your business. For example, even though drop shipping offers lower profit margins, running a drop shipping store is much easier to scale in the future since you don't have to worry about inventory.

My wife and I chose a traditional store because we needed to replace her lost income in a fairly short period of time. Plus, we wanted to be in full control of our customer service. While I know many people who drop ship and sell items as an affiliate, the ramp up time to meaningful profits is much longer.

Step 1: Find A Webhost And Domain

I wanted to start this section off by addressing a few philosophical issues. One question I get asked all the time is why should I host my own website and shopping cart when there are so many services available that will allow me to use their own proprietary shopping system for free? Why wouldn't I just want to open an Ebay or Yahoo store? Why not just have an Amazon store?

I always answer this question with another question. Would you ever place your future and destiny in the hands of someone else who doesn't share your same interests?

Not only do services like Ebay charge an arm and a leg to sell items (you forfeit up to 15% of your profits with Ebay), but they can mess with you whenever they feel like it. In fact, Ebay has raised their fees without warning on a number of occasions which has driven smaller stores out of business. Don't fall for the allure of using someone else's setup. You want to own your store. You never want to be tied down or forced to use a specific service provider. With this concept in mind, let's move on to the guts of this section.

Register Your Domain

One of the most important aspects of your online store is your domain name. Make sure you choose a domain name that is short, catchy and memorable with no dashes in the name. I use **GoDaddy.com** to register all of my domains. Especially if you plan on having multiple sites like I do, it's far easier to manage all of your domains in one place. Plus GoDaddy's prices are dirt cheap.

While you are there, you should also pick up an SSL certificate which is required to encrypt and secure transactions over the internet. **GoDaddy.com** offers SSL certs for a very low price. For more information on SSL and how to install the certificate please refer to my article on **How To Choose And Install An SSL Certificate**

Choosing A Webhost

When you first launch your online store, you aren't really going to need a powerful webhost. Initially, you aren't going to be attracting enough customers to bring a shared hosting account down. (Although there is an exception to this rule depending on the shopping cart software you choose. More on this later). As a result when you are first starting out, your main focus should be on reliability, support and saving some cash.

For example, when I first started out, I looked for the following attributes in my potential webhost providers

- Are they cheap?
- Are they reliable? Do they have a decent uptime?
- Do they have good technical support?
- Do they load one machine down with too many users?
- Do they offer the features that I need to run my online store.

My Recommendations

I probably researched over 20 different shared webhost providers and narrowed the field down to 2, **Hostgator** and **Bluehost**.

Ultimately, I decided to go with **Bluehost** because they won me over with the responsiveness of their tech support. In fact, I ran my online store on **Bluehost** for 2 straight years paying only $6.95 a month until I outgrew my shared hosting account a few years ago.

Bluehost offers a very cheap plan for $6.95 a month that pretty much covers anything you'll ever need in a shared host. There is only one type of plan and you can host as many domains as you would like with unlimited SQL databases and bandwidth.

Dedicated Hosting

It might seem like a long ways off, but eventually you will want to transition your store to dedicated hosting. For dedicated hosting, I highly recommend **ServInt** which is what my wife and I currently use for our online store.

The other reason I'm bringing up dedicated hosting early on is because certain shopping carts require more horsepower to run. For example, the Magento shopping cart (I'll be covering shopping carts later), pretty much requires dedicated hosting right from the start in order to run a usable storefront.

In any case, selecting a domain and webhost provider isn't a big deal. You can sign up for very little money and start your store for practically nothing.

Step 2: Find Goods To Sell Online

Finding products to sell online is where many people get stuck when trying to start an online business. There are 3 main issues to deal with. For starters, you have to decide what you want to sell. Do you want to sell physical products? Do you want to sell software or informational goods?

Unfortunately, no one can answer that question except for you. If you need help in coming up with ideas however, you may want to check out a previous article I wrote on **How to Find a Niche Market for Your Online Store**.

In general though, I would recommend picking items to sell that meet the following criteria

- The product should not be fragile and easy to ship
- The product should not take up much physical space
- The product's inherent value should be ambiguous. For example, I would never sell electronics because there is a set value for your goods that everyone is aware of. On the contrary, keepsakes and informational goods are much harder to place a price tag on.
- The product should be timeless. Once again, I would never sell electronics because they lose value the longer they stay on the shelves

Can You Make Money?

The second problem is determining whether you can actually make money selling your product. The key is to not get too hung up on any given idea because if the target market is not big enough, your product may not be worth selling.

Personally, I use a quick and dirty way to determine if my online store idea is viable. If you are interested, please check out my article on **How To Determine If Your Online Business Idea Even Has a Chance**.

Finally, the biggest problem is that even if you manage to choose a product or a set of products you want to sell, where the heck are you going to source your products from? How and where do you contact the manufacturer so you can get wholesale pricing? Before I tell you the best way to find your vendors, there are several things to consider right off the bat.

Do you want to deal with only domestic (United States) vendors?

Dealing with vendors in the US is much easier because everything is familiar to you. It is much easier to contact your vendors because they are in a similar time zone and they speak the same language. However, because the manufacturing costs are much higher in the US, you will end up paying more money for your products which will negatively affect your profit margins. The main advantage is that shipping arrangements can be easily made and it's generally easier to obtain the products you want to sell.

Do you want the absolute lowest cost for your products?

If you want the absolute best deal for your products, then you might want to consider looking in Asia to source your items. These days, you'll find that most things are made and sourced from Asia. Why? It's because they offer the best prices. However, it can be a major hassle to import items into your home country. If you do manage to get the process down however, the profit margins are unbeatable. If you want to learn more about sourcing your products from overseas, you may want to read the following articles.

- **How To Import Goods From Overseas For Your Online Store**
- **Product Sourcing: What To Expect When Dealing With Overseas Vendors**

Do you want to carry inventory or drop ship?

Drop shipping is great since you don't have to carry inventory, but you are still responsible for making sure that your customer is happy and satisfied with the purchase. As a result, you have to make sure that the vendors you choose are absolutely reliable. If you choose to drop ship, handling returns can be a major hassle. Even worse, you'll sometimes have to deal with irate customers even though you were not at fault. Deciding to drop ship also limits your choice of vendors.

How Do I Find My Vendors?

Now that you are aware of your product sourcing options, the best way to find vendors is to attend wholesale tradeshows. For example, if you are

interested in importing products from China, you can check out the **China Import And Export Fair Website**. If you are interested in wholesale fairs in the US, you can check out various tradeshow websites such as **Wholesale Central**.

Going to tradeshows is ideal because

- All of the vendors are aggregated in one location. You can set up appointments to meet multiple vendors in a single day
- They will have samples of their merchandise available for you to see. This is especially important when dealing with overseas vendors because obtaining samples can sometimes take months.

Why Not Do All Of My Research Online?

You might think that you can do all of your vendor research online, but wholesale vendors that you find on the web can be extremely sketchy. In fact, there are many vendors online that are middlemen who pretend to be wholesale vendors just to get your business. It is because of these deceptive practices that I recommend finding vendors at trade shows rather than purely online. For more information on buying wholesale, please checkout my article on **Why Buying Wholesale Can Be Misleading**.

Wholesale Vendor Services

Going to tradeshows and contacting vendors you find online can be extremely time consuming and expensive. Fortunately, there are many web based services that aggregate and screen out wholesale vendors for you to choose from. Today, if my wife and I were to start all over again, we would probably use these services exclusively over traveling and screening vendors by hand, especially since we now have kids. If you are not convinced, here's an example of how a company like **WorldWideBrands.com** can save you time.

WorldWide Brands offers the following services at a very reasonable price:

- They provide a list of pre-verified drop-ship wholesalers, light bulk wholesalers (orders under $500), high volume wholesalers, liquidation wholesalers and import wholesalers. The best part is that **Worldwide Brands** has a screening process to make sure that you are dealing with legit companies.
- They provide information estimating how well your product will sell
- They provide information on how many people are searching the Internet for your products
- They provide information on how many other people are selling your products.
- They tell you who your competitors are so you can see whether the market is saturated.

From experience, I can tell you that it can be very difficult to locate wholesale vendors just by doing random web searches. Why waste your time when there are many services out there that aggregate the data for you already?

Keep in mind though, that these services won't do the heavy lifting for you. You still have to take the time to contact each and every vendor and create your own business relationships. Finding good vendors and establishing trust is the key to good product sourcing.

Step 3: Select A Free Shopping Cart

So you've signed up for your webhost, registered your domain name, and established where you are going to source your goods. It's now time to start working on your online store front.

Most people have the misconception that you have to pay thousands of dollars to hire someone to create a website for you. Thanks to open source, there are many fully featured shopping cart software packages out there that are absolutely free. What's nice about using an open source shopping cart is that you aren't tied down to a specific company or service provider. You can take your store wherever you go and you pay absolutely nothing.

When my wife and I first started our online store, the available shopping cart choices weren't nearly as mature and feature rich as they are today. Now is the perfect time to start a professional online store at no cost whatsoever. For this ebook, I went ahead and downloaded, installed and evaluated the latest open source shopping carts to provide you with recommendations. I'll also talk about some of the choices my wife and I made in selecting our shopping cart software and the reasons why we made our selection.

Introduction

There are many free open source shopping carts available. Some of the carts that I looked at were

- **Magento**
- **OSCommerce**
- **OSCMax**
- **ZenCart**
- **Prestashop**
- **Agoracart**
- **Opencart**
- **Wordpress ECommerce**

While everyone will have different criteria for their own shopping cart, I narrowed down my recommendations based on product maturity, features and 3rd party support.

Please note that some of the carts that didn't make my recommended list are absolutely fantastic and have lots of potential but were ultimately lacking a few features that I felt were important. Prestashop, for example is an amazing and modern shopping cart but lacks a few key payment modules for the US marketplace.

In any case, my philosophy is that if you are new to building an online store, you are going to want to err on the more conservative side. You'll want a shopping cart that is stable, fast, does what you want it to do and has a good responsive community. It is based on these criteria that I can wholeheartedly recommend the following carts **OSCMax**, **ZenCart** and **Magento**.

OSCMax

OSCMax is based on the granddaddy of all open source ecommerce shopping carts, OSCommerce. In fact, OSCMax is identical to the base install of OSCommerce except that it has many useful plugins already pre-installed. Because it is based on OSCommerce, you have access to the thousands of free third party plugins available on the **OSCommerce website**

The library of plugins is so vast that if the base install of OSCMax is missing something, you will probably find someone who has written a plugin for it. The only caveat is that adding plugins can be a major pain and you'll probably need a tiny bit of php knowledge to do this. Personally though, I think that the OSMax base install is very feature rich already.

ZenCart

ZenCart is a branch off of OSCommerce and is extremely feature rich and easy to use as well. In fact, ZenCart is probably the easiest shopping cart to install and get running right away. Why? It's because most if not all webhosts offer a one click installer right from the CPanel interface. You pretty much just have to click on the Simple Scripts installer and voila, you are ready to go.

ZenCart probably has most if not all of the features that you might need to run a small-medium size store. However, if you need additional functionality that ZenCart doesn't offer, it will be extremely difficult to add. Because ZenCart is a completely different branch off of OSCommerce, ZenCart users do not have access to the same vast plugin library. If you are considering Zencart, you should probably take some time to look at the default features from the website to make sure that what you need is all there.

Magento

If you know that you are eventually going to require the most feature-rich open source shopping cart available to run your online store, then Magento is probably your best bet. After playing around with Magento for a few days, I can say that it is probably the most feature rich open source shopping cart out there right now. You can perform some very intricate sales promotions on individual or groups of items. You can even manage multiple stores from a single installation.

The downside is that Magento runs extremely slowly and thus can not be run on shared hosting. This is unfortunate because Magento pretty much does everything, but all of that functionality comes at the cost of speed. Since it can be major pain to switch shopping carts though, you may want to consider starting out with Magento.

What If I'm Completely Tech Averse?

Some people just don't feel comfortable installing or tweaking their own website let alone modifying an open source shopping cart. One time, I tried to help a coworker of mine launch her online store using OSCMax. Unfortunately, she didn't possess the basic knowledge to even make simple edits to her store and had to ask for help for every little change. Ultimately, I had her go with a paid solution because of the added support. If you fall under this category, you may want to consider **CRELoaded** and **XCart** which are paid shopping carts that I recommend.

If you are completely tech averse and want to do as little setup as possible, I recommend **Yahoo Merchant Solutions**. In general, going with a hosted solution like Yahoo goes against my philosophy, but Yahoo is the best of the

bunch. Before going with Yahoo however, I recommend at least playing around with an open source shopping cart before giving in to temptation.

CRELoaded

CRELoaded is yet another shopping cart that is based on OSCommerce. Just like OSCMax, the Pro version of **CRELoaded** has many features already built in. The main advantage is that you have a full staff and backing of a company to support you as you implement your store. The code base is stable and professionally maintained. They also offer this hosted credit card processing service that is PCI compliant out of the box (more on this in part 4) and seamlessly integrated into the shopping cart.

XCart

What sets **XCart** apart from some of the other companies is that **XCart** offers a complete out of the box solution for all of your eCommerce needs. The code is extremely robust, stable and is used to run many brand name online stores.

What makes things easy is that **XCart** offers hosting services on top of their shopping cart. If you are completely tech averse, you can have **XCart** set up your hosting account and the entire shopping cart for you. **XCart** is also known to provide excellent support.

Yahoo Merchant Solutions

Yahoo Small Business Solutions is a completely hosted shopping cart solution. What this means is that they handle everything for you including all of the setup, hosting and shopping cart setup. The downside is that you have to pay a monthly fee in addition to a percentage of your gross sales. If you want to avoid as much technical work as possible, then **Yahoo Small Business Solutions** is the way to go.

You've Given Me Too Many Choices. What Should I Choose?

Unfortunately, only you can answer that question. I've already narrowed down the field from hundreds to just a handful of shopping carts for you. Most if not all of these shopping carts can provide you with a test drive of the front and back end of the storefront as well. Do your own due diligence and run through the features of each cart to determine what you need.

I would naturally start with one of the 3 open source shopping cart options that I've recommended because they are free. If the coding or installation is over your head and you need a little help, then I would then look at some of the paid options that I mentioned above like **XCart** or **CRELoaded**.

Finally, if you don't want to worry about anything setup related at all and you are willing to give away a small chunk of your sales, then **Yahoo Small Business Solutions** is probably good for you.

What Do I Use?

I selected the base OSCommerce install to run our online wedding linens store. Looking back, this was probably not the best decision but I went with OSCommerce because I was paranoid about server speed. Things can be quite unpredictable when you use a shared hosting environment. I knew that I wanted my store to run as fast as possible, so I chose a very basic store and only added the functionality that I absolutely needed.

The following are must have features in a shopping cart

- Search Engine Friendly URLs
- Availability of 3rd party templates and themes
- Fast product upload from a spreadsheet
- Coupons/Gift vouchers
- Wide array of payment processors
- Cross selling
- Dynamic photo resizer
- Integration with real time shipping services
- Single page checkout

Today, my store is so heavily customized that it is difficult to add any new features. Eventually, I will migrate our cart to something more powerful but it will be an extremely painful move. If I were to do it all over again, I would have used OSCMax or Zencart. Both OSCMax and Zencart run fairly well on a shared hosting environment so you have nothing to worry about.

Step 4: Select A Credit Card Payment Processor

Your online store is worthless unless you can accept payments from your end customers. There are many different ways to accept payment. For example, you can accept payments through **Paypal**, Google Checkout or even check/money orders. But despite the many payment choices available, the most important one is the ability to accept credit cards online.

Looking at the payment statistics for our online wedding linens store, 97% of our customers use a credit card to checkout and the other 2.9% use Paypal. Less than .1% use check or money order. For an online store, paying by credit card is an absolute requirement. In this article, we will discuss the different options on how to process credit cards online.

Processing Credit Cards

Virtual Terminal

First off, there are 3 main ways to take credit cards online. The first way to accept payments is to sign up for what is called a virtual terminal. Basically how this works is that when an order comes in via the phone or web, you can then manually enter in the credit card information on a secure terminal. However, since the focus of this series is on building a fully automated online store, this is not a viable option in the long run.

Process Credit Cards On A Third Party Website

The second solution is to have a link from your online store during checkout that takes the customer away from your site to the website of your payment vendor. The customer then enters in their credit card number on your vendor's website where the payment is processed. Once the transaction is complete, the customer is then redirected back to your online store. The standard Paypal account for example allows you to do this for free.

The main disadvantage of this free solution is that processing credit cards is roundabout and confuses customers. Why should a customer be taken away from your website to another site that looks different only to be redirected back once again when the payment is made? While processing credit cards this way offers the easiest setup, it can have severe consequences on your

sale conversion rate. For example, the conversion rate for our online store was almost 50% less when we accepted credit cards in this fashion through **Paypal Standard**. In fact, accepting credit cards this way was probably one of the main reasons business was extremely slow when we first opened our online store.

Process Credit Cards Directly On Your Store

The best way to process credit cards is to have a merchant account with a gateway and process credit cards directly from your online store. It might be more of a hassle to setup and it might cost you a bit more upfront, but trust me, it's worth it. The ability to process credit cards without a customer having to physically leave your website will not only lend credibility to your store but it will increase conversions as well.

Merchant Accounts And Gateways

The downside is that the choice of where to open your merchant account and gateway can be overwhelming. For example, here are the payment modules that oscMax supports right out of the box for US shops. To make things worse, there are many different dealers/distributors of some of these services that all have different price points.

- **Authorize.Net**
- **Linkpoint**
- **EFS Net**
- **GeoTrust QuickPayments**
- **iPayment**
- **2CheckOut**
- **PSIGate**

How Do You Decide?

Deciding on a credit card merchant and gateway account can be quite intimidating at first due to the terminology and different price points. I've written up a good guide on **how to select a credit card merchant and gateway** already that you should definitely read if you are shopping around. In the meantime, I can save you some time by telling you what I've used in the past.

For our online store, we've used both **Authorize.net** as well as **Paypal Website Payments Pro** and can wholeheartedly recommend both services. If you would like to know more about some of the other services mentioned above, feel free to check them out. But I found **Authorize.net** and **Paypal** to be the easiest and cheapest services to use especially when we were just starting out.

Authorize.net

The great part about **Authorize.net** is that it's supported by almost every single shopping cart out there. The confusing part about using it is that there are hundreds of resellers offering different rates.

Some of these resellers have pretty sketchy websites as well. Since rates and fees change all of the time, you should take some time and shop around for the best rates. The Authorize.net reseller I signed up for was **Merchant Plus** and they are extremely competitive in terms of rates.

Once again for more information on shopping for merchant accounts and gateways, please refer to my article on **how to select a credit card merchant and gateway**.

Paypal Website Payments Pro

Paypal Website Payments Pro offers an extremely competitive merchant account and gateway solution as well. What I like about Paypal Website Payments Pro is that you can ship your products via UPS and USPS all from the same interface. Because it is so easy to ship products and accept payments through a single website, our online store uses Paypal Website Payments Pro today. It's not the cheapest merchant/gateway solution out there, but the convenience is worth it.

A Note About PCI Compliance

I just wanted to touch on the topic of PCI compliance because it has been a hot topic amongst would be shop owners. Because of all the credit card fraud stories you've read about in the papers, the PCI standards group has

issued a set of guidelines that must be followed in order to process credit cards on your website. The requirement of PCI compliance only applies if you either store, process or transmit credit card data. Therefore when using services like Authorize.net or Paypal Website Payments Pro, you are transmitting credit card information to the gateway so you must be PCI compliant or risk getting fined.

The issue of being PCI compliant has deterred many would be shop owners from selling items online because they don't want to go through the hassle of becoming PCI compliant. Becoming PCI compliant isn't that big of a deal. To make sure you are PCI compliant, you need to make sure of the following.

- Make sure you don't store credit card numbers on your server or database
- Make sure you don't use a laptop on a wireless LAN when using a virtual terminal
- Make sure you are up to date on anti-virus and firewall software on your computer
- Make sure your server is PCI compliant by getting it scanned for free. You can get your site scanned for free on the **Hacker Guardian** website
- Make sure you use SSL encryption to transmit credit card data
- Fill out a questionnaire in regards to your credit card and security practices

There is also this misconception that shared servers can not be PCI compliant. This is completely false. Hosts like **Blue Host** are PCI compliant and run hundreds of stores on their servers.

Disclaimer: Please note that I'm not an expert on PCI compliance. The above checklist may not be a comprehensive list and you should check the **PCI Standards** website for more information.

Step 5: Get A Great Design

If you've followed steps 1-4, you should now have a webhost and domain, products to sell, an online shopping cart and a way to process credit cards online. It's now time to put on the finishing touches to your online storefront.

As you may have noticed, the default installation of your online shopping cart is plain, bland and boring. If you stick with the out of the box look, you aren't going to be attracting many customers let alone selling any product.

The lack of graphic design skills often discourages would be online shop owners. In fact, most people look at the out of the box template and think to themselves, "Man, I'm not a web designer, how am I going to create a professional looking store front?" The good news is that you don't really have to be a designer to obtain a great looking store or website.

The Template System

The look and feel of all of the free open source shopping carts I recommended can easily changed by modifying the store template. The nuts and bolts of your shopping cart remain the same, except the skin changes to suit the look that you are trying to create for your online store.

One of the main criteria for my shopping cart recommendations in part 3 was the availability of 3rd party templates. Because the shopping carts I've recommended have become very popular, many talented web designers have already created many beautiful looking store templates for sale at very reasonable prices.

For example, **Algozone** carries a large variety of store templates for OSCMax, ZenCart, and Magento across a wide range of categories. All of their templates are of very high quality and they offer 24/7 support on any template that you purchase. Furthermore, they are all fully tested and guaranteed to work on the platform that you choose.

Should I Try And Design My Own Template?

Even if you are tech savvy and familiar with HTML/CSS, I would still recommend getting a pre-made template. With our online store, I spent 3 straight weekends designing my storefront when I could have just paid 100 dollars, but I was too cheap. If you work out the number of hours I devoted to tinkering with my store, I was effectively working for 2-3 dollars an hour and it's debatable whether I did a better job.

The time I used up working on aesthetics could have been better utilized working on our core business which has nothing to do with web design. That's not even counting the number of hours I devoted to testing my changes to make sure that there were no bugs. Not worth it I tell you!

I Got My Template, What's Left To Do?

Once you have purchased your template, you still have to tinker with the following things

- You have to create your own unique store header
- You have to play around with the colors to suit your style

Your store header is just a banner that goes across the top of your store. You will have to use Photoshop or any popular image editing software to create your own unique brand.

All of the professional templates offer the ability to tweak the store colors via the CSS stylesheet. If you don't know what I'm talking about, it's very straightforward. Basically, there is one single file that outlines the fonts and colors used for various parts of the store. Tweaking your color scheme is just a matter of editing the file and loading up your webpage to see the difference. It takes a bit of time to get things right, but it's not difficult at all. In many cases, the default color scheme is more than adequate.

Quick Tutorial On How To Install ZenCart On BlueHost

ZenCart is probably the easiest shopping cart to understand and begin with. One of the beauties of using ZenCart as your shopping cart is that most webhosts provide a one click install of ZenCart. To show you how easy it is, I'm going to provide you with a quick tutorial on how to install Zencart below assuming you are using **Bluehost** as your webhost.

Go To Your BlueHost Control Panel

The first thing you need to do is to access your BlueHost Control Panel. This can be accomplished by typing the following address to any web browser

https://<yourdomainname>.com:2083

Once you are logged in, click on the "cpanel" tab on the upper left to bring up a menu. Scroll down until you see the Software/Services section as pictured below and click on the "Simple Scripts" button.
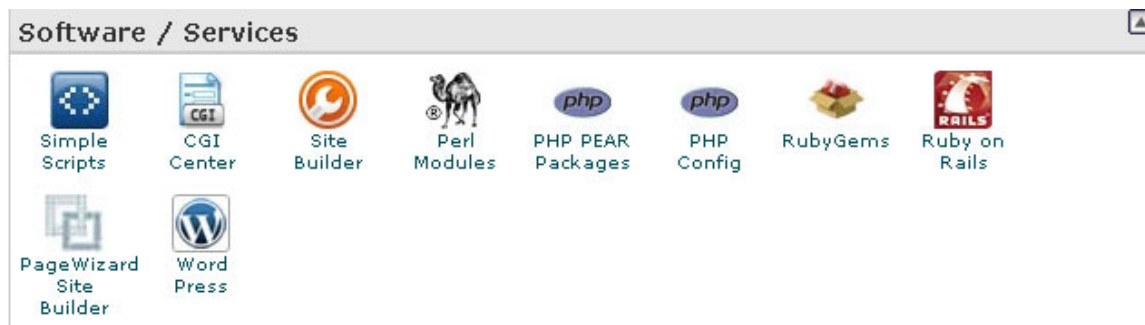
Simple Scripts

Simple scripts is an excellent tool that allows you to quickly and easily install many applications with the click of a button and is free with your **Bluehost** account. Once you have clicked on the "Simple Scripts" button above, you should see a screen full of programs to choose from. Scroll down until you see the ecommerce section and click on "ZenCart".

Finally, you should see the following screen shot below. Simply click on the "Install" button, follow the directions and complete your installation. It is as simple as that!

Using your favorite web browser, type in your domain name and you should now see your shopping cart! Depending on the version installed, your website should now look something like this.

Quick Tutorial On How To Install A Zen Cart Template From Algozone

As you probably noticed, the default out of the box template for Zen-Cart is pretty bland and ugly. Initially when my wife and I first launched our online store, we made the mistake using the out of box template and simply sticking our logo at the top of the page. Big mistake! If you stick with the out of the box look, you aren't going to be attracting many customers let alone selling any product.

As I alluded to earlier, the best way to proceed is to purchase a professionally created theme or template and make slight modifications rather than starting from scratch.

There are many places that sell shopping cart themes, but I have used and highly recommend **Algozone**. They offer a wide variety of themes to choose from for all of the major shopping cart brands.   Installation is very simple and I will show you in the following tutorial how easy it is to install a basic template for ZenCart.

Download The Template

The first step is to download the template file to your desktop computer. If you purchased your template from **Algozone**, you will receive a file in a standard compressed format .tar.gz.

To extract the contents of this file onto your computer, you need to use either winzip.exe or winrar.exe which are both free utilities found on the web. Go ahead and place the extracted files onto your desktop.
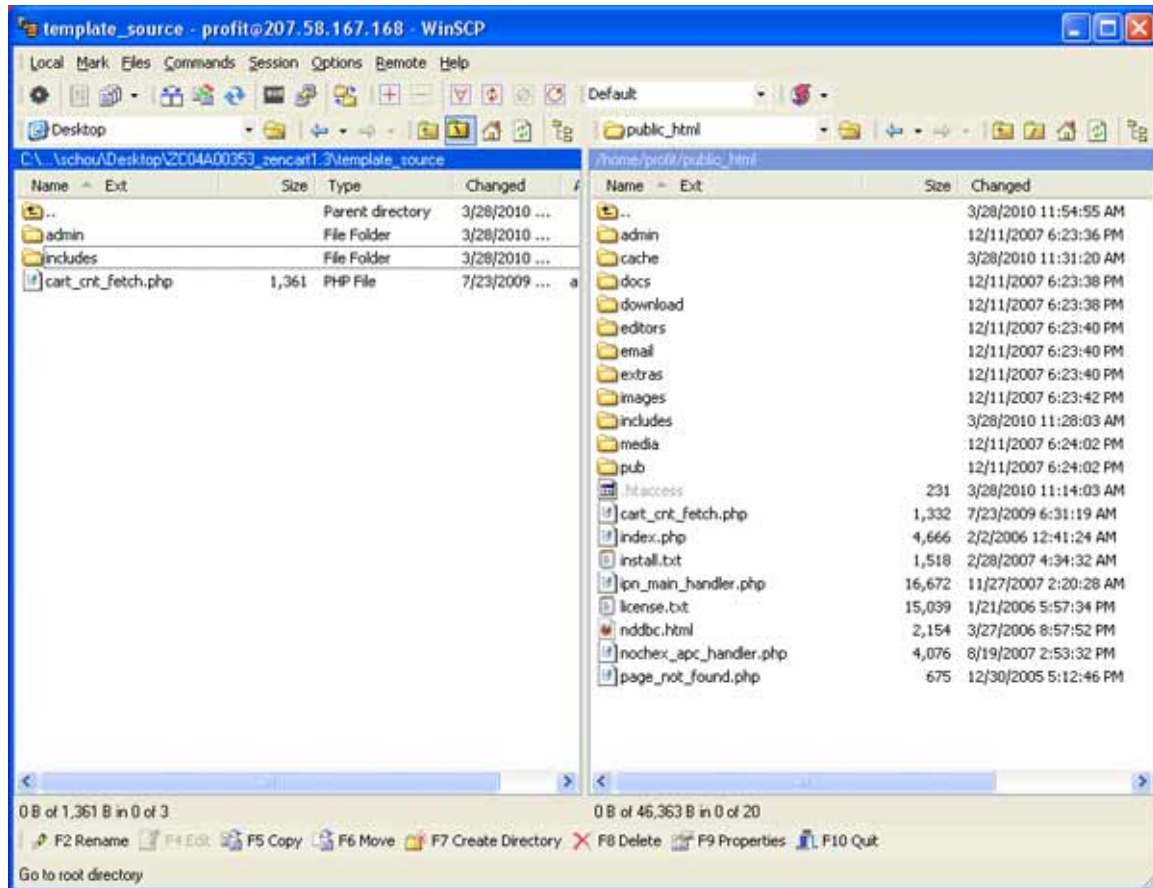
Install The Template Files

Before proceeding with the install, make sure you have backed up your existing ZenCart installation. In addition, make sure that you have installed ZenCart properly using my instructions above by verifying that your shopping cart is up on your web browser.

The next step is to transfer all of the files to your webserver. To do this, I use a program called WinSCP which is freely available on the web.   Most

tutorials will tell you to use FTP, but my advice is to never use FTP to transfer anything ever!

The reason is because FTP is not a secure protocol. Everything that is transmitted using FTP (including your password) is completely transparent and unencrypted. WinSCP is a program that encrypts all of your data and is a secure means of transferring files to your web server.

1) Launch WinSCP. The program should look like the following

2) On the left hand column, go to the template source directory of the open archive that you extracted from Algozone. On the right hand column go to the directory where your zencart installation resides on your webserver.

3) Select all files/directories in the template_source directory and upload (copy) them to the main directory where your Zencart files are located in your remote server.   If you don't know where that is, look for files/directories like index.php, includes, admin ...etc.

Enable The Template In ZenCart

Once all of the files are copied over, go to the admin window of ZenCart using your browser. If you didn't change the defaults, the URL should be

<yourstore>.com/admin

Once on your admin page, go to the Tools->Template Selections screen

On the template selection screen, click on "New Language" and on the right hand pull down menu, select your newly purchased template and click "insert".

Voila! Your new template is installed. Instead of the ugly out of the box zenCart template, your new storefront can look like this!

Conclusion

So there you have it, 5 easy steps to create your own online store. If you tally up all of the costs involved…

- Domain – $9.99
- Webhost – $4.95
- Shopping Cart – Free
- Credit Card Processing – $30
- Store Template – $130

You can realistically get started for only $179.94 with a recurring cost of only $34.95 a month. This is just a fraction of the cost of running a traditional brick and mortar store and you don't even need anyone to run the cash register.

In any case, I hope that you found this tutorial useful! If you would like to know more on what it's like to run an online store, please follow my blog at **MyWifeQuitHerJob.com**. Since my wife and I have already gone through it all, we are more than happy to share our experiences and help those who want to start their own store.