



Technology and Web



Your Startup and Small Business Guide

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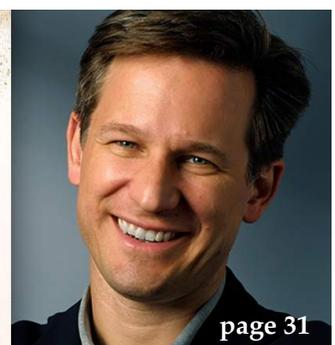
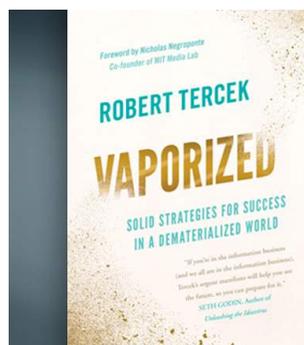
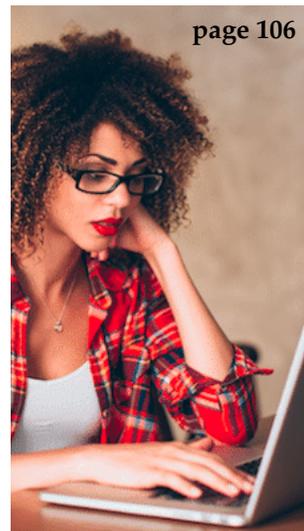
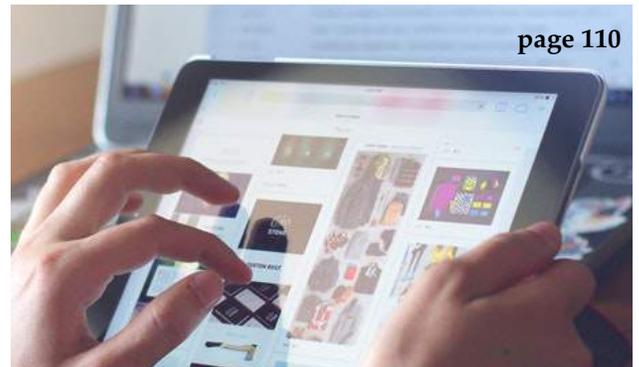


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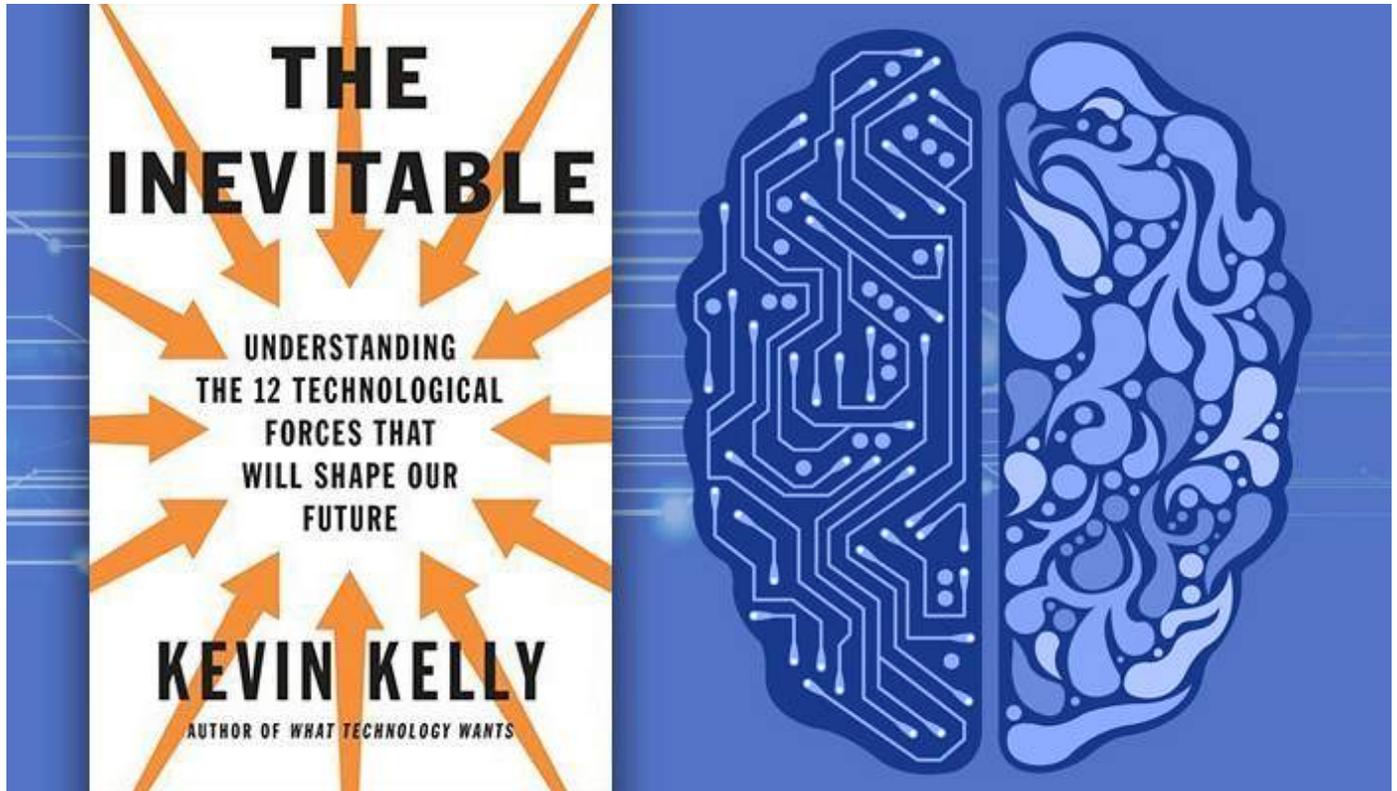
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Wired Magazine Co-Founder Talks Major Artificial Intelligence Breakthroughs [Book Excerpt]

[Kevin Kelly](#)



The following excerpt has been selected exclusively for StartupNation readers from “The Inevitable: Understanding the 12 Technological Forces That Will Shape Our Future” by Kevin Kelly, published by Viking, an imprint of Penguin Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. Copyright © 2016 by Kevin Kelly.

In Chapter 2 of “The Inevitable,” titled Cognifying, Kelly discusses the concept of artificial intelligence. In the excerpt below, he introduces the three recent breakthroughs that will make artificial intelligence more prominent in the years to come.

Cheap parallel computation

Thinking is an inherently parallel process. Billions of neurons in our brain fire simultaneously to create synchronous waves of computation. To build a neural network—the primary architecture of AI software—also requires many different processes to take place simultaneously. Each node of a neural network loosely imitates a neuron in the brain—mutually interacting with its neighbors to make sense of the signals it receives. To recognize a spoken word, a program must be able to hear all the phonemes in relation to one another; to identify an image, it needs to see every pixel in the context of the pixels around it—both deeply parallel tasks. But until recently, the typical computer processor could ping only one thing at a time.

That began to change more than a decade ago, when a new kind of chip, called a graphics processing unit, or GPU, was devised for the intensely visual—and parallel—demands of video games, in which millions of pixels in an image had to be recalculated many times a second. That required a specialized parallel computing chip, which was added as a supplement to the PC motherboard. The parallel graphics chips worked fantastically, and gaming soared in popularity. By 2005, GPUs were being produced in such quantities that they became so cheap they were basically a commodity. In 2009, Andrew Ng and a team at Stanford realized that GPU chips could run neural networks in parallel.

That discovery unlocked new possibilities for neural networks, which can include hundreds of millions of connections between their nodes. Traditional processors required several weeks to calculate all the cascading possibilities in a neural net with 100 million parameters. Ng found

that a cluster of GPUs could accomplish the same thing in a day. Today neural nets running on GPUs are routinely used by cloud-enabled companies

such as Facebook to identify your friends in photos or for Netflix to make reliable recommendations for its more than 50 million subscribers.

Related: [The Miracle Morning for Entrepreneurs \[Book Excerpt\]](#)

Big data

Every intelligence has to be taught. A human brain, which is genetically primed to categorize things, still needs to see a dozen examples as a child before it can distinguish between cats and dogs. That's even more true for artificial minds. Even the best-programmed computer has to play at least a thousand games of chess before it gets good. Part of the AI breakthrough lies in the incredible avalanche of collected data about our world, which provides the schooling that AIs need. Massive databases, self-tracking, web cookies, online footprints, terabytes of storage, decades of search results, Wikipedia, and the entire digital universe became the teachers making AI smart. Andrew Ng explains it this way: "AI is akin to building a rocket ship. You need a huge engine and a lot of fuel. The rocket engine is the learning algorithms but the fuel is the huge amounts of data we can feed to these algorithms."

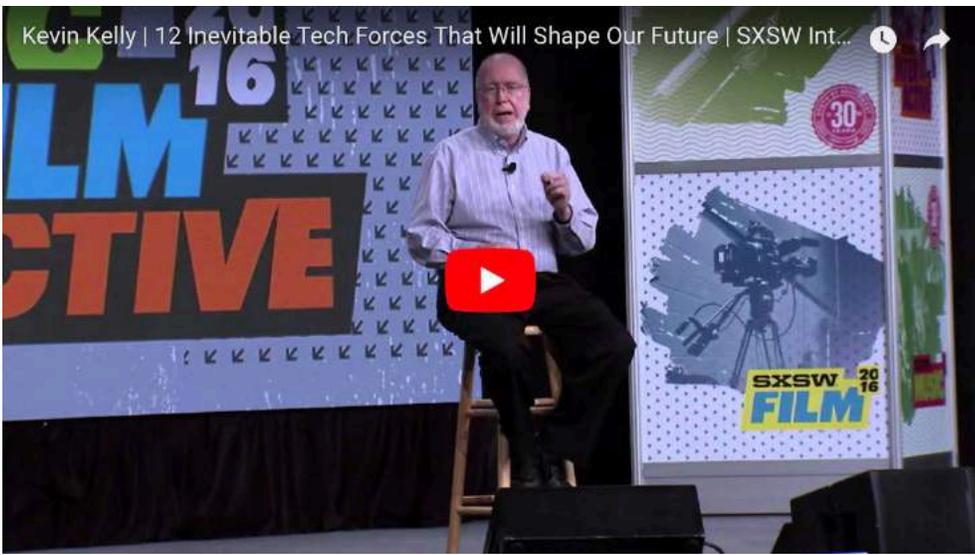
Better algorithms

Digital neural nets were invented in the 1950s, but it took decades for computer scientists to learn how to tame the astronomically huge combinatorial relationships between a million—or a hundred million—neurons. The key was to organize neural nets into stacked layers. Take the relatively simple task of recognizing that a face is a face. When a group of bits in a neural net is found to trigger a pattern—the image of an eye, for instance—that result ("It's an eye!") is moved up to another level in the neural net for further parsing. The next level might group two eyes together and pass that meaningful chunk on to another level of hierarchical structure that associates

it with the pattern of a nose. It can take many millions of these nodes (each one producing a calculation feeding others around it), stacked up to 15 levels high, to recognize a human face. In 2006, Geoff Hinton, then at the University of Toronto, made a key tweak to this method, which he dubbed “deep learning.” He was able to mathematically optimize results from each layer so that the learning accumulated faster as it proceeded up the stack of layers. Deep-learning algorithms accelerated enormously a few years later when they were ported to GPUs. The code of deep learning alone is insufficient to generate complex logical thinking, but it is an essential component of all current AIs, including IBM’s Watson; DeepMind, Google’s search engine; and Facebook’s algorithms.

This perfect storm of cheap parallel computation, bigger data, and deeper algorithms generated the 60-years-in-the-making overnight success of AI. And this convergence suggests that as long as these technological trends continue—and there’s no reason to think they won’t—AI will keep improving.

To learn more about “The Inevitable: Understanding the 12 Technological Forces That Will Shape Our Future” by Kevin Kelly. View Kevin Kelly’s video speaking at the 2016 SXSW Conference.



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“The Inevitable” is available now wherever fine books are sold and via [Penguin Random House](#).

Reviews of “The Inevitable”

“Anyone can claim to be a prophet, a fortune teller, or a futurist, and plenty of people do. What makes Kevin Kelly different is that he’s *right*. In this book, you’re swept along by his clear prose and unassailable arguments until it finally hits you: The technological, cultural, and societal changes he’s foreseeing really are inevitable. It’s like having a crystal ball, only without the risk of shattering.”

-David Pogue, Yahoo Tech

“This book offers profound insight into what happens (soon!) when intelligence flows as easily into objects as electricity.”

-Chris Anderson, author of “The Long Tail”

“How will the future be made? Kevin Kelly argues that the sequence of events ensuing from technical innovation has its own momentum...and that our best strategy is to understand and embrace it. Whether you find this prospect wonderful or terrifying, you will want to read this extremely thought-provoking book.”

-Brian Eno, musician and composer

“Kevin Kelly has been predicting our technological future with uncanny prescience for years. Now he’s given us a glimpse of how the next three decades will unfold with The Inevitable, a book jam-packed with insight, ideas, and optimism.”

-Ernest Cline, author of “Ready Player One”

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Q&A with Stefan Pernar: Tips for Virtual Reality Startups

[Emily Friedel](#)



The virtual reality market is on the brink of exploding, with worldwide revenues from virtual reality and augmented reality [predicted](#) to be over \$162 billion in 2020.

Now is an ideal time for startups to get into this booming industry, but just because a market is ripe for newcomers doesn't mean success is guaranteed.

We spoke to Stefan Pernar, managing director of [Virtual Reality Ventures](#), about some of the things startups can do to prosper in this rapidly-growing industry and get their piece of the lucrative virtual reality action. The following conversation has been lightly edited for clarity.

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StartupNation: How much room is there in the virtual reality (VR) industry for startups at this stage?

Pernar: There's still a huge amount of room. I think there's room for a hundred-fold increase in the market, just based on the fact that Samsung has recently reported that they have sold about five million [Gear VR](#) headsets. That's a relatively high number in terms of where the market is at now compared to where it was a couple of years ago. But if you compare it to where the market can go – in terms of hundreds of millions of headsets at some point in the future – it's very much in the early days.

StartupNation: What should VR startups have in the fronts of their minds when developing their products?

Pernar: The need to follow the standards for proper VR applications to make sure that people who try the technology have a good experience. What can happen if you're not careful is that you can develop a VR app, and if you don't take into consideration the special requirements of immersive applications, you can create an app that makes the user extremely dizzy or even sick. So that's probably the number one thing that you need to consider.

If you want to try your hand at something a bit more innovative, then go with immersive sound (binaural audio), as well.

Related: [The Future of Entrepreneurship and Virtual Reality](#)

StartupNation: Are there industries that VR startups may not be thinking about now, but could potentially be very profitable over the next decade or so?

Pernar: I think there are some interesting applications in healthcare that people are not considering. Healthcare is definitely an important area. I would also say training and education is probably one the highest potential industries.

StartupNation: Are there marketing challenges unique to VR that startups should be aware of?

Pernar: The marketing side of things is relatively straightforward, but it doesn't hurt to do a fair bit of sales. That's something we have experienced: you can have a great product, but if you don't back it up with a good sales effort then you are going to lose out to people who don't have such a good product but are focusing more on sales.

Demonstrations are also very important. If people haven't tried virtual reality yet, then they really don't know what it's all about, what the impact is on them. But as soon as they put the headsets on and have a bit of a go, that's when their mind starts to race, and they really understand what this technology is all about. They're often very surprised by the experience.

StartupNation: Do you have any tips for VR startups on how to pitch to investors?

Pernar: I would probably back up the presentation with industry research showing how many headsets have been sold, what the projections are, just in case the investor is not aware of where the industry is going.

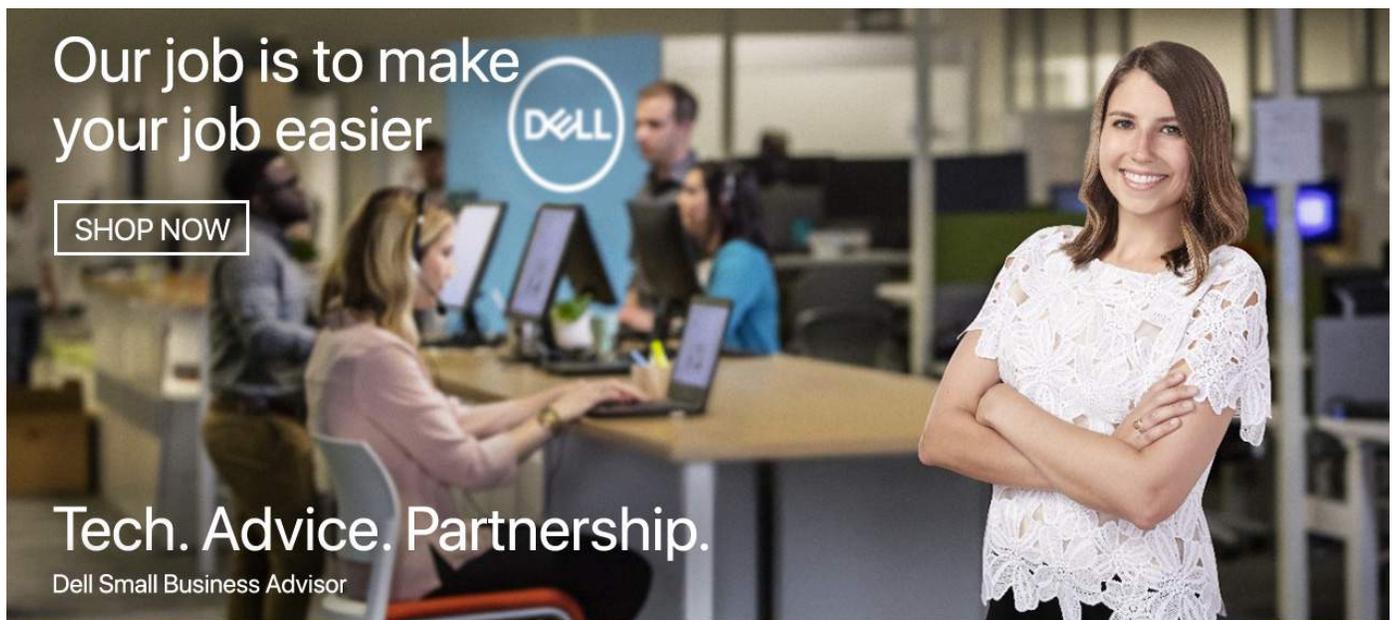
StartupNation: VR technology is moving ahead in leaps and bounds. How important is it for startups to stay on top of the latest industry news and developments?

Pernar: It is quite important. But if you try to chase the latest and greatest in technology, you risk losing focus on your product because with your product you have a certain vision, and that vision can be achieved with a certain set of technologies. If you always try to switch technologies to stay on top of the latest developments, you might end up wasting resources. So stay focused is the message.

StartupNation: Would you like to add anything else you think will help VR startups to improve their chances of success?

Pernar: Ideally get a good budget together, and get together with someone who can advise you from a business coaching perspective. I think by now it's obvious that virtual reality is the next big thing, but recognizing a trend like that and successfully executing a business idea, they're two different pairs of shoes.

Also, don't underestimate how much money you will need to execute your idea. If you can't afford to be self-sustaining for at least three years, don't even try to go into the business.



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5 Ways Fintech Helps Support Startups

[Jami Schwartz](#)



Fintech is simply a term that refers to advances in financial technology. This technology helps with banking, lending, payments and much more. Fintech is meant to make financial services more efficient, and it also makes them much more useful and more accessible to startups.

5 ways fintech benefits small businesses

Consider some of the ways this technology provides easier access to financial solutions for startups:

1. Fintech lending platforms

Not so long ago, getting a business loan almost always meant visiting a bank. This process required complex applications, lots of documentation and

usually, a long wait. In addition, traditional banks tended to look for established business credit reports and owner equity. Startup companies usually couldn't satisfy these banks requirements, so they had to do without the traditional bank loans.

Some emerging Fintech solutions allow business owners to get [easier access to business funding](#). For example, some lenders allow applicants to complete the loan process online. Business owners don't need to gather documentation because they can simply link online accounts to their application.

In addition, these new lenders have the ability to judge applications by using different kinds of information, so they don't always need to look at just credit scores or owner stakes. Best of all, many of these loans can get approved right away so small businesses can get funded within days, or even hours.

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2. Online purchase processors

In the past, taking credit cards may have required a merchant account and expensive credit card machines. Companies like PayPal and Stripe now allow entrepreneurs to accept payments, send invoices and even pay creditors and employees via a computer. Merchants can therefore accept money by transferring from one account to another and these technologies also allow them to accept credit and debit cards without a merchant account.

This new wave of online payment processors doesn't just make it easier to accept payments online; they also allow businesses to accept money and make payments with mobile phones. Even the smallest startup can accept payments with one of these payment processors, the right app and a smart phone. As another example, a company called Square sends out free credit card readers that work with mobile phones for businesses that plan to use them.

Related: [How the World of Fintech is Changing Finance for Entrepreneurs](#)

3. Mass payment technology

These days, many advertising networks, affiliate networks and other internet businesses rely upon partners and affiliates. In turn, these companies need to send out mass payments, which can be a very complex task. It is made especially complex because many of these companies do business all over the world, so they have to conform to regulations in different regions and countries.

A company called Tipalti has emerged with a SaaS solution that simplifies this whole process. It allows companies to make payments to many different individuals who live all over the world. Meanwhile, the service keeps the payers in compliance with anti-terrorist, banking and other payment regulations.

4. Fintech for check payments

Some small businesses have a hard time managing their cash flow because they have to wait for checks to arrive and then to clear. These days, the process of writing checks can be done entirely online, and this makes it much faster for companies to access their funds. In many cases, it is also more convenient for customers, so it truly is a win-win situation.

For example, new technology from Zipmark allows customers to pay online. The service processes the payments overnight, so the business has money in its accounts by the next day. This kind of technology is particularly useful for landlords and other real estate companies that accept monthly rental payments. Businesses can therefore offer online payments and then get paid quickly.

5. Bill-paying tech

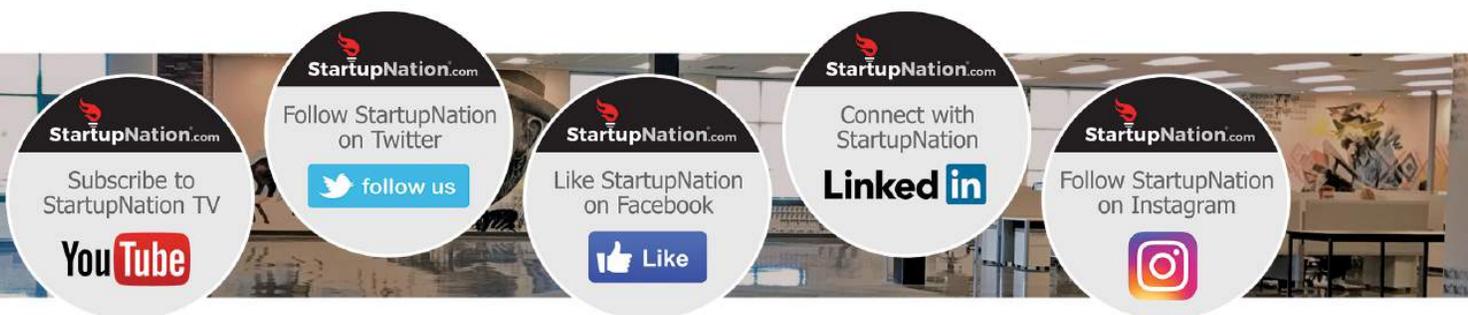
Some startups may have trouble managing their own routine bills. A small business owner might hope to delay payment until the due date to help manage operating cash, but at the same time, these businesses don't want to pay too late because they may incur late fees, damage their credit and get a bad reputation.

A service called Check can help with this process. Check gives business owners a place to consolidate all of their bills in one place. The service also helps manage these payments to ensure they get paid in time. Even better, [it can pay the bills online](#), so nobody has to worry about stuffing checks into envelopes and looking for stamps.

How can fintech help your startup grow?

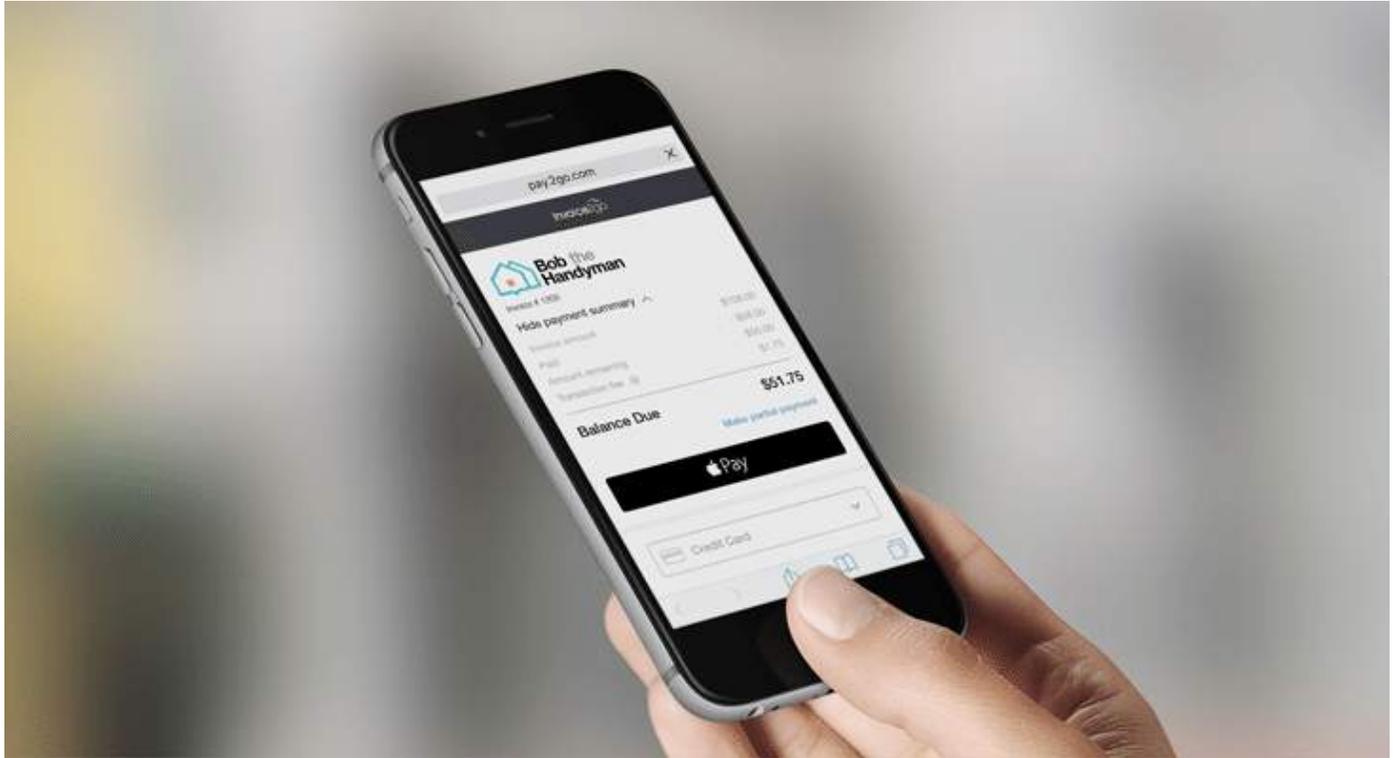
Every new company needs to accept payments, pay bills and learn to use financial services to their advantage. Fintech solutions allow business owners to conveniently manage their finances from their computer or smart phone. They may also make these services more accessible to very new or very small companies.

As a startup founder, all you need to do is find the fintech companies that suit the needs of your unique company. If you have a financial issue you need to solve, it's very likely that you can find a fintech solution to help.



Apple Pay: A Game Changer for Small Business

[Greg Waldorf](#)



It takes maybe two or three minutes to make a credit card payment online.

That may not sound like a huge amount of time at first glance, but considering that people have been complaining about how long it takes for the supermarket chip reader to gather our credit card information (about 30 seconds), three minutes is forever.

It also seems to defeat the key purpose of shopping online: convenience.

That's why [many in the tech world](#) think Apple's rollout of Apple Pay on the web is a pretty big deal.

So why haven't you heard about it? It's probably because the media likes new stories and Apple Pay has already been around for awhile.

Apple Pay allows people with the latest IOS (Apple) devices to make secure payments with the touch of a fingertip on the phone's Touch ID pad. That's the big deal. Simply put, easier payments means getting paid faster.

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No longer do you have to type in your billing address and your ZIP Code. You don't have to pick up your card, look at the back and try to decipher the faded CVV numbers. In fact, you don't have to type anything at all.

One touch of a finger and you're done. You can get back to work.

For entrepreneurs who generate invoices out in the field, it's a game changer.

"It will be great for our business," Andrew Chmielewski, toffee maker and owner of [Dave's Sweet Tooth](#), said of Apple Pay. "I think this has the potential to help solve some of our cash flow issues. Hopefully our clients will catch on and it can be mutually beneficial."

Apple Pay is also more secure than many payment systems: When you use Apple Pay, the recipient doesn't receive your credit card information. Instead, the app generates a unique number for every transaction.

As small business owners, our customers (plumbers, electricians, writers, contractors, organizers, handymen, makeup artists, dog walkers and beyond) form the backbone of the American economy. They need to get paid quickly in order to keep their books balanced and in order to survive. They depend on it. The American economy does, as well:

Some 28 million small businesses in America account for 54 percent of all U.S. sales, according to the Small Business Administration.

With Apple Pay, a plumber can fix a toilet and on the way out the door, send an invoice. By the time he or she gets to the car, voila; their grateful customer has already sent in their money using Apple Pay.

It also puts regular small business folks, who don't have the time to sit down and learn every new technology that comes out, on the same playing field as techies and executives.

Consumers expect slick invoices and easy payment systems. It used to be that only big businesses could offer that, and small ones were left to handwrite invoices. Now the little guys can compete with the big guys.

Apple Pay is a step in the continuum of what's possible for startups, and it's exciting. Sometimes the littlest changes are significant when it comes to convenience and removing an invisible barrier that people don't even know is there.

"I'm hoping that (Apple Pay) will help to speed up our cash flow cycle and allow our customers to pay for their orders in a more seamless and timely fashion," Chmielewski said.



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The Future of Entrepreneurship and Virtual Reality

[Justin Tsai](#)



Virtual reality is all the rage right now. [Researchers](#) predict there will be almost 140 million VR headsets in use by 2025, of which, 90 percent will be mobile. Mastering the concept of virtual reality may seem daunting, but the truth is, entrepreneurs and startup founders are already implementing online marketing tactics that pave the way for an easy adoption of the technology.

Today, businesses online offer interesting content, engage on social media channels and reach customers through targeted marketing. Turns out the fundamentals of running a business successfully online in a world dominated by virtual reality will likely remain the same.

Fully-immersed experience

In our 2D world, companies brand themselves online with a name, logo,

colors and fonts on a website or social media page. But in the near future, a consumer's experience with an online business will be a fully immersive one. From the comfort of their home, consumers will be able to virtually test or try on products, communicate with store owners and order services by simply putting on a headset. Companies ahead of the curve are already jumping on this opportunity. In 2016, Chinese e-commerce giant Alibaba [announced](#) plans to incorporate VR technology into its online shopping experience. Its more than 400 million customers will soon be able to buy and test products while experiencing virtual simulations of physical storefronts.

Related: [3 Major Technology Trends to Streamline Efficiency and Productivity](#)

Personalization

Highly-targeted marketing has blown up in recent years due to technological innovation. Today, businesses on Facebook can get as specific as targeting consumers via their life events, recent purchasing behavior, political affiliations and more. Stitch Fix, for example, is personalizing its customers' experiences via constantly improving algorithms. With each purchase a Stitch Fix customer makes, the algorithm gets smarter about the individual, and combined with the work of a Stitch Fix stylist, the company ships articles of clothing according to the individual's tastes. In a virtual reality-dominated world, consumers will be able to walk down aisles with products curated specifically for them. Online business storefronts will be presented differently depending on a customer's likes and dislikes, color preferences and music tastes.

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Immediacy of information

Developers are continuing to reduce the friction of information flow between consumers and startups. A business's online presence started as a static website, showcasing images and information, but providing little in the way of direct communication. As time progressed, they became more dynamic, allowing consumers to contact and engage with business owners directly from the website. Presently, site visitors can communicate with store owners through a variety of means: live chat, SMS or even Facebook Messenger. Facebook, for example, is pushing chatbots to communicate with consumers even when the owner isn't around. As virtual reality becomes universal, consumers will be able to put a headset on and immediately talk to the store owner, or a holographic chatbot who looks like an owner or an employee. Barriers to information are broken down, and consumers have immediate access to employees and customer service representatives, both real and virtual.

Why does this matter to entrepreneurs?

Although the virtual reality storefront may seem light years away, larger businesses are already testing the waters. Entrepreneurs and small business owners should consider whether becoming an early adopter of the technology may be a viable marketing solution for their business. Startups that successfully represent themselves online, and connect with customers through responsive customer service and visually engaging content, will be better equipped to succeed in the VR-dominated future coming down the tracks.

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4 Ways to Improve Your Client Relationships Through Automation

[Albizu Garcia](#)



The word automation doesn't exactly evoke excitement. However, automation doesn't have to mean mundane and robot-like. In marketing terms, automation can help promote brand consistency, which in turn, can create reliability and trust.

As entrepreneurs, we all know what it's like to take part in endless back-and-forth email chains with clients. When we talk about efficient client communication, email isn't necessarily at the top of the list. Client communication shouldn't have to be so difficult, especially when it comes to content approvals for example.

Fortunately, there are many cases where automation can come in to save the day, as well as your client relationships. Automation can make all the difference; just check out these four ways it can help your startup below.

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Automate content approvals

Soliciting your clients for approval can often be as much of an ordeal for you as it is for them. With continuous conversations and the influx of information, it's important to establish clear and organized funnels of communication. The less work for your clients, the better. If neither side benefits from endless emails, it sounds like a lose-lose, right?

With projects come emails and attachments, along with emails about those attachments and general feedback discussions. What could be a simple email can snowball into a larger, more complicated ordeal. Often, more people who are related to the project get involved just to ensure that everyone is up-to-date. But it doesn't have to be this way.

Though email is consistent and mostly universal, its disparities tend to outweigh the benefits of its transparency. Using a tool that automates the approval process can help your team notify the right people at the right time, gather feedback from clients and stakeholders, and move the process along for you until everything is approved. No excessive emailing necessary.

When email is taken out of the mix, the workflow between your internal team and external clients or approvers can be significantly streamlined. It allows you to communicate with clients via email only when it's vital, and dedicate more of your time to concentrate on other aspects of your campaigns, like audience engagement and customer analysis. Instead of keeping up with last week's email chain, your clients can also be involved in other areas of your work, such as the brainstorming stage, rather than simply acting as final approvers.

Automate the feedback process

There never seems to be enough hours in the work day, but you can save a few when you automate the process of gathering feedback. With an automated feedback process, your team can cut down the time it takes to gather client requests for project revisions, as well as content approvals. Instead of bombarding clients for feedback and suggestions, have an automated process notify them at the right time, which helps keep workflows consistent.

With an automated feedback system, your clients can include their input directly on projects when it's their turn, removing all confusion about whose feedback is needed and at what time. Ultimately, distractions can be greatly reduced through feedback automation, and efficiency can be greatly increased.

Automate learning more about your clients and their industries

Staying up-to-date on the latest news and tools within your client's industry should always be a top priority. While it's easy to make a promise to stay informed, it's vital that you make it a habit. Market knowledge is the best advantage over your competitors. By automating your learning, you can make a solid commitment and impress your clients when you sound like an expert.

You should always be learning and improving your techniques, alongside ever-changing technology. Automating your learning can be as simple as scouring the web for current trends and events. Our team does a weekly news scan, where we search for our favorite buzzwords so we can stay on top

Related: [4 Reasons Why Learning is the Key to Staying Ahead in Entrepreneurship](#)

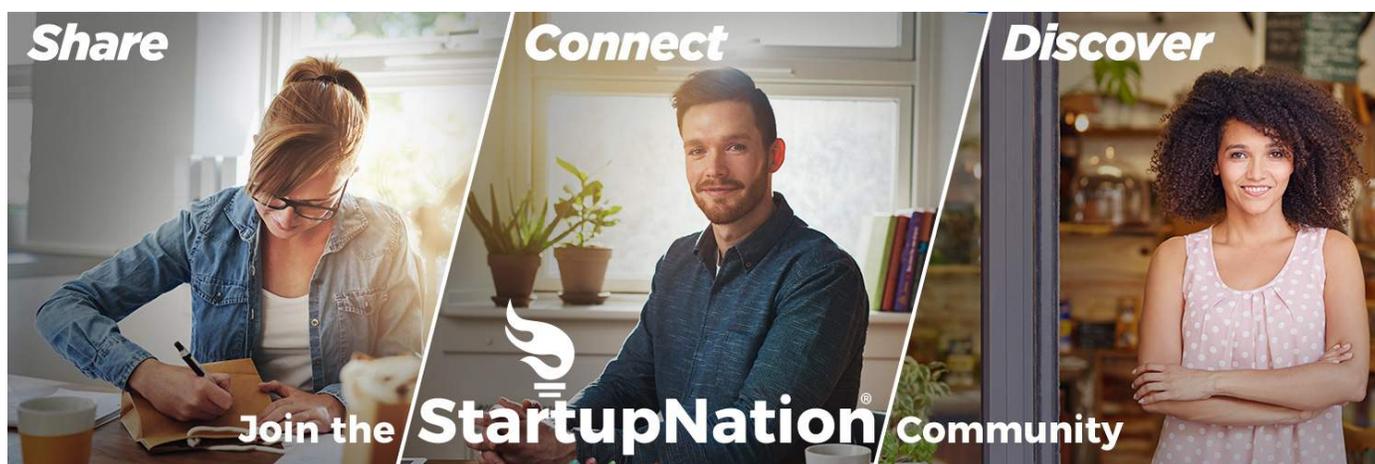
of the latest marketing news. When you're not scouring the web for the latest trends, make sure to enable [Google Alerts](#) that will notify your team at any mention of your brand, client, etc.

In addition to Google, there are all sorts of tools out there to assist your automated learning. It can be as simple as subscribing to a news site or downloading a new app to do the work for you. [Feedly](#), for example, is an application that automatically compiles personalized news from multiple channels on one platform. There's no excuse for being uninformed when there are so many tools to do it for you.

Automate your reporting

For the number crunchers and non-number crunchers alike, data is important. Clients want to know that you're doing your job and numbers always seem to do the trick. You also know that working out analytics can be a chore unless of course, you automate your reporting. Simply telling your clients that your "numbers are up" isn't going to cut it.

Tools like Google Analytics are a must. An automated reporting system can help track the traffic to your website and provide the numbers to help you evaluate progress. By consistently evaluating metrics and automating your reporting, you can show your clients positive growth over time.



CLICK ON THE IMAGE ABOVE

Automation conclusion

When you're representing a brand or a client, consistency is not just important, it's *necessary*.

Thankfully, automation and consistency go hand-in-hand. Speaking from experience, when communication is unorganized, the whole work equilibrium can get off balance.

Using automation tools can help you regain that balance and encourage collaboration between your team and your clients, alike. Once you automate normal tasks like getting content approved, gathering client feedback and reporting on your efforts, it's quite simple to make a habit out of it.



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New Ideas and Big Impacts: Startups Changing the World

[Jordan Kasteler](#)



As the saying goes, big things come in small packages. This is especially true for startup companies. These budding businesses sometimes revolutionize their industries, all with forward thinking and big ideas. Some of the most impressive new companies made waves recently, and with their innovation, it's easy to see why these are the startups changing the world.

Aqua-Yield

By 2050, the global [population will reach 9.7 billion](#), according to the U.N. As early as 2037, the world could [run out of phosphorous](#), an essential fertilizer macronutrient that helps crops grow. To prevent this, we must reduce our phosphorous use in the next 20 to 40 years, or we could begin to starve. We must uncover or discover technologies that will help feed our growing

population with the limited resources available.

[Aqua-Yield](#) introduced the “smallest innovation in agricultural history,” providing an answer to feeding our growing population. The company’s technologies deliver materials directly to the plant’s cells, resulting in a much higher overall efficiency. Aqua-Yield’s process introduces liquid nanotechnology to agriculture, which leads to significant advantages for the grower. Results of the company’s unique technologies include higher yields, lower costs, shorter crop cycles, less environmental impact, and an increase in nutrient impact.

Since 2014, Aqua-Yield has saved farmers millions of dollars in fertilizer. In addition to these financial savings, the environmental impact is huge. Growers can experience a decrease of 80 percent in use of plant nutrition materials. To top that off, growers also see a 30 percent increase in crop yields.

While the innovative process makes use of the smallest scale, there is no doubt about its substantial impact on farming. Aqua-Yield is changing the agricultural world with its disruptive technology that can benefit us all.

Related: [It’s Time To Start A Movement](#)

Beyond Meat

Modern day meat agriculture is more efficient than ever. However, it still takes a toll on the environment in the form of land damage, greenhouse gases and water pollution. Vast amounts of water and electricity are required to fill the demand in the country, not to mention the animal welfare issues caused by traditional farming, such as overcrowding and poor conditions. Plant-based meat alternatives also contribute to the health and well-being of consumers by using all-natural high-quality ingredients without harmful additives and preservatives.

[Beyond Meat](#) has done the impossible by engineering plant-based meat. Whereas previous products were vegetable-based imitations, Beyond Meat offers the same levels of healthy protein and power – minus the animals. These burgers are a far cry from tofu options, offering a texture and taste like fresh ground beef.

The company offers several mouth-watering varieties, including burger patties, Beyond Beef Crumbles, and Beyond Chicken Strips. Many Walmart, Target, Kroger, Safeway, Publix and Sprouts locations already stock these innovative meal options, and the demand is growing fast.

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Cylance

[Cylance](#) is changing the game when it comes to antivirus software. This company takes advantage of artificial intelligence to create the first proactive software protection plan. In the past, programmers identified viruses and then they wrote a code to disarm the threat. With Cylance, however, the need for programmers in the battle against computer viruses is all but eliminated.

Cylance’s programs learn to recognize and conquer viruses on the go without interference from programmers. When Cylance detects a virus, the software reacts instantly, greatly reducing the chance of losing important files or having personal information compromised. With this threat-sensing technology, computer security will never be the same.

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SnapKin

This device is the world's first robotic interior designer. You place the tool in the center of a room, where it then swivels around to scan the space.

Innovative software powers [SnapKin](#), allowing it to take highly accurate 3-D measurements of any space.

Once it compiles the information, SnapKin generates a digital floor plan of the space, complete with highly accurate dimensions. It gathers the data in a matter of seconds and converts it into a cloud model Revit, DWG, or IFC that is compatible with most software. This architectural revolution saves homeowners the trouble of measuring individual walls, moving furniture, etc., and helps optimize time for architects and building professionals.

Oculus and VR

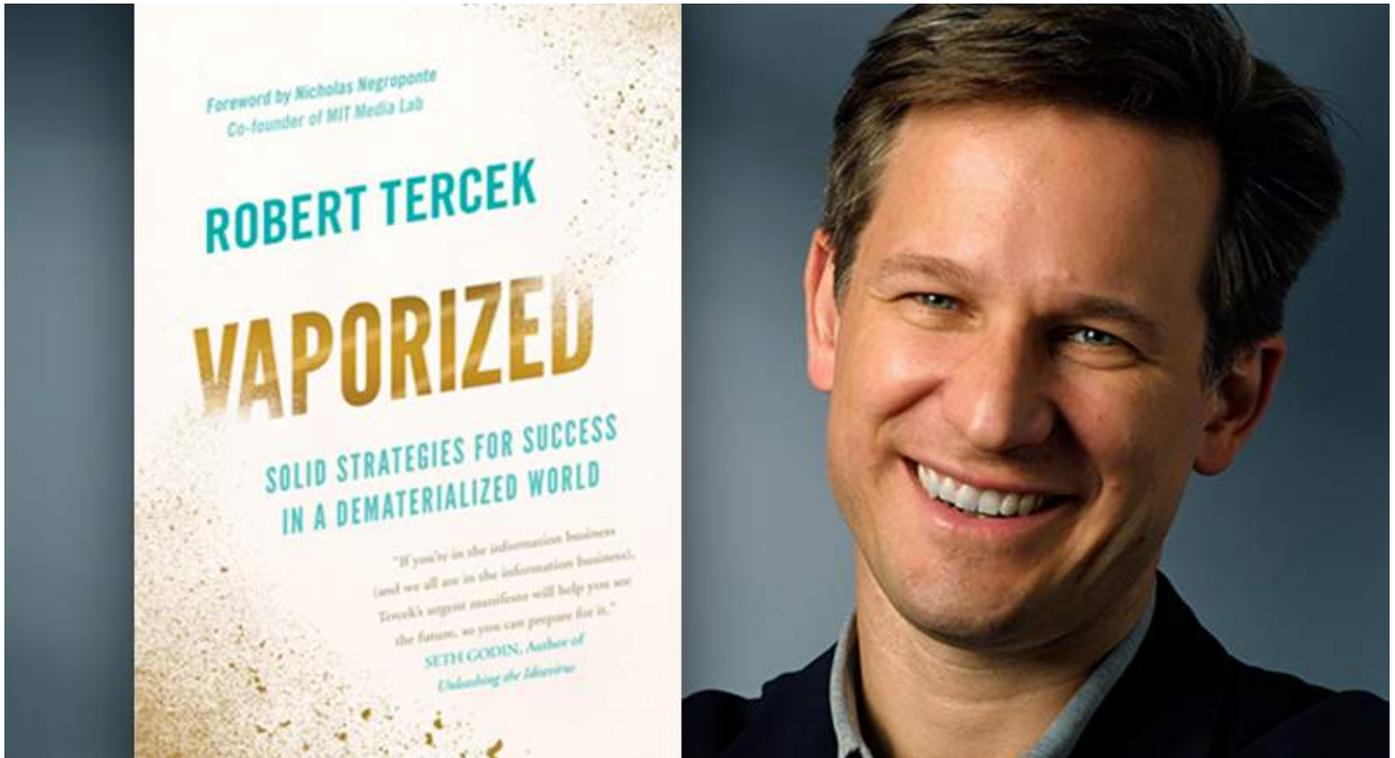
The Pokmon GO epidemic of 2016 proved one thing: The world gets very excited for virtual and augmented reality. [Oculus Rift](#), to many people, is the inspiration behind the mobile game. This virtual reality headset was the first of its kind and has sold numerous units since its initial release. Each year, more and more companies release software compatible with the Rift, meaning we'll see more virtual reality opportunities in the future.

From earth-friendly businesses to technologically innovative designs, the future is now, and it looks brighter than ever. It's time to take notice of these creative, innovative startups and what they can accomplish.



Changing the Brewing Industry with Big Data [Book Excerpt]

[Robert Tercek](#)



The following is an excerpt from “Vaporized: Solid Strategies for Success in a Dematerialized World” (LifeTree Media, 2015) by Robert Tercek:

Apart from the addition of stainless steel brewing vats, the process of brewing beer hasn’t changed much in the past 1,000 years. And yet Steve Hershberger, a technology entrepreneur who built systems for tracking industrial manufacturing and distribution, uncovered an opportunity in the beverage industry for SteadyServ. As a hobby, Hershberger once invested in a microbrewery based in his hometown of Indianapolis, Ind. From the outset, he applied the tech-geek discipline of measuring everything: borrowing from his experience in Silicon Valley, Hershberger developed a set of key performance indicators (KPIs) for the brewery to track every measurable aspect of the brewing process.

As the fledgling brewery began to win awards and prosper, Steve shifted his attention to the distribution business. He wanted to learn about the data systems used by the beer distributors and their customers. He was mildly stunned to realize that there were no such systems in the entire beverage industry. Zilch. Zip. Nada. What Steve learned about the beverage business was shocking to an infotech geek.

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How does a bartender know how much beer is left in a keg? He lifts the metal canister by one edge, swirls the contents inside, and makes his best wild-ass guess. Sometimes the bartender guesses right and sometimes he is wrong: if he's wrong, the bar will run out of a popular brew on a busy night. Unhappy patrons won't stick around for another round. Multiplied across the 500,000 bars in the United States, this rudimentary technique leads to billions of dollars of lost income.

How does a beverage company find out which beers customers are ordering? Today it sends college students equipped with clipboards and pencils to ask patrons in bars. It's hard to imagine a less reliable source of information for a mature \$100 billion industry than the alcohol-saturated memories of a partying crowd after happy hour.

The beverage and hospitality industries lacked a system for tracking the consumption of draft beer in real time. To Hershberger, this was a golden opportunity to apply everything he knew about information technology to the ancient brewing business. In 2012, he started a new company called SteadyServ.

Related: [Creativity Culture in Entrepreneurship \[Book Excerpt\]](#)

To solve the data problem in the beverage industry, SteadyServ created a product called iKeg that consists of a metal ring loaded with sensors and a wireless transmitter. The ring is attached to the bottom of a keg of beer and provides a steady stream of information based on the weight and pressure changes. The information is relayed wirelessly to SteadyServ's cloud, where it is converted into usable structured data. This information is then streamed to specialized mobile apps designed to optimize decision-making all the way through the brewing value chain:

- SteadyServ's mobile apps enable a bartender to keep track of all of the inventory in-house and order fresh beer with a single touch on the screen.
- Another app alerts the distributor automatically when a keg is nearly empty, thereby ensuring that a replacement will be on the delivery truck.
- The app for bar owners enables the proprietor to monitor the sales—by the glass, in real time—of every keg of beer in-house.
- A single integrated data feed in the app allows bar owners who manage several establishments to manage them all remotely, so they can compare the performance of one bar against another.
- More broadly, the aggregate data generated across all participating bars in a given city or region can provide beverage marketers and distributors with useful insight into breaking trends in different regions, even neighborhoods.

Ultimately, brewers will be able to use the data generated by SteadyServ to test and fine-tune marketing campaigns and promotions and to improve their product lineup.

The SteadyServ story is a microcosm of the Big Data trend that is sweeping across every mature manufacturing business in the world. Entrepreneurs in

every field are using connected sensors to discover and analyze new fields of information, converting it from random data smog into useable insight to drive old-school manufacturing and distribution companies to greater efficiency.

With SteadyServ, Steve Hershberger developed a new technological tool to collect data that allowed him to run his business more efficiently. This isn't the only way that a traditional business can develop a proprietary data asset. In some cases, no invention is necessary: the data that can transform your business and give you a critical competitive edge in the Vaporized Economy might already be in your pocket. But you need to figure out how to unlock it and utilize it before your competitors do it first.

“Vaporized: Solid Strategies for Success in a Dematerialized World” is available now via fine booksellers and at StartupNation.com.



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4 Reasons Why Learning is the Key to Staying Ahead in Entrepreneurship

[Victoria Feder](#)



Have you ever used Amazon's virtual assistant, [Alexa](#)? Ask it a question and you'll get an answer. Give it a command and it will do the job for you. In another year or two, it might even give you life advice.

With this kind of technology already widely available, it may be time to start asking ourselves some very pointed questions. For example, will technology make skills training and development unnecessary? Let's dig deeper.

While it's true that technology will become increasingly adept at accomplishing step-by-step tasks that can be easily measured, it still can't strategize, give wide-ranging advice or come up with creative solutions. That's exactly why we'll still need skills training and development well into the future.

Simply put, skills training, or lifelong learning, is the key to staying ahead in the entrepreneurial world as artificial intelligence (AI) assistants and household robots get better and better. Here are four reasons why that's true.

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Keep up with current tech and always be in demand

According to research from Oxford University, [47 percent of jobs in the United States are at risk of automation](#). However, this doesn't necessarily mean jobs are disappearing, as many would assume. They're *changing and evolving* as more tasks become automated.

James Bessen, an economist at Boston University, notes that [jobs that involve the use of computers have increased since 1980](#). So technology isn't killing jobs, but rather shifting the way we work. This is forcing people to change, or more accurately, learn more. If you want to be a successful entrepreneur in the digital age, you have to learn to work with and use new technology to do your job better.

Marketing is one field where this need for lifelong learning is incredibly clear, especially when you consider that many tasks can be automated, like advertising on social media, sending emails and collecting and reporting data.

As Neil Patel, a leading online marketer, notes, all [marketers now require new digital skills that are higher on the value chain](#), like the ability to craft

pay-per-click campaigns, build social media strategies and create mobile marketing plans. They also need to be able to analyze data and make that analysis actionable.

Related: [Artificial Intelligence and its Growing Impact on Startups](#)

Degrees are great, but you can't learn skills that don't exist yet

You can find tons of evidence out there showing [why getting a college degree is beneficial](#) over a lifetime. But the point of a higher education should be to [learn how to learn](#). This will prepare you for continual learning throughout your career.

What you learn about a specific subject is always changing due to new technology, research and ideas — especially in a field like marketing. The methods you use to get a job done today won't be the same tomorrow.

For example, if you graduated with a marketing degree in the early 1980s, you probably had no idea what content marketing was at the time, because it didn't exist.

However, if you want to be attractive in marketing today, you must learn all about content marketing. After all, between 2011 and 2015, job listings for content marketers grew by 350 percent on Indeed.

Certain jobs evolve—and so should you

If you follow online marketing trends, you may have heard that [SEO is dead](#). If you look more closely, you'll see that as Google repeatedly unveils earth-shattering algorithm changes, the SEO industry evolves to meet those changes.

When [LinkedIn interviewed Rand Fishkin](#), founder of Moz and one of the world's leading SEO experts, he elaborated on how SEO has evolved. It may have started with stuffing keywords to rank high on Google, but now SEO specialists must understand the intricacies of complex algorithms, like [indexation and crawling](#).

Like SEO jobs, most marketing careers aren't dying. They are simply evolving because of technology. If you adapt and learn what's required to stay ahead, you'll be in a much better position for sustained success in your field.

Staying on top of these skills, continually sharpening the tools in your toolkit and making sure your company as a whole stays sharp will keep you and your company competitive.

Learn new skills to improve brain function

[People are working longer than ever before](#), which means they must maintain (and boost) their productivity into old age. One of the ancillary benefits of continuous learning is that it actually improves brain function.

Scientific research has consistently confirmed the power of lifelong learning. Just consider these three examples:

- [Learning a new language at any age](#) improves concentration skills and critical thinking
- [Learning quilting and photography](#) has been found to improve memory
- [Learning how to play action video games](#) enhances brain function

While these don't directly connect to digital marketing, the point is clear: if you dedicate yourself to a lifetime of learning, you'll be able to continually pick up the most important new skills in your field as they come. You won't be overwhelmed by new technology or ideas, like learning [the latest marketing skills for the world of augmented reality](#).

Take control of the future

There is a significant and lasting benefit to learning applicable skills in your industry. The unavoidable truth is that many entrepreneurial fields, like marketing and SEO, are evolving on a day-to-day basis due to innovations in technology.

If you don't get into the habit of teaching yourself and your team new digital skills, you run the risk of not being able to adapt to crucial industry changes—and that means getting left behind.

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So what are some of the main areas where artificial intelligence is making a difference for new businesses?

“Big data”

The sheer volume of trackable data that is available to a new business can be overwhelming. It is difficult to know where to start when faced with such huge amounts of information about customers, competitors and processes.

Artificial intelligence technology is helping businesses to track data patterns, and use them to their commercial advantage. Tracking movement in the buying patterns of customers, and responding quickly to changes in demand, allows startup businesses to become more agile and potentially compete on an equal footing with larger competitors.

When combined with the use of social media, artificial intelligence is a powerful tool to better understand customers, meet their demands and get ahead of the competition.

A streamlined business

For those startup companies that would otherwise have to take on administrative staff, artificial intelligence is offering significant employment cost-savings. Customer service and personal assistant roles can be filled using AI technology – scheduling business meetings is just one area where artificial intelligence software can take over, emailing other attendees to update them on developments.

“Customer chat” software also allows businesses to save on employment costs, as pre-defined commonly asked questions by customers can be answered without the need for the physical presence of a customer service representative.

In fact, an insurance firm in Japan has recently replaced more than 30 employees with an AI system that can “think like a human.” The firm has forecast a 30 percent increase in productivity as a result, and expects a return on their investment in less than two years.

Related: [Kevin Kelly Discusses Artificial Intelligence in The Inevitable](#)

Data entry and other mundane tasks

Artificial intelligence is utilized in a number of industries for data entry, including accounting. This allows startup accounting firms to develop a role as business partner to their clients, rather than simply being hired to complete statutory accounts and ensure tax compliance.

Automated data entry within online accounting software, for example, where information from bank accounts is imported directly, allows accountants to focus on helping their clients’ strategically by freeing up time for both parties.

Mundane or “back office” tasks in other industries are similarly being carried out using artificial intelligence, offering considerable benefits to newly-formed businesses:

- New manufacturing businesses can increase productivity and save money using automated “sorters” that identify and remove substandard items from the production line. Automated inspection technology is highly accurate, and can be of significant long-term benefit to new businesses.
- GPS data and onboard devices within vehicles can be used to record and analyze an employee’s time on the road, and at a customer’s site. This could make logistical decisions more efficient, and offer a better view of whether individual and business productivity goals are met.

The benefits of artificial intelligence for startups

Professional services company, Accenture, describes artificial intelligence as “IT systems that sense, comprehend, act and learn.” The growing impact of these systems on startup companies has resulted in a wide range of benefits, including:

- Reduced costs
- Increased productivity
- The ability to make better business decisions
- Time to grow the business
- Back office automation allowing staff to focus on creative or core tasks
- Greater agility and ability to respond quickly to market changes
- Better able to meet customer demand
- Increased efficiency of sales or operational processes

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Artificial intelligence offers entrepreneurs the ability to start a streamlined business that is agile enough to respond quickly to customer demand. Reliable insights into customer behavior also enable clearer decision-making.

As this form of technology becomes cheaper, it is likely to make an even greater impact on startup companies. More automation of routine work will, in turn, allow business owners to focus on growing their enterprise sustainably.



7 Tips for Using Data to Keep Your Startup Ahead of the Curve

[Jessica Lachs](#)



“Data-driven” has become a buzzword at startups, on par with “disruption” or “lean.” But truly having a data-driven culture means more than tracking your monthly active users or running the occasional experiment. It means building out a scalable data infrastructure, focusing on experimental design and using data to make decisions.

In my experience as an entrepreneur, I’ve seen firsthand how a healthy use of data can help take a business to the next level. To get ahead in today’s competitive startup landscape, here are seven tips for using data to improve your own business.

1. Start thinking about data from day one

Building a “data-driven culture” is a massive undertaking if you only start

tracking metrics a year into your company. One of the most important things we did at DoorDash was setting up a robust data architecture from day one. In those early days, we only had a handful of deliveries per day, and could have easily tracked them in a simple document like Google Spreadsheets. Instead, we set up a data tracking infrastructure before our first delivery and built it to scale. Today, we can look back at all of our data, starting with the very first customer, and even know the delivery time of that very first order.

2. Understand your customers and your product

Oftentimes, startups will build a product for a certain use or a specific type of customer, only to find that users are doing something very different than expected. Data can help you understand who your customers are, how they interact with the core features and what your product team may be missing. You can use this feedback loop to help determine if you truly have product and market fit.

For example, you may find that a certain feature is being used more than anything else. That's what happened to the [Slack team who found that the chat function of their game was more popular than the game itself](#). Or you may find that a certain type of customer is using the product the most, the way that [Justin.TV's team found that gamers were posting the most videos, leading](#) them to pivot and launch Twitch. You'll never know where your product could go without understanding how it's being used.

Related: [Disruptive Technology in 2017](#)

3. Be naturally skeptical when it comes to data

You can make data say almost anything depending on how you cut it, how you graph it and the story you tell alongside it. But you need to make sure the data actually makes sense. Before you change your entire operations based on new results, first do some mental calculations. Does the data seem

right based on what you know about the business? Is it trending the way you think it should? If not, you need to dig in further. Always approach data as a skeptic, and ask, “What don’t I know?” before jumping to conclusions.

4. Run meaningful experiments

Experimentation can be key to optimizing and tweaking your product (Google famously tested [41 shades of blue](#) to determine the final color for links on its search results page). To get accurate results, you have to run thoughtful and well-designed experiments, not simply make a change and see what happens.

A solid A/B testing framework can help you determine if correlations uncovered by analysis of historical data truly represent causal relationships.

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5. Don’t ignore the plumbing

One of the biggest mistakes startups make is not having a strong data infrastructure. This underlying plumbing is not glamorous, is rarely discussed, isn’t going to generate revenue or give you any new business metrics to share with your CFO. If you don’t focus on the underlying infrastructure and put time, energy and thought into collecting clean data, you’ll never get good results.

6. Make data accessible

Data adds little value if it’s sitting in a database, queryable by only a few people. In contrast, opening up data to employees and teaching them how to use it can make the entire company more empowered. By knowing how to pull data, people across your business can truly understand how their efforts are impacting the business, make better decisions and better prioritize their work.

Of course, this is easier said than done. Many people don't know how to pull data, let alone best leverage it. You may consider offering tutorials to all employees so that they can start analyzing data on their own, or hosting weekly office hours for one-on-one tutoring.

7. Ignore your data

Finally, you have to be comfortable ignoring your data. You may have the best in class data infrastructure, testing tools and data analysts, but data can only tell you so much. Particularly, when you're in your company's earliest days, you need to have a vision and trust your gut.

That's not to say that you shouldn't use data at all. You can use data to inform yourself, check that you're on the right track, and prove a hypothesis. Data can quickly show you when you're wrong and help you adjust. At the end of the day, sometimes you have to make a decision with no data, and you need to be comfortable trusting your instincts and taking a stand. Ultimately, data informs decisions but it doesn't make decisions: you do.



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How Cloud Technology is Enabling More Budding Entrepreneurs to Set Up Business

[Alex Tebbs](#)



There is no doubt that cloud technology is growing in popularity; we're using it in our personal lives more than ever before, and businesses are adopting cloud infrastructure and applications to improve workplace collaboration, productivity and even security.

Paving the way for a new wave of business leaders

One great thing about the cloud is that it's opened up new doors for budding entrepreneurs. There are many people out there who have a fantastic business idea, as well as the ambition and drive to become their own boss, yet the financial aspect of running their own business puts them off from taking a leap of faith.

With cloud technology, that no longer needs to be the case. It removes the need for entrepreneurs to pay for premises and hardware installations, instantly cutting down on overhead and other associated costs. This can be even more of a blessing for those living in cities with higher commercial property rental prices.

Entrepreneurs will not find themselves with a shortage of cloud-based tools to choose from, as there seems to be a tool that can help with almost anything. For example, many business owners will tell you that accounting is one of the most tedious and time-consuming tasks, but with the help of cloud technology, things like payroll and expenses are significantly sped up.

Related: [What Cloud Accounting Software is Right for My Business?](#)

Using cloud technology as your business grows

As your business grows, you may decide to take on a couple of staff members, if you haven't already. At this point, you'll probably consider renting office space, but there's no reason why you can't form a business where all employees work remotely, at least until you're *sure* you can afford to pay both wages and property overhead.

Cloud technology can facilitate small teams in so many ways. First, it makes resource sharing extremely easy. Take Google Drive and Dropbox, for example. Both of these tools can be accessed and used by multiple people at any one time. As your company grows, make sure there is consistency with the software and tools your team uses in order to maximize collaboration and productivity.

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If your team works remotely, then it's vital to invest in software that can aid business communication. It's best to look for an integrated solution that encompasses voice calls, instant messaging, email and video conferencing. This makes not only talking to your employees easier, but your clients, too, cutting down on travel time and costs. Though it's not to say you should carry out all of your communications this way, because face-to-face interaction is still incredibly valuable.

You'll probably wonder how your business can stay secure when you take on more and more employees, who potentially have access to sensitive company and client information. The misconception that cloud technology is less secure than other systems is simply not the case; growing startup companies have multiple options when it comes to keeping their data safe.

Staff should also be trained on how to stay safe when working in the cloud by storing sensitive data locally, checking for encryption and avoiding using unsecured, public WiFi networks.

What's in store for the cloud?

Cloud technology is a hot topic right now, and as more and more businesses become aware of the benefits, we'll continue to see a rise in cloud adoption. Choosing a handful of cloud-based tools that you can roll out across your company is an easy and cost-effective way to consolidate many of your startup's processes.

Because the cloud is such a catalyst for startups, it's also likely that we'll see an increase in home-run businesses over the next few years. Advancements in cloud technology, in conjunction with artificial intelligence, will only aid this by providing new, innovative solutions to budding entrepreneurs.

We believe there will come a time when everyone is living in the cloud. With this in mind, it's never too early for entrepreneurs and startups to consider how they can incorporate the technology into their own day-to-day operations.

Why Yesterday is the Time to Understand Blockchain

[Stephen Woessner](#)



If you're not an enthusiast already, it's time to start believing the hype about blockchain. In fact, it's difficult to under-hype the significance of blockchain. It might be tempting to roll your eyes when hearing hyperbolic statements like, "it's the most significant technological advancement in our lifetime. Or since the wheel."

But this isn't just wonky numbers geeks getting overly dramatic. It's no exaggeration to say you need to understand blockchain, cryptocurrency and exponential technology in order for your startup to survive and thrive in the coming decades.

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What is blockchain?

You've heard of and are maybe even trading in [Bitcoin](#) or [other cryptocurrency](#). But, cryptocurrency is just one example of what is possible through blockchain technology. It's a distributed network of information, or a block of information, moving through a chain of agreed upon terms.

Investopedia describes it this way:

“[Blockchains](#) – which use what is known as [distributed ledger](#) technology (DLT) – are appearing in a variety of commercial applications today. Currently, the technology is primarily used to verify transactions within digital currencies, though it is possible to digitize, code and insert practically any document into the blockchain.”

In other words, blockchain can be used as an authentication tool for most any information.

Through my podcast, [Onward Nation](#), I have the privilege of speaking with some of the very best minds in the business world. Two of the most fascinating interviews I've done recently were with Ric Edelman and Terry Brock.

[Edelman](#) and [Brock](#) both know about the potential of blockchain to alter the world as we know it. Ric Edelman is widely regarded as one of the top advisors in the wealth advisory field, having been named in 2016 among the country's Top 10 Wealth Advisors by Forbes Magazine. His latest New York Times best-seller is entitled “[The Truth About Your Future: The Money Guide You Need Now, Later and Much Later](#).” Terry Brock is a communicator who helps individuals and organizations master technology and relationship marketing to build their business and be more profitable. He currently is a leader in the blockchain and cryptocurrencies space helping people make sense of and make money with these game-changing tools.

Related: [Blockchain Applications for Startups and Entrepreneurs](#)

Beyond the trust economy

Edelman explains that blockchain has the potential to eliminate the trust economy and replace it with authentication economy. Trust is expensive. Edelman uses the example of settlement on a home.

Normally this process takes 60 to 90 days. You are trusting mortgage lenders, real estate brokers, title companies, lawyers, etc. The title company needs to verify ownership of the land, and any liens or encumbrances on the property. Mortgage companies need to verify your income and credit history, all of which takes time. All of these services cost money on top of the price of purchasing or selling the home.

With blockchain, all of this information and all of these processes can potentially be accomplished instantaneously. You can settle on that house later this afternoon, if you want to. This is the future, according to Edelman.

Brock continues the theme, further expanding on it. Blockchain is all mathematics and the math is verified at every “link” in the chain. Terms are put in place, and there is no guesswork involved. Again, you do not have to trust multiple people and organizations in a transaction. This is the beginning of a trust-less economy.

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Lifelong learning is more important than ever

Both Brock and Edelman see a larger lesson in the advent and ascendancy of blockchain technology: the importance of lifelong learning. The job you are in

now may or may not exist 10 years from now. Exponential technologies such as blockchain and AI are even now disrupting industries and making some jobs obsolete.

Brock points to an example from the late 1800s when machines were developed to gather grain from fields. This put people who wielded sickles for a living out of work. In order to survive, they needed to adapt and learn new skills.

Edelman and Brock both see jobs with repetitive tasks as on the way out, and not just areas we often think of, such as assembly workers and drivers, for instance. In the legal world, there are AI systems like ROSS taking over the role that used to be filled by first year law associates.

I asked Edelman and Brock for one or two big takeaways they could offer entrepreneurs.

Edelman advises startups to leverage the power of technology.

“The proper use of technology is not to do something once, but to do it 10,000 times. Tech allows you to scale up quickly, so take advantage of that scalability,” he said.

For Brock, the lesson is to not be afraid to spend some capital on lifelong learning. He closed our conversation with a quote from Benjamin Franklin: “Pour the coins of your purse into your mind, and your mind will overflow your purse with coins.”

Blockchain is not likely to be a passing fad – far from it. This is way more than watching the vertigo-inducing price of Bitcoin from day to day. Now is the time to pay attention. Pay attention to where the blockchain is likely to disrupt your business, and fields adjacent to yours where ripple effects might occur. These are incredibly exciting times to be an entrepreneur. Opportunity is at hand for all with the knowledge and desire to keep learning and growing.

How to Harness the Power of IoT Without a Technical Background

[Gaby Román](#)



Just a few years ago, the Internet of Things (IoT) was a wave only [big businesses like General Electric](#) were riding on. When [Nest was bought by Google](#) for a whopping \$3.2 billion, though, regular, non-tech people started to take notice of what our future was shaping up to be.

Once fun gadgets like smart lights, Roombas and Apple watches started permeating the general public, it was clear that IoT was here to stay.

Today, people come to expect everyday gadgets to be smart. They assume internet or wireless connectivity will be a part of any TV they buy or new refrigerator they install. It's simply a part of our normal, everyday lives.

Which is one of the reasons why now is the time to jump on board.

If your idea or startup is at all IoT focused (or if anything you're planning on launching is smart) there might never be a better opportunity to get your feet wet. Just look around and see for yourself.

You don't need to be a technical founder

The other reason you shouldn't wait to take advantage of the growing tech trend? Because now, more than ever before, [non-technical people](#) are being given the ability to do what was previously only possible for engineers and programmers.

With no-code software allowing anyone and everyone to develop apps, harness IoT and launch tech-forward startups, teachers, doctors, baristas, and more are becoming developers.

To drive the point home even more, [the IoT market is expected to hit \\$7.1 trillion](#) over the next couple years. If the fact that you can break into that sector and stake your claim as a non-technical founder doesn't get your heart pumping, I don't know what will.

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No-code tools make IoT and intelligent software possible

You've seen website builders all over the internet. From WordPress, to Wix, and more, you can create your own site in just a few simple steps these days, no HTML or programming required.

As technology advances, though (and because the internet is now more than just websites), the same is happening for applications and software.

No-code builders like [Bubble](#) and [Dropsource](#), for example, let you easily develop your own software or marketplace app without ever having to write

a single line of code. Add software like [Zapier](#) to the mix, which allows apps to “talk” to each other, and you can now build an entire SaaS startup without ever coding or hiring a developer if you want. Simply drag and drop to create the front end of your project, connect the back end using plain English, and you’re set.

As a non-tech person, you can now launch your MVP or prototype in weeks instead of months or years.

Related: [How IoT Companies are Changing the Startup World](#)

No-code intelligence

Let’s say you have a startup similar to Airbnb that lets people book apartments and homes around the world. With platforms like Bubble or Dropsource, you could build the entire front and back ends of an Airbnb-type app in just a few days or weeks.

You could then connect your app to Zapier and a program like [Chatfuel](#), which would let your app communicate with an intelligent chatbot (also built without coding).

That [chatbot could be programmed](#) to send a message via Facebook to a user who looks at a particular listing on your app. Maybe you’d tell it to show them other apartment and home recommendations in an area in which they were previously searching.

You could even let that same user book one of your apartment suggestions straight through your chatbot, which would then send the information back to your app and secure the reservation.

Looking at another example, let’s say you’ve used a no-code builder to develop an app similar to Citibike, which updates New Yorkers on exactly when a nearby bike is available.

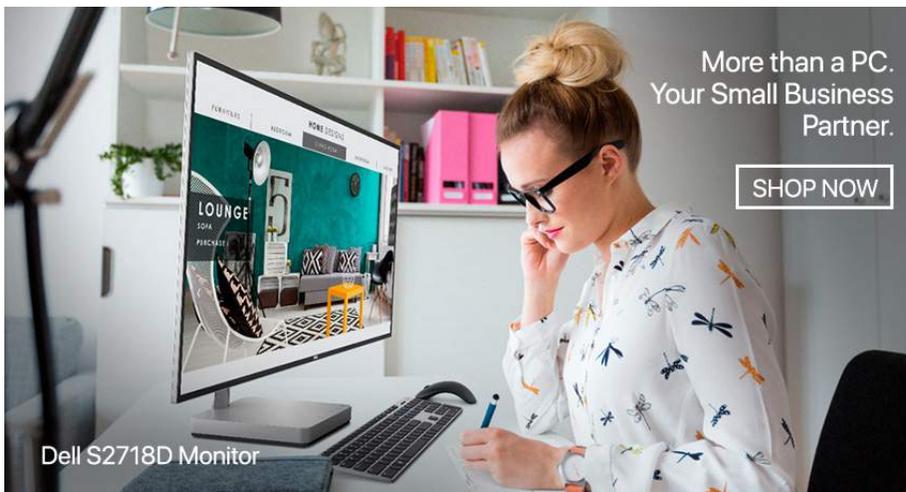
Using the same setup as the last example, you could program an intelligent chatbot to notify shared-bike riders when one is available. Taking it a step further, you could even send notifications through Facebook when your app indicates a user is nearby their usual pickup spot.

All of that, without ever writing a single line of code, no technical background required. Talk about harnessing the power of IoT and intelligent tech.

It's your turn

If you're an app founder or part of a startup team keen on jumping on the Internet of Things bandwagon, take the next step. The lack of a technical background is no longer a hindrance to building an idea, incorporating it into our digitally evolving world, and even creating smart chatbots to help run your growing business.

With so many tools and resources available to you right now, it's your turn to start getting technical.



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The Best Platforms for Building a Chatbot

[MyCorporation](#)



It's a chatbot world and we're just living in it — but we prefer it like that! [Chatbots 101](#), an infographic created by Oracle.com in 2017, revealed that 65 percent of consumers prefer to contact businesses through messaging apps.

These stats are encouraging businesses of all sizes to follow customers onto messaging platforms where they can respond to requests and hold conversations together. This kind of communication has a powerful effect on company ROI, with 56 percent of businesses stating that the technology has been a positive return on investment.

Related: [4 Benefits Chatbot Technology Can Provide Your Startup](#)

However, many businesses aren't "on" or open 24/7, which is what 50 percent of customers expect during their interactions. The solution here is pretty simple: build a chatbot, or an automated software, that customers can communicate with. Often powered by AI, chatbots interact with customers through a chat interface like voice or text. While chatbots tend to have different functions depending on the site they are configured through, they are designed to assist you by answering questions and troubleshooting.

The same infographic even notes that chatbots have the potential to save \$174 billion across industries including insurance, financial services, sales and customer service.

Ready to build a chatbot of your own, but have no idea where to start? Check out our roundup of the best platforms below.

[DigitalGenius](#)

Chatbots are meant to be practical, and the team at DigitalGenius works to combine AI with deep learning. This means customer service transcripts are converted into word vectors where meaning and context are extracted using statistical operations in order to predict the answers. With additional services that include automating responses and routing cases, this platform is designed to better empower your startup's customer service.

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[FlowXO](#)

Smart chatbots are made simple with FlowXO, which specializes in creating several chatbots once for platforms like Facebook Messenger, Slack and SMS. Conversations come alive when chatbots are able to send over text, images and links along with push messages at the right time to keep them informed. Best of all, there are no new tools to learn — you can plug your chatbot into your help desk software or email and start talking.

[Pandorabots](#)

The world's leading chatbot platform does it all. From advertising to toys and games and domain expertise, this free web service builds and deploys chatbots for businesses in every industry. You can program your bots to evolve along with the customer and remember important details. You can also deploy the bot in apps that use the Pandorabots API. Beyond customizing your chatbot, the staff at Pandorabots will also help train your in-house team to maintain your chatbot, help debug or refine your AIML and select a plan that suits your bot hosting needs.

[Recast.AI](#)

Technically, bots aren't meant to be "dumb," but every now and then you encounter a few that truly don't understand you. Enter Recast.AI, a platform that creates bots that truly understand humans and put developers first by building their chatbots in minutes. The service includes a Bot Builder to create a flow of conversation and manage dialogue, a Bot Connector for reaching out on messaging apps like kik and Slack, an analytics dashboard to review your numbers, free hosting and much more.

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3 Major Technology Trends to Streamline Efficiency and Productivity

[Constantina Kokenes](#)



As an entrepreneur, you should keep up with business trends to ensure you're using the latest practices and strategies. Technology can help you streamline efficiency and productivity while also helping you reach and retain a broader audience.

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Here are three technology trends to keep up with during 2018.

1. Evolution of online threats

With the growing threats of hackers, startups should plan on investing in cybersecurity tools and software to protect their company's and customers' information. Currently, [90 percent of small businesses](#) don't provide protection against cyberattacks. Most believe they won't be targeted because they don't provide as large of monetary benefits as larger companies do, yet [70 percent of attacks](#) are aimed at small businesses because they're unprotected.

Cyberattacks are predicted to get more complex as technology continues to evolve. While artificial intelligence (AI) provides businesses with a greater chance to drive positive customer experience, [it comes with its own risks, as well](#). Phishing, fraud and AI-powered password guessing are just a few of the predicted online threats to come this year.

While AI comes with its risks, it can also help protect your business from attacks if you utilize the right software and tools. AI can use machine learning tools to predict and identify attacks. You can also budget time and funding for patch testing and application testing. When you test your system, you see exactly where your strengths and weaknesses are and can act upon these weaknesses before hackers do.

Related: [3 Technology Trends to Watch in 2018](#)

2. Mobile impact grows

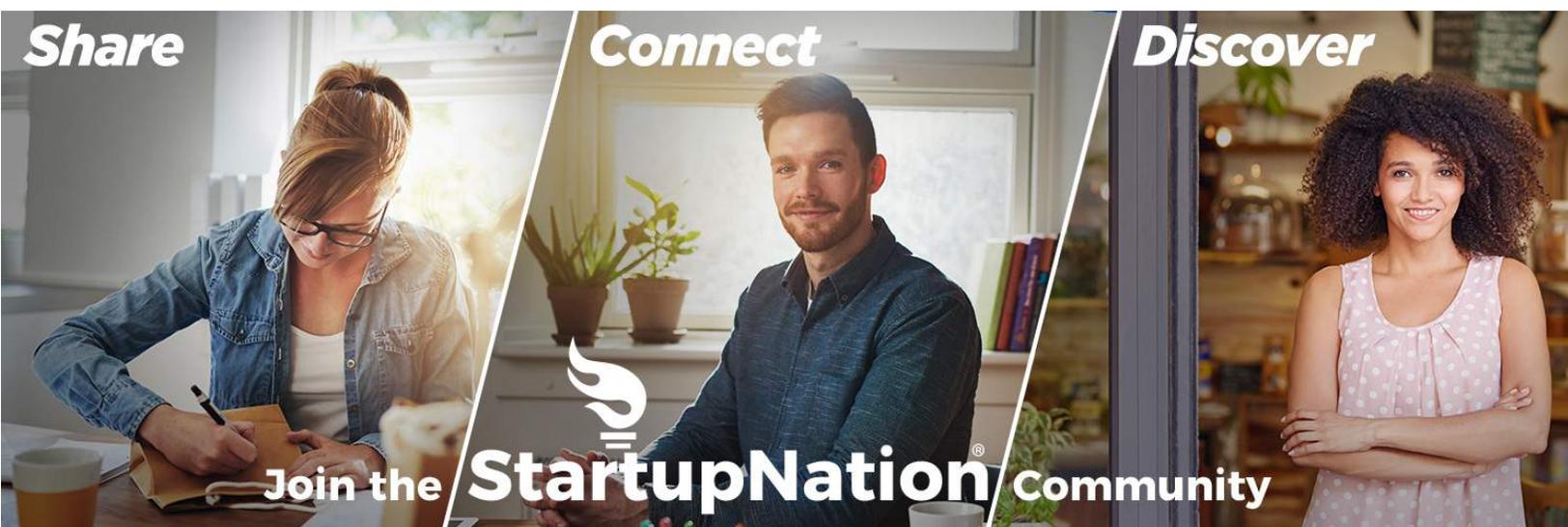
Mobile continues to grow for consumers, with [51 percent of website traffic](#) coming from mobile and the average time spent on mobile devices reaching five hours a day. To increase your website's traffic, focus on your mobile strategies this year in a variety of ways.

First, simplify your mobile app or make your website mobile-friendly if you haven't already. Implement a navigation menu that's simple to use and is present on all pages. This reduces the number of clicks needed to navigate

your site, and consumers will enjoy being able to find what they want with ease. Your startup's information should also be easily-presented and easily understood. Your mobile search engine optimization (SEO) will also improve once you've made these modifications to your website, which can leave you with better rankings, especially in your local search.

Second, focus on mobile payments. Cash currently remains the most popular form of payment, but non-cash transactions [rose 11 percent](#) between 2014 and 2015. What's more: it's projected that [56 percent of consumers](#) will use mobile payments by 2020. Check payments continue to decline, and mobile payments can help you with your invoicing needs as they give your clients and customers multiple ways to pay you. Cashless payments include credit and debit cards, mobile wallets like Apple Pay, Samsung Play and Google Play as well as in-app, in-browser and person-to-person (P2P) payment platforms (Venmo, PayPal, Messenger, etc.)

Finally, you should improve your website's speed, user experience and SEO through your accelerated mobile pages (AMP). AMP pages can greatly affect your website's traffic and conversions. E-commerce sites with AMP pages see a [20 percent increase](#) in sales than those without, and 51 percent of online users are more likely to click a page with AMP results.



CLICK ON THE IMAGE ABOVE

3. Augmented reality versus virtual reality

Virtual reality (VR was predicted to evolve and be adopted quickly by businesses, but augmented reality (AR has made the move, instead. AR shows to be more cost- and user-friendly for both startups and consumers (VR units are limited around the world, whereas AR technology can be found in most smartphones).

With AR, consumers are immersed into virtual environments with a more personalized and complex experience. Your startup should create these environments which show customers how your products and services can help them (for example, Pokémon Go, Ikea Place, Snapchat Lens Studio). VR offers deeper immersion into virtual environments, but it comes with heavier price tags for high-end devices.

However, neither AR nor VR will be mass adopted for a few years as the technology continues to evolve. To keep up with (or even ahead of) the AR trend, improve your AR training and ideation process for your products or services.

To improve your startup's efficiency and productivity, you need to keep up with industry tech trends. These three technological trends can help you increase your customer experience and retention while also boosting your workflow in 2018.

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The Future of Content Marketing: 3 Technology Trends to Watch in 2018

[Tyler Hakes](#)



As we look forward into 2018 and beyond, there are a number of technology trends that will shape the future of content marketing. New platforms, systems and tools are shaping the way that marketers and brands reach their audience.

The prospect of a shifting landscape can be scary, but with the right understanding of coming changes, marketers and entrepreneurs can prepare for the future, anticipate upcoming trends and identify unique opportunities for growth.

To get a look at how technology will change content marketing, let's look at three big trends happening now.

Custom content journeys

Many companies still think of content marketing as a collection of content that readers find on your website then read at their own leisure. But smart marketers are learning to craft content journeys that help guide prospects from the top of the funnel all the way through their purchase decision.

With new tools and technology, brands and publishers will be able to better target and segment their audience. They can use activity and demographic data to surface the right content for the right people at the right times.

This can already be accomplished to some extent with the right retargeting strategy, but new tools will allow you to tie together the customer journey across different platforms and touch points.

Related: [13 Fundamental Lessons to Improve Your Content Marketing Strategy](#)

New distribution channels will emerge

We've already seen some big changes with regards to organic content distribution on social networks (e.g., Facebook's latest algorithm change), but we're also seeing a more fundamental shift.

Many platforms are evolving, and the way that we use them will also shape the way that brands publish and share content.

Facebook's recent focus on their Messenger app and the [rise of chatbots](#) are a prime example of a new distribution channel emerging from an existing platform. Now, instead of sharing content from a Facebook page or blasting it out in a newsletter, you can [send content directly to subscribers](#) with a chatbot.

We will likely see an increase in these new channels as platforms mature and introduce new features.

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Advanced tech platforms demand new, immersive brand experiences

Content formats are changing. We've already seen a big jump in the use of video and audio content as brands look for new ways to stand out from competitors and take advantage of different promotional channels.

But many companies have remained slow to take steps toward new formats, largely because these are seen as only incremental advantages that come with a hefty upfront investment. This is because the *devices* that consumers use for consumer content are still relatively unchanged.

Computers, tablets, and even smartphones are screens with similar interfaces.

But this is soon to change. With the increase in AR and VR technology, the way that we interact with digital content will begin to fundamentally shift. Rather than text and video content that we consume through a screen, new formats will emerge. Immersive, real-world experiences will become the new media through which we interact with brands and publishers.

Of course, the heart of content marketing is still creating great content; that will not change.

While technology is increasingly a part of any smart content marketing strategy, it can't do the heavy lifting.

It's important to think of the role of technology as a supplemental way to improve your content marketing efforts, not as a bandaid for poor content.

With the right combination of great content and innovative technology, you can take your content marketing to the next level.

How Voice-Activated Assistants Can Help Entrepreneurs Work Smarter

[Ann Logue](#)



By now, many of us are owners of an Amazon Echo, a Google Home, or other voice-activated assistant. These gadgets are equipped with lots of tricks to smooth the running of a household, but the companies that produce them know that the big market is in applications for businesses. That's what will move these from novelties to essentials. There are skills you can use in your workplace now that are especially useful for a startup or small business.

To begin with, a voice assistant can remove a little bit of desk clutter. They make great timers for those who use [Pomodoro](#), or similar time management systems; and replace sticky note reminders. In fact, you probably have the skills of Microsoft's Cortana or Apple's Siri on your computer, so you may not even need a new device. On the other hand, you can run multiple Amazon Echo or Google Home from the same account, a nice feature if you are a solopreneur with an outside office.

Related: [Gary Vee Says VoiceFirst Technology is the Future of Business](#)

Next, check out the lists of Skills available, which are growing daily for each of the different assistants. These Skills can allow you integrate your calendar and to-do lists with voice commands. If you have employees, a single office voice assistant can help you share status reports or add things to each other's to-do lists, helpful if you and your staff keep different hours. Another use is placing supply orders. It's easy to add things to a list and send them to a vendor. After all, one reason that Amazon invented the Echo is to generate sales, and the competing devices have these capabilities, too. You can also place catering orders through Skills that connect you to restaurant delivery services. Set it up once, then reorder with a simple request.

Skills can integrate with other devices and technologies that you use through a service called If This Then That (IFTTT), which lists applets that extend different devices. For example, if you use Trello for project management, you can connect it to Alexa or Siri through IFTTT.

Voice assistants work with a range of lighting systems, security features and appliances at home or the office. Want to get the coffee maker running in your office? Ask Alexa as you walk out the door at home. You can also set up a smart doorbell to see who is knocking on your office door and let them in without getting up from your desk, or control lights and temperature settings remotely.



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Amazon is upfront about its desire to get [Echo devices into business environments](#). For now, its biggest use is in conference rooms, but that is likely to change. Echo (and many other voice assistants) can connect to calling services like Skype, giving you the services of a conference speaker without any wiring or additional cost. The voice assistant manufacturers also offer ways to make custom Skills that may help you do a specific work task, or offer a new service to your customers.

Voice assistants aren't indispensable – yet – but they will be before long. There are enough business applications now that you may want to get ahead of the curve. Why not?

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These 2018 Tech Trends Will Help Your Startup Thrive

[Jessica Thiefels](#)



Startups have the greatest opportunity to benefit from evolving technology. Already agile, new tech developments make these organizations more streamlined, effective and engaging, allowing them to increase profit and provide greater levels of service to customers and clients.

“Technology can help small business owners leverage limited capital in smarter and more effective ways. In some cases, using technology is a natural progression for processes you may already have in place in your business,” [Alyssa Gregory](#), founder of Small Business Bonfire, said.

Knowing what’s up and coming will allow your small business to use the latest technology to thrive in an increasingly competitive space. Keep the following trends in mind and consider how you can implement them to drive growth, security and profit in 2018.

Blockchain in everything

Blockchain will be everywhere in 2018, with more and more companies building on this technology to automate contracts, facilitate money transfer and secure assets. Most small businesses are ready for blockchain, according to a [2017 IBM Study](#) of 3,000 global C-suite executives. The study found that 33 percent of organizations across a range of industries are considering or are already using blockchain, with security against fraud and cybercrime being the main reason organizations are interested.

But why cybersecurity? The blockchain is decentralized, meaning it inherently offers a distributed method for detecting threats. This reduces the replication of costs and efforts that's happening right now—which is a waste of an already small IT budget.

“Blockchain lets us redefine the economics of cyber security in many areas. We're working in anti-malware but I've seen some other interesting ideas, ranging from giving people back control of their data to incentivizing better audits of smart contracts,” Steve Bassi, CEO of [PolySwarm](#), a blockchain-based threat intelligence marketplace, said.

Related: [This Serial Entrepreneur Says VoiceFirst Technology is the Future of Business](#)

Machine learning goes mainstream

Machine learning (ML) is a type of artificial intelligence (AI). This complicated system processes large amounts of data to make predictions, i.e. provide insights, answer questions based on programming, etc. If this technology feels way off, think again. [Geoff Hoppe](#), business intelligence expert, gives examples of machine learning in action in our life right now:

- Autonomous vehicles (probably the most commonly cited example of ML)
- The “did you mean” function when you misspell something in Google
- The ranking of “top things to do” in a Google search for a given topic
- Speech recognition capabilities (such as Siri)

For startups and small businesses, this technology will be available as software that allows you to address large sets of data, like product reviews, sales numbers or customer research.

Video turns everyone into a filmmaker

Content is still king—but video is becoming more and more important in order to remain competitive in recruiting, marketing and sales. Not only will video traffic account for [80 percent](#) of all consumer internet traffic by 2019, but video on a landing page, for example, can increase conversion rates by 80 percent, according to an [EyeView case study](#).

Thanks to evolving technology, entrepreneurs don’t even need to work with a professional to create their own video content. Instead, with basic film skills, you can take the work in-house, creating videos for every aspect of your business, including:

- Sales
- Recruiting
- Training/onboarding
- Social media
- Company-related/behind the scenes

You can even create your own animated video with some editing platforms, allowing you to stand out from your competitors who haven’t evolved into video—all while staying within budget.

The cloud is growing

Startups have been relying on the cloud for many years, which was traditionally used for email and storage. In 2018, the cloud is growing, becoming more mainstream and is available for nearly every aspect of business.

In fact, 23 percent of IT budgets in 2018 are allocated for hosted and cloud-based services among SMBs with less than 100 employees, according to the [2018 State of IT report](#) by Spiceworks.

Among spending categories, the highest percentage of businesses reported an increase in cloud budget as compared to 2017. More businesses also reported a decrease in hardware budgets in the last year, according to the report.

This expansion of cloud use is making business easier and more efficient, with 46 percent of SMBs using the cloud for communication, 42 percent for backup/disaster recovery and 24 percent for productivity, according to the same Spiceworks report. This makes a lot of things easier, including remote employee management and collaboration, another growing trend among startups.

Get ready for tech

Small businesses are able to be more agile and effective thanks to technology across a wide range of industries, from marketing to cybersecurity. Keep an eye out for these trends and how you can use them to be more successful and profitable in 2018.

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This Serial Entrepreneur Says VoiceFirst Technology is the Future of Business

[Gary Vaynerchuk](#)



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VoiceFirst

Chances are good that most people reading have at least heard of, if not experimented with, all the platforms we have discussed so far in this book. But few of you at the time of this writing are probably sitting around thinking, *What's my Alexa Skill gonna be?* And yet you should, because we're about to talk about a tech innovation that I am absolutely sure will transform how the world consumes content. It's called VoiceFirst, and anyone currently

building a personal brand needs to learn about it fast and early. Its platforms are the equivalent of yet to be discovered Malibu beachfront property, much like Twitter in 2006, Instagram in 2010 and Snapchat in 2012.

I daytrade attention, and lately I am particularly interested by what people pay attention to during the transitions of their day, especially the three that occur in the home: what they do during the first 15 minutes of their morning, the first 15 minutes after they come home from work, and the last 15 minutes before they go to sleep at night. Those are transition periods. They're the moments when we take stock, get updated, and plan for the next few hours of our lives. We're busy, so we want to do it fast. There was a time you'd pull out a pen and paper and start a to do list, turn on the radio, or even check an app. Now, though, you don't even have to do that. All you have to do is talk.

Podcasts fill our brains during the long periods when we're quiet, such as while we drive or travel. VoiceFirst platforms are going to allow us to fill our brains during all the interstices of our lives, those blips of time that used to be lost to forgettable activities like brushing our teeth, sorting through mail, or even checking our phone notifications.

In 2016, Google revealed that 20 percent of searches on its mobile app and Android devices are done by voice.

That number is only going to rise, fast. And you have an amazing opportunity to make sure your brand rises with this trend.

Related: [7 Accomplished Entrepreneurs Share How to Start a Business with \\$100](#)

As of this moment, there are two key players: Amazon Alexa, played through a device called the Echo, and Google Assistant, played through its Google Home device. Microsoft, Apple, Samsung, and others are preparing to make their respective pushes into the space with platforms of their own, but at this time it makes sense to focus only on the big two. I started with Alexa, launching a Flash Briefing Skill called GaryVee365.

A Flash Briefing is a short report offering users a key bit of information.

Mine offers daily motivation from yours truly. The Skimm's airs its breakdown of the day's top news stories; eHow's presents daily life hacks. Add these and others to your list of Flash Briefings, and when you ask for them, either by saying, "Alexa, give me my Flash Briefings," or even, "Alexa, what's in the news?" you'll hear from your favorite sources one after another.

Other Skills offer more interactive experiences. Enable *The Tonight Show* Skill (as opposed to the Flash Briefing) and you could ask for Jimmy Fallon's most recent monologue, but you could also get the most recent *Tonight Show* guest list or a rundown of his newest Thank You Notes, a popular segment on the show where he expresses gratitude for anything from PopTarts to Ryan Gosling. I could develop a Skill called GaryVee Recommends Wine that recommends three wines to go with whatever you told it you were going to eat and gives you the ability to order those wines straight from the Skill through a thirdparty alcohol delivery service like Drizly or Minibar Delivery or from my family wine shop, Wine Library.

What we're seeing with the development of VoiceFirst is the culmination of our addiction to speed. The world moves fast and we want to keep up. If there is a choice between reading a notification or checking an app and getting the same information via VoiceFirst, which allows us to keep our hands free and multitask, the latter is what we're going to pick. Just like the first washing machines and coffeemakers, VoiceFirst platforms will save

people time. Once the masses understand that, they are going to flock to them. Be there ready and waiting when they do.

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Your Flash Briefing will be a one minute version of your one hour podcast, a one minute audio version of your eight minute videos or live streams, or a one minute selection of your pretty pictures on Instagram. You can bring people so much value right now, whether you create for Google, Amazon, or both. While brands have developed countless Skills, most deliver the same basic experience. The field is clear for anyone who is clever enough to come up with something fresh and new. Take the landgrab, my friends, and become a vital part of your consumers' morning routines. Very soon, as even more brands jump onto these platforms, it will get harder to make a dent in people's awareness. Don't let this moment pass. Don't let the big guys snap up all the cheap real estate. Please, put down this book right now and go create your Skill. Your one minute audio tip of the day could be the thing that compels a person to put on your podcast during their morning commute instead of their usual NPR or classic rock.

Skills 101

- Keep your content super brief.
- Make it native. Do not do what I did with my original podcast when I just transferred the audio from a video onto the podcast platform. Tailor your content to suit the reason people are coming, which is to get fast, easily digestible information nuggets. "Hey, Alexa users . . ."
- Make it the highest quality possible. I cannot stress how important it is that you not treat your Skill as a dumping ground. It's great to collect the scraps from your other content so they don't go to waste, but study each piece closely and use your imagination and creativity to craft something new and fresh with them.

You know how it's such an irritating process to get off an email list? First, you have to bother to go to the bottom of the email and hunt for the unsubscribe button. Then you have to plod through a box asking if you are absolutely sure you want to leave, and would you care to share the reason? And then finally, upon confirming that you've been unsubscribed, you're told it could take a few business days before the emails stop coming.

In VoiceFirst, all people will have to do once they lose interest in your content is say, "Alexa, remove MumboJumbo's Flash Briefing," and boom, it will be done. You will have no room for error. No room to be annoying or too long or low quality. Go ahead and document the process while you learn how to craft your content—you can use clips from all that material for other content—but make sure whatever segment you publish is short and tight. You will need to be remarkable right out of the gate, or in three milliseconds, you'll be shut down.

VoiceFirst is going to become a huge pillar in our communications. By the time this book is published, Amazon Alexa, Google Assistant, Apple Siri, or some other platform will be talking to us in our cars. Remember when we all thought it was amazing that we could be driving along, recall that we used to love Kenny Rogers's "Lady," and download his greatest hits as soon as we got to our destination (because we would never do that while driving, right?). Soon, we won't have to wait to play a song or pull over to type in a location on a map app. We'll just tell Alexa what we want her to do, and she'll do it. Finally, texting and driving will be a thing of the past—unless we're in our driverless cars.

Skills 201

There is no Skills 201. The feature is so new, we're only just now identifying best practices. I hope you'll share yours with me as you discover them and explore all the exciting possibilities in this space. Hit me up at [@garyvee](https://twitter.com/garyvee).

My intuition is that all the brands in the how to space will flock to VoiceFirst by 2020, and they will battle to be the ones chosen to teach people to make cookies and pair wine and get better at chess and clean carpets.

It'll be our on the go resource, too. When changing our oil in the garage, we won't pull out the car manual or Google "How to change your oil." We'll just call out, "Tell me how to change my oil," and the VoiceFirst technology sitting on a shelf or mounted on the wall will ask us what kind of car we drive, then walk us through the process with step by step instructions. Right now we're putting VoiceFirst tech in only one or two rooms in the house. In the future, we won't go anywhere without it.

Imagine This: Alexa Skills

Let's say you're a 49 etiquette coach named Marlo. You used to think you'd be educating children in the finer points of polite conversation and the continental style of eating, but over time your services have been increasingly sought out by companies desperate to fill in the educational gaps of their millennial hires. They just don't know anything about proper protocol, especially for international business or formal affairs. Your business is doing OK, but things are starting to feel routine.

You're at your boyfriend's house one morning, and you hear him ask Alexa to tell him what's in the news. A seemingly human voice reads the morning headlines, then the weather, some sports stats, and a fun fact of the day, all from different media outlets.

Fun fact of the day? That’s not news; that’s just learning for the sake of learning.

A lightbulb goes on.

You spend the next few weeks recording the answers to every etiquette question you can think of. How do you fold a napkin for a formal table? Should I invite my boss to my birthday dinner? What’s the best icebreaker question? How do I end a conversation at a cocktail party without being rude? Can I wear black sneakers with a black suit? You could have asked your phone these questions, but you look up “How to build an Alexa Skill” online and learn that there’s a studio just a few miles away that will help you record the audio file. You upload your new Alexa Skill, The Manners Maven, and announce it to your clients and on all your content channels. They love the way the platforms let them engage with you in a virtual one on one. It gives them confidence. Eventually, you add “calls to action” to direct people to other pieces of your content on the internet so they can discover longer versions of the answers they got from you here, as well as guest posts from other experts and interviews with people sharing their funniest, most awkward faux pas.

“Crushing It!” is available now at fine booksellers and can be purchased via StartupNation.com.



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E-Commerce



5 Reasons Why Dropshipping is the Future of E-Commerce

[Jennifer Xue](#)



According to Forrester Research, the size of online retail sales will be \$370 billion by the end of 2017. Moreover, 23 percent will come from dropshipping businesses, which translates to \$85.1 billion. This sheer size alone is attractive to many entrepreneurs, including startups.

By appearance, an online retailer that adopts this model looks identical to its conventional e-commerce competitors. Since customers only care about the product, the price and the reputation of the store, rather than how the products are sourced and who fulfill the shipments, [dropshipping](#) can be a well-kept secret in the e-commerce world.

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In a nutshell, “dropshipping” is a business model where the retailer doesn’t actually keep the inventory in his or her possession nor process the orders. All orders are fulfilled and shipped directly from a wholesaler. This allows the retailer to focus on the marketing side of the business.

Many big names in e-commerce started out with dropshipping, such as Amazon and Zappos. Today, billion-dollar dropshipping online retailer [Wayfair](#) and the million-dollar [Blinds.com](#) are top case studies for those who need inspiration.

Below are five reasons why the dropshipping business model is appealing to both startups and seasoned entrepreneurs. These issues have been nagging problems in conventional e-commerce, which can be solved immediately with the dropshipping model.

1. Product sourcing

Conventional e-commerce stores must source products directly from wholesalers, which are often in different countries. They also require items to be ordered in bulk, which are then delivered to the local warehouse prior to being promoted and sold. The entire process requires a lot of time, money and resources. It often includes the involvement of costly intermediaries, such as banks, cargo shipments and export-import agents.

However, the dropshipping model allows retailers to sell products without having to worry about sourcing for large quantities of each item. With a turn-key e-commerce storefront like [Shopify](#) and a dropshipping app like [Oberlo](#), the whole process is streamlined considerably. The retailer can choose to contact the wholesalers by e-mail to notify them that their products are now

being carried at the store. The rest of the process, such as importing product photos, changing prices and order tracking, can be easily done from the dashboard.

Related: [Create a Profitable Dropship E-Commerce Store in 6 Steps](#)

2. Storage

A conventional e-commerce store requires large storage spaces, especially when it carries numerous or large items. Storing ten to 100 items might be imaginable, but storing 1,000 to 1,000,000 items can cost a real fortune, which is not within a startup's budget. The dropshipping model solves this high warehouse rent problem, as the products stay with the manufacturer or [wholesale supplier](#) until they're purchased.

3. Order fulfillment

Most e-commerce founders don't expect to spend most of their time picking, packing and shipping orders. Of course, they can outsource their order fulfillment to [Amazon FBA](#) or a boutique e-commerce fulfillment, like [ShipMonk](#), for convenience. However, the dropshipping model allows a hands-free fulfillment as the whole process of packing and shipping lies in the hands of the wholesaler or manufacturer.

4. Cataloging and photography

A conventional e-commerce store owner needs to take professional-quality photos of products, which includes a good digital camera, a light box, lighting and more, which can be quite costly. This problem is solved with a dropshipping management app, as the "product importing" feature allows for instant photo import.

5. Scalability

Wayfair.com is a giant dropshipping online retailer, which carries more than eight million products from 10,000 suppliers. Yes, eight million! Such massive scalability is made possible by this business model.

Since the retailer only needs to focus on the marketing and customer service sides, they don't need to worry about the skyrocketing warehouse rental and other overhead costs.

In conclusion, the dropshipping model provides small startups with limited resources the opportunity to confidently compete with medium and large-sized online retailers, thus making the e-commerce world an equal playground for all. This being said, expect to see more e-commerce stores adopting this model in the future.



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How to Optimize E-Commerce for Millennials

[Daniel Matthews](#)



Millennials are highly interested in great deals, experiences and ethical business practices. When it comes to the latter, [72 percent](#) of millennials are willing to pay more for products from brands that prioritize sustainability. Even so, they're hard to pin down. According to MergeIn, [price is the number one concern for millennials](#), which presents a conundrum: How can you capture a millennial audience with low prices and sustainably sourced materials at the same time? Sustainable goods are costly to produce. The millennial market is rife with issues such as this.

The good news is, because you're reading this, you're truly interested in giving millennials a great [e-commerce](#) experience. With this goal in mind, consider how you present your offering, the authenticity of your brand and your website's user experience.

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Presenting your offering to millennials

Everyone has something to sell. What makes your offering valuable? Or, how can you present your offering to emphasize its value?

One driving force for millennials is the fear of missing out (FoMO). The Hartford identifies using FoMO as a [reliable way to attract millennial customers](#), given that 68 percent have made a purchase to avoid missing out. If there's only so much of something, the product is exclusive, and there's inherent social pressure to make a purchase. For example:

- Email marketing company GetResponse offered 40 percent off new accounts, but emphasized there were only so many available
- X Music Festival piqued curiosity by posting incomplete images of artists, then offered a limited number of VIP tickets to people who could guess who the artists are

Brands have been harnessing the power of scarcity for as long as brands have been a thing, but social media increases FoMO because millennials are influenced a great deal by their friends online.

The perception of scarcity is one of the [cognitive shortcuts](#), known as heuristics, that influence customer purchases. Amazon uses price anchoring consistently. The e-commerce giant crosses out prices and lists the item at a lower price, which makes the buyer think the item is worth the crossed out price. Along with that, you'll see there are only so many of each item available.

People stereotype websites based on appearance (another heuristic), and a website with an insecure domain can create the perception of contamination (I'll speak to this more in the User Experience section).

For millennials, one huge aspect of what they buy comes down to social identity. That's why, according to [MergeIn](#)'s research, 78 percent prefer spending money on experiences instead of things. Experiences speak to who you are and what you value. Additionally, what a brand stands for—the passions and causes a brand represents—is a big part of social identity for millennials.

Related: [5 Reasons Why Dropshipping is the Future of E-Commerce](#)

Brand authenticity

As an entrepreneur dipping into e-commerce, you have a unique opportunity to attract millennials who want to support you for who you are and what you do. You are not a huge faceless entity, you are not Amazon gobbling up the marketplace. You're unique and you have a story, just like each customer.

There are several ways to look at authenticity in the e-commerce sphere. The first is exemplified by Jane Lu, founder of Showpo, a women's fashion and apparel site. In an interview with [Online Retailer](#), she said:

“For both Showpo and my own personal brand, our key was the power of social media, which showcases our brand voice perfectly. The trick is to not care about pleasing everyone, we know who we are and what our brand is so we build on that. The market as a whole is far too big to target everyone so by having a strong voice in a target market, we're much more likely to dominate.”

Lu's strong voice for her brand speaks directly to her target audience on social media. Her story becomes Showpo's story. People who shop Showpo know they're buying from a human being thoroughly invested in her brand and her customers.

The other aspect of brand authenticity is supporting a cause that aligns directly with what your company does. [Max Harris](#), VP of e-commerce for Gardener's Supply Co. said:

"We were green before green was cool. To succeed in embodying such a visible attribute (being 'green'), you have to be authentic, and sometimes you can't be afraid to take bold stands against things you believe aren't good for your customers."

The employees at Gardener's Supply bought out the founder of the company, whom Max describes as an "eco-warrior." They continue his cause, in part by calling out a company like Monsanto (which sells genetically modified seeds). Through blog posts and social media, Gardener's Supply gets vocal about the cause the company stands for.

In turn, how you present your brand in your blog and on landing pages is part of your site's user experience.

Finishing the deal with user experience (UX)

UX is like the clothing a salesperson wears and the attitude she has as the customer navigates their way to a purchase. You want UX to represent your brand aesthetic to a T.

Like a good handshake, start with the basics. Make an e-commerce site [user friendly](#) by doing the following:

- **Make each page a place where the user can accomplish a goal:** For an e-commerce site, a landing page is typically one where the user can click to buy a product; think about how you can make each page goal-oriented
- **Make it easy to get around:** Navigation should be intuitive and sleek; if there's a blog, don't make it hard to get there or get out
- **Makes pages readable:** Cut down on noise and filler—present the content, the product and the product description in a clear, simplistic theme on the page
- **Present images and words in a clean, clear layout with solid colors that don't overwhelm:** The web is full of noise, so get to the basics in a clear and elegant fashion

Make it easy for people to checkout, and look into allowing customers to buy directly on the website through a software solution like Shopify. You must have an [SSL certificate](#) so that people feel comfortable making purchases on your site.

According to MergeIn, 63 percent of millennials make smartphone purchases. Chances are that number is low compared to the reality. Make sure your site is mobile friendly. Include an option for people to review products, as well—millennials love looking at reviews, and about 84 percent use their smartphones to look at reviews while they're in a store.

You can differentiate yourself in multiple ways. One way would be by presenting blog content and videos front-and-center on the homepage.

Additionally, there's nothing wrong with considering a recommendation engine once you've nailed the basics of UX. Millennials will be delighted to get relevant recommendations on your cozy e-commerce site.

Follow through with your branding on your site through appearance and blog posts, and make it easy for people to get in touch with you. They'll love surfing back to your store again.

When To Sell on Amazon... and When Not To

[Simon Slade](#)



Online selling platforms are plentiful these days. E-commerce professionals have a variety of options for where and how they set up their store, from [Etsy](#) and [eBay](#) to [Amazon](#) and [Shopify](#). Amazon is a popular choice for online sellers for a variety of reasons, but there are some important facts to consider before embarking on your journey as an Amazon seller. Amazon can work great as an e-commerce platform for some, but for others, it might not be the best choice.

Why Amazon is a great place to sell

The benefits of Amazon as a selling platform are plentiful. Firstly, sellers have access to a massive group of buyers who inherently trust the platform and go there to shop. That type of exposure can't be underestimated. Not only is

there a very high volume of traffic on the site, but many customers return to the site because Amazon works hard to earn repeat business through excellent customer service and perks like free two-day shipping for Prime members.

That goodwill extends to those who sell on Amazon, too. The company works hard to support its third party sellers, who make up a third of the site’s total sales. Despite these benefits, there are several reasons why an online seller might be unable to sell on Amazon. Here are a few setbacks that you might experience as an entrepreneur.

Related: [Want to Launch a Subscription Service? Do These 3 Things First](#)

Why you might not be able to sell on Amazon

1. You can’t get approved

Amazon has a long list of [categories and products that require approval](#). Each category has its own restrictions and requirements which can present a challenge for a seller. Your product has to meet Amazon’s expectations completely or you won’t be allowed to sell.

For example, in order to sell DVDs, videos or Blu-ray, you will need to have an existing seller account with some very high ratings, including a cancellation rate of 2.5 percent or less and an order defect rate of less than 1 percent. Additionally, you’ll have to provide Amazon with three invoices or purchase orders from your largest inventory source. These stipulations, while required by Amazon to protect the customer, can make it very difficult to break into some sales categories on the site.

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2. You need your money ASAP

Amazon distributes payments every two weeks, period. It's a simple, easy direct deposit, but the timeline is strict (there are some workarounds, but they require an application process and approval). This can present a major challenge for sellers who need the money immediately to put it back into their business and help with growth.

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3. You are low on capital

A seller account on Amazon can cost between zero and about \$40 per month. Regardless of the type of seller account you have, you will pay a referral fee for every product sold. Depending on the type of product you are selling and how much you are selling it for, this can be as low as 6 percent or as high as 20 percent. Some product categories even have a minimum referral fee, usually between \$1 and \$2. For media products, like the videos, DVDs and Blu-rays used in the example above, you'll pay an *additional* \$1.80 to Amazon for each sale.

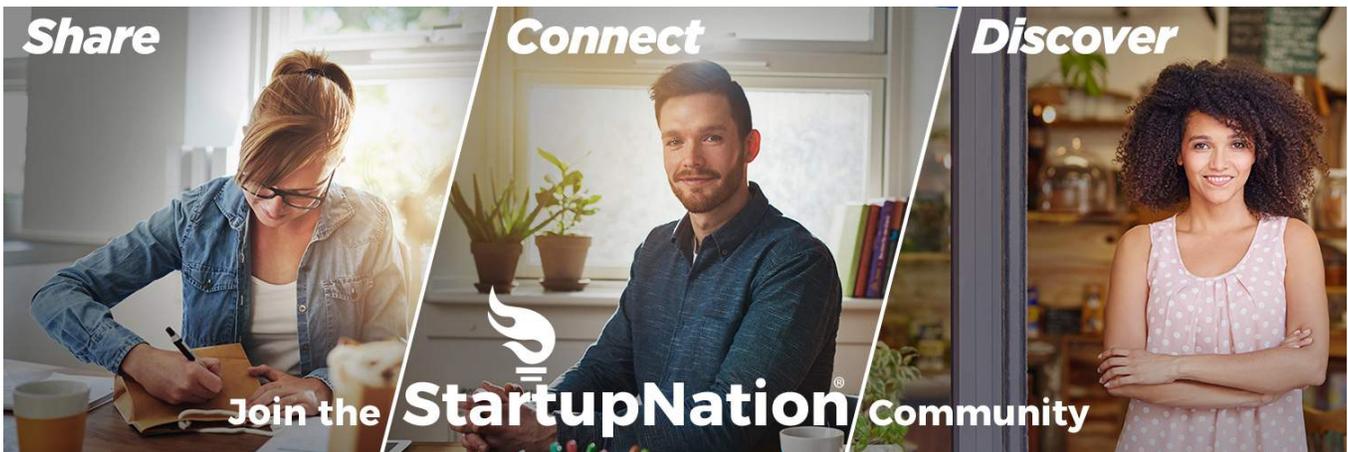
All of these seemingly small charges add up, especially if you were hoping to get the perks of the monthly \$39.99 business account. For a small operation with little capital to start, these mounting fees can make selling on Amazon a very unattainable prospect.

4. You are too small or unique to price compete

Many, if not most, of the products sold on Amazon were purchased in bulk by the seller. Bulk purchasing allows sellers to drive the price down very, very low. If you can't make large orders—either because you don't have the overhead or because your item is one-of-a-kind—it's going to be really hard for you to compete.

It's not for everyone...

But that doesn't mean it's not for you. These are just a few challenges associated with this selling platform, but they don't negate it as a valid option for many online sellers—even some startup businesses. If you have the right information and you're prepared to jump through some hoops, it might end up being the perfect platform for you. Every startup is different!



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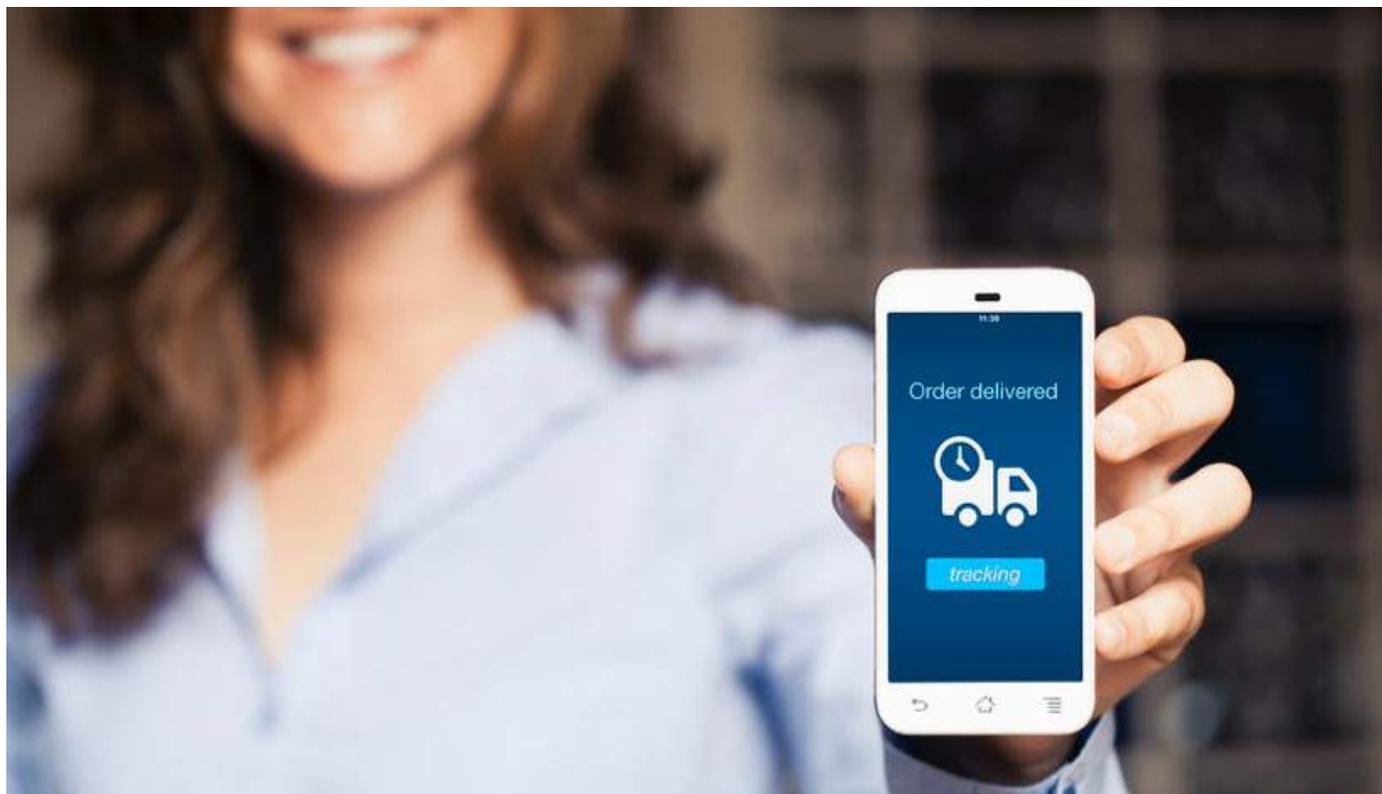
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How E-Commerce Startups Can Compete with Amazon Shipping (and Win)

[Nicholas Daniel-Richards](#)



Although it may seem like ages ago, many of us remember what an ordeal it was to order products that were unavailable in our local stores. Back then, free shipping wasn't a thing. Two-day shipping was exorbitantly expensive and reserved for nearly-forgotten birthday presents for the notoriously hard-to-please grandma. And if we needed pedestrian items like lightbulbs or toothbrushes, we would pencil in an immediate trip to Walmart.

Fast forward years later, and we are not only ordering these items online, but Amazon Prime members can expect to receive them in two days with no shipping charge. With Prime, it seems that we can order nearly anything and have these items land on our doorsteps in two days or less. As a result, most

of us are guilty of abandoning our carts on other sites after discovering that a) shipping isn't free and b) it could take five to seven days to receive our orders. Why would we want to pay extra and wait when we can just click on our Amazon app and receive the same product within two days?

This common consumer behavior is supported by the fact that sites offering "free shipping" reduce abandoned carts by 36 percent.

And this means that it is now essential for e-commerce startups to offer free, fast shipping. But while this seemingly unreasonable demand may strike some as an insurmountable challenge, there are several things that entrepreneurs can do to get their orders out quickly and at low cost.

Related: [When to Sell on Amazon... and When Not To](#)

Businesses need to minimize the time between the order received and the shipping label on the box. When dealing with higher volume orders, it's important to:

Influence the customer's perception of speed

As soon as an order is shipped, the email with tracking information should be in the recipient's inbox. Even if the order itself doesn't arrive in two days, the knowledge that the product was shipped immediately will influence the shopper's perception of shipping speed. The positive experience of knowing the order was shipped and the expectation of when the order will arrive increases the possibility of the customer returning for further purchases.

Get a shipping rate quote for each order

Shipping costs can vary widely among the different carriers, so it benefits business owners to search for the best price. If shipping many orders that are similar, then you may benefit from group shipping methods based on the order type. If handling orders that have a variance of line items, manually rate quoting each order can be time-consuming, which in turn causes orders to become backlogged. Instead, you should choose an optimized platform or program to quickly determine the cheapest option without holding up the order fulfillment process.

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Build shipping costs into the order

It's even possible to make money using this tactic, especially if the cheapest option among shipping carriers was chosen. Business owners can also review reports on how much was charged for shipping versus how much was actually paid. Typically, most WMS (warehouse management system) solutions provide these shipment reports that chart the historical performance of orders that were shipped out.

Reduce the steps required to fulfill orders

Entrepreneurs tend to use paper pick lists to manually fulfill orders. However, this can be a slow and error-prone process, especially if the warehouse is disorganized or pickers are unfamiliar with the warehouse layout. Instead of paper pick lists, go digital. The best way to improve order fulfillment speed is to incorporate barcodes. Barcodes eliminate the guesswork involved in picking and packing orders and drastically reduce fulfillment errors.

If a company has a wide selection of products in a warehouse that has aisles and shelves, it's extremely important to organize inventory (and if possible)

use technology to optimize picking routes. This reduces walk time, and again further eliminates potential mistakes when picking items for orders.

Use precalculated weights to simplify the packing process

Generally, the cost of shipment is determined by either the weight or the package it's shipped in (or both, depending on what the order is and where it's going). While using scales at the time of packing seems like a logical step to determine the weight of the order, there are solutions that allow you to set the weight according to the product's SKU or the weight and shipping method of each type of shipping container. This method, combined with a rate quote comparison for each shipment, will allow you to achieve a more efficient shipment cost per order when weight needs to be accounted for.

Create magic when a customer receives their order with surprise and delight

It's definitely a challenge to beat Amazon's speed and free shipping; and even if an entrepreneur is running a very efficient operation, it will still be a benchmark to reach. So, what else can a growing e-commerce startup do to compete?

They can add an additional element of experience for customers by personalizing the order. If the owner is using [Shopify](#) as the e-commerce store, it's possible to determine if the customer is a first time customer or has ordered before. Some WMS solutions provide automation rules to set personalized notes or even to add a free product to the order based on what is contained in the order, or the profile of the customer. This personal touch makes a big impact on the customer, and is often more valuable than the expected shipment that arrives a little bit earlier.

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4 Ways to Give Your E-Commerce Customers a Memorable Unboxing Experience

[Nicholas Daniel-Richards](#)



Because customers have come to expect fast, free shipping for nearly everything (thank you, Amazon Prime), e-commerce startups are under a lot of pressure to meet these expectations. And, while there are several things that they can do to [compete](#), e-commerce merchants can encourage repeat visits by exceeding their customers' expectations in other ways.

One effective tactic is to create a memorable “unboxing” experience. If you are familiar with this e-commerce term, you may envision YouTube videos of excited influencers opening packages with drama and flair, enticing their viewers to purchase the same items with a coupon code listed in the comments. And, while this is definitely an effective marketing tool, it is not what we are referring to here.

Creating a memorable unboxing experience for your customer is important because it is just that: an experience.

Our memories are based on our experiences, and they define our beliefs, opinions and feelings. So, if a company can create a memorable (and positive!) experience for its customers, it begins to establish a relationship resulting in future purchases and customer loyalty – both of which are essential for lasting success.

Retailers like Amazon offer customers what they need, when they need it. When you order a package of light bulbs because you don't want to put on pants to go to CVS, they arrive in two days, in a branded box, with several plastic bubbles to ensure they arrive in tact. It's great for your utilitarian needs.

Related: [4 Ways to Etsy-fy Your Customer Experience](#)

But, let's say you want to splurge on something a bit more special. Maybe you are looking for a set of unusual earrings that you can't find at the department store or a finely-crafted belt that your old-fashioned dad would deeply admire. When emotion and desire drive a purchase decision more than the utilitarian "need," user experience becomes an essential component.

When a customer invests the time and effort to search for the perfect gift, it's an emotional process. So, if the merchant you purchase from acknowledges this by making the purchase special, perhaps by adding a few sheets of tissue paper or red ribbon on the box, you feel grateful. You will remember this experience (and it's not because you saved a few bucks or because your order came a day earlier than expected).

This is the kind of experience you want to create for your customers; one that impresses them, that they will share with others, and that will keep them coming back to your e-commerce shop.

Fortunately, there are several ways to do this:

Design clever packaging

Don't take the Amazon route and tape a cardboard box with branded tape. Instead, stamp the box with a memorable [graphic](#), cover it in [playful text](#), or mark cutouts that enable customers to repurpose the box in fun or useful ways.

Once the customer opens the box, impress them with custom packaging. Startup company, [Sheets and Giggles](#), does this by placing all orders in cloth knapsacks made out of the same eucalyptus fabric that their bedsheets are made from. By doing this, they demonstrate pride in their product, care for the customer's interaction with the product, and a generous spirit that is rarely found among companies focused primarily on the bottom line.

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Personalize the box and/or the contents

Whether you acknowledge them as first-time or return customers, include your customer's names on the materials in the package or show some personality. This can be done by using messaging like, "Nice to meet you" for a first-time customer or "Hello again!" for a return customer.

The key to adding that extra touch at scale is to keep it simple. As long as it's relevant and it comes across as authentic, it will elevate the experience of your brand every time.

Surprise them with unexpected gifts or tchotchkes

Everyone appreciates a promo code for a future order, but few of us are delightfully surprised by them. Instead, we toss them into a coupon drawer where we (usually) forget about them. But, if you have ever purchased something from an [Etsy](#) seller, chances are pretty good you were charmed to discover various unexpected items included in your order, such as quirky magnets, fun stickers or unusual candies.

The previously mentioned Sheets and Giggles also make their customers feel special by including at least one unexpected gift with each order, such as sleep masks, slippers, T-shirts and coasters. They also occasionally include a more expensive item, such as a robe. Imagine how you would feel if you received such an unexpected bonus in your order!

Include a story about the creator or the origination of the product

Telling a story about humble beginnings or about an unusual place where the product came from builds rapport with the customer. The item is no longer an item in a box, but rather, it has a history and a life.

Another tactic is to include a detailed “inspected by” note in the box, which also humanizes the process necessary to get the product to the customer. Some e-commerce entrepreneurs have claimed that doing this reduces their number of returns, because customers are less likely to complain about a package that was inspected prior to shipping.

Some retailers have done so well with their packaging that the package itself is worth something. An obvious example is Tiffany’s, the blue boxes of which are often found listed on eBay. But whether or not a retailer’s packaging finds intrinsic value, it’s experiential value is undeniable and an indispensable component to an online startup’s efforts in retaining loyal customers.

Create a Profitable Dropship E-Commerce Store in 6 Steps

[Amy Morin](#)



After my husband passed away unexpectedly in 2006, I decided to launch a side hustle to help me feel more financially secure. But, as a therapist who was used to earning money based on “billable hours,” the concept of earning money in my sleep was foreign.

I began my first side hustle as a freelance writer. And fortunately, that turned into an opportunity to write a best-selling book.

But before my writing career took off, I began another side hustle—I started a dropship e-commerce store. Although it required a fair amount of work up front, within a couple of months I was earning income in a fairly passive manner.

I never even saw most of the products I sold. And the best part was, it cost absolutely nothing to get started.

I learned that there's profit not in just selling products, but also in selling my pre-made businesses. Over the course of a few years, I created several online stores. Once they proved profitable, I sold those pre-made businesses to people who were looking for passive income opportunities without the hassle of launching their own website.

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Here's how you can start your own dropship e-commerce site:

1. Choose your product carefully

I chose to sell fine jewelry because it is inexpensive to ship and the markup on jewelry is high. Without a brick-and-mortar store, I could price products competitively.

I knew I'd never outrank the national jewelry stores for something like "wedding rings" in a Google search. But, if I chose small niche stores, like "pearl earrings," I could attract customers. So choose a small niche that will attract customers specifically to your site.

2. Research wholesale companies

Finding a reputable wholesale company is the key to having a good e-commerce store. You'll need to find a company that is willing to dropship directly to your customer and you'll want to make sure your wholesale company has a good reputation. If they ship items too slowly, or products run out of stock often, you're going to look bad to customers who think you're filling their orders.

Conduct an online search of wholesale companies who sell the products you want to offer. Be on the lookout for people who claim to be a wholesaler but aren't actually wholesale companies. A legitimate wholesaler will usually require an application and won't charge you sales tax.

Related: [Boost Brand Marketing of E-Commerce Business](#)

3. Create your retail website

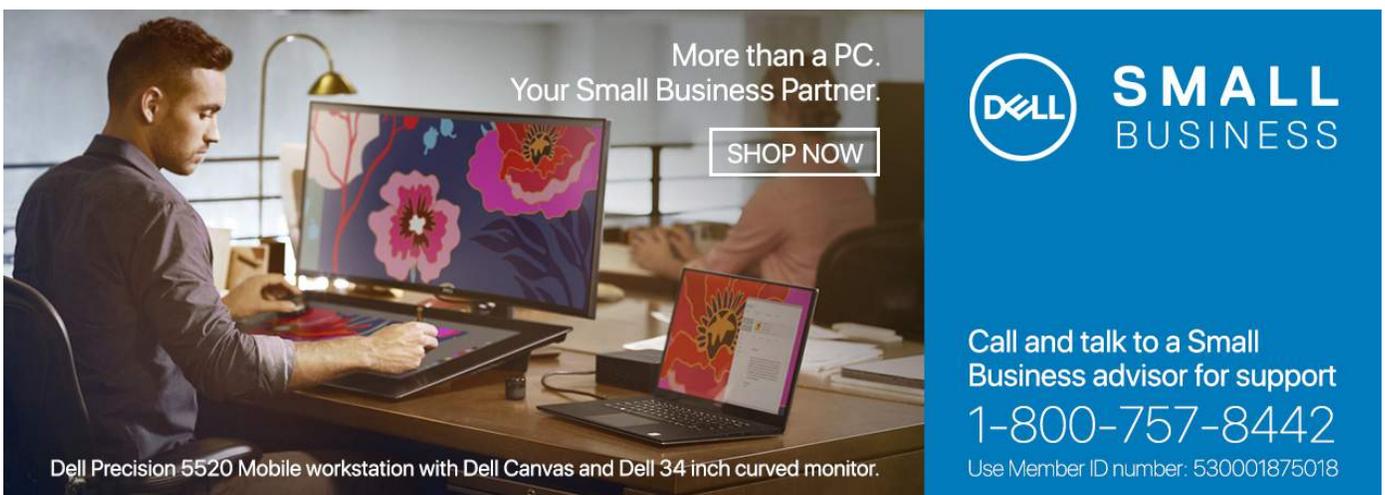
Once you have secured a wholesaler, create your online store. Choose your store's name, purchase a domain and launch your website.

I highly recommend creating your own website if you can. You'll likely need to make ongoing changes to your site and quick access to your content is crucial. I once had a product featured in People magazine and sales skyrocketed. But it was essential to be able to highlight it on my website fast.

4. Research shopping cart options

A shopping cart is the most important part of your website. If customers don't trust their payment is secure, they won't buy your products. So choose your shopping cart wisely.

There are many free shopping carts out there and those may work well if you only sell a few products. But, if you plan to have a lot of inventory, or you want to offer promotional codes, you'll need a more sophisticated cart. Fees vary greatly so you'll want to do some research to determine which cart will work best with your e-commerce site.



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5. Decide how you'll offer customer service

Good customer service builds trust. There are several ways you can reply to customer questions and comments. I've tried everything from email support to live chat to a toll-free number.

If you're not available to return emails or answer the phone during normal business hours, you may want to hire a virtual assistant to reply to customers. You don't want to lose sales because you weren't available to answer questions.

You should also review how your wholesale company deals with returned items. They may allow your retail customers to return items directly to them. Or, you may need to accept the returns and then return it to your wholesale company yourself (or keep it in stock until the next customer orders it).

6. Market your products

There are many different ways to market your products and you'll need to discover which strategies work best for your store. Social media, newsletters, blog posts and search engine ads are just a few ways you might attract customers.

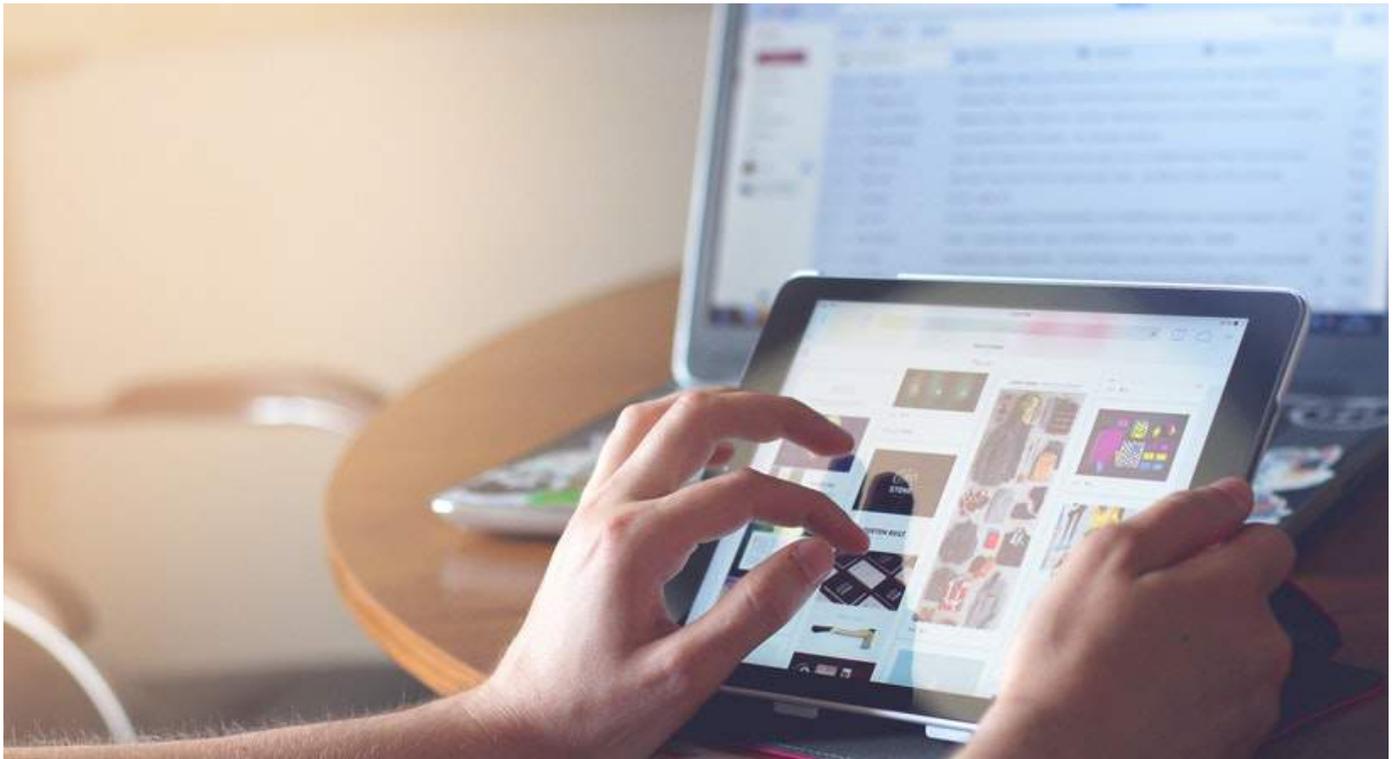
Consider selling products on other websites, like eBay or Amazon. But it's important to test your wholesaler out first to ensure that they're able to deliver reputable products on time. Otherwise, bad reviews could tarnish your reputation and get you banned from selling in those marketplaces.

Maintaining a steady side hustle income

There's definitely some trial and error involved when you're creating a dropship e-commerce store. But, if you're patient, you'll learn to recognize what works best for your business. With persistence and hard work, your e-commerce store can become a profitable and fun way to earn money while you sleep.

E-Commerce: Is Your Product Ready to Compete Digitally?

[Melanie Nuce](#)



The ever-changing online marketplace can be a boon to startups. Not only are more consumers buying online all over the world, e-commerce marketplaces also aim to offer consumers a wide product selection, creating an opportunity for startups to provide the unique variety of must-have items across multiple categories.

If you can harness its power, e-commerce can help your product leap geographic boundaries and open up a whole new world of sales opportunities.

Here are four questions to help you gauge your product's readiness for the digital age.

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Have I identified my products the right way?

Consider the UPC, or Universal Product Code, your passport to new sales territory. Ensure that the UPCs assigned to your products are authentic and include a [GS1 Company Prefix](#), so that your brand is linked with your products. This specifically constructed UPC is also referred to as a Global Trade Item Number, or GTIN. It uniquely identifies a product in the global supply chain—use that number to create a UPC barcode and include the same number in your online listing. By identifying your company and its products this way, you can avoid the unnecessary cost of relabeling (since some retailers will reject product that is not labeled according to standard specifications) and increase sales success.

Additionally, companies working with retailers and online marketplaces need a different UPC for each product they sell, and product variations require unique UPCs to distinguish one variation from another, such as different varieties of tea. Each barcode can be printed and attached to a product, or incorporated into the product's package design. Make sure you have proper placement, sizing and quality printing to help your product sail through the checkout process. There are a variety of [solution providers](#) out there that help small businesses with barcode and package printing.

Related: [The Benefits of UPC Barcodes for Your Small Business](#)

Can my product be discovered online?

With retailers rethinking the in-store experience and consolidating their physical locations across the country, e-commerce provides an abundance of sales opportunities.

Recent research from BigCommerce revealed that 51 percent of Americans prefer online shopping, with e-commerce growing 23 percent year-over-year.

Help consumers cut through the clutter to find your product, whether they are shopping on Google, Amazon, Etsy, eBay, or a multitude of other online marketplaces or retailer websites. With proper product identification, the right product can surface in search engine results and enable its sale anywhere, anytime. The same GTIN numbers in a barcode are also used online, ensuring consistency between the digital and physical shelf, making it easier for your products to be found in web searches.

On e-commerce platforms, if you want your product to be searchable, applying random or proprietary numbers won't work—your products need to be globally, uniquely identified according to the retailer's requirements or it may be hidden from search results.

Are my images doing the product justice?

Time to hang up your entrepreneurial hat for a minute and think like a consumer. Would you buy a product that does not accurately represent the color, size, or texture of a product? Without the ability to see the product for themselves, consumers rely heavily on imagery as part of their e-commerce experience, especially while shopping on a mobile device.

A recent study from Nielsen found that the majority of mobile shoppers (62 percent) rated the ability to see product pictures as the most important factor in their shopping decisions.

Professional photos of your product taken at different angles can be the difference between outstanding reviews and increased sales, or complaints about having to return your product.

Am I providing complete product details?

Beyond the visual representation of the product, think about all the other key selling points a consumer would need to know about it—emphasis on “all.” Today’s consumer is concerned with much more than traditional considerations of price and overall quality. Driving a movement of information transparency, shoppers want to know the complete makeup of the product, where it came from, how it was produced and whether or not it matches with their lifestyles, dietary choices, and / or moral values.

By providing complete product details such as ingredients, sourcing information and environmental impact, startups can appeal to the widest audience and reassure the consumer that they are dealing with a reputable company. Launching a product with detailed product attributes (dishwasher safe, made from recycled materials, for example) can be a great point of differentiation and help sell your product versus the competition.

Ultimately, when the time comes to officially make your product visible to your target audience, you want to leave nothing to chance. Although product launches have their learning curves, you can be ready to compete online by understanding business best practices, retailer requirements and evolving to address consumer behaviors.

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About StartupNation

Since it was launched in 2002, StartupNation Media Group, LLC. has provided millions of Americans with the information, inspiration and connections they need to start, grow and manage a successful startup business. Founded by passionate entrepreneurs, Jeff and Rich Sloan, StartupNation is a multimedia company located in Birmingham, Michigan.

The Sloan Brothers are company creators, lifelong entrepreneurs and brothers who have helped millions of entrepreneurs pursue success. As co-founders of StartupNation, the duo co-host the StartupNation Radio Show and authored the acclaimed how-to book, "StartupNation: Open for Business."

StartupNation's content is crafted by entrepreneurs for entrepreneurs, offering the necessary insights for personal growth through in-the-trenches, how-to content authored by subject matter experts, thought leaders and business professionals.

StartupNation provides access to experts in a variety of business disciplines through its various media channels and fosters peer-to-peer interaction in its vibrant online community forums.

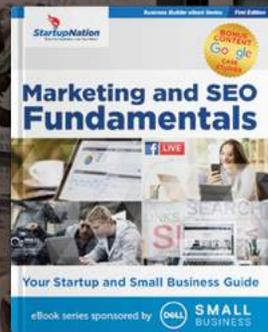
The breadth and range of businesses StartupNation serves includes sole proprietorships, home-based businesses and part-time businesses, all the way to the most esoteric and sophisticated ventures.

StartupNation remains a longstanding, mainstay brand and constantly attracts, inspires and educates entrepreneurs and small business owners who want to be their own boss and live the American Dream.

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About Jeff Sloan

Founder at StartupNation



Jeff Sloan is one of America's leading entrepreneurial and small business experts. Drawing on his own vast entrepreneurial experience, Jeff co-founded StartupNation.com in 2002 along with his brother, Rich, to provide aspiring entrepreneurs and small business owners with the knowledge, resources, inspiration and empowerment to create and/or grow a successful business. Today, StartupNation remains a longstanding, mainstay brand, providing access to experts in a variety of business disciplines through its various media channels, helping millions of entrepreneurs pursue success.

In his role at StartupNation, Jeff has co-hosted the award-winning nationally syndicated [StartupNation Radio show](#), which aired in more than 85 markets, authored the book "StartupNation: Open for Business" published by Random House, and keynoted numerous conferences, including the Microsoft Small Business Conference and the Small Business Administration of America annual conference.

Jeff's personal entrepreneurial track-record started with the successful commercialization of his own patented invention known as the "Battery Buddy," which was successfully licensed to Masco Industries and sold through leading retailers in the early 1990s. Following on that success, Jeff formed a venture development firm and put his experience to work as a company crafter to directly facilitate the development, funding, launch, growth and exit of early stage ventures, including by way of example, Clarity, Inc., Genego, Inc., Aereous, Inc. and Rubicon Genomics, Inc.

Jeff's current portfolio focus is in the facilitation of local commerce through a new venture he founded and leads known as [Wantify, Inc.](#), and in the music business through a newly launched venture known as [FanLabel, LLC](#). Interestingly, throughout his career as an entrepreneur, Jeff has never received a paycheck from an entity he didn't have a hand in creating.



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