



A FREE GUIDE FROM ARDENT SELLER

Spreadsheet vs. Inventory Software

an honest decision guide

When does a spreadsheet stop being enough?
Ten signals you've outgrown yours, the honest
comparison, and how to know it's time to switch.

SIGNALS

COMPARISON

WHEN TO SWITCH

WELCOME

An honest question, honestly answered.

Spreadsheets are how almost every maker starts. Free, infinitely flexible, runs on the laptop you already own. They work — until they don't. The question this guide tries to answer honestly is: how do you know when you've crossed that line?

We make Ardent Seller. We have a clear interest in you switching. But we also know switching too early is a waste of money, and switching too late is a waste of everything else — your evenings, your accuracy, your peace of mind. This guide is designed to help you decide which side of that line you're on, without leading the witness.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Read Section 02 first. Count how many of the ten signals describe your business right now. Three or fewer, your spreadsheet is probably fine. Four to six, start evaluating. Seven or more, you're paying a hidden cost every week.

WHAT'S INSIDE

- 01** Why most makers start with spreadsheets
The legitimate case for staying on Excel or Sheets.
- 02** 10 signals you've outgrown your spreadsheet
The observable behaviors that mean it's time to evaluate alternatives.
- 03** The honest comparison
Where spreadsheets win, where dedicated software wins, and what each really costs.
- 04** When to switch (and when not to)
Concrete thresholds for both decisions, plus the migration mistake to avoid.

SECTION 01

Why most makers start with spreadsheets

Before naming the limits of the spreadsheet, it's worth being clear about why it's the right tool for so many makers for so long. The reasons are good ones.

The honest case for spreadsheets, in three points: they cost nothing beyond software you probably already own. They are infinitely flexible — every column, every formula, every tab is yours to design. And they're portable: a CSV file is a format every other tool in the world can read, so the data you build there is never trapped. For a maker selling a few SKUs out of a single channel with simple recipes, a well-built spreadsheet is genuinely hard to beat.

What changes is not the spreadsheet. It's your business. As your SKU count, channel count, recipe complexity, and order volume grow, the same flexibility that made spreadsheets perfect at the beginning starts costing you time, accuracy, and visibility. The next section names the specific moments when that crossover happens.

OUR BIAS, STATED PLAINLY

We make inventory software. If you're reading this, we'd obviously rather you choose ours over staying on Excel. So this guide errs in the other direction wherever it can — listing what spreadsheets do well, what software still doesn't do better, and the criteria for staying put. If after reading this you decide your spreadsheet is fine, that's a successful outcome too.

SECTION 02

10 signals you've outgrown your spreadsheet

These are observable, not theoretical. Each one is something you can verify by looking at your week. Count how many describe your business as it is right now.

SIGNAL 01

You re-enter the same data three times for one order

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

An order comes in on Etsy, you log it in your sales sheet, decrement raw materials in the inventory sheet, and copy the totals to your accounting tab. Same data, three places, every order.

WHY IT MATTERS

Triple-entry is where errors enter your books and where your evenings disappear. Either of those alone justifies a real system; together they make the math obvious.

SIGNAL 02

You can't tell what you have without counting it

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

Someone asks how many of a product you have ready to ship, and the only way to answer is to walk to the shelf and count. The spreadsheet number is 'close-ish' but you don't trust it.

WHY IT MATTERS

When the file and reality have drifted apart, the file has stopped being your source of truth. That's the core function of an inventory system, and it's the function your spreadsheet has stopped performing.

SIGNAL 03

The file is too slow or too large to share

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

Opening it takes 15 seconds. Two formulas time out before they calculate. Sending it to your bookkeeper means cutting tabs out or zipping it.

WHY IT MATTERS

Spreadsheets struggle past about 50,000 rows of data with formulas. When you start dreading opening the file, you've outgrown the format itself, not just your version of it.

SIGNAL 04

You can't hand it off to a helper without losing it

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

Onboarding a part-time helper means a 30-minute walkthrough of 'don't edit this column,' 'always update this tab first,' and 'here's the password.' A week later, a row gets dragged and the formulas break.

WHY IT MATTERS

If the file requires you to be in the room, it's not a system — it's a single point of failure. The cost of one broken-formula incident usually exceeds a year of software.

SIGNAL 05**Your numbers don't match reality at month-end****WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE**

You count physical inventory at the end of the month and the variance from your spreadsheet is large enough that you stop trusting either number. You start 'adjusting' to make them line up.

WHY IT MATTERS

Untraceable variance is what auditors flag and what tax preparers charge extra to clean up. It's also the moment your books stop being a tool for decisions and start being a chore.

SIGNAL 06**You've stopped tracking certain things****WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE**

You used to track packaging-material costs per unit. You used to update labor time per recipe. You've quietly stopped because it's too tedious. Margin numbers haven't been right in months.

WHY IT MATTERS

When the data you most need to make decisions is the data you've given up on, the spreadsheet has crossed from helpful to harmful — you're now flying without instruments.

SIGNAL 07**You don't know what each product really costs to make****WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE**

Asked 'what's the gross margin on Product A?' you give an estimate. You can't pull the answer from the file in under a minute, and you're not 100% sure of the inputs.

WHY IT MATTERS

Per-product unit economics is the single most valuable number a maker can know. If your file can't produce it on demand, your pricing decisions are guesses.

SIGNAL 08**You can't track recipes or BOMs that share components****WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE**

Your lavender soap and your lavender candle both use the same fragrance oil. When you decrement the oil for a soap batch, the candle recipe doesn't see it. So you double-count, or track it manually, or just stop tracking.

WHY IT MATTERS

Shared-component bills of materials are the moment spreadsheets become structurally incapable of giving you the right answer — not just inconvenient, but mathematically wrong without heroic effort.

SIGNAL 09**Photos, descriptions, and SKUs live in different places****WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE**

Product photos in Drive. Etsy descriptions in a Google Doc. SKUs in the spreadsheet. Costs in another spreadsheet. Adding a new product means updating four files, and updating one later means hunting through four files.

WHY IT MATTERS

Each scattered system is a place data can drift. Every place data can drift is a place customers see something wrong — an out-of-stock listing, a price that doesn't match the photo, an SKU that doesn't scan.

SIGNAL 10**Filing taxes means rebuilding the year from scratch****WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE**

Tax time arrives. You spend a weekend (or pay your CPA to spend a weekend) reconstructing categories from receipts, statements, and the scattered tabs in your file because the live data isn't in a usable form.

WHY IT MATTERS

When tax preparation has become a project rather than an export, you're paying the cost of the spreadsheet in March every year — usually in a form that dwarfs a software subscription.

SCORING YOURSELF

0–3 signals: your spreadsheet is genuinely fine. Don't switch yet. 4–6 signals: start evaluating. The cost of switching is now smaller than the cost of staying. 7+ signals: the cost of staying is no longer hidden — it's every weekend, every reorder mistake, and every tax season. The math has flipped.

SECTION 03

The honest comparison

Both tools have legitimate strengths. Here is where each one wins, with no thumb on the scale.

DIMENSION	SPREADSHEET WINS	SOFTWARE WINS
Up-front cost	\$0. Free Sheets, or Excel you already own.	Subscription, typically \$15–\$50/month for solo makers.
Setup time	Minutes. Open a blank sheet and start.	An afternoon, sometimes a weekend, to import and configure.
Flexibility	Total. Any column, any formula, any layout.	Bounded by what the software supports.
Multi-user safety	Risky. One drag breaks formulas across the file.	Strong. Permissions and edit history protect the data.
Multi-channel inventory	Manual reconciliation across channels.	Auto-syncs Etsy, Shopify, Square, etc. as one source of truth.
Recipes & BOMs	Possible but tedious; shared components are a known weak spot.	Native. Shared components decrement correctly.
Per-product unit cost	Possible if you maintain it; usually doesn't survive contact with reality.	Live. Costs flow from materials › recipe › product.
Photos & product data	Lives in separate tools (Drive, docs, spreadsheets).	Centralized with the rest of the product record.
Tax preparation	Reconstruct the year from receipts.	Export by category in a few minutes.
Data ownership	100% yours, in a CSV anyone can read.	Yours, but locked to the vendor's format unless they offer export.
Learning curve	Zero if you know spreadsheets already.	Real, but front-loaded — days, not months.

THE COST COMPARISON THAT ACTUALLY MATTERS

Software costs about \$300–\$600/year. The question isn't whether that's expensive in absolute terms — it's whether it costs less than what your spreadsheet is costing you in time, errors, missed deductions, and missed reorders. For most makers past Signal 5, the math isn't close.

SECTION 04

When to switch (and when not to)

The two decisions that matter, with concrete thresholds. Use these to commit one way or the other.

Switch when any of these are true

- You hit 4+ of the 10 signals in Section 02.**

This is the most reliable test. The signals are observable, not theoretical — if four describe you, the cost of staying is real and ongoing.
- You sell on more than one channel.**

Multi-channel inventory reconciliation is the single hardest spreadsheet task and the easiest software win. If you sell on Etsy plus a craft fair, plus your own site, software pays for itself in saved time alone.
- Your products use shared raw materials.**

Two products that draw from the same fragrance oil, the same wax, the same flour — spreadsheets handle this badly by design. Software handles it by definition.
- You've added (or want to add) a helper.**

Anyone other than you needs a system, not a file. The cost of training someone on your spreadsheet, plus the risk of them breaking it, exceeds a year of software the day you start.
- You're hiring a CPA or bookkeeper.**

Professionals charge by the hour to clean up data. The data they want lives in the categories software produces natively.

Stay with spreadsheets when any of these are true

- You have fewer than 20 SKUs and one channel.**

At that scale, a well-built spreadsheet is genuinely sufficient. Software optimizes problems you don't have yet.
- Your business is genuinely simple.**

No recipes, no BOMs, no shared components, no batch production — just buy items, mark them up, sell them. Some retail businesses fit this and don't need software.

Your file works and you can answer questions from it.

If you can pull current stock, gross margin, and last month's P&L from your spreadsheet in under a minute, your file is still doing its job.

 You're in your first 90 days.

Don't buy software before you have data to put in it. Run a spreadsheet for the first quarter, learn what your business actually needs to track, then evaluate.

 Your business is highly seasonal and currently dormant.

If you sell only at holiday markets and the rest of the year is quiet, the cost of a year-round subscription may not pencil. Free tiers exist for a reason.

THE MIGRATION MISTAKE

If you do switch, don't try to migrate everything at once. The single biggest mistake is recreating five years of historical data in the new tool — it's a month of work that produces nothing. Start fresh from the date you switch. Keep the old spreadsheet as a read-only archive. Forward-only migration is the difference between a one-weekend setup and a six-month abandoned project.

YOUR DECISION, ON YOUR TERMS.

Now you have a real answer.

The right answer isn't universal. For some makers, the spreadsheet stays the right tool for years. For others, the math flipped two seasons ago and they're paying the cost without knowing it. The value of this guide is in giving you a way to tell which one you are.

If the signals say it's time, here's what we built next.



When you're ready to switch.

Ardent Seller was built for the moment a maker realizes their spreadsheet has stopped helping. Inventory, recipes, sales, margins — all in one place. Start on the free tier with no credit card. If your spreadsheet is still working for you, stay there. When it isn't, this is the next step.

www.ardentseller.app

Start free — no credit card required.

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