

THE eCOMMERCE CHRONICLES, *an interested party's overview of the massively changing business climate and culture triggered by the emerging practice of online selling and buying, known as eCommerce.*

*By Carla R. McBeath-Urrutia**

PART I. THE eCOMMERCE PLATFORM

Now that we have crossed the threshold of “e-commerce is just a phase” into “e-commerce is essential for any business”, it is easier to relax and adjust to learning how to do it, and do it right. This article explores recent innovations in e-commerce platforms, forming the core infrastructure of any online shopping experience.

Some industries have been forced into e-commerce. Small stores are trying to sell any way possible when their doors are closed. Restaurants, who traditionally did very little delivery business, are trying to find a way to market those non-perishable sauces and mixes. Professionals, such as doctors and lawyers, are launching virtual medical and legal appointments. But even large retail clothing and accessories stores, which have been on the forefront of e-commerce for a long time, are now forced to look at their own online presence and upgrade. The consumer climate has changed and e-commerce is at its center. Fortunately, creative companies have continued to innovate. As of now, three resources are available that were previously only known by a small group of sellers. These resources create and build the three pillars of a successful e-commerce enterprise: the Platform, The Catalogue and the Story.

As a business in e-commerce, you need to know about all three of these resources. However, the first step is to tackle the most important part of your e-commerce presence—your e-commerce platform—the framework and the mechanism of your store and sales process. Here are some of my observations, about the current portfolio of e-commerce platforms. Please be advised that this is my opinion, and is based on observation and research. You are encouraged to make your own investigation.

E-Commerce Platforms

Shopify * Wix * GoDaddy * Squarespace * BigCommerce * WooCommerce * Volusion

In the last year, e-commerce platforms have upgraded, innovated and launched marketing campaigns to reach new prospects that are just entering the e-commerce landscape. I have included a short list, to highlight only what I know about them, and to give some distinguishing features that may not be apparent. I have prioritized them, based on my research, experience and preferences:

Shopify is a Canadian multi-national company with a proprietary e-commerce platform, which has experienced unprecedented stock growth over the last year, as e-commerce has become a necessity. As first in the list, it is the one with which I have had the most experience. Shopify's platform for small businesses and start-ups is excellent, transparent, supported by a large number of compatible apps and tutorials and even offers a portfolio of free templates. But the primary star is their proprietary Shopify platform to build a scalable, product-oriented e-commerce business. The platform can adapt to Point of Sale, Drop-shipping or Print on Demand (all of which work beautifully within the platform). Their stock is increasing in value, their research and development continues, and they are responsive to changes in the marketplace. For the novice, they offer a free trial, and everything you could need to start up a business, for pennies (you should buy your own domain). Start at [Shopify.com](https://www.shopify.com) in your quest.

Two e-commerce companies I need to mention, for other reasons, are Volusion.com and BigCommerce.com. Unless you are already a large company, it is not worth the trouble to look them up. Both of their websites invite one to embark on a “free trial” immediately, with no further information about the platform or applications. This lack of transparency might work with large companies, who already have a business connection with Volusion or BigCommerce clients, but not in the sharply changing world of smaller and more agile e-commerce enterprises being created now. Most e-commerce enterprises are small, capable of quickly adapting to markets and can become highly profitable. But without a long track record working with a technology, small companies look for transparency first in a technology partner. Volusion and BigCommerce do not offer it.

WooCommerce evolved out of WordPress, which is a website platform, for, essentially, wordy websites. Although it shows promise in pivoting to the new, visually oriented e-marketplace, it is a long way behind. Some reviews I noted say that the website is difficult to customize.

Wix, Go Daddy and SquareSpace have been optimizing and upgrading alongside Shopify for years. Go Daddy is the largest domain registry in the world and has now added some e-commerce applications to their website development business. Wix has also entered their e-commerce platform in the race, alongside their website-building software. Squarespace, which always offered a visually centered website design, suitable for artists and photographers, now offers an online store as well.

With the exception of BigCommerce and Volusion, all the above companies have enough information on their websites to make an informed decision about choosing one, for a free trial. Watch some video tutorials about how to customize the themes and platforms, to get a sense of the level of difficulty in the process.

A couple of tips:

Themes can be purchased. Website themes that are free are not necessarily the best themes for conversion. Pay attention to the theme you use, and look for a good, paid theme that proves it can convert (unless you are merely showcasing your work, and not selling it). Therefore, it is not wise to pick a platform just because of the free themes it offers. Look at the other features.

Cybersecurity is important. Shopify has a robust fraud-detection team to keep you from being fleeced by credit card scams, right out of the gate. This should be top of your list, if you are selling online. If you want to sell globally, some of your first attempted sales may be frauds, so pay attention. There are networks of credit card scammers in other countries, looking for new e-commerce stores. Shopify blocks sales that bear indicators of fraud, then alerts the shop owner, as part of its platform.

Watch for other platforms to become more visible. Adobe Magento Commerce is a cloud-based e-commerce platform with a section for small business eCommerce, but the entire website is written for large businesses. Even if the platform were designed for small start-ups, the website language was not.

When looking for the right platform, look closely. There are a lot of them out there, but few excellent ones. Your start-up may not even need the most comprehensive platform, so keep in mind your goals. Also, keep reading....things are changing all the time.

*About the author: Carla McBeath-Urrutia started noticing e-commerce platforms 7 years ago, when designing websites and writing blogs for sole practitioners, then worked with an insurance company

during a time when online insurers popped up. While working in digital marketing, she found selling the concept of digital marketing and e-commerce to brick-and-mortar stores was difficult at best. Even after Amazon cracked the code to popularity, nothing gave power to e-commerce until stores closed and social distancing was imposed to fight a pandemic. As a researcher and copywriter, Carla has followed e-commerce as it has suddenly become a necessity, instead of an accessory.