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WHAT YOUR SMALL BUSINESS CAN LEARN FROM HOME DEPOT

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Give online customers a way to interact with in-store employees, and other

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lessons from the big-box success story.

Big-box stores aren't always the faceless, inflexible behemoths we make them out to be. Home Depot was in the spotlight recently when it invested \$300 million on an omnichannel strategy to get customers to make purchases on mobile phones and at kiosks. Since then, the company's online sales have increased 50 percent—and that's just part of their success.

Small businesses should borrow these lessons from the retailer:

Lesson 1: Integrate online and in-store sales.

The retailer began offering items online that the stores don't normally carry. The plan was to allow online customers to pick up items in store, and then bet on higher sales. It worked. One in every five online customers [buys additional items](#) when they pick up their order, according to a recent report by Lightspeed.

You may not be able to spend millions on new distribution centers, but consider doing something similar on a smaller scale. Most consumers nowadays research potential purchases online first. Small businesses need to reach out to these customers to expand their audience and stay competitive.

Lesson 2: Use remote communication to connect with online

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customers.

Home Depot also invested in Skype-enabled kiosks to allow online shoppers to chat with in-store salespeople—and saw its appliance sales increase 10 percent.

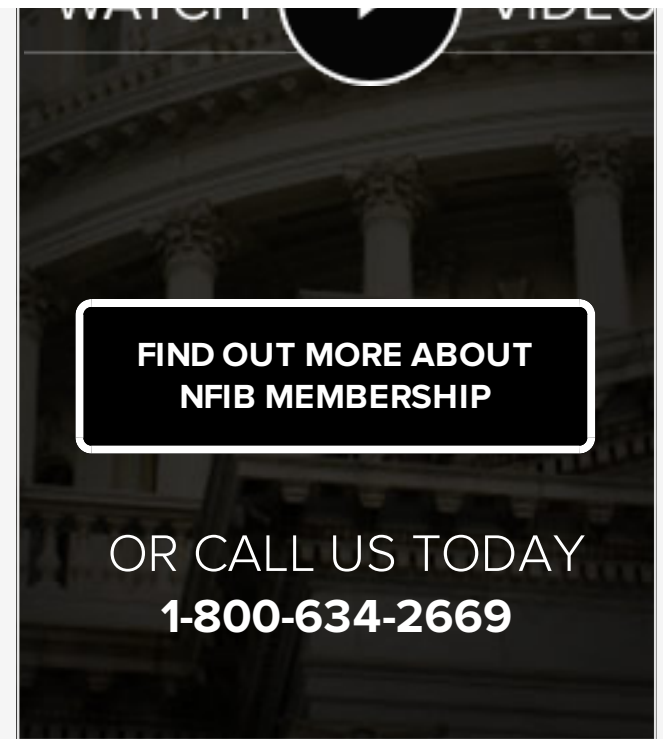
Small business owners who want to modernize their communications systems could consider implementing remote communication systems in their stores as well.

One reason is that inexpensive technology can give shoppers a sense of what your merchandise looks like better than a static picture. It can also enable store associates to [help customers place online orders](#).

There's also a chance that connecting customers with the people most familiar with your merchandise will encourage them to stop by in person.

Lesson 3: Create smart partnerships.

“Home Depot does partnerships very well,” says Tatsuya Nakagawa, co-founder and VP of marketing and strategy for [Castagra](#), a Reno Nevada-based wastewater coatings manufacturer. Nakagawa familiarized himself with the store's practices several years ago when he sat on the board of a regional supply chain association. Inspired by the Home Depot, he says he invested \$20,000 on a consultancy to help his company make better partnerships with applicators, painters and coaters. The decision has since paid off many times over, Nakagawa



says.

Lesson 4: Hold community events in-store.

Nakagawa learned a different lesson when he visited a Home Depot. The store regularly held family events in which they provided building toys and a space for kids to play. “They gave the kids aprons and hard hats and really engaged the community,” he says.

The point wasn’t just to make the store family-friendly. “When people come to those workshops, the dads buy a bunch of stuff before they leave,” says Nakagawa, who has held community events at his company. “It also taught the kids that Home Depot is the only store that matters.”

Big box stores like Home Depot are at the forefront of new business trends from a technology and customer experience standpoint. It’s good for small business to keep tabs on them—and emulate them when possible.

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