

To DIY or Not to DIY?

Moving your Independent Pharmacy Online

Consumers have flocked online during the pandemic but many smaller independent pharmacies are still lagging behind.



Reports from McKinsey & PWC both indicate that online pharmacy sales & telemedicine were two of the biggest growth areas online. McKinsey reports of a “decade in days” when it comes to consumers’ digital adoption. Boots online sales had grown by 155% and many other pharmacies have reported similar growth.

This dramatic shift in consumer behaviour has seen a response from Irish pharmacies. The PSI’s Internet Supply List increased from 51 pharmacy websites at the end of 2019 to 128 at the end of 2020 to currently exceed 170 pharmacy websites. When you consider that the big pharmacy chains & groups are listed as a single pharmacy website it means that there are many hundreds of Irish retail pharmacies who are now selling products online.

It’s great to see that many independent pharmacies have realized that their current and future customers want an online customer service experience. With the movement of Amazon into the pharmacy market and disruptive online nationwide delivery services like Healthwave in Ireland, and Phlo & Lloyds Direct in the UK, independent pharmacies need to start building their online brands.

However, many independent pharmacies are still lagging behind with outdated brochure websites and others have not yet entered the online space at all.

Written by Colm Baker

Futureproof Your Retail Pharmacy With An Online Customer Service Experience

While the occasional cosmetics sale may not worry your bottom line too much now, these small transactions will allow your online competitors to build trust with your customers.

As telemedicine grows, online services like Healthwave, Phlo and Lloyds Direct that offer nationwide prescription deliveries will increasingly be trying to attract your dispensary customers online.

It’s true that many people would still rather support a local independent pharmacy. But what if you’re the only local pharmacy that doesn’t allow people to order prescriptions, book services and shop online?

While it may seem like a massive undertaking for independent pharmacies to enter the world of e-Commerce, you don’t necessarily have to go “**all-in**” and compete with the big pharmacy chains for total domination of the online market.

Most independent pharmacies, particularly owner-operated single independents, have no intention or ambition to “move online” in such a big way. And that’s perfectly okay. You will have a lot less headaches.

But for the reasons discussed above you do need to provide an online customer service experience that at a minimum, allows your **local customers** to order prescriptions, book services and shop online. This could be viewed as a **defensive, long-term strategy** rather than one focused on growth.

For most independent pharmacy owners, the exit strategy is to sell your business at some point in the future. Put yourself in the shoes of prospective buyers. Would you be

less willing to invest in a business that hasn’t an e-Commerce website in 5, 10 or 15 years?

Which is the Best Option for Moving Your Independent Pharmacy Online?

It can be difficult to know what is the best route to move your specific independent pharmacy business online. While there are plenty of website platforms and services I will breakdown the main options as:

1. Do It Yourself
2. Low-Cost Agency Development
3. High-Cost Agency Development

Any of these options could work for your pharmacy but you need to consider each option in relation to your specific business. Consider the following questions first:

- How much time do you & your team have available?
- What marketing skills & experience does your team have?
- What are your ambitions for your pharmacy website?
- Are you focused on futureproofing your existing retail business or growing new revenue streams?
- Will you need to recruit new staff to manage your website, marketing and order fulfillment if you intend on scaling a large e-Commerce business?
- What level of investment are you willing to put into website development?
- What ongoing level of investment are you willing to put into digital marketing, website management and license fees for software?
- Do you have a unique selling proposition to other pharmacies who are far more experienced selling online?

- Will you be able to win customers from pharmacies who have been online for 5-10 years?

Doing It Yourself: Is your life not hard enough?

Regardless of which website platform you choose, it will never be as easy to launch a website as the platforms make it out to be. With that said, I know there will still be some pharmacy owners who will want to explore this route. There are only two website builders you should consider if you are going the DIY route: Shopify & WooCommerce (WordPress).

Shopify is a comprehensive, all-in-one e-commerce software solution. It streamlines the process and makes it easier for you to create an online store, accept payments, and manage your products. It also has dedicated customer support based in Ireland. You don’t have to worry about as many of the technical aspects of managing a website, such as hosting, updates, and security.

However, to provide such an easy-to-use platform, there are limitations with pricing, design, features, content management, and integrations.

Yes, you may be able to build a simple website using Shopify. But to build a high-performing website that will compete with other pharmacies who spend in excess of £20,000 on their websites is a different kettle of fish altogether. You will still need a development team to get near that level.

The more apps and features you want, the more monthly fees you will incur. There are also restrictions around payments, products and business models to be aware of. Don’t forget you are only renting a space on Shopify’s software and as a result, you have to play by their rules.

WooCommerce is an open-source e-commerce plugin built for WordPress websites. It



allows you to create an online store and leverage the most powerful content management system available, WordPress.

Since it is open source, this offers much more flexibility than Shopify, and you can customize every aspect of your website. You will have enough functionality & freedom to sell any type of product with awesome design features.

WooCommerce definitely requires more technical skill to get your website launched and running well. While there are endless videos & support articles online, getting direct customer support about your specific problems is not as simple as with Shopify.

Although there are limitations with Shopify when it comes to pricing, design and functionality, **I would recommend it as the best choice if you are going the DIY route** unless you have some technical website experience with WordPress.

However, I do not recommend going the DIY route. You will create endless headaches and waste so much of your own time to produce a website that won't look or perform as well as your competitors. This route should only be considered by those pharmacies who are really watching the bank balances or have website development experience in their teams.

Low-Cost Development - WordPress Agencies eg. The Social Pharmacist

A recent KPMG report found that 99% of Irish consumers say that a good website is important when they are shopping online. Having a team of professional designers, developers, graphic designers and marketers will provide a much safer route to launching a high-quality website with a great design and customer experience.

A WordPress website will give your pharmacy a range of additional benefits and freedom to develop your online brand as your online business evolves. This route allows you to enter the e-Commerce space in a serious way and learn what it's all about before making serious investments in time, finances and personnel.

There are many reputable website development agencies who can build a modern, effective e-Commerce website for your pharmacy. But also be aware of many unscrupulous people in this industry too.

One of the biggest problems you will encounter is that most website development companies won't have a clue about your business,

your services, your products or the features that you need. You will end up micro-managing and spending so much time providing content to these agencies. It's one of the big advantages of working with our pharmacist-led team at The Social Pharmacist.

We also implement a simple "Drag & Drop" page builder on all of our pharmacy clients websites. This means you will be able to make simple edits to text and images yourself without any knowledge of coding. We also provide a range of video tutorials so you can learn how to manage the minor edits needed on your website yourself.

Depending on the size of your pharmacy, you could also be eligible to get 50% of the development costs covered by your Local Enterprise Office.

You should consider this route if you don't want to make a major investment but want a modern, high-quality website that futureproofs your retail pharmacy. You will be able to enter new markets and create new revenue streams while developing your teams e-Commerce skills.

High Cost Development - Magento, ABCommerce, Absolute etc.

For those independent pharmacies who have major ambitions and are ready to make a significant investment, there are a number of enterprise-level solutions that offer additional benefits.

The most popular of these solutions for the Irish pharmacy market has been AB-Commerce. AB-Commerce offers a turnkey solution for medium-sized retailers, encompassing best-in-class e-Commerce functionality, web hosting, high-end graphic design,

over 100 martech plugins and ePOS/ERP systems integrations.

There are also other enterprise-level examples such as McCabes Pharmacy (Absolute), Meaghers Pharmacy (Milk Bottle Labs), Cara Pharmacy (IRP Commerce) and Life Pharmacy (Magento).

These websites are all really well equipped to take your e-Commerce functionality to the next level. This route should only be considered by those independent pharmacies who are ready to invest serious time, finances and personnel into e-Commerce. Remember that paying for an e-Commerce website to be launched is only your initial cost. An even greater investment is needed in personnel, marketing and advertising budgets to turn it into a standalone, profitable, self-sufficient business. Before making the investment, be certain of how you're going to stand out and provide a clear difference to the other pharmacies who have been doing this for years.

My Personal Recommendation

Customers want to reduce their time in retail stores and want the convenience of ordering prescriptions, services and products online to save time.

You need to start developing your online brand now. You need to provide an online customer service experience that futureproofs your retail pharmacy business. You don't want to be the only local pharmacy that doesn't provide an online experience for customers.

But you are no longer only competing with local pharmacies in your area. The growth of e-Commerce means that you are now competing with big pharmacy chains across the country for

retail sales. And the growth of nationwide prescription delivery services also create a growing threat to your dispensary turnover too.

Creating an online customer service experience for your local customers minimizes the risk of losing customers to online alternatives. Moving your pharmacy online can also create new revenue streams and growth opportunities.

But what route should you take?

Don't be fooled by the lure of "easy money". You will be competing with at least 30 Irish pharmacy brands who have invested in high-end e-Commerce websites. Not to mention others who are doing a great job building online businesses using lower-cost websites. Many of your competitors will have a 5-10 years headstart on you too. They probably have greater brand awareness through a bigger retail footprint too.

On writing this article, there are over 170 pharmacy websites on the PSI Internet supply list. To put that into perspective, there are only 10 spaces on the first page of Google. How do you differentiate from them? If you are going to try to compete with them, it will take time, money and a lot of hard work.

Reflect realistically on your business, your ambitions, the skill sets within your team and how much investment you are ready to make in eCommerce at this current moment.

If you are still uncertain about which route to take, feel free to get in touch with me through The Social Pharmacist website.

