DEVELOPING AN E-COMMERCE PLAN FOR MW/GW RESTORE

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ABSTRACT

We worked with MetroWest/Greater Worcester Habitat for Humanity ReStores to create an e-commerce implementation plan. Through 9 interviews and the analysis of 11 e-commerce platforms, we evaluated e-commerce business models and marketing methods. Using this data, we developed an e-commerce implementation plan. Specifically, we recommend ReStore sell high-value collectibles and antiques on eBay, larger pick-up only items on Facebook Marketplace, and within three years create a BigCommerce powered website integrating both prior platforms.

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Introduction

How much do you know about the affordable housing crisis in America? Habitat for Humanity is a non-profit organization that works to ensure safe, affordable, and accessible housing to all. One of the ways that Habitat raises money is through its ReStores. ReStores are retail stores that sell new and gently used items such as furniture, appliances, and surplus/reusable building materials to generate revenue for home-building. ReStores connect people to items that would otherwise be discarded because of minor cosmetic damage, changes in fashion, or poor construction, despite still being functional (Hebrok, 2016). ReStore provides people with an alternative to disposing of unwanted, good condition household items.

An e-commerce solution could help ReStore reach more consumers interested in sustainability and generate additional revenue for Habitat for Humanity to use for its mission. Therefore, the goal of this project was to establish an environmentally and fiscally sustainable plan to add e-commerce to the Worcester and Ashland, Massachusetts ReStores' business model. While e-commerce generates waste from packaging and shipping products, sustainably sourced packaging such as ReStore's donated boxes increases environmental friendliness (Escursell et al., 2021).

Methods

The goal of this project was to help the MetroWest/Greater Worcester (MW/GW) ReStores establish and begin implementing a maintainable and data-driven e-commerce plan. The MW/GW ReStore wanted this plan to include growth of the e-commerce model over the next 1-3 years. A successful implementation of this plan will increase revenue generated by the Worcester and Ashland ReStores and thereby assist Habitat for Humanity's mission. To achieve this goal, we established the following objectives:

1. Identify MW/GW ReStore's e-commerce platform needs and priorities
2. Explore and comparatively analyze different e-commerce platforms
3. Compile, Analyze, and Present
4. Prototype chosen platform and use iterative design adjusting prototype based on feedback
5. Establish a training program and social media marketing plan for ReStore

We achieved each objective by conducting interviews with ReStore employees, small business owners in the Worcester area who conduct e-commerce, and business school professors from Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI). We also conducted content analysis of different e-commerce platforms evaluating a wide variety of attributes in our comparative analysis. This along with our research allowed us to grasp an understanding of what needed to be done to create a plan for the local MW/GW ReStore.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Findings

Using data collected from the aforementioned interviews and meetings with our sponsor and ReStore manager Kevin Maguire, we identified four criteria that we used to evaluate e-commerce platforms: i) integration with point of sale systems, ii) integration with social media, iii) easy to use interface, and iv) accommodation to the variety of items ReStore wants to sell. Secondarily, we evaluated the cost of the platform, and whether it offers both shipping and in-store pickup. Based on these determined criteria we were able to narrow down possible platforms to three options: eBay, Facebook Marketplace, and BigCommerce.

We found that the most suitable e-commerce plan for the MW/GW ReStore starts with the implementation of eBay as the first and primary e-commerce platform. Multiple ReStores explained how they started their e-commerce venture using eBay and focused their efforts on perfecting the process of shipping, packaging, and customer support (Multiple ReStores[1], Personal Communications, 2024).

Through a mixture of interviews with academic experts, local businesses, and other ReStores, we identified five marketing techniques that are worthy for consideration for the MW/GW ReStore's future plans.

The first of these techniques, and also the lowest in entry difficulty, is to use social media marketing. The 9 businesses we interviewed followed one of two approaches: (1) Creating short-form trendy content to increase engagement and build a following, and (2) making low-effort posts regarding sales, product listings, and other events of interest. Regardless of which of the approaches, or combinations thereof, a business uses, it will be important to have pre-planned, scheduled content at a maintainable and consistent frequency to keep your audience interested and engaged (Multiple ReStores and Professors[2], Personal Communications, 2024).

The next of these techniques also revolves around utilizing social media however comes with a higher operating cost: sponsored posts. Sponsored posts are great for drawing users of your targeted demographics to your platform and increasing traffic but they do come at a price. Of the people we spoke to, the majority of them did not invest in social media sponsored posts, with some of them viewing it as a growth opportunity while some of them found it to be too expensive to result in adequate returns (Multiple ReStores and Local Businesses[3], Personal Communications, 2024).

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1. Central Arizona and Austin, Texas
2. Northern Virginia, Portland Oregon, Thunder Bay, Central Arizona, Austin, Professors Hall-Phillips, Shah
3. Northern Virginia, Portland Oregon, Thunder Bay, Central Arizona, Austin, Bedlam Book Cafe

Another approach that can be quite effective but requires a considerable amount of expertise is Search Engine Optimization (SEO), which is the process of rearranging the content of your website so that search engines such as Google are more likely to recommend your website over others given a search string of relevant keywords. While SEO is technically free to do, it requires technical knowledge and specific information on current search engine behavior to actually be effective. It will be beneficial and more cost-effective for the ReStore to have an intern or marketing employee learn the skill. Another important distinction to note is that SEO is only relevant to you if you are operating your own website; platforms such as eBay, Amazon, Etsy, Temu, and others do not allow you to optimize search through Google.

One option that is available–either in conjunction with SEO or as an alternative–is to promote your site via Google, which is an especially appealing option for recipients of Google's Ad Grant. While the skills required to utilize the Google Ad Grant look daunting, Google provides free and detailed tutorials on how to learn their system–which could be a worthwhile investment for ReStore marketing personnel.

The final option to consider is to contact local media outlets and ask them to write about the ReStore's inclusion of e-commerce within purchasing options. This marketing method has been used to great effect by the ReStores in Austin, Texas, who had weekly events with local media to advertise their BigCommerce site to the local audience for pick-up purchases.

Recommendations

We recommend the MW/GW ReStores focus on eBay in the short-term to reach consumers interested in their smaller, collectable items. eBay is the best suited platform for that goal due to their large pre-existing consumer base for collectable items on, reducing the need for the ReStores to draw in their own consumers. eBay has also used their market share to negotiate shipping partnerships at rates more favorable than ReStore could do themselves. When it comes to cost, eBay will waive the insertion fee for nonprofits, allowing those groups to either sell as many items as they want as a normal seller or purchase the cheapest subscription for an eBay storefront.

We recommend that the ReStores list larger items through Facebook Marketplace and make them available for in-store pickup. Using Facebook Marketplace offers multiple benefits, it allows ReStore to sell large products to its substantial userbase, and introduces those consumers to ReStore by having them pick up the item in person. Facebook Marketplace also doesn't charge any fees for transactions that happen off the platform such as an in-store pickup, so the only cost ReStore will incur is the time spent to list the items and interact with consumers.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Once established on both eBay for smaller items and Facebook Marketplace for larger items, *we recommend that the ReStores create their own website powered by BigCommerce*, an e-commerce platform that allows businesses to set up their own online stores. BigCommerce has strong integration with eBay and Facebook Marketplace, allowing items listed on either of those platforms to also be listed on a business or organization's website. Using this, ReStore can market their BigCommerce website, building up their own consumers while also having their listings available to the sizable eBay and Facebook Marketplace consumer-bases.

We believe that by using these three platforms in conjunction, ReStores will be able to successfully reach consumers of a wide array of their products while establishing their own dedicated e-commerce consumer-base.

Acknowledgements

Building Hope and Homes

 Imagine a family home, a house with a mother, a father, a newborn baby, and a dog. The father is a veteran of the U.S. Marine Corps who served for eight years after enlisting at 18, and the mother is a veterinary technician. Now, fill the home's yard with trash, glass, debris, and give it a roof that leaks whenever it rains or snows. The heat cuts out during cold winters, and the family wakes up in freezing temperatures. Rent is difficult to make with all the other expenses that come along with a young family. All the while, your landlord is making repairs to the house, implying a possible rent increase. This is the story of Izzy, Kaleigh, and their son Emerson, a family building a new affordable and safe home with the MetroWest/Greater Worcester (MW/GW) branch of Habitat for Humanity (Habitat, 2023).

 According to the U.S. Census Bureau's review of poverty in the United States, 11.5% of residents were living in poverty in 2022 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). The U.S. government defines poverty by the number of persons in a household as compared to the income level of that household. More specifically, as of 2022, the poverty line for a single-person household was $14,580 and $30,000 for a family of 4. Looking at these statistics locally, Worcester County, Massachusetts had a poverty rate of approximately 10.6% in 2022 with an age breakdown shown below (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022).

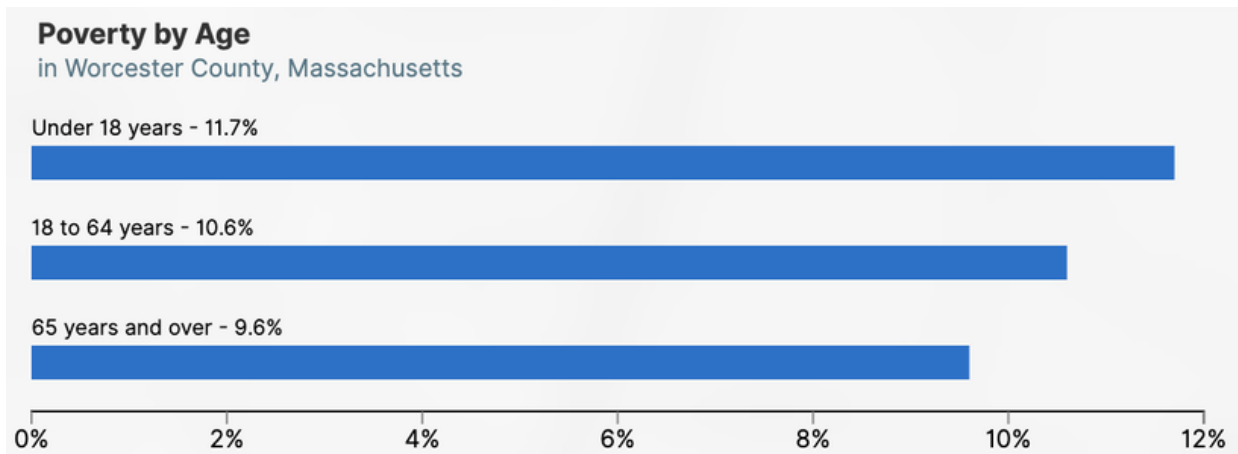**Poverty by Age**
in Worcester County, Massachusetts

Under 18 years - 11.7%

18 to 64 years - 10.6%

65 years and over - 9.6%

0% 2% 4% 6% 8% 10% 12%

Figure 1: Poverty by Age in Worcester County, Massachusetts (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022)

BACKGROUND

Housing Insecurity

Housing insecurity refers to a situation in which a family or individual is living in an unsafe/unsuitable home or is cost-burdened, which is defined by The National Low Income Housing Coalition (NLIHC) as spending more than 30% of a total household income on housing costs and utilities (Aurand, et, al. 2023).

The United States is facing a shortage of affordable housing, with over 40% of renters being cost-burdened in 2022, which has significant consequences for low-income households. Across the U.S., the National Low-Income Housing Coalition found that there are only 33 available economically priced homes for every 100 extremely low-income renter households (NLIHC, 2023). An illustration of this distribution state by state can be found in appendix A.

Massachusetts specifically is also no stranger to the housing insecurity crisis. The Coalition found that many families throughout a range of income classifications are cost burdened, shown in figure 2 (NLIHC, 2023).
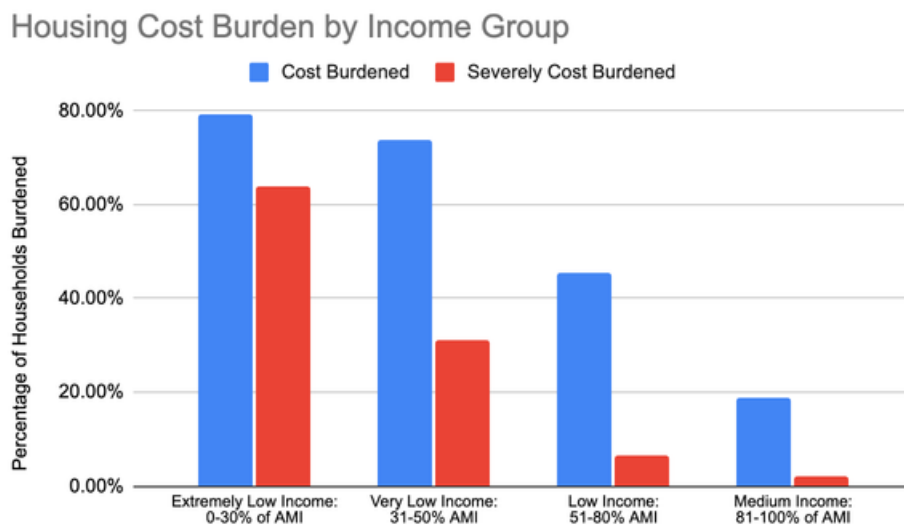

**F*igure 2:* *Housing Cost Burden by Income Group in MA (NLIHC, 2023).*
Note: AMI stands for Area Median Income

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The Struggles Faced by the Housing Insecure and Cost-Burdened

When families are forced to live in unaffordable housing, how do they offset these costs? The answer is that many of these families are forced to sacrifice other priorities such as food and health care. A 2020 study found that families facing housing insecurity were 40% more likely to also experience food insecurity (Lee et al., 2020). In other words, the financial strain that cost-burdened families face can cause an extreme decision: food or a roof over their heads. Another struggle faced by those who are housing insecure comes when someone within the household needs medical care. As shown below, these families face an impossible financial situation in which some necessities must be cut.

	Estimated Monthly Costs for a Family of Four Living Below the Poverty Line
Monthly Income	$2,312
Fair Market Rent	$1,342
Estimated grocery bill	$967
Health Care costs per month	$31,065/12= $2,589
Monthly Deficit	**$2,586**

Figure 3: *Estimated Monthly Costs for a Family of Four Living Below the Poverty Line (Aurand, et, al. 2023)*

Fostering Independence not Dependence

When families are forced to live in unaffordable housing, how do they offset these costs? The answer is that many of these families are forced to sacrifice other priorities such as food and health care. A 2020 study found that families facing housing insecurity were 40% more likely to also experience food insecurity (Lee et al., 2020). In other words, the financial strain that cost-burdened families face can cause an extreme decision: food or a roof over their heads. Another struggle faced by those who are housing insecure comes when someone within the household needs medical care. As shown below, these families face an impossible financial situation in which some necessities must be cut.

BACKGROUND

ReStore

One of the ways that Habitat raises money is through its ReStores, retail stores that sell new and gently used items such as furniture, appliances, surplus/reusable building materials to generate revenue for home-building. ReStores connect people to items that would otherwise be discarded. Furniture and other household items are often discarded because of minor cosmetic damage, changes in fashion, or poor construction, despite still being functional (Hebrok, 2016). ReStore provides people with an alternative to disposing of unwanted, good condition household items. They sell a large variety of products including used furniture, appliances, building materials, flooring, lighting, and recycled paint.

An e-commerce solution could help ReStore reach more consumers interested in sustainability and generate additional revenue for Habitat for Humanity to use for its mission. Therefore, the goal of this project was to establish an environmentally and fiscally sustainable plan to add e-commerce to the Worcester and Ashland ReStores' business model. While e-commerce generates waste from packaging and shipping products, sustainably sourced packaging such as ReStore's donated boxes increases environmental friendliness (Escursell et al., 2021).

Sales Platforms

Some platforms are more adept at helping mission-based, nonprofit organizations to grow, such as eBay, which primarily sells smaller collectable objects and clothes (Hasker 2010). Nonprofits on eBay can benefit from creating a virtual storefront (example below) to emphasize their brand (Brooks, 2021). Charities can also join the eBay Charity Connect program which will allow the charity to discount eBay store fees and increase brand visibility (Brooks, 2021).

eBay is also the go-to e-commerce website for auctions, which allow uncertain sellers to find out what buyers are willing to pay for an item (Hasker 2010). Regardless of whether you are selling using an auction or with a fixed price, it is critical to reduce buyer uncertainty by including detailed descriptions, good pictures, and descriptive titles (Hasker 2010).

Figure 4: *Austin Habitat for Humanity eBay storefront*

Two other examples of e-commerce platforms that provide different experiences are Shopify and Amazon (Lin, 2022). Lin found Shopify to allow business owners significant customization and plugin options but requires the seller to find their own third-party shipping solution. In contrast, Lin found that Amazon provides a global reach, convenient 3rd party logistics, and many options to sellers when it comes to shipping, packaging, warehousing, and distribution centers, however dramatically less customizability and brand visibility.

A table showing a comparison of differences between the three platforms is shown below.

Platform type (or factors to consider?)	Amazon	Shopify	eBay
Customizability	Low storefront customizability	Very customizable	Low/Medium storefront customizability
Shipping	Many convenient options	Need to find your own solution	Many convent options
Ease of use for consumer	More product descriptions and comparisons to comparable products on other websites	Very different case by case	More interaction between buyer and seller
Ease of use for business	Easiest when selling mass-manufactured products	More work to set up, more options to optimize, more room for growth	Best with consumer-to-consumer selling
Visibility	Product-dependent	Depends on how well marketed	Product-dependent
Unique Advantages	Optimized for businesses selling to consumers	Extreme customizability	Auctions

Figure 5: *e-commerce Platform Comparative Table (Ranganathan & Ganapathy, 2002), (Hasker 2010), (Lin, 2022), (Al-Qudah et al., 2023)*

Marketing

Marketing is a necessity to ensure that your target consumers can find and purchase your product. It is generally a safe choice to market through as many mediums as you can, spreading your brand as far as you can and reaching as many users as possible (Brinckerhoff, 2010). Social media platforms provide one of the best mediums for smaller businesses to market on with a 2014 study saying even six hours a week spent marketing on social media is enough time to increase traffic to a store (DeMers, 2014). Marketing shouldn't be limited solely to the initial postings, since prompt and high-quality responses meaningfully decrease the chance of losing a customer (Berkley, 2010).

BACKGROUND

Figure 6: *An example visual advertisement*

The design and plan of a marketing campaign is instrumental to its success. There are many ways to effectively market a brand, but they all rely on conveying a memorable message to consumers. You can increase the number of people who remember your marketing through several different methods including but not limited to: increasing the number of people who see it, including consumer engagement to make it seem more popular and trustworthy, and using bright visuals or catchy slogans (shown left) (Gamble, 2016).

For a mission-oriented business or organization, the business' mission can offer a competitive advantage in marketing. Picking a marketing tone consistent to the mission will give a business a congruent public-facing image and improve consumer recognition (Brinckerhof, 2010). It's also vital for the business's practices and messaging to be consistent and transparent ensuring the customer knows how their contribution will make a difference (Brinckerhof, 2009).

If using a website, an additional marketing method could be Search Engine Optimization (SEO), the process of emphasizing your most relevant keywords within your website which increases your chance of being recommended to the correct searchers by Google or other search engines. By including the keywords within headings or the top of the page the search engine is better able to determine to whom it should recommend your website, increasing the chance that interested consumers find your website (Sharma, 2019). [1]

We worked with Habitat For Humanity's MW/GW ReStores to develop an e-commerce plan for their two stores and we discuss our methodology in the next chapter.

Project Goal

The goal of this project was to help the MetroWest/Greater Worcester (MW/GW) ReStore, which includes both the Ashland and Worcester ReStores, establish and begin implementing a maintainable and data-driven e-commerce plan. We do not expect any ethical considerations to be an issue with our project as there are no risks, and all participants will give informed consent. The MW/GW ReStore would like this plan to include growth of the e-commerce model over the next 1-3 years. A successful implementation of this plan will increase revenue generated by the Worcester and Ashland ReStores and thereby assist Habitat for Humanity's mission. To achieve this goal, we established the following objectives:

1. Identify MW/GW ReStore's e-commerce platform needs and priorities
2. Explore and comparatively analyze different e-commerce platforms
3. Compile, Analyze, and Present
4. Prototype chosen platform and use iterative design adjusting prototype based on feedback
5. Establish a training program and social media marketing plan for ReStore
6. Social Media Marketing Plan

Objective 1: Identify MW/GW ReStore's e-commerce platform needs and priorities

To establish a successful e-commerce platform for MW/GW ReStore, we needed to first understand what products would be the best fit for the online platform. To start this process, we visited the Worcester and Ashland ReStores and conducted a content analysis of their sales logs using ThriftCart. We were unable to conclude anything significant from this data. Due to this shortcoming, our next step was to speak with our sponsors about their needs and priorities when it comes to e-commerce platform needs and priorities. From these meetings we were able to determine both the vision of our sponsors and the product type that they would like to sell online.

METHODOLOGY

Figure 7: *Another example of a visual advertisement*

Objective 2: Explore and comparatively analyze different e-commerce platforms

Based on data from objective 1 and our background research, we analyzed different e-commerce platforms in order to create a cost-benefit analysis matrix. To accomplish this objective, we conducted semi-structured interviews and both participant and content analysis of e-commerce platforms.

To begin, we systematically analyzed different e-commerce platforms and user data on usability, functionality, product type, sales demographic, and more. Then we conducted interviews with 5 other ReStore's employees with successful e-commerce implementations, 2 WPI professors with business and marketing expertise, and 2 local businesses who are experienced with e-commerce. At the beginning of this project, these ReStores primarily used their own websites and held auctions on eBay (Habitat LA ReStore Online, n.d.). Interviewing them gave us insight into how they started their e-commerce platform implementation, specific successes of the platform and training and any pitfalls to avoid. This allowed us to get a better grasp on what might work for MW/GW ReStore and what kind of training could be most helpful (See Appendix C for interview questions). Additionally, the interviews with the professors and local businesses gave us insight on industry norms, marketing strategies, and overall widened our scope of options when it came to platform choice.

Using a combination of research and what we learned from our interviews, we constructed a cost-benefit analysis matrix for both social media marketing and purchased advertisements to better recommend a marketing plan.

Objective 3: Compile, Analyze, and Present

In order to make the data we collected usable, we began by compiling the interview data into an interview matrix, which had responses by participants and by topic. From there, we compared and contrasted our data in the interview matrix. We then combined information about e-commerce solutions into a qualitative decision matrix for the platforms. We used the interview matrix and platform qualitative decision matrix to create a matrix with ratings of each platform's features. The categories consisted of desirable and undesirable qualities derived from what was learned from the interview matrix and platform qualitative decision matrix. We then presented our findings and suggestions to our sponsors at Habitat for Humanity ReStore. Once they reached a decision, we proceeded to begin implementation of the new MW/GW ReStore e-commerce platform.

Objective 4: Prototype e-commerce platform and iterate based on feedback

We developed a prototype e-commerce platform using an iterative design process. This method is a cyclical process that can be divided into five stages: planning, ideation, prototyping, testing, and review (Jonassen, 2008). We planned the e-commerce prototype based on information we learned from interviews, observations, and the criteria shared with us by our sponsors. Next, we designed and developed a prototype using a website template. To test every prototype iteration, we met with our sponsor to receive feedback. Finally, we presented the results to our sponsors. We repeated this process until our sponsors were satisfied with the prototype.

*F**igure 8:** Template for MW/GW ReStore's eBay page*

Objective 5: Establish a training program and social media marketing plan for ReStore

We started our work on the training program by determining the necessary content of the program. We then interviewed a couple of employees who were part of the target audience for the training program (See Appendix C for interview questions).
Using this information and the information we gathered in Objective 4, we developed draft training resources (such as an eBay posting checklist, a list of BigCommerce Resources, etc.). These training resources also included a detailed section on how to start social media marketing tailored towards marketing for a mission. We then piloted the materials with our sponsor and sought their feedback on the clarity and usefulness of the training materials.

Armed with this information, we revised and improved the training resources to better suit the needs of the ReStore.

Objective 6: Social Media Marketing Plan

We developed a plan of action to get the MW/GW ReStore successfully established on social media platforms to increase traffic and interest in the e-commerce website. This was a multifaceted plan that began with establishing ReStore's presence on the most prominent social media platforms including Facebook, Instagram, and Tiktok. The focus was on targeted advertisements that are both intriguing and interactive. An example of a simple facebook advertisement for ReStore can be in figure 6 (shown earlier).

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The Platforms

Through the nine interviews we conducted and meetings with our sponsor Kevin Maguire, we were able to determine four criteria that were used to evaluate e-commerce platforms: i) integration with point of sale systems, ii) integration with social media, iii) easy to use interface, and iv) accommodation to the variety of items ReStore wants to sell. Secondarily, we evaluated the cost of the platform, and whether it offers both shipping and in-store pickup. Based on these determined criteria we were able to narrow down the platforms we evaluated to three options that fit these requirements: eBay, Facebook Marketplace, and BigCommerce. Below in figure 1, we list our evaluations of these platforms (See Appendix D for the full table).

Platform Option	Point Of Sale integration	Social media integration	Cost	Shipping Options	Item Options	Customer usability
eBay	Any with Application Programming Interface	Yes, both directions	$.30/sale + 2% + $5/month	Shipping labels	Anything, includes a variety of collectibles and antiques	Easy to use
Facebook Marketplace	No	Yes, both directions	5% or $.40/sale minimum or $0 if pay in person	Fully DIY	Anything, mostly furniture and appliances	Moderately usable
BigCommerce	Any with Application Programming Interface	Yes, both directions	$29/month to $299/month	Third party	Anything	Customizable

Scale of colors			▾
Undesirable	Concern	Neutral	Desirable

Figure 9: *Evaluation of the three e-commerce platforms that were determined fit the criteria we had determined*

Other platforms that we conducted analysis on included Etsy, Temu, Squarespace, Shopify, Amazon, Lightspeed, Square, and Wix. While some of these platforms also fit the criteria discussed above, we found the chosen platforms of eBay, Facebook Marketplace, BigCommerce to have more versatile qualities that would be of benefit to ReStore's e-commerce business. Firstly, eBay as mentioned before has a massive user base. It also has the benefit of the variety of products that are listed on their site, which boasts 15 unique categories. Additionally, eBay, unlike other large platforms such as Amazon, has the strength of auction listings, a key component in generating the most revenue for unique items such as antiques, oddities, collectibles, and artwork. These are the categories of items that the Ashland and Worcester ReStores often receive. Secondarily, BigCommerce has the advantage over other business technology platforms such as Square, Squarespace, and Wix through its plethora of plugins which can provide the ability to integrate other platforms such as eBay within a central storefront.

Through our evaluation of e-commerce platforms and effective marketing strategies for those platforms we have developed a plan for the MetroWest/Greater Worcester (MW/GW) ReStores to implement e-commerce into their business model. This implementation consists of three steps:

1. Identifying the products ReStore would like to sell online
2. Choosing a platform to use based on the product type
3. Employing effective marketing strategies based on the audience you are trying to reach

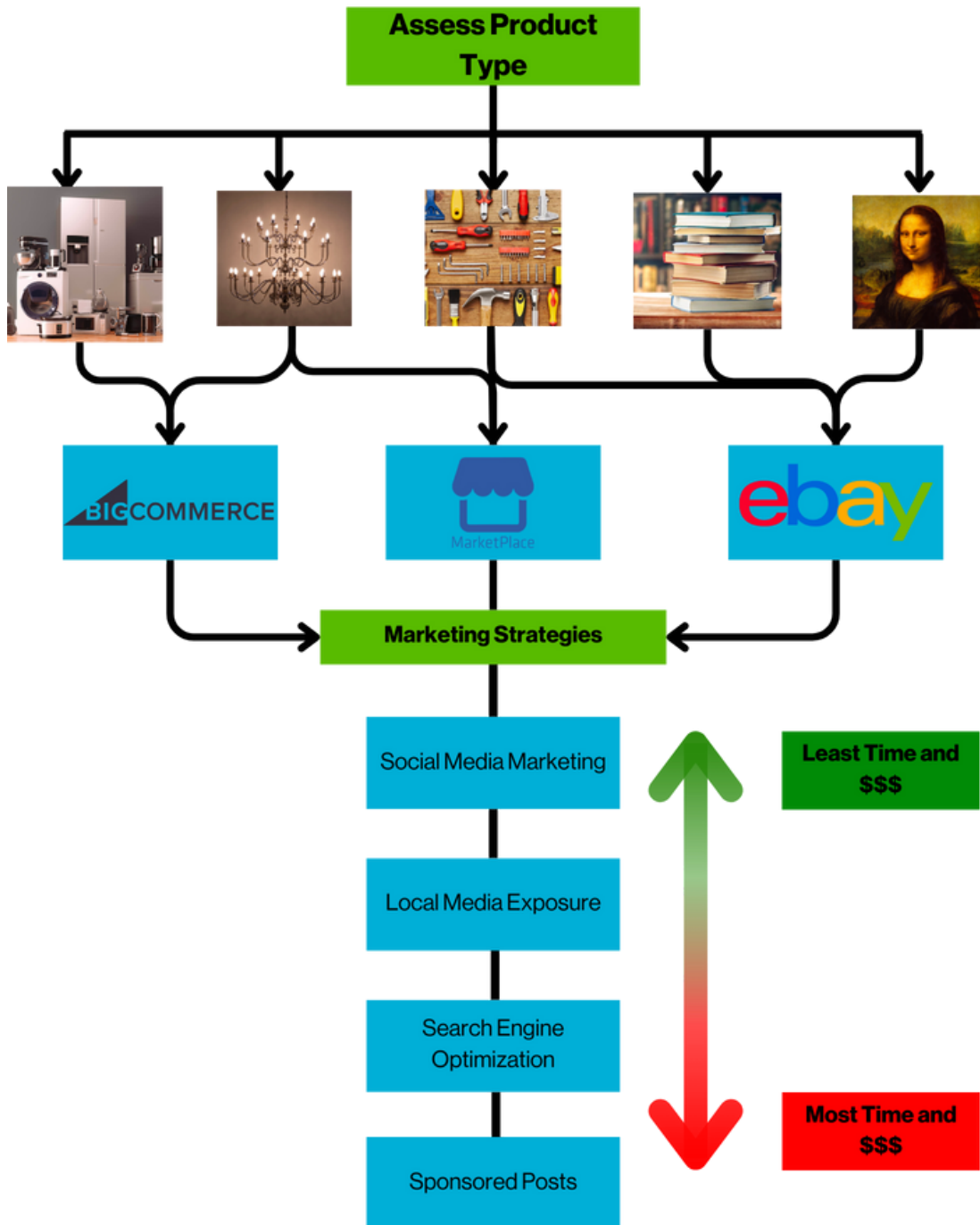We outline the plan in figure 10, on the next page:

Figure 10: *General Outline for implementation of e-commerce (product type listed from left to right: Appliances/Furniture, Home Decor, Hardware/Tools, Media, Artwork/Collectibles/Antiques*

Product Type and Platform for MW/GW ReStores

After narrowing down our search of platforms to the three most befitting our criteria, we then had to determine what products that ReStore was going to start with in order to determine an initial platform. Through interviews and conversations with our sponsors at the MetroWest/Greater Worcester (MW/GW) ReStores, we determined the items they want to prioritize for e-commerce. MW/GW ReStores' initial foci are small to mid-size collectibles such as figurines, beanie babies, art work, and various oddities and antiquities (Kevin Maguire, personal communication, 1/11/2024). While larger items such as appliances and furniture also benefit from being listed online, the difficult logistics of shipping large items far outweigh the benefits of reaching a larger customer base, therefore we determined those items should be listed for in store pickup only.

Using the analysis of e-commerce platforms as well as data we collected from interviews with different ReStores, we determined that ***eBay is the perfect starting point for the MW/GW ReStores to begin their e-commerce journey (Finding 1)*** (Multiple ReStores[4], Personal Communications, 2024). eBay is one of the largest e-commerce sites for selling used or niche items, retaining approximately 167 million monthly users (O'Sullivan, A, 2024). eBay also provides benefits to those such as ReStore who set up a charity storefront. With a charity account, eBay charges lower selling fees than to noncharitable users, and does not charge an insertion fee for selling above a certain number of items per year.

Once MW/GW ReStores have established themselves on eBay, the next step is to create a website through BigCommerce. BigCommerce is an e-commerce platform that allows their sellers to create their own site uniquely customizable to their business and branding. This will allow ReStore to be able to ***solve the problems of customizability and brand awareness from eBay; in order to direct consumers from their SEO, social media marketing, and general consumer base to a site that is wholly ReStore focused (Finding 2)*** (J. Nemec, Austin ReStore, Personal Communications, 2/7/2024). In an interview with the Austin, Texas ReStore, one of the most successful current ReStores who utilizes e-commerce, we noticed that they had set up a BigCommerce site as a place they could direct all of their online traffic to from their SEO, social media marketing, and general consumer base (J. Nemec, Austin ReStore , Personal Communications, 2/7/2024). Another attractive asset BigCommerce possesses is the ability to link both Facebook Marketplace and eBay.

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4. Northern Virginia, Portland Oregon, Thunder Bay, Central Arizona, Austin

This will allow ReStore employees to post on eBay and Facebook Marketplace and it automatically updates sales onto the main site. While creating the comparative analysis of e-commerce platforms we determined that ***Facebook Marketplace is the best online platform for ReStore to sell furniture and other home goods to local consumers (Finding 3)***. Along with this, the ability to integrate with BigCommerce was a big advantage as well.

Effective and Sustainable Marketing Strategies

Through a mixture of interviews with academic experts, local businesses, and other ReStores, we were able to identify five marketing techniques that are worthy for consideration for the MW/GW ReStore's future plans.

The first of these techniques, and also the lowest in entry difficulty, is to use social media marketing. The businesses we spoke to largely followed one of two approaches: ***Creating short-form trendy content to increase engagement and build a following, and making low-effort posts regarding sales, product listings, and other events of interest are the two most widely used marketing approaches by e-commerce businesses (Finding 4)*** (Multiple ReStores[5], Personal Communications, 2024).

Of the two approaches, the ***short-form trendy content seems to receive multiple times the engagement and following compared to the more business-oriented posts (Finding 5)*** (Multiple ReStores, Personal Communications, 2024). ***Business-oriented posts, however, can also be used to link consumers to specific products or draw them into a specific event so, while less popular, they also have a purpose in a businesses' marketing plan (Finding 6)*** (A. Hall-Philips, Personal Communications, 2/6/2024). Regardless of which of the approaches or combinations thereof, your business chooses to go with, ***it will be important to have pre-planned, scheduled content at a maintainable and consistent frequency (Finding 7)*** (A. Hall-Philips, Personal Communications, 2/6/2024, Multiple ReStores[6]).

The next of these techniques also revolves around utilizing social media but comes with a higher operating cost: sponsored posts. ***Sponsored posts are great for drawing users of your targeted demographics to your platform and increasing traffic but they do come at a price (Finding 8)*** (P. Shah, Personal Communications, 1/22/2024). Of the people we spoke to, the majority of them did not invest in ***social media sponsored posts, with some of them viewing it as a growth opportunity while some of them found it to be too expensive to result in adequate returns (Finding 9)*** (Multiple ReStores[5] and Local Businesses, Personal Communications, 2024).

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5. Northern Virginia, Portland Oregon, Thunder Bay, Central Arizona, Austin
6. Austin, Thunder Bay

Another approach that can be quite effective but requires a considerable amount of expertise is Search Engine Optimization (SEO), which is the process of rearranging the content of your website so that search engines such as Google are more likely to recommend your website over others given a search string of relevant keywords. While SEO is technically free to do, it requires technical knowledge and specific information on current search engine behavior to actually be effective (Finding 10) (P. Shah, Personal Communications, 1/22/2024). It will be beneficial and more cost-effective for the ReStore to have an intern or marketing employee learn the skill (A. Hall-Philips, Personal Communications, 2/6/2024, Multiple ReStores).

Another important distinction to note is that SEO is only relevant to you if you are running your own website; platforms such as eBay, Amazon, Etsy, Temu, and others will all have their own SEO experts working to increase the visibility of all listings from a Google search.
One option that is available–either in conjunction with SEO or as an alternative–is to promote your site via Google, which is an especially appealing option for recipients of Google's Ad Grant. While the skills required to utilize the Google Ad Grant look daunting, Google provides free and detailed tutorials on how to learn their system–which could be a worthwhile investment for ReStore marketing personnel (Finding 11) (A. Hall-Philips, Personal Communications, 2/6/2024).

The final option to consider is to contact local media outlets and ask them to write about the ReStore's inclusion of e-commerce within purchasing options. This marketing method has been used to great effect by the ReStores in Austin, Texas, who had weekly events with local media to advertise their BigCommerce site to the local audience for pick-up purchases. (Finding 12) (J. Nemec, Austin ReStore , Personal Communications, 2/7/2024)

Immediate

To create an e-commerce plan for the Habitat for Humanity Worcester/Ashland ReStore, we recommend ReStore begin with an eBay charity connected store (see Finding 1). We recommend that the MW/GW ReStore creates a new e-commerce position focusing on, first, creating a good process for posting items online, packaging, and shipping. In order to help the person creating listings on eBay starting out, we created a preliminary checklist outlining the most important tasks to keep in mind while listing items on eBay as well as provided an example posting.

eBay Listing
CHECKLIST

BEFORE LISTING:

☐ START THE LISTING BY TYPING IN THE ITEM AND TRYING TO FIND A MATCH THROUGH EBAY'S CATALOG

☐ ADD HIGH QUALITY PHOTOS WITH A CLEAN BACKDROP

☐ MAKE SURE THE ITEM IS THE ONLY THING IN THE PHOTO

☐ **TITLE TEMPLATE: "NEW" [BRAND] [PRODUCT NAME] [MODEL NO] [VARIANTS — SIZE, COLOR] [ADDITIONAL KEYWORD]**

☐ CHECK OUT SIMILAR PRODUCTS LISTED TO VIEW COMMON DESCRIPTIONS AND TITLES FOR THAT ITEM

☐ ADD KEYWORDS RELEVANT TO THE ITEM AND DO NOT USE TOO MANY KEYWORDS

☐ EMAIL THE CUSTOMER AFTER PURCHASE THANKING THEM FOR THE ORDER AND ASKING THEM TO LEAVE A REVIEW

☐ FOLLOW UP WITH CUSTOMER SUPPORT PROMPTLY

SETUP

☐ ADD A SHIPPING POLICY THROUGH EBAY'S BUSINESS POLICIES TO MAKE LISTING FASTER

☐ CONSIDER THE USE OF PROMOTED LISTINGS IF EBAY HAS MANY SIMILAR ITEMS ALREADY LISTED

*F**igure 11:** An eBay listing checklist and important things to keep in mind when listing*
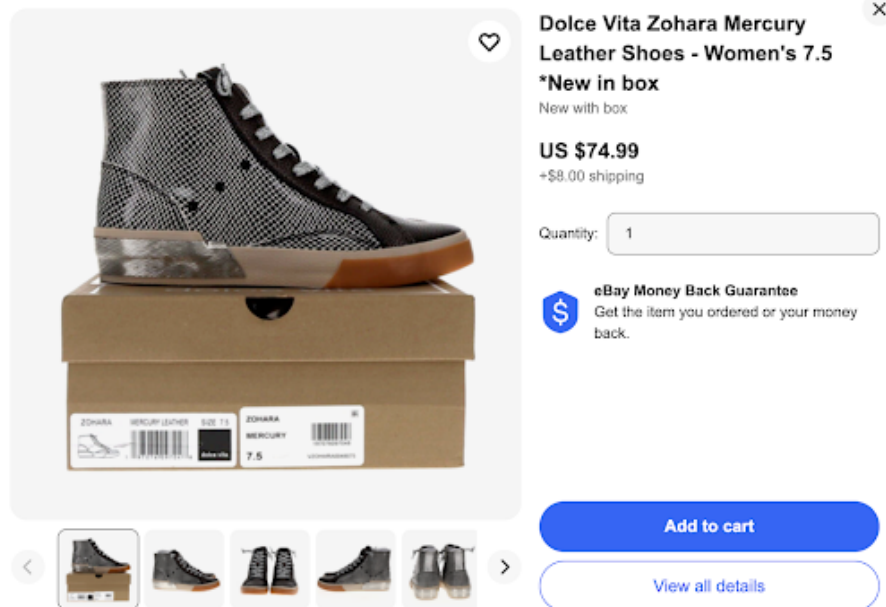
Figure 12: *Example eBay Posting*

Along with this we recommend this employee works on promoting the new eBay site through Facebook and Instagram, contacting customers through any existing customer database like an email or text list, loyalty programs, in-store promotions, and talking with local media.

Milestones to Hit

Before moving further along in its e-commerce journey, based on both the research/analyses and interviews that we have conducted, we recommend that the MW/GW ReStores hit the following milestones in order to justify the growth and expansion of their e-commerce model.

1. Self sustainable
   a. The revenue generated from e-commerce is more than sufficient to support the BigCommerce and eBay subscriptions along with any staff required for all platforms and social media marketing
      i. We recommend at least being able to justify at least one full time employee dedicated to e-commerce before pivoting to BigCommerce
2. Promotable
   a. The following on your marketing social media accounts has had significant growth in engagement on posts to be leveraged to direct consumers towards the new BigCommerce site
      i. We recommend that you aim to get your engagement on posts to at least 100 followers

Post-Milestones

As a future recommendation, we believe integrating BigCommerce and Facebook Marketplace is imperative to growing the brand and online visibility as a whole while also generating more revenue (see Finding 2, 4). BigCommerce allows for the integration of the items listed on both eBay and Facebook Marketplace in one ReStore oriented website. This makes sure the ReStore has a revenue stream that includes in-store pickup using Facebook Marketplace and uses BigCommerce as a platform to list items as both in-store pickup and shipping as a central hub of items people who are interested in the ReStore can view.

In addition to the recommendations that we are providing to the MW/GW ReStore, we are also providing a road map of sorts that will break down our findings into a simple flow chart. This flowchart can be used by any ReStore, nonprofit, or business that is hoping to get into the e-commerce space and needs some guidance. The flow chart starts with an assessment of your products. What type of products would you like to list on e-commerce.

We recommend that ReStore focus primarily on social media marketing via free posts and that any money spent on sponsored social media posts should be closely tracked and correlated to a change in sales behavior to determine the concrete effects and lead to an informed decision of their worth (see Findings 9/10). Once the BigCommerce site is created, we also recommend that ReStore look into hiring a staff member with preexisting skill sets in SEO and/or Google Keywords or having a staff member learn these skill sets through openly available resources and applying them towards the website (see Findings 10-11).

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