Sales Tax Survival Guide

Life-saving tips to keep you afloat in a sea of changing compliance rules

Avalara

Whitepaper

Sales tax challenges are constantly evolving. It can be difficult for companies to keep up with the sea of new or changing obligations. Avalara to the rescue! Our Sales Tax Survival Guide provides tips to help you navigate the challenges of managing sales and use tax compliance. This guide is a tool to help you understand the basic tenets of sales and use tax, your obligation to get it right, and best practices to make the compliance process less of a burden on your business. It's not meant to be a substitute for professional tax advice.

Why it's important to get sales tax right

In the 45 states that collect sales tax, businesses with a connection to the state, or **nexus**, are obligated to register and remit the correct amount of sales tax. Many states are expanding rules around nexus to recoup losses from remote sales and recover from budget shortfalls. With the complexity and constant changes made to state sales tax rates and regulations, you may not even realize that your business is out of compliance. But that doesn't protect against audits, penalties, or fees if you're found to be in violation of the law.

It's not enough to be aware of your sales tax obligations; you need to be fully prepared to comply with them. That means employing best practices for managing sales and use tax as laws change (and as your business changes) and knowing what solutions best fit your company's growth needs.

Here are 10 sales tax challenges that could rock your boat along with tips for staying afloat in a sea of complex compliance regulations.

Sales Tax Survival Challenge #1: Determine nexus

An easy way to end up with unexpected tax liability is to ignore nexus. Defined as a substantial connection between your business and a state, nexus regulations determine whether you're required to file and remit taxes to a given jurisdiction. Understanding nexus is crucial to getting compliance right as your business expands.

Survival Tip: ***Learn more about what can trigger nexus.***

Many businesses are surprised to learn that nexus connections can be made through relatively innocuous or seemingly casual business activities. Having a remote employee in another state, using warehouse space in another state through a program like Fulfillment by Amazon (FBA), or even attending trade shows in another state can all trigger nexus in some states. On a state-by-state level, department of revenue websites usually include a page discussing what triggers sales tax nexus within the state. If you're not sure whether you've properly identified nexus obligations for your business, a nexus analysis study can provide peace of mind that you're compliant with new or changing regulations.

Survival Tip: ***Understand click-through and affiliate nexus***

One of the more nuanced areas of sales tax compliance is **click-through** or **affiliate nexus**. To collect sales tax revenue on previously untaxable sales (typically online sales) some states have declared affiliate relationships to create nexus. This means that if someone in another state provides promotional codes or affiliate links that help your business make sales, you could be creating nexus in that state. Under these thresholds, even small businesses can find themselves with nexus in states they never anticipated paying sales tax in. Avalara's online nexus guide is a good reference for which states have these protocols in place.

Survival Tip: ***Keep an eye on economic nexus.***

On June 21, 2018, the United States Supreme Court ruled in the case of South Dakota v. Wayfair, Inc. giving way for states to impose sales tax on remote sellers based on **economic nexus** (the volume or dollar value of sales into a state) and not just physical presence. Already, more than 20 states have economic nexus laws in place or pending. What that means is that, in addition to states where you have physical presence nexus, you could be required to collect and remit sales tax on sales into states where you meet the minimum thresholds for economic nexus either based on volume of sales or total revenue from those sales.

Sales Tax Survival Challenge #2: Keep up with laws and regulations

As states seek new revenue streams, they change the rules: rules about which products and services are taxable or exempt, who pays taxes, when sales and use taxes are filed, and tax rates. Thousands of these tax rule changes happen every year, making it tough to maintain compliance.

Survival Tactic: ***Get acquainted with DoR websites***

Each state's department of revenue has its own website, where new rules (and, often, clarifications of existing rules) are published along with forms and filing deadlines. To keep up with rule and regulation changes in the states that matter to your business, you'll want to familiarize yourself with the layout of these sites and the resources available on each. Since each state's department is independent from all other state departments of revenue, these websites look and feel drastically different and be difficult to navigate. Spend some time exploring each one, and you'll be better equipped to find any new tax information you need to know.

Survival Tactic: ***Stay informed on what's new or changing***

Trying to keep up with every change to sales and use tax rates, rules, and regulations is an arduous process. Thank goodness there are free online resources like Taxrates.com and AvalaraSalesTax.com that can do that work for you. If you're looking for help with more than just tax rates, Avalara.com is an excellent, trusted resource for information about tax laws and legislation changes, industry and analyst research, reports, webinars, and guides for every business type and size and every tax compliance need.

Survival Tactic: ***Automate taxability and rate determination***

Keeping up with new sales and use tax laws gets tougher as the number of states your business collects taxes for increases. If you're feeling swamped by the sheer volume of tax law changes, offloading your taxability and rate determinations to tax automation software like Avalara AvaTax can reduce this burden, allowing your company to focus more on revenue generation and less on avoiding audit risk. The AvaTax accuracy guarantee means you don't need to worry about rate discrepancies costing your company money in the event of an audit.

Sales Tax Survival Challenge #3: File returns on time

If every sales tax jurisdiction used the same schedule for filing returns, businesses would have an easy time avoiding late filing fees and penalties. Unfortunately, every jurisdiction is different: Some require annual filing, some quarterly, some monthly – and some have different requirements for different types or sizes of businesses, or different due dates for paper filers and electronic filers. Avalara's [States and Dates Guide] is a helpful reference for keeping track of schedules, deadlines, and filing requirements for every state.

Survival Tactic: ***Know your jurisdiction rules***

Filing on time, every time means knowing the due dates for every jurisdiction in which you have nexus. In some states with local **home rule** jurisdictions, this may require knowing due dates not only for the state but also for local jurisdictions. Check state department of revenue websites to confirm the exact dates when returns are due.

Survival Tactic: ***Learn about amnesty programs***

If you've failed to remit the proper amount of sales tax or have gotten behind on filing, many states offer temporary amnesty programs to allow a penalty-free late remittance period. Requirements to take advantage of amnesty programs can vary significantly, and other states offer **voluntary disclosure** programs that act in a similar way. Avalara's professional services can help you evaluate whether it makes economic sense to use an amnesty or voluntary disclosure program in the event of late or missed sales tax payments.

Survival Tactic: ***Streamline the returns process***

Filing one sales tax return can be time-consuming. Filing dozens is a massive headache. Streamlining the returns process is just good business sense, but different solutions make sense for different businesses. Small businesses or midsize companies that only need to register, remit, and file returns in a few states may opt for an easy, signature-ready online forms remittance service like TrustFile. Companies with more complex needs can fully automate the returns process, which makes it as easy as reviewing a multi-state ledger, approving the total, and clicking a button to file and remit all taxes at once. If you do business in states that participate in Streamlined States Tax (currently 24 states) and your company qualifies, Avalara, as a certified service provider (CSP), can calculate tax and file returns for you in those states at no cost. Avalara is one of only a few select providers certified by the Streamlined Sales Tax Governing Board to perform this service.

Sales Tax Survival Challenge #4: Manage exempt sales

When a purchaser is exempt from paying sales tax, whether that purchaser is the federal government, a non-profit organization or a wholesaler, a sales tax exemption certificate must be received and filed. While many businesses try to maintain these files physically, manual filing leaves you open to audit risk and errors. If exemption certificates are integral to your tax compliance practices, check out our Tax Exemption Certificate Survival Guide for additional information.

Survival Tactic: ***Verify and validate exemption certificates***

When you receive a new exemption certificate, make sure the certificate is valid and that all certificate numbers are correct. It's important to verify each certificate with each jurisdiction's taxing authority (for example, California's verification system for exemption certificates can be found here). Businesses that fail to verify certificates are cutting a corner that could lead to more risk. Taking on this task manually can be cumbersome and prone to errors or oversights. Automatic verification can ensure that any discrepancies are caught long before they become a problem.

Survival Tactic: ***Keep certificates up to date***

Sales tax exemption certificates aren't valid forever. When businesses obtain these certificates to sell to tax-exempt customers, they sometimes forget to note the expiration date of the certificate and flag it for renewal. Having an expired certificate, in the eyes of the auditor, isn't any better than not having one at all. If you're handling exemption certificates manually, it's critical to maintain a record of expiration dates and either contact your customers to obtain an updated certificate or ask them to provide one the first time they make a purchase after the expiration of their existing certificate. Otherwise, you could find yourself falling out of compliance, one customer at a time.

Survival Tactic: ***Ditch the filing cabinets***

One of the easiest ways to lose or misfile exemption certificates is storing them only as physical, hard copies. Filing cabinets are prone to misfiling and make for difficult, time-consuming searches. At audit time, paper records take longer for auditors to sort through, leading to longer, more expensive audits. Scanning your exemption certificates is a good first step toward maintaining digital records. Using an automated solution like Avalara CertCapture makes that step far more powerful, allowing for automated verification and document management. Automation ensures lower risk at audit time and significantly reduces the time auditors take to comb through exemption certificate records.

Sales Tax Survival Challenge #5: Exemption certificate management

Finding the right state tax rates is the easy part of getting sales tax right. Then the tricky parts start: learning which states allow different rates in different jurisdictions, then figuring out which rates from which jurisdictions properly apply to each transaction.

Survival Tactic: ***Learn your sourcing rules***

When you Sourcing refers to the location where a sales transaction is taxed. Some states tax sales based on **origin** – where the seller is located; others base sales tax on **destination** – the location where the buyer takes possession of the item sold. As a seller, it's important to know whether you're located in an origin-sourced state or a destination-sourced state. To complicate matters, sourcing rules work differently if you're a remote seller, meaning you're based in one state and selling into another state where you have nexus.

Survival Tactic: ***Get past the ZIP code***

Many businesses still get tax rates by looking up a table with ZIP codes and their associated rates. If ZIP codes and tax jurisdictions always lined up, this wouldn't create the possibility of errors. Unfortunately, ZIP codes are a convenience for the federal postal service, while sales tax jurisdictions are created by state and local authorities. Translation: The boundaries have nothing to do with one another. In states like Colorado, tax district borders are so tangled that next-door neighbors can have different sales tax rates. Geolocation is a much more reliable and accurate tool for calculating exact sales tax. Geolocation technology is built into

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Avalara's tax calculation software so that the right tax rate is automatically applied to every transaction. The advantages of geolocation over ZIP codes are well illustrated in this whiteboard video.

Survival Tactic: ***Know your Home Rule states***

Some states make a single statewide taxing authority the source for all tax rules and regulations, as well as the sole determiner of nexus in the state. However, other states allow local jurisdictions to have some level of control over sales tax. Depending on the state and the extent of its home rule doctrine for local tax districts, different challenges can arise. In some states, nexus must be established in a local jurisdiction for local sales taxes to be collected while in others, simply having nexus anywhere in the state creates a nexus obligation for all taxing jurisdictions within the state. Watch this short video for more insight into the complexities of home rule.

Sales Tax Survival Challenge #6: Understand drop shipping tax relationships

Drop shipping arrangements allow sellers to simplify order logistics and expedite delivery to customers but can also complicate sales tax. Drop shipping involves two types of transactions: one between the seller and the buyer and one between the seller and a third-party supplier who delivers the product directly to the customer on behalf of the seller. Both can get tricky when it comes to sales tax. This guide provides more information on understanding the tax implications of drop shipping.

Survival Tactic: ***Stay on top of nexus laws***

FRetailers rely on drop shippers to help them get products into customers hands faster, usually by having inventory shipped directly from a manufacturer or wholesaler. As a seller, you're generally only obligated to collect sales taxes on a sale if you have nexus in the customer's state. However, in some states, use of an in-state drop shipper by an out-of-state retailer is considered a nexus-creating relationship. In California, New York, Texas, and Florida, for example, if a drop shipper delivers goods on a remote seller's behalf, that seller could be obligated to collect sales tax on the taxable sale even if the seller doesn't have nexus in the ship-to state. Furthermore, certain states, including California, Connecticut, and Hawaii, will obligate the supplier (or drop shipper) to collect sales tax if they have nexus in that state but the seller doesn't. Read more on the topic of drop shipping and nexus.

Survival Tactic: ***Know state rules for reseller certificates***

Most states don't consider the transaction between the retailer and the drop shipper a taxable transaction as long as proper documentation (a valid resale or exemption certificate) is provided. Resale exemption certificate procedures are individual to each state. Many states will accept an out-of-state resale certificate, multijurisdictional form, or alternate documentation in a drop shipping situation. However, in the states that don't accept these, the seller may have to deal with some unexpected requirements. For example, in California and other states that have stricter requirements for resale certificates, a seller may have to register with the state in order to provide a valid exemption certificate. By registering to get that certificate, the seller would now be obligated to collect sales tax from customers in that state even though the seller previously did not have nexus. For more scenarios involving exemptions, check out our drop shipping Q&A forum.

Survival Tactic: ***Keep tabs on Amazon***

Fulfillment by Amazon (FBA) is a popular and profitable drop shipping program, providing ecommerce sellers with an expansive infrastructure for order fulfillment. Amazon currently collects sales tax on its own sales in all 45 states that have a state sales tax including those where the company does not have nexus. Why the voluntary paying of sales tax? It's possible that Amazon anticipated a remote seller sales tax would become enforceable (which happened in June 2018 with the Supreme Court decision on South Dakota v. Wayfair), or perhaps the company intends to open warehouses or distribution centers in those states. Sellers who participate in FBA or plan to expand their online sales should consider following Amazon's lead and getting ahead of any sales tax obligations that could arise from drop shipping relationships.

Sales Tax Survival Challenge #7: Get service taxability right

Sales and use tax used to apply almost exclusively to sales of tangible personal property (TPP). When the economy of the United States shifted from manufacturing-driven to service-driven, services began to be taxed as well. Today, most states that charge sales tax consider at least some services taxable.

Survival Tactic: ***Know if your state is presumed taxable***

Generally, states presume services to be either exempt or taxable. Only four states – Hawaii, New Mexico, South Dakota, and West Virginia –presume them to be taxable unless a specific exemption applies. In most other states, services are presumed exempt unless singled out for taxation. Increasingly, however, states are taxing more services to balance budgets and boost revenue. Washington D.C. expanded sales tax to enumerated services in 2014, North Carolina did so in 2016, and California is looking to do the same. If your business is engaged in selling services, it's important to know where they're subject to tax. Learn more about sales tax on services.

Survival Tactic: ***Beware of bundling***

In many states, service charges are considered taxable when they cannot be separated from the sale of tangible personal property. This means that if you sold a dishwasher with "free" included installation, versus selling the dishwasher for $50 less but with a $50 installation fee, a customer would have to pay more sales tax. Because of this, depending on your sales tax jurisdiction and how it handles bundled purchases of services and TPP, you may want to create separate service charges. This difference can ensure you're saving your customers from paying taxes on services that would otherwise have been exempt.

Survival Tactic: ***Watch for new laws***

Because cash-strapped states are seeking new sources of revenue, service taxability is expanding in many jurisdictions. Even if your business is currently not subject to sales and use tax, or only a small portion of your sales are taxable, expansion to a new state or changing laws and regulations could make your taxability picture more complex. Monitoring news sources and blogs, as well as state department of revenue websites, can help you to keep abreast of any new developments that could affect service taxability for your business.

Sales Tax Survival Challenge #8: Register to collect tax

Before you can file and remit taxes to any jurisdiction, your business needs to file registration forms. These forms vary depending on jurisdiction. While some states require just one registration form to collect tax in the entire state, many local jurisdictions in home rule states have their own individual registration requirements.

Survival Tactic: ***Know what triggers registration requirements***

Generally, if you're making any taxable sales in a state, the state will require you to file for a sales tax ID number. Many states base registration requirements on what specific goods or services are being sold, and do not require businesses to register if none of these sales are likely to be taxable.

Survival Tactic: ***Learn your NAICS code***

To register to remit sales tax, you'll need to know the NAICS code that describes your industry. This code is required on most state registration forms. If you need to look up your industry's code, the NAICS website has a handy lookup tool. For example, one commonly used NAICS code is for internet retail sales: 454110. All internet retailers, regardless of the specific goods they sell, will register using the same code.

Survival Tactic: ***Outsource registration form filing***

When your business is growing, you don't want to take a chance on getting registration wrong. Instead of filing registration forms yourself, consider putting that time and effort back into your core business functions while outsourcing the tedious tasks associated with registration. Outsourcing can also help if you're interested in deregistering from a state. If you no longer have nexus, deregistration can ensure you're no longer on the hook for filing taxes in a state. Avalara Professional Services offers a full range of business license, tax registration, and deregistration services.

Sales Tax Survival Challenge #9: Don't forget about use tax

So, you've tackled sales tax, but what about its less-understood cousin, use tax? Two types of use tax, sellers' use tax and consumer use tax, can pose compliance issues for businesses in the United States. To avoid running afoul of auditors, you'll need to familiarize yourself with both.

Survival Tactic: ***Get the rates right***

Even if you're sure about the sales tax rates in the jurisdictions where you collect and remit sales tax, make sure you also confirm the proper use tax rates. Many businesses are surprised to learn that use tax rates and sales tax rates aren't always equivalent. This discrepancy can lead to compliance issues and makes use tax a prime target for state auditors. In fact, 80 percent of audits are for use tax, while only 20 percent are for sales tax. Approximately a dozen states and Puerto Rico have adopted use tax reporting requirements for out-of-state sellers. These states include Alabama, Colorado, Georgia, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana Oklahoma, Vermont, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, and Washington.

Survival Tactic: ***Understand both use tax types***

The names of the different use tax types can be confusing. Some sellers think they're only liable for paying sellers' use tax and that only individual consumers are responsible for consumer use tax. The truth is that any time your business paid no sales tax (or a lower sales tax rate than your state charges) for products you used in your business, you'll be liable for consumer use tax. That means if you're buying printer toner online or making other purchases from out-of-state sellers who do not charge sales tax, you need to pay the proper use tax rate to avoid falling out of compliance. Check out this short video to learn more about getting consumer use tax right.

Survival Tactic: ***Know your use tax exemptions***

While most purchases used in a place of business will be subject to consumer use tax, many states make exemptions for certain types of purchases. One of the most common of these exemptions is manufacturing equipment; typically, use tax is not due on equipment used to manufacture other goods. Some companies overpay use tax or keep large amounts of money in reserve for potential tax issues. This can be avoided by understanding and using the exemptions available. Tracking changes to these exemptions, however, can be difficult without automating sales and use tax compliance – especially when a business operates in several tax jurisdictions.

Sales Tax Survival Challenge #10: Survive audits and lawsuits

If you've never been through a sales tax audit, it can be a daunting prospect. The average audit typically lasts 30 to 45 days and auditors can be on-site for two to four weeks. Being able to prove that you have collected and remitted the right amount of tax is critical to the process. Yet a recent Wakefield Research study found that 75 percent of companies surveyed believe that an auditor would find errors if their company was subject to a sales tax audit. Tax automation reduces that angst. Avalara customers spend 79 percent less time proving compliance during an audit and get the added benefit of an audit accuracy guarantee with AvaTax.

Survival Tactic: ***Collect and remit correctly***

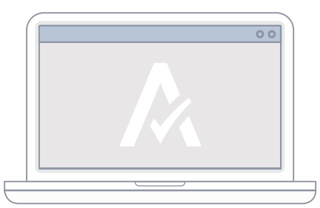
The single best defense any business has against an audit or qui tam lawsuit is getting rates and product taxability right. Even the most meticulous record-keeping won't protect your business from fines and penalties if customers have been charged incorrect rates or you've been remitting less to the state than you've been collecting. Getting this complex step right can take a lot of effort – especially if you sell a wide variety of products.

Survival Tactic: ***Keep documentation organized***

If you're filing documents manually and showing your auditor stacks of paper, it's likely you'll be in for a long slog. Missing or expired exemption certificates are a particularly pesky problem, as many businesses don't realize they're required to keep these certificates ready for auditors to look at. Bottom line: If you can't produce the certificate, you will be assessed. Companies historically have not been successful in winning a legal argument on an audit assessment if there was a lack of proper documentation. Documentation management software can be a big help in ensuring a clean audit trail.

Survival Tactic: ***Understand the audit process***

If your business receives an audit notice, it's important to know enough about the audit process to prepare adequately. These tips from former auditors can help you get ahead of the game in case you're audited, with advice for what to do – and what not to do. You may also consider whether you need to bring in outside help to make your audit run more smoothly. The big takeaway? If you make things easy on your auditor, you'll make things easier on yourself. If your records and processes are in good order, you don't have anything to fear from an audit. Automating the document storage and retrieval process helps. Avalara customers have even seen auditors [run out of things to look for] in their first day of the audit.



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Your Life Ring: Automate sales and use tax

Managing transaction tax can be overwhelming, especially if you're obligated to register, collect, and report sales and use tax in several states. It's survival mode just trying to keep up with different rates, rules, and regulations. You're on the hook to get it done and held liable by states (and state auditors) if it isn't done right. Automating sales and use tax compliance in your accounting system, ERP, or ecommerce system can alleviate much of this strain and put you on a more even keel. Avalara's tax management software ensures real-time tax calculation and proper management of tax exemptions and streamlines the remittance and filing process for sales tax returns in every U.S. jurisdiction. It's time to rescue yourself from the hassles of sales tax and sail through compliance with ease, confidence, and Avalara sales tax automation software.