

SILVIA CARTER

# SELLING ONLINE INTERNATIONALLY:

How to set up & manage  
a cross-border e-commerce

BOOK 4 OF 7



Excerpt from:

# **SELLING ONLINE INTERNATIONALLY: How to Set Up & Manage a Cross-Border E-commerce**

# **SILVIA CARTER**

## **SELLING ONLINE INTERNATIONALLY: How to Set Up & Manage a Cross-Border E-commerce**



[The Digital Exporter Series](#) consists of seven independent books with more than 100 international case studies, each sharing the best tools, actionable solutions, and step-by-step explanations on how to sell online across channels and borders.

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- Book 2 – [GETTING CLIENTS OVERSEAS, ORGANICALLY: How to set up local, international & global SEO.](#)
- Book 3 – [GETTING CLIENTS OVERSEAS, BY ADVERTISING: SEA, SMA and other acquisition channels.](#)
- Book 4 – [SELLING ONLINE INTERNATIONALLY: How to set up & manage a cross-border e-commerce.](#)
- Book 5 – [SELLING ONLINE INTERNATIONALLY: How to sell on local & international marketplaces.](#)
- Book 6 – [DEVELOPING A STRONG INTERNATIONAL BRAND: Multilingual social media & social selling.](#)
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# CHAPTER 9

## SUCCEEDING IN DIGITAL EXPORT WITH CROSS-BORDER E-COMMERCE: CHOOSE THE RIGHT CMS OR PLATFORM

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*In terms of technology, there are several options for starting a cross-border e-commerce, whether B2C or B2B.*

*These specific solutions help you manage translations, currencies, payments, shipping and other localization services on the international scale. In this chapter, you will find some of these options and the explanation of their pros and cons.*

# **SAAS, CLOUD, OPEN-SOURCE... THE BEST SOFTWARE FOR YOUR CROSS-BORDER E-COMMERCE**

One of the first things you need for starting your B2B or B2C digital export project is a website that can sell your products or services internationally. Whether you need to develop it fully from scratch or to add the e-commerce functions to an existing website, there are so many technical solutions to choose from that it can be hard to understand which one is the best for your project.

These solutions are basically software applications that enable companies to manage all the functions required in the front-end<sup>78</sup> and in the back-end<sup>79</sup> to sell online. Before these solutions were available, companies that wanted to sell online, internationally, or even domestically, had to build their whole own e-shop by coding it in-house or by hiring external developers. That was an expensive, complex, and lengthy process mainly because it was hard to scale, difficult to manage and did not work with the other applications companies were using to run their business.

Nowadays, this method is used less and less, as numerous other cheaper, easier, and more effective solutions have become available.

So, overall, the options for building a cross-border e-commerce can be summarized in the following categories:

- 1) **Build your own:** this is a method rather than a solution, and, as we just saw, it is used less and less. If you choose it, you will need to hire someone, either internally or externally, to make it specifically for you according to your specifications by coding it entirely in

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<sup>78</sup> These are the functions used by your clients, such as browsing the product pages, choosing the color or size variations, adding a product to the cart, checking-out, etc.

<sup>79</sup> These are the functions you use to manage your online sales, such as product listing, order management, payment processing, inventory, warehouse fulfillment, etc., sometimes with the option to integrate accounting, CRM and other third-party business applications.

HTML or in other programming languages, or by combining that with one of the following solutions.

- 2) **Traditional platforms:** to use this type of platform, you must first pay an annual license fee, then access the platform to customize your website, then install it either on their cloud, in which case they also belong to category 4 below, or on other hosting servers, in which case they are called 'on-premises' because they need to be installed and managed on-site. In both cases, you will need some IT assistance, internal or external, because the development, customization, implementation, ongoing upgrades, and maintenance are very technical.

Some examples are Oracle ATG, SAP Hybris, and IBM WebSphere.

- 3) **Open-source platforms:** these platforms are like those in the previous category, not only in terms of features but also with regard to the need for IT assistance for the development, customization, implementation, ongoing upgrades, and maintenance. The advantage here is that with these platforms you don't need to pay a license fee. As before, you can choose to install your website either on their cloud, in which case they also belong to category 4 below, or on other hosting servers, in which case they are also called 'on-premises' because they need to be installed and managed on-site as for the previous category.



### TIP

*Shopping-cart software is like a CMS plugin or extension that is fully-dedicated to e-commerce functionalities. It is a piece of software that only works on existing websites: by adding it to an existing website you turn the website into an e-commerce. Therefore, shopping-cart software must not be confused with e-commerce software.*

Some examples are Magento Open Source (acquired by Adobe), Odoo, Drupal, PrestaShop, Shopware, OpenCart, WordPress.org<sup>80</sup> with an add-on of shopping-cart software like WooCommerce.

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<sup>80</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/WordPress>.



### TIP

*PrestaShop is free with many free or paid themes and plugins that allow you to customize the graphic template and style of your e-commerce the way you want. It includes many multilingual and international features, making PrestaShop extremely popular for cross-border e-commerce.*

- 4) **Cloud-hosted platforms:** as mentioned in the two previous categories, this type includes some of the traditional platforms as well as some of the open-source platforms that have added a cloud hosting system to their original offers. Because of that, they now are also called 'cloud-hosted' platforms, but the IT assistance for the development, customization, implementation, ongoing upgrades, and maintenance is the same as for the two previous categories.

Some examples include Magento Commerce Cloud (acquired by Adobe), Salesforce Commerce Cloud (ex-Demandware) and Oracle Commerce Cloud. There are also simpler and cheaper or free platforms, such as Freewebstore<sup>81</sup>, which are suited to smaller businesses or startups.

- 5) **SaaS platforms:** these platforms provide e-commerce features under a software-as-a-service model that is a single codebase, which means that everyone using it has basically the same technology pack depending on the monthly fee plan selected with very few or no options for customization. This type of platform includes hosting, and the monthly fee covers not only the software application but also the server use, upgrades, and maintenance.

WordPress.com<sup>82</sup>, whose plan for e-commerce starts at \$45 per month, or BigCommerce, whose plans start at \$29.95 per month, or Shopify, whose plans start at \$29 per month, are the most popular examples. On top of the online sales features, Shopify offers the option of integrating offline sales functionalities with a point-of-sale (POS) solution for in-person shopping, which is a great

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<sup>81</sup> Free only for businesses with up to €30,000 sales per year and using the Freewebstore domain name in the URL.

<sup>82</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/WordPress.com>.

advantage for those businesses that also have brick-and-mortar stores<sup>83</sup>.

Easier SaaS platforms are the so-called website builders, which are dedicated to building any sort of website, not only e-commerce. Most of them are free of charge for basic websites, which is why they are quite popular among start-ups. So, if your website is developed with one of these website builders, you can simply add the online sales features for inventory, payments, shipping, etc. by changing your plan into the one for e-commerce.

Simplicity is their greatest advantage<sup>84</sup>, which is outweighed by the inconvenience of their limited features for international sales and SEO. Despite that, the three most popular are Wix, whose e-commerce plans start at \$23 per month, Weebly<sup>85</sup>, whose e-commerce plans start at \$25 per month, and Squarespace<sup>86</sup>, whose e-commerce plans start at \$30 per month.

There are also free platforms such as Square<sup>87</sup> Free Online Store<sup>88</sup> or Ecwid<sup>89</sup>, but you're limited in functionalities or in number of products.

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<sup>83</sup> This Shopify POS solution can also be used with other types of e-commerce, for example on WordPress by installing a dedicated Shopify POS plugin. This is not, however, the only POS solution for WordPress, since many others are available, sometimes cheaper than Shopify POS, such as WooPOS, which integrates automatically on WooCommerce.

<sup>84</sup> By blending drag-and-drop building with e-commerce features, these website builders are very popular among business people that have no coding or e-commerce skills.

<sup>85</sup> In 2018, Weebly was acquired by Square.

<sup>86</sup> Widely used by creatives and artists because of enhanced portfolio features.

<sup>87</sup> Square is the company that provides a payment processing device, or a POS that enables businesses to accept credit cards on mobile phones, a little white square box.

<sup>88</sup> Free for the owners of a Square account. It is a convenient option for those businesses with a brick-and-mortar store, but with the free plan they can only use a domain name with Square in the URL.

<sup>89</sup> Free for up to 20 products and not on your own domain.

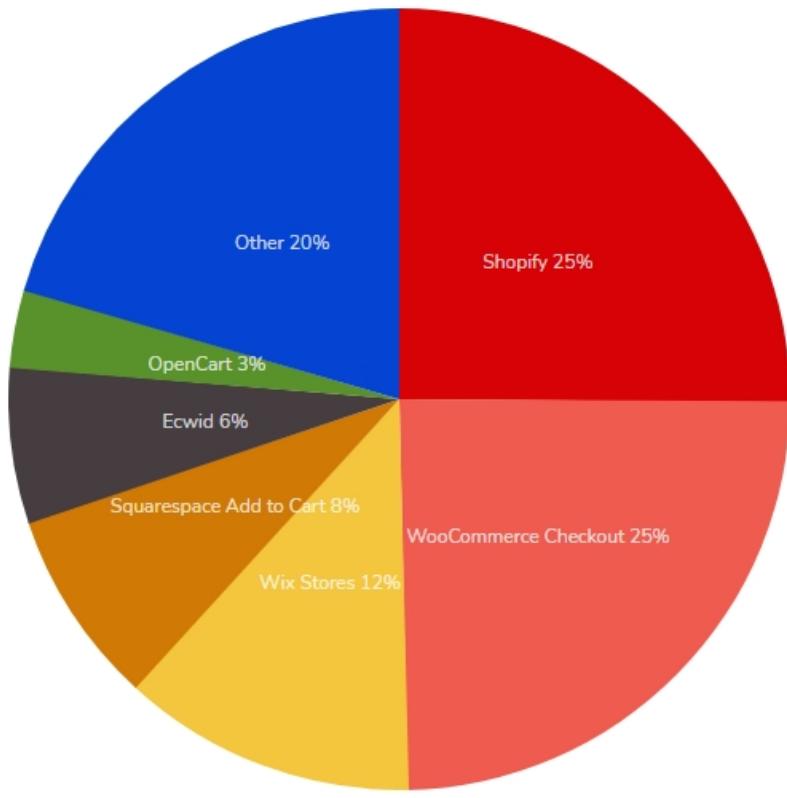


Figure 26: e-commerce technology market shares on the entire internet<sup>90</sup>.

What do e-commerce software and shopping-cart software do?

The key functions are mainly four:

- **Products management:** add and remove products or services, manage descriptions, pictures, sizes, colors, quantities, statistics, etc.
- **Order handling:** receive and validate purchase orders, calculate taxes, send invoices, print shipping labels, track delivery, follow-up purchases, etc.

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<sup>90</sup> Check out the BuiltWith website to see the breakdown by country and by technology: <https://trends.builtwith.com/shop/traffic/Entire-Internet>.

- **Check-out streamlining and security:** speed-up the purchasing process through built-in payment gateways that are linked directly to your bank account.
- **Web marketing and SEO:** with integrated tools to optimize e-commerce performance on the internet, manage abandoned-cart reminders, add social selling options, offer coupons and special discounts, etc.

## CMS FOR CROSS-BORDER E-COMMERCE: WHAT IS IT?

A CMS is a web-based platform or software, usually open-source and free, that provides the tools to build a website.

The main difference between it and the e-commerce software presented above is that a CMS is for building a website according to any type of objective and need, not only for e-commerce. It can be thought of as part of category 3, since it is frequently open-source.

The main advantages of using a CMS are low cost, reliable quality, and, once the website is developed, the ease of managing it to update the content as and when required without your having to be a web developer.

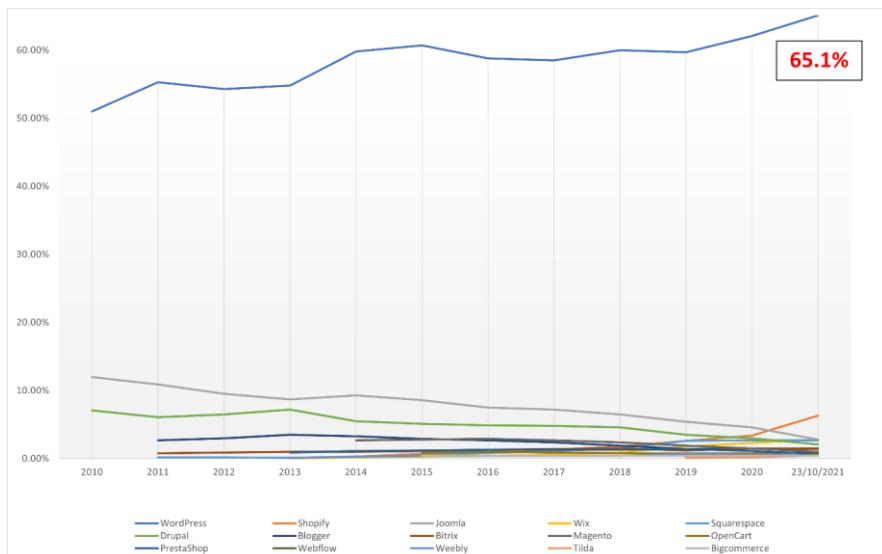


Figure 26b: the market shares of the top 15 CMS in the world<sup>91</sup>.

Among the most popular CMSs around the world, WordPress is the most used, with a market share of more than 64% of worldwide CMS websites<sup>92</sup>. Open-source, free, and with millions of websites built with this CMS worldwide, the number of additional features developed by third-party partners and the quality of the support you can get are very high.

The WordPress dashboard is very user-friendly, and it is easy to learn how to manage a website thanks not only to the tutorials available on WordPress itself but also to the huge materials made freely available on the internet by other people. Therefore, the options with WordPress are almost limitless, since it is suited to the development of any kind of website for free or at low cost.

<sup>91</sup> Source: W3Techs by Q-Success,

[https://w3techs.com/technologies/history\\_overview/content\\_management/ms/y](https://w3techs.com/technologies/history_overview/content_management/ms/y).

<sup>92</sup> Matt Southern, 'WordPress Powers 39.5% of All Websites', *Search Engine Journal*, 4 January 2021, <https://www.searchenginejournal.com/wordpress-powers-39-5-of-all-websites/391647/>.

For e-commerce, since WordPress doesn't come with any built-in payment processing features, all the online sales functionalities can be added easily using some free or premium shopping-cart software in the form of plugins like WooCommerce, BigCommerce, Ecwid, and many others.

BigCommerce and Ecwid are also e-commerce SaaS platforms, as you saw in the previous pages: you can create your e-commerce on their platforms and then link them to WordPress to add a blog, or you can create your e-commerce directly on WordPress and integrate one of these plugins to add all the e-shopping functionalities to your WordPress website.

## **WORDPRESS.ORG VS. WORDPRESS.COM**

In 2005, when WordPress became very popular, it decided to split into two different CMSs: WordPress.org and WordPress.com.

The first of these is the open-source software. You can download it for free and then install it for your domain name on your web hosting.

Once you have downloaded it, you can access your dashboard and take full control of the development of your website, starting with the choice of the graphic template, also called the 'theme' in the technical CMS vocabulary, to the installation of your e-commerce plugin as well as all other plugins that are necessary for making it cross-border (see the next case study for more details).

With WordPress.org you are free to customize your e-commerce as much as you want with free or premium plugins, themes, and many other applications. You're the owner, and you own all its data.

Welcome to the world's most  
popular website builder,  
delivered on the world's fastest  
WordPress managed hosting platform.



Search WordPress.org



Get WordPress

## Meet WordPress

WordPress is open source software you can use to create a  
beautiful website, blog, or app.

Figure 26c: WordPress.com vs. WordPress.org.



## CASE STUDY

*How do you turn a WordPress.org website into a cross-border e-commerce?*

*These are the key steps:*

- *First, make sure your theme is compatible with WooCommerce or with the shopping-cart plugin you want to use. If your theme is not compatible, you will need to change it.*
- *Install the WooCommerce plugin or another one you want to use.*
- *With WooCommerce, or the other e-commerce plugin you've installed, your dashboard will have an additional tag in the left-side menu, 'Products'. In there you will now be able to create your product or service pages with their descriptions, pictures, and all other shopping-related information.*
- *Install WPML, or Polylang, or any other plugins to add the multilingual functionalities to your website.*
- *With WPML, or the other multilingual plugin you've installed, your dashboard will have an additional tag in the left side menu, 'WPML'. In there you will have the settings to decide on the domain structure, including the choice among the sub-directories or sub-domains for each language, the options for the language selector, etc. This type of plugin will also help you translate each page and product of your website in a SEO-friendly way and to link them under the right sub-directories or sub-domains.*
- *Install Mollie, which is compatible with WooCommerce, or any other plugin for international payment systems that is compatible with WooCommerce. With this plugin, you will have a new tag in WooCommerce where you can choose the currencies and the payment systems that you want to offer to your online customers.*
- *Install Yoast or any other plugin for SEO that is compatible with WooCommerce. With this plugin, you will have a new tag on your left-side menu where you can add your ID for Google and other search engines. This type of plugin will also help you add all the HTML tags for the 'on-page' SEO for each page and product of your website, and, since you previously installed WPML or a similar plugin, you will be able to do this 'on-page' SEO work for all your translated sub-directories or sub-domains.*

*Check out [book 2 of The Digital Exporter Series](#) for all the details on how to choose the best domain structure and how to do 'on-page' SEO for a cross-border e-commerce. Or find out more about plugins in the next chapters.*

WordPress.com is different because it includes a hosting service. It was created by Automattic, Inc., a company founded and led by one of WordPress.org co-founders, Matt Mullenweg, which is also the reason why many people get confused with these two WordPress sites.

If you want to use WordPress.com for your cross-border e-commerce, then, unlike WordPress.org, it will not be free. These are its pricing plans:

- Limited – the free basic and limited version, with only up to 3GB of storage.
- Personal – \$48 per year, with only up to 6GB of storage.
- Premium – \$96 per year, with only up to 13GB of storage.
- Business – \$300 per year, with only up to 200GB of storage.
- E-commerce – \$540 per year, with only up to 200GB of storage.
- VIP – starting at \$2,000 per month<sup>93</sup>, although you can only get a final price quote by contacting someone in the sales team.

Apart from the cost, WordPress.com has other disadvantages, and the worst ones for your digital export project are:

- You cannot install all the plugins or themes you want, except for a few from a limited list, unless you sign up for the VIP plan at \$2,000 per month.
- You cannot install Google Analytics, Ads, or any other tracking or advertising applications, unless you sign up for at least the Business plan.
- Your site will advertise WordPress.com unless you sign up for the Business plan. That means that, if you sign up for the cheaper plans, on top of the ‘powered by WordPress.com’ on your web pages you will have wordpress.com/ in your domain name URL.
- WordPress.com can shut your e-commerce down if it considers that it is violating its conditions.

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<sup>93</sup> <https://wpvip.com/pricing/>.

# HOW TO CHOOSE THE BEST SOLUTION FOR YOUR CROSS-BORDER E-COMMERCE

Choosing your e-commerce platform is key for your digital export project, and, since there is no one right recipe, take your time to make sure that the solution you like suits your objectives.

The most important thing you should take into consideration is the geographic area you want to serve with your cross-border e-commerce, which means in which foreign countries you want to sell your products or services.

Whether all the e-commerce platforms presented in the previous pages can work in most countries around the world, there is one country that requires a different approach: China.

In China, not only is Baidu (not Google) your best friend', but, with the Great Firewall, the internet protection system operated by the Ministry of Public Security of the People's Republic of China<sup>94</sup>, and the technical performance website constraints, which need the closest possible servers to ensure fast loading speed, a cross-border e-commerce must comply with several SEO, SEA, legislative, and technical requirements.

If, for example, you are using Shopify with the automatic integration of Instagram shopping through Facebook, your e-commerce runs the risk of being censored, because Facebook is banned in China. See [book 2 of The Digital Exporter Series](#) for all the details.

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<sup>94</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great\\_Firewall](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Firewall).



## TIP

*As communications pass between client software and server software, the distance between the two can impact your cross-border e-commerce download speed and, therefore, your online sales performance overseas. Make sure the international latency of your e-commerce, i.e., the time your foreign internet shoppers take to download your web pages, is not too high. High latency is one of the first reasons not only for a high bounce rate, which is bad for SEO, but also for cart abandonment.*

In the following case study, you will find some final suggestions on the points to consider before you make up your mind.



## CASE STUDY

*How to choose the system that best suits your digital export project?*

*Here are the key points to consider:*

- 1) *Budget: how much are you willing to invest, whether per month or up-front, for web development?*  
--Currencies: in how many different foreign currencies will your products be sold?  
--Payments: what are the payment systems used most by your foreign prospects?  
--Taxes: how many VAT systems do you have to manage?  
--Deliveries: in how many different ways will your products be delivered?
- 2) *Time: are your products or services ready for international online sales, or are they still in the development stage?*
- 3) *Geographic area: how many countries and languages do you want to serve? And based on this answer:*  
--*Currencies: in how many different foreign currencies will your products be sold?*  
--*Payments: what are the payment systems used most by your foreign prospects?*  
--*Taxes: how many VAT systems do you have to manage?*  
--*Deliveries: in how many different ways will your products be delivered?*

*The last point is inversely correlated to your budget because the larger the geographical scope, the more sophisticated, and expensive, the necessary cross-border e-commerce solutions will be.*

*The second point is also inversely correlated to your budget in the sense that, if you're in a hurry with no time to learn how to use the free or cheaper systems, you will end up choosing one of the platforms with built-in functionalities, which for cross-border e-commerce can easily be very expensive in the long run.*



## TIP

*The best e-commerce platform is not the most popular but the one that will be able to deliver the objectives you've set for your digital export project, and it should fit with your technical skills or those of your team.*



## KEY TAKEAWAYS

*To start your digital export project, you need a website that can sell your products or services internationally, either B2C or B2B or both. Whether you need to develop it fully from scratch or to add the e-commerce functions to an existing one, you can choose among several technical solutions, which are software applications to manage online sales.*

*These solutions can be summarized in the following categories:*

- 1) Build your own.
- 2) Traditional platforms.
- 3) Open-source platforms.
- 4) Cloud-hosted platforms.
- 5) SaaS platforms.

*To choose the best e-commerce solution, you need to make sure that it can meet the objectives you've set for your digital export project, and that it fits with your technical skills or those of your team.*