

# READY FARMER



**THE FARMERS' GUIDE TO CREATE, DESIGN,  
AND MARKET AN ONLINE FARM STORE**

# **READY FARMER ONE**

**The Farmer's Guide to Create, Design,  
and Market an Online Farm Store**

**DIEGO FOOTER  
NINA GALLE**

**Foreword by Jean-Martin Fortier**

**Introduction by Dan Brisebois**

# CHAPTER 2

## CHOOSE AN ONLINE SALES PLATFORM

# You're excited to start selling online, but what platform do you choose?

This decision will determine what features you can work with, such as inventory management and store credits, and the time investment it will take to collect and fulfill orders.

There are many different options out there, and they vary in price, ease of use, and features.

Instead of just thinking about your online sales platform as software, consider it your partner in good times and bad. How much time do you want to spend on online

sales management, and how much do you want your partner to do for you?

Think about the company running the platform. Do they understand the needs of farming? Is the product built for farmers? Is that important to you? How much customization are you looking for?

The deeper you dive into finding the right e-commerce partner for your business, the more you'll learn about the nuances of different systems. Let's dive in.

## WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN AN ONLINE STORE AND A WEBSITE?

A website is a landing spot for your business. It gives customers a place to learn more about you and to explore what else you have to offer. Think of it as your online business card—it's someplace you can send someone to learn more. Some website platforms include an online store platform.

Your online store, however, is solely used to sell your products. Most online store platforms allow you to add information about yourself and your products, but the main purpose is to convert visitors into customers.

# ONLINE SALES PLATFORM MACRO CONSIDERATIONS

When choosing an online sales platform, you need to consider macro considerations (time, budget) and micro features (ability to customize one small thing).

**We suggest using the macro to narrow down your choices and then refining your choice using the micro.**

There are four macro considerations for choosing an online sales platform: time, budget, sales channels, and customer service.

## **Time Investment**

How much time are you prepared to invest in a system?

Spreadsheets and online forms are the most basic way to run online sales. They are free, but like most things, there is a cost/time tradeoff: lower cost = a larger time commitment, and vice versa.

Many free solutions, like spreadsheets, require a significantly higher time

investment than an integrated e-commerce system. Additionally, tasks like invoicing and inventory management must be done manually.

Look at your business week. How much time do you have for administration? Do you have other team members that could help with this? What is your average order volume?

**If you are doing more than twenty-five orders or are dealing with more than twenty-five customers, spreadsheets will become overwhelming.**

E-commerce platforms simplify the online sales process by using software to manage everything you would have to do manually with a spreadsheet. This makes weekly store management much easier and frees up a lot of time.

But not all e-commerce platforms are created equal. Different platforms require different amounts of time to set up and manage stores. Platforms like Local Line and Shopify are very easy to set up.

Skill is another factor that should be considered when thinking about time investment. If you have a lot of familiarity with software, spreadsheets, and online platforms, then that will make things go faster when you set them up. If you don't have these skills, then you need to find a platform that makes it very easy to set up a store.

When deciding on a platform, consider both the initial time investment to set up the store and that required to manage the store every week.

## Your Budget

How much are you willing to pay monthly or annually for your platform?

**A lot of people  
immediately think,  
» I need the cheapest  
option.«**

Remember, though, that there is often a cost-to-feature tradeoff. Look at the features included in each platform and decide which ones are critical. The features needed might depend on what type of products you sell—i.e., features needed to run a CSA are different from running a food hub or selling meat products. Let's

say you're a beef farmer. Certain features, such as the ability to change invoices post-sale for variable-weighted products, will make your life easier.

Also, different platforms are priced differently. Some platforms have a low monthly fee, but they only offer a very basic set of features at a low price point. To use the features you want, you have to add them to your base subscription, which can add up over time.

Another approach is to charge an additional sales fee—a percentage fee the platform charges per order. Many base platforms offer a \$0/month plan plus an additional sales fee of perhaps 3 percent. This is a percentage that gets deducted for each payment that goes through the system to the e-commerce platform. It's a great option for those just starting out, but it can add up as your business grows.

With Local Line, if you are selling less than \$2,400/month (\$28,800/year), the \$0/month plan + 3 percent sales fee is great. If you sell more, moving to a paid plan is a more cost-effective option.

Typically, the more money you invest in a great e-commerce platform, the less time you spend on manual administrative tasks. What is the cost-benefit analysis for your business?

How many sales does your business make each week? Fewer sales might be easier to manage manually, but eventually, once

you go past a certain threshold, managing sales manually becomes too much work. This is where automation comes in and makes things easier.

Farmers are often frugal to a fault. We have heard business owners doing thousands of dollars in sales a week complain about the cost of a \$30/month plug-in. Don't lose sight of the big picture.

Before you decide not to get the \$30/month upgrade, ask yourself, "How will this \$30 make things easier each month?"

## What Are Your Sales Channels?

What sales channels are you managing online—CSA, online store, restaurant sales?

If you have multiple sales channels, we recommend finding a platform to manage them all—one platform to track customers, manage inventory, collect orders, and get paid.

**Having a single platform will make your life a lot easier.**

When looking for a multi-channel sales platform, you might need to let go of some desired features. For example, you might find a platform that can manage your CSA

and your retail store, but it may lack some retail store features you are looking for.

If you only have one sales channel, such as your retail store, then you can focus on the best platform for that sales channel. But think ahead—are you considering adding another sales channel in the future? If so, you might want a platform that could also work with that future sales channel.

What are the specific needs of your business?

For example, suppose you are a food hub or farmers market looking to sell online. In that case, you'll need a few other features that a farmer selling retail may not need—e.g., the ability for your vendors to upload and update their products themselves. Using a generic e-commerce platform, only one user can upload products and set inventory. This means that vendors are not in charge of their products.

So, in this example, you would need to ask yourself: how many vendors do I have? How do I want my online store to be organized? Do I have a dedicated team member to manage inventory?

Or, if you are a CSA running a buy-down model, you want customers to be able to go in every week to pick what they want without you manually having to do so. You'll need a feature like a store credit to track how much CSA members have left in their accounts each week.

## WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A FARM-FOCUSED PLATFORM AND A GENERIC E-COMMERCE PLATFORM?

There are many different platforms to choose from. Some are built for farmers, and others are built for any business. Does it matter if it is a farm-focused platform? This depends on what you sell. There are different features that you can only find in a farm-focused platform that are not available in a generic one. These include selling by weight, standing orders, store credit, and different price lists for different sales channels.

Another thing to consider is that the people working at those platforms know farmers. They know how the business works, what farmers need, and how best to help them.

### Customer Service

You want to know who you're working with. The customer service offered by different platforms is essential for your success. Odds are there will be moments when the platform isn't working the way you want it to, or you need a bit more support to get started.

You want to know that when you need help, there will be someone on the other end of the line who is willing to help you. Different platforms have different reputations when it comes to the service they provide. Large platforms might take a

bit more time to get someone on the line, and they often prioritize their customer service a bit less.

**With a farm-focused platform, like Local Line or Local Food Marketplace, you can be assured that the person on the other end of the line understands your needs as a farmer.**

They have worked with thousands of farmers before and are well-equipped to help you deal with any challenges.

**Also, smaller businesses have more flexibility in adding features and changes to the platform you request.**

Shop around the different platforms. Reach out and ask questions. See who gets back to you. This will help you decide whether the customer service they are offering works for you. Depending on your comfort level with technology, you might need more or less support.

What about ease of use?

Online sales platforms have come a long way in the past few years and most platforms today are relatively easy to use. All platforms will have subtle nuances, but the differences between the “hardest” and “easiest” platforms are small, so we don’t see the ease of use as a differentiating factor.

That said, be prepared to learn something new. A platform’s ability to work for you is dependent on your ability to learn the software. Luckily, there are entire customer support teams and lots of resources available to guide you along the way. But remember that there will be a learning curve and be prepared to deal with that.

## ONLINE SALES PLATFORM MICRO CONSIDERATIONS

Now that we’ve discussed the macro considerations let’s get into the nitty-gritty of platform features. If you’ve never used an e-commerce platform before, these features may seem very new to you.

Let’s break down the features into three main categories: online storefront, products and orders, and fulfillment and payment processing.

### Online Storefront

You want your online storefront to be streamlined, easy to navigate, and optimized across all devices for a great customer experience. Your storefront needs to display what you are selling, and the shopping experience should be intuitive and simple. Good features to look for include:

- *Different price lists.* This feature allows you to have different product availability and pricing for different sales channels—for example, having a retail and wholesale price list. You can send different customer types to their relevant price list.
- *Product customization.* The ability to upload product photos, descriptions, and certifications. Different platforms will offer different levels of customization, like the ability to categorize products for easy navigation.
- *Payment flexibility.* Set up online payments and customize your payment terms. Create discount products, issue store credits, and offer multiple payment types at checkout.

## Products and Orders

What do you want the backend to look like?

The backend is the interface you see as a business. It includes inventory, order summaries, etc. For the backend, you want features that will make running your business seamless. This includes how your inventory is managed and how the software interacts with unique business cases, such as variable-weighted products and subscription models. Good features to look for include:

- *Automatic inventory management.* This feature will automatically track total inventory as items are purchased

through your online store. When the inventory runs out, the item becomes out of stock, preventing overselling.

- *Low-inventory notifications.* The system will automatically alert you when your inventory is below a certain threshold. This will allow you to increase inventory levels when needed.
- *Product visibility.* The ability to list or hide out-of-stock or seasonal products.
- *Support for CSAs.* Depending on the CSA model you use (box vs. buy-down model), you want your platform to have features needed to run your CSA. These could include standing orders—where the same order is automatically made week after week—or store credit—where a customer’s CSA credit is automatically deducted as they order.
- *Sell by weight.* Customize checkout to defer payment and update orders when the final weight is known. This is essential for producers who sell by weight, such as meat farmers.
- *Custom reports.* The ability to download sales reports over the season. Furthermore, you want the ability to customize these reports to show what is important to you over different time periods, such as popular products, delivery locations, and average order size. This will allow you to make data-driven decisions regarding what you sell and don’t sell.

## Fulfillment and Payment Processing

Order fulfillment and payment processing are essential aspects of running an online business. How are your customers going to pay you? How will you get the products to them? You want software that gives you as much flexibility as possible. Depending on the size of your business, you may want to offer more pickup locations and fewer delivery options, as well as different payment options for different customer types. Good features to look for include:

- *Unlimited and custom delivery areas and pickup locations.* The ability to customize your distribution areas, frequency, order lead time, order minimums, and fees for each sales channel (i.e., retail vs. wholesale). This will allow you to create a delivery plan that works and is profitable for your business.
- *Payment options.* Every business is different, and every customer is different. You want to use software that gives you the ability to customize which payment methods you accept, such as e-transfer, cash, credit card, etc.
- *Sales fees.* Consider how much the online store software is taking per payment it processes. These fees can add up as you grow your business. *Note: These fees are in addition to fees charged by credit card processors.*
- *Pick and pack lists.* The ability to download customized order

summaries to streamline your pick and pack processes. Each business has its own picking and packing system, so you want your software to provide an overview that works for you. Online Sales Options

Now let's walk through different online sales options that are currently available. For each option, we'll discuss the appropriate business model, who the target customer is, and the strengths and challenges of each software platform.

### SPREADSHEETS

A lot of farmers run their "online store" barebones with email and spreadsheets. They use email and online forms to take and accept orders and they track their orders in a spreadsheet.

**Spreadsheets are a great way to get started, but it takes a lot of work because every order that comes in has to be logged manually. It also requires a lot of monitoring if you accept orders through multiple channels.**

For example, if you send out a product list on WhatsApp and email, and then post a

reminder on Facebook and Instagram, you have to constantly check those places for new orders. You have to be prepared to update your spreadsheet multiple times a day so you don't miss an order.

Since it is a manual system, you can expect challenges—such as when customers order outside of the delivery window or want to make adjustments to their existing order.

Each change requires you to respond and make an edit. The spreadsheet may act as the central hub for order fulfillment, but you are the one responsible for filling it in.

You can run your business using a spreadsheet, but there are ways that are more efficient, utilize less brain power, take a lot less time to manage, and can scale.

## BENEFITS

- Free
- Low learning curve

## CHALLENGES

- Very time intensive
- Subject to human error
- Does not update in real-time
- Not linked to online payment
- Does not track inventory
- No ability to host multiple sellers on one platform
- Does not scale

**Key Takeaway:** Spreadsheets are a great place to start if you want to dabble in online sales. To make spreadsheets work, you need to have a small customer base and product list, and you need to be very organized. While they work, spreadsheets take a lot of manual labor and quickly become overwhelming.

## SQUARESPACE

Many people know Squarespace for its easy-to-use website builder. It provides various templates, and a user can easily drag and

drop text and photos to make a website their own. In addition to its website builder, Squarespace has an e-commerce feature that enables users to upload products, track inventory, and accept payments.

Like many other online store platforms, Squarespace can accept orders, which is a huge timesaver compared to a spreadsheet. Instead of sending out product lists to customers through messaging apps, social media channels, and email, you can share the link to your online store and start receiving orders.

You can also upload multiple products, create unique product names and descriptions, and include product photos.

Squarespace also allows users to organize their products into product categories for easier navigation.

Squarespace integrates with payment processors like Stripe and Paypal and allows you to sell gift cards, add customer reviews, integrate with social channels, and sell subscriptions.

Overall, it is a sound, generic e-commerce platform that could work for many businesses.

## BENEFITS

- Seamless integration into existing Squarespace website
- Automatic inventory management
- Ability to upload product photos and descriptions
- Ability to accept online payments—i.e., credit cards
- User-friendly, responsive storefront
- Ability to sell subscriptions
- Connect your store to third-party tax and shipping tools
- Extras: gift cards, customer reviews, integration with social channels

## CHALLENGES

- No ability to create price lists for different customer types (i.e., wholesale pricing versus retail pricing)
- Inventory is tracked per product unit; not able to change unit measurement
- Built for any e-commerce use—not specific to farmers
- No ability to host multiple sellers on one platform, such as a farmers market or food hub

**Takeaway:** Squarespace offers an easy-to-use solution for e-commerce. It has many great features, such as the ability to sell subscriptions, which would be great for food-box services. The platform

is not suitable for users who sell various products in different pack sizes, for meat producers, or for those who sell to a variety of sales channels. Additionally, it would be difficult to manage food hubs or farmers markets on this platform.

## SQUARE

Square has revolutionized how small businesses accept payments. It works as an online credit card payment processor and offers various point-of-sale (POS) options, such as the Square Terminal and Square Register. In addition to their payment processing, Square offers an online store solution.

Its e-commerce platform has all of the features of a generic e-commerce platform, such as inventory management, distribution options such as pickup and delivery, payment processing, and a customizable storefront. As they are a payment processing platform first and foremost, their platform seamlessly integrates with all of their other products—so you can sell in person with their POS and online with the same inventory.

### BENEFITS

- Automatic inventory management
- Integrates with Square's POS and payment systems
- Ability to upload product photos and descriptions
- Ability to accept online payments—i.e., credit cards
- User-friendly, responsive storefront

### CHALLENGES

- No ability to create price lists for different customer types (i.e., wholesale pricing versus retail pricing)
- Inventory is tracked per product unit; not able to change unit measurement
- Built for any e-commerce use; not specific to farmers
- No ability to host multiple sellers on one platform, such as a farmers market or food hub

**Takeaway:** If you sell in-person and online, and already use Square's POS systems, this is a great option. Both your e-commerce platform and payment tools are hosted by the same system, which keeps you organized. Similar to Squarespace, the platform is not suitable

for users that sell a variety of different products in different pack sizes, for meat producers, or those who sell to a variety of sales channels. Additionally, it would be difficult to use for food hubs or farmers markets.

## SHOPIFY

As one of the most popular generic e-commerce platforms, Shopify is stocked with features built for online sales. Similar to Squarespace and Square, Shopify allows you to upload unique products, accept online payments, and integrate them into a website. The software works on a monthly subscription basis and does not have platform-specific transaction processing fees.

The platform offers many great e-commerce features and integrates with over 6,000 apps on their Shopify App store. Additionally, they offer a wide range of store themes to customize your store and make it your own.

As their target audience is anyone with something to sell online, some features are nice to have but may be more targeted to businesses selling non-perishable products.

### BENEFITS

- Customizable storefront with many templates to choose from
- Automatic inventory management
- Ability to upload product photos and descriptions, including multiple photos per product
- Ability to accept online payments—i.e., credit cards
- User-friendly, responsive storefront
- Analytics dashboard to better understand sales, orders, and audience
- Able to list different product variations, such as package size
- Integrates with social media channels and other sales avenues, such as Facebook, Instagram, Google, and eBay
- Mobile friendly

### CHALLENGES

- Built for any e-commerce use—not specific to farmers; some features may be better for non-perishable food products versus fresh products
- No ability to host multiple sellers on one platform, such as a farmers market or food hub
- Challenging to sell variable-weighted products
- Designed for businesses who ship products via third-party delivery services, rather than for businesses doing local pickup or direct delivery

**Takeaway:** Shopify is a very popular e-commerce platform for anyone with something to sell online. They are one of the leaders in the online commerce space. When designing your online store, Shopify offers a lot of customization options and templates to choose from to make it your own. As the platform is built for anyone with anything to sell online, some features specific to farmers and food sales are lacking.

## LOCAL FOOD MARKETPLACE

Local Food Marketplace was developed with local food sales in mind. The software was launched in 2009 by local food advocates and technology entrepreneurs Doug Frazier and Amy McCann. Their strong

suit is their farmers market and food hub platform. They make it easy for food hubs to organize products and connect with vendors.

They also offer farms solutions to sell online, organize their orders, and keep track of their inventory. They offer farm-specific features such as unlimited prices for different sales channels, delivery-route management software, and the ability to download and print off automated harvest and pack lists.

One challenge of Local Food Marketplace is that it can be costly for new and young farmers. They have a start-up fee in addition to a monthly subscription fee, which can be a large investment for those just starting out.

### BENEFITS

- Built for farmers
- Offers unlimited price lists
- Offers the ability to create recurring orders
- Delivery-route management software
- Integrates with QuickBooks accounting software
- Download and print off automated harvest, pack lists, and labels
- Great platform for food hubs and farmers markets

### CHALLENGES

- Includes a one-time setup fee, which can be expensive for new farmers
- Less flexibility when designing the storefront

**Takeaway:** Local Food Marketplace is a great tool when managing a food hub or farmers market. Additionally, the platform was developed for farmers with local food sales in mind. The platform can be costly for young farmers starting out.

## **LOCAL LINE**

Local Line is an all-in-one business tool. The software offers unique options for farmers, for food hubs, and for markets. Local Line was built for farmers and continues to adapt its product based on the needs of food producers. Each feature found on the platform was built with what farmers, markets, and food hubs need to be successful.

Local Line offers many great features, such as unlimited price lists, integration of tons of small-business apps, and a free website builder for those looking to create their own. Additionally, the platform allows farmers to connect with nearby farmers markets and food hubs also using Local Line, so they only have to list their inventory once to sell through multiple channels.

**Local Line is also well known for its customer service, always offering a helping hand at any time of the day (even on weekends)! The company's mission is to help farmers reach their business goals every year.**

One challenge of Local Line is the limited ability to customize your own storefront, and it provides fewer templates to work with in comparison to a platform like Shopify.

## BENEFITS

- Built for farmers
- Inventory tracking, plus advanced inventory with different pack sizes
- Different price lists for different customer types—i.e., retail vs. wholesale
- Ability to adjust invoices for variable-weighted products post-sale
- Ability to accept multiple payment options—i.e., credit cards, SNAP/EBT, e-transfer, cash
- Great platform for food hubs and farmers markets; ability to connect with other food hubs and markets as a farmer
- Free website builder
- Highly-rated customer service

## CHALLENGES

- Less flexibility when designing the storefront

**Takeaway:** Local Line is built with farmers in mind and has created two products to suit their needs. The pricing model makes it available for individuals with all different types of budgets, and it scales with the size of the farm. The online store platform has limited ability for customized design.

In summary, most e-commerce platforms solve one problem: not tracking and fulfilling orders manually. This is not the case when using spreadsheets, which can lead to inefficiencies and errors over time. Different e-commerce platforms offer different features and subscription models, which will suit your needs better than others.

The more you start to explore the world of e-commerce, the more you'll learn about which software is out there and which will work the best for your needs. Depending on what you sell, who you sell to (i.e., retail, wholesale, or CSA), and the size of your business, different options may work better for you.

Also, many of these programs offer free trials and are happy to talk about whether their product suits you, so take advantage of that! Shop around, test out a few, and find what works.

Just remember to consider these questions:

- How much time do I want to put into it?
- What is my budget?
- What is my business model?
- What specific features do I need?
- Who do I want on the other end of the helpline?

**IF YOU WANT TO EXPLORE EVEN MORE OPTIONS, CHECK OUT OUR ROBUST LIST OF E-COMMERCE AND FARM TOOLS ON THE RESOURCES PAGE.**



# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

## **Nina Galle (@ninawrites\_\_)**

Nina Galle is a Dutch-Canadian writer and interviewer focused on helping farmers gain autonomy by owning their sales channels. As the Head of Content at Local Line, Nina built the farmer education program with dozens of videos, guidebooks, articles, and templates, all with the aim to empower farmers to get online and connect with their customers. Finding her passion for local food started during her undergrad at Dalhousie University in Ocean Science where she observed first hand that the problems facing the ocean ecosystem were largely the result of the global, industrial food system. Pivoting to agricultural sciences, Nina completed an MSc in Food Systems at Wageningen University through an environmental science lens. Today, Nina continues to arm farmers with the tools, knowledge, and community they need to sell online at Local Line.

## **Diego Footer (@diegofooter)**

Diego Footer is best known for his farm podcasts such as Farm Small Farm Smart and Grassfed Life. Over the past ten years, Diego has traveled across the country to tell the stories of hundreds of farmers while inspiring thousands of people to start farming. Diego is also the founder and owner of the farm tool companies Paperpot Co. and Modern Grower. In his spare time, he is a YouTuber, entrepreneur, engineer, finance nerd, product designer, and writer. While all those things, he is a dad first and lives with his family in San Diego. Get inspired or have a laugh by following him on Instagram @diegofooter.

**What if you could increase your farm sales, reach new customers, streamline your sales process, and get back all the time you spend at the farmers market?**

An online farm store makes all of this possible and Ready Farmer One is the blueprint.

**You'll learn:**

- How to make it easy for customers to buy your products with little to no involvement from you.
- How farmers are freeing up weekends by dropping the farmers market while maintaining their income.
- Why your farm business is at risk if you are only selling at this one place.
- Four simple marketing strategies anyone can use to increase your farm's sales.
- Why your product might not be as unique as you think it is, and how you can fix it.

Others are doing it, and you can do too. This book is filled with stories of farmers who have used these methods to change their farm businesses, increase sales, and free up time. Don't get left behind.

» **I haven't been this excited about a book for a long time. If you want your farm to thrive in the modern marketplace, Ready Farmer One is your catalyst. I can't recommend this book highly enough.**«

— *Joel Salatin author of You Can Farm*

» **Ready Farmer One is the most important new farming book of the next decade. I've learned a lot, and you will too.**«

— *Jean-Martin Fortier author of The Market Gardener*

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