

How COVID-19 Forced Us Into E-Commerce Overnight — And Changed Our Retail Story Forever

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When COVID-19 shut everything down, a Saturday evening call changed our entire retail journey. Faced with the risk of not affording salaries, we were pushed into building an e-commerce website—fast.

I remember the exact moment everything changed.

It was a Saturday evening, around 6 pm. I was settling into what I thought would be a quiet night when my boss called. Her voice was calm but heavy — the kind of tone that tells you things are serious before a single word is spoken.

“We need to do something,” she said. “Otherwise we won’t afford to pay salaries.”

That was the moment reality hit. Shops were empty. Movement was restricted. Customers were indoors. Retail, as we knew it, had come to a stop. The walls were closing in, and we needed a lifeline — fast.

And that “something” turned out to be an e-commerce website.

- Not a plan.
- Not a pitch deck.
- Not a long meeting.
- A website. Live. Functional. And it had to work.

Burning the midnight oil

We didn't have the luxury of long strategy sessions, user personas, or wireframes. We were in survival mode.

Everyone went into overdrive. Collaboration tools weren't even fully mainstream yet — Zoom was still finding its feet, Google Meet felt experimental, and WhatsApp groups were the new project management tool. No one was seeing each other; everything was happening in fragments, buzzes, notifications, and late-night calls. **Sleep disappeared. Day and night blended into one.**

But somehow, through the chaos, we started putting the pieces together — product feeds, images, prices, descriptions, payment integrations, delivery workflows. It felt like building a car while already cruising down the highway.

In four days, we had done the unthinkable:

- A working online store.
- Over 6,000 products.
- Fully searchable.
- Ready for customers.

We didn't even stop to celebrate because the truth was — we were not sure if it would even work. But we launched anyway.

The Shock That Followed

Then the impossible happened. Within two weeks, we crossed KES 1 million in online sales. That number felt unreal. It wasn't just money — it was proof that the shift to online wasn't optional anymore. Consumers weren't just buying online because it was convenient; they were doing it because it was the only way to access anything. People who never imagined making an online purchase suddenly trusted the internet with their groceries, hardware, cosmetics, electronics — everything.

For years, digital transformation was a buzzword. In 2020, it became survival.

Retail Would Never Be the Same Again

Before COVID, online shopping in Kenya was more of a side experiment for many retailers. Nice to have, but not

urgent. A future plan.

COVID flipped that overnight.

- Retailers who hesitated were left behind.
- Those who adapted early stayed afloat.
- And those who executed fast — thrived.

Our small team, running on panic, adrenaline, and sheer determination, became a living example of what necessity can produce. That website didn't just generate revenue; it kept people employed, kept operations alive, and forced the business to evolve years ahead of schedule.

What We Learned

- Speed beats perfection. If we waited to make the “perfect” system, we would have shut down.
- Customers adapt faster than businesses think. Kenyans embraced online shopping far quicker than predicted.
- Digital is no longer optional. Every retailer needs an online channel — not as a side project, but as a core operation.
- Crisis forces clarity. We discovered what mattered most: survival, creativity, teamwork, and pure resilience.

Looking Back

When I think about that Saturday call, I realise it wasn't just a moment of pressure — it was a turning point. A trigger. A push into a direction that would ultimately reshape our entire business.

- From that chaotic sprint came structure.
- From panic came innovation.
- From survival came growth.

And that first rushed e-commerce website became the foundation for everything we built in the years that followed.

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