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Music And The Internet : E-Commerce: Selling Your Stuff Online

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This is a very important area of your site, dedicated to your music and your merchandise-- CDs, cassettes, vinyl, t-shirts, stickers, hats, mugs, secured downloads, etc. You can incorporate your discography into this section if you like, which is nice-- it reminds people why they want the album and then allows them to buy it right away.

The most important considerations here are: sell as much as you can, in as many different ways as you can. Be meticulous in the design of this section and descriptive in the content-- you want your users, your *customers*, to understand exactly what they can buy and how they can buy it. The following are a couple of different e-commerce options. I recommend you research all of them, and choose the one-- or combination of a few-- that make the most sense to you.

SNAIL MAIL

This is probably the most cost effective method for you, but also probably the biggest pain in the ass for your customers. Basically, they send you a check or money order, you send them the goods. That means that it could take fifteen days or more for a user to get the stuff, because once you get the check, you normally need to wait five to seven days for it to clear. This method is also more work for you than some of the other methods, as you have to keep on top of the payment and then ship the product. You also need to be very clear about shipping and handling charges. It's going to cost you a lot more to ship something to Denmark than to ship something to someone within your city limits, so think about how you are going to delineate these charges. Pros: low overhead, money straight to your pocket. Cons: customer has to wait, more work for you, higher chance of you making a mistake.



CORPORATE RETAILERS

It's good to offer corporate retail options because these are trusted sellers-- many customers feel safer giving credit card numbers and other delicate information over the Web when they know they are dealing with a dependable, legitimate retailer. Since corporate retailers are set up to perform thousands of transactions a day, they usually offer quick and easy purchase options and are also quick to ship (usually within 24 hours). Finally, good corporate retailers do most of the work for you, saving you time and cutting down on the potentials for mistakes.

[StarPolish](#) offers artists the ability to easily sell their stuff right here through the site-- and actually rewards artists who work hard to sell their products with significant cash prizes and exposure to an impressive [A&R Panel](#). Because StarPolish exists entirely to help developing artists, its [sales program](#) is specifically designed with developing artists' needs in mind. You will find it more reliable and artist-friendly than other corporate retail options on the Internet. Perhaps more importantly, StarPolish only take a small percentage of sales-- less than any other corporate retailer on the net, and far less than any of the other examples below. So you get to keep more of the money, on top of the chance to win a large cash prize. I encourage you to read more information on the StarPolish [sales model](#), it's definitely my top recommendation. But compare details with these other popular options below, and see for yourself that StarPolish is the best way to go...



With [CD Baby](#) you begin by shipping them at least five of your CDs. Note that they will only sell your CDs, not any other merch. CD Baby then creates a webpage for your CD "with RealAudio sound clips, links back to your own website, and all of the text and descriptions you want." The e-commerce application lives on their site, so you have to point to that page for your orders. They take all orders via Visa, Mastercard, American Express, Discover, check, money order, international money order, cash, phone or fax.

They ship within 24 hours. They also submit your CD Baby site to galleries and search engines. All of this is great, because it's easy and artist-friendly. However, CD Baby charges you \$4 per CD sold. If you sell your CDs for \$10-\$12, that means they keep a hefty 33%-40%. On top of that, there is a registration fee of \$35.

When you sign-up as a new artist on MP3.com, not only do you get a free page, but you are eligible to participate in their D.A.M. (Digital Automatic Music) CD program for free. MP3.com keeps a flat 50% of the CD sale price-- extremely high, but they will manufacture and ship your CDs for free, and that's a cost savings to you. They manufacture the CD to contain songs in both MP3 and standard CD audio format. However, many artists don't like the way the CDs and artwork look when manufactured by MP3.com, and it's an important point. You may want to maintain control on how your stuff looks, as it reflects your [image](#). Nevertheless, it's something to consider. Even if you decide not to participate in the D.A.M. program, you should still sign-up and get an artist page up-and-running on MP3.com. Remember, just because you have your own fabulous website, it doesn't hurt to put up pages in other places as well, especially when they're free!



Everyone knows and trusts Amazon.com, which makes them an attractive option. They are, according to PC Meter ratings, the #1 retailer on the web. The Amazon.com Advantage Program lets you sell your CDs just like it were any other CD on Amazon. Advantage members get "an Amazon.com page with track samples, space for customer reviews, bios, cover art, and liner notes, MP3 downloads, and free stocking, shipping, cover scanning and sound encoding." They usually ship out within 24 hours. The Advantage Program is even easier than the CD Baby program-- really hassle-free. But beware-- not only does Amazon not lift a finger to promote developing artists or their CDs-for-sale, they take a whopping 55% of the list price of the CD! Of course, if you're selling your CD for \$10, that's essentially the same as CD Baby.

[CDstreet](#) is an interesting option, because they allow you to sell your music and merchandise through your own website. As they say, "We maintain the secure payment servers, the merchant accounts with American Express, Discover, Visa, JCB, Mastercard and InternetCash™, the shopping cart applications, the secure servers, authorization gateway and provide you with the HTML code to insert into your pages to begin taking orders via the Web quickly." They also give you the option of shipping the item yourself or having CDstreet perform fulfillment. They accept phone and fax orders. The service charge is 15% of gross sales with no per month minimum or setup charges, which is very reasonable. However, the CDstreet program is confusing and requires much organization, work, and maintenance on your part. If you're going to go through a corporate retailer, part of the reason should be to have them do most of the work.

YOUR OWN SECURE SERVER

Your host service probably has options for expanding your site to include Secure Socket Layer (SSL) encryption. With [Concentric](#) you can add Secure Socket Layer (SSL) encryption onto your basic hosting plan for just \$10 per month. But you would have to be experienced in E-commerce applications to know where to begin. For \$44.95 per month (as opposed to the basic plan fee of \$24.95 a month), you can get the basic Concentric plan *plus* an electronic commerce package, which includes up to 25 products organized in up to 3 product departments, SSL transaction encryption, product catalog and shopping cart, and offline credit card transaction processing. This is clearly the choice for the do-it-yourselfer, but it means that all of the work is on your shoulders. It also may simply not be financially worth it, if you're not selling a lot of stuff over your website. I personally don't know any independent bands that do it this way, but it is a possibility.

E-MAIL EXCHANGE PAYMENTS

[PayPal](#) is free to use and claims to be the world's first e-mail payments network. PayPal allows users to send money instantly and securely to anyone with an e-mail address, by combining secure technology and e-mail exchanges. EBay users use PayPal frequently-- it's kind of like an online Western Union. PayPal is good because it charges nothing-- in fact it gives users a \$5 credit for signing up, which would mean that first-time users would effectively get \$5 off of their order from you. But again, you've got to stay on top of it-- once someone "e-mails" you his/her payment, you've got to ship out the merchandise. You're on your own from that

point on. And people unfamiliar with PayPal may find it too be too much of a hassle to sign up, then submit their payment info, then e-mail you. At the very least, it's a good option to consider-- and as PayPal grows, they may offer more business related services (such as an accept payments on your website" option) that will further assist you.

A FINAL NOTE ON INTERNET SALES

After analyzing which sales methods are going to work the best for you, consider giving your users "good deals" if and when they choose to support those methods. For example, let your customers know that if they order via snail mail (the method that will probably make you the most money,) they can get a t-shirt at half price. Do what you can to make your customers feel as though they are getting a good deal. If you have a lot of old 7"s to unload, give them away as value-added to anyone that buys your current CD. Reward customers for larger purchases. Think about offering package deals – "order the new album, a t-shirt and a hat, and get 20% off the total!"