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Lotus Sculpture

What should a business do when their legacy e-commerce platform keeps them trapped in the past?

Lotus Sculpture wanted more than their Yahoo! platform could give them. They came to Miva for a sophisticated modern site and a team dedicated to implementing the owner's vision for the business.

These can be exciting times for an entrepreneur. When inspiration strikes, bringing an idea to market can be as simple as setting up shop online. A man or woman with an idea quickly becomes the proprietor of an e-commerce business with access to a marketplace that is limited only by demand for the product.

The early stages of a business can be both exciting and stressful. For new online ventures, the focus usually needs to be on the most basic aspects of the enterprise. Product development, marketing, and customer support must all be just right. When these critical components need attention, it's no wonder the website's e-commerce platform doesn't always get the scrutiny it deserves.

In the world of e-commerce, it may be partially true that when sales volumes are low, one platform gets the job done as good as any. But as business grows, the wrong e-commerce platform can hinder expansion and prevent the company from moving forward. What happens when e-commerce platform shortcomings become too critical to ignore?

Lotus Sculpture founder Kyle Tortora had to answer this question when he found himself at a crossroads with his online business. As long as he kept his store with Yahoo! Merchant Services, he was stuck with a legacy platform that couldn't keep up with his vision for the site.

By moving to Miva, he upgraded the look and feel of his site while also reducing the amount of time and headache he had to dedicate to website operations as a business owner. This has freed him up to continue focusing on the aspects of his business he is truly passionate about.

Lotus Sculpture

Kyle Tortora's first job after college was selling website services to small businesses in New York City. It paid the bills, but it wasn't the best fit for his goals and passions. As he puts it, "Two years wearing a suit every day was two years too long." He quit his day job and hit the road, heading to India for the first time.

Tortora had spent time in Asia during and after college, but it was on this trip to India that things clicked for him. "I had an epiphany when I saw my first bronze Nataraja statue," he says. He discovered a passion for Eastern art, and the early glimmer of a business idea formed in his mind. "I saw how the artists' lives were being impacted by the lack of demand for their unique, handcrafted statues."

Tortora returned home, but within a year he was back in India laying the groundwork for a new online marketplace where these artists could sell their work. "My goal," he says, "was to create a new market for the artists, a fulfilling job for myself, and to increase Western exposure to the beauty and complexity of Eastern religious art."

Problem

- » Legacy platform with a dated look and feel
- » No dedicated designer relationship
- » Dozens of small design and functionality roadblocks

Solution

- » Lotus Sculpture switched to Miva for a vastly improved site and dedicated support.

With these ends in mind, Tortora launched the Lotus Sculpture website, and used a closet in his parents' house for his inventory storage. Thirteen years later, his business has grown past the closet, basement, and garage stages. He now houses Lotus Sculpture in a dedicated warehouse in southern California, and he has forged long-lasting relationships with the best artisans in countries like India, Thailand, and Cambodia.



Legacy Platform Headaches

Three years ago, Kyle Tortora made the decision to move his business from the East Coast to California. Things were going well and it was time for Lotus Sculpture to get its own warehouse space. As he made the move west, Tortora decided it was also time to reconsider the platform for his virtual storefront.

When Tortora launched the Lotus Sculpture website in 2000, he chose Yahoo! Merchant Services as his e-commerce platform. "They were a brand I knew, and their platform was already set up," he says. E-commerce

was young then, so a ready-made platform from a trusted name made sense. However, as Tortora readily admits, "Not a lot of research went into the decision."

Tortora's online business grew, and as he increased his focus on the online customer experience, he began to bump up against limitations in the Yahoo! platform. "At first it was just small things I wanted to do, but couldn't," says Tortora. "But over time, a bunch of small changes you can't make all aggregate into a website with a look and feel that's completely dated."

With Yahoo! Merchant Solutions, some of these small things included:

- » Unsophisticated photo functionality. The Yahoo! store allowed one front-page photo per product, and users would have to click through to a gallery page for additional photos. "This just wasn't the next-generation way to view product photos on today's internet," explains Tortora.
- » Rigid check-out flow. On Yahoo! the shipping calculation happened at the end of the check-out flow. But a four-foot stone Buddha statue is fairly heavy, and so the shipping expense is not incidental to the purchase. Tortora wanted to calculate shipping earlier in the flow for the sake of his customers, but it wasn't a customization he could do with Yahoo!.
- » A generic "me-too" site. The cookie-cutter look and feel of the Yahoo! site didn't match Lotus Sculpture's market positioning as a premier source of authentic high-end Eastern sculpture. Tortora was selling a premium product from a primitive store front.

Tortora also points out that in addition to the website quality issues he experienced, he encountered problems in the relationship he had with Yahoo! Merchant Services. "There was no relationship with a designer on their end," he says. "I was just one of a hundred faceless accounts to them."

In fact, in order to get work done on his website, Tortora had to solicit third-party help. "I had to hire and

manage a developer who knew the Yahoo! platform," says Tortora, and this only contributed to the headaches of keeping the site running.

A final key consideration for Tortora was the platform's payment structure: Yahoo! Merchant Services charged one percent of every sale made on the site. As Lotus Sculpture grew, this type of fee schedule became more and more untenable.

Modernizing With Miva

Lotus Sculpture founder Kyle Tortora decided that in conjunction with his physical move to California, he would also move his e-commerce site to Miva. From the beginning of the development and migration process, he found working with Miva to be very different from working with Yahoo!.

Rather than having to hire a third-party to work on his site, Tortora now has direct access to his own dedicated Miva developer. "At Yahoo! I never had a single contact dedicated to my site," says Tortora. "With Miva, I have a developer who works directly on my account. His name is Nick."

"With Miva, I'm able to fully implement the vision I have for Lotus Sculpture."

— Kyle Tortora
Founder, Lotus Sculpture

The new site Miva built for Lotus Sculpture gave it what Tortora calls "a vastly upgraded look and feel." He continues, "We went from a Web 1.0 design to a fifth generation modern design." The new site featured many improved and modernized design elements throughout, including:

- » Cutting edge photo functionality. All relevant photos are visible on the product page, and they now feature a mouse-over zoom feature that doesn't take the customer away from the purchase flow.

- » Product videos. "This is something I couldn't do on my Yahoo! store," says Tortora. For many of Lotus Sculpture's larger sculptures, video of the piece can be a big help in closing a sale.
- » Testimonials and social rating. "The peer aspect is very important to my business these days," says Tortora. The store's front page now includes an attractive list of satisfied customers, and an encouragement for customers to connect on Facebook.

Additionally, because he has a dedicated developer, it is much easier for Tortora to make ongoing changes as needed. "A good example would be optimizing the check-out flow," he explains. "I spent a month optimizing that flow, stripping it down to the bare necessities, and fixing things like putting the shipping calculation up front for people." Through it all, he found Miva's support to be exceptional and hyper-responsive. "With Miva I write an email with the changes I need, and they're done in a week."

Living The Dream

Since he made the switch to Miva, Tortora's business has continued to grow. He's seen improved conversion rates, which he attributes to the updated site design and all the little changes he was finally able to make to provide his customers with a more fluid shopping experience.

He strongly prefers working with an in-house developer at Miva, and points out that having someone in-house at Miva "means they are a true pro on the platform." Rather than having a third-party developer who doesn't necessarily know all the best-practices or where the platform is headed in the future, Tortora explains that "with Miva, my developer Nick knows how to best implement my vision from within the Miva platform. He's on it every day, so he knows it inside and out. And, if there's something I want to do that's not already there, he will help me get it." All of this means that by choosing Miva, Tortora has completely taken care of the e-commerce platform for his business. "My goal isn't to have a bunch

of employees," says Tortora. Now, instead of having to stay up-to-date on the latest web technology, or worry about hiring development manpower, he has the power and expertise of Miva running his site for him.

"With Miva, I'm able to fully implement the vision I have for Lotus Sculpture," says Tortora. "I'm an extraordinarily fortunate person who is living his dream each day." 



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