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How to Select an eCommerce Platform *that Simplifies the Complexities of B2B Selling*

The evolution of B2B sales toward digital accelerated rapidly as a result of the pandemic. With trade shows and other in-person sales opportunities canceled, B2B eCommerce took the lead. More than 7 in 10 B2B buyers now say they prefer digital self-service and remote sales rep interactions, McKinsey found.

And because digital selling is efficient and saves on travel costs, the shift is likely to be permanent. More than a third of B2B purchases and replenishment orders now take place via fully self-service interactions. Forrester reported that US B2B eCommerce sales reached \$1.7 trillion in 2021 and expects this volume to exceed \$2 trillion in 2023 and \$3 trillion by 2027.

While many B2B companies have invested in B2B eCommerce websites, it's no longer enough to simply have a transactional site. B2B companies need to think beyond the cart and check out and consider how to deliver an exceptional end-to-end customer experience, including advanced search capabilities, account management tools, and more.

Powering these experiences requires an eCommerce platform that can solve for B2B-specific use cases. However, the journey of buying an eCommerce platform for a B2B company has grown complicated and oftentimes frustrating. Each vendor uses their own jargon to define the functions within their platforms, with little to no consistency in the market.

We've created this guide to help B2B buyers understand the functions B2B eCommerce platforms provide, what questions to ask when evaluating vendors, and when a B2B company should choose out-of-the-box over best-of-breed and vice versa.

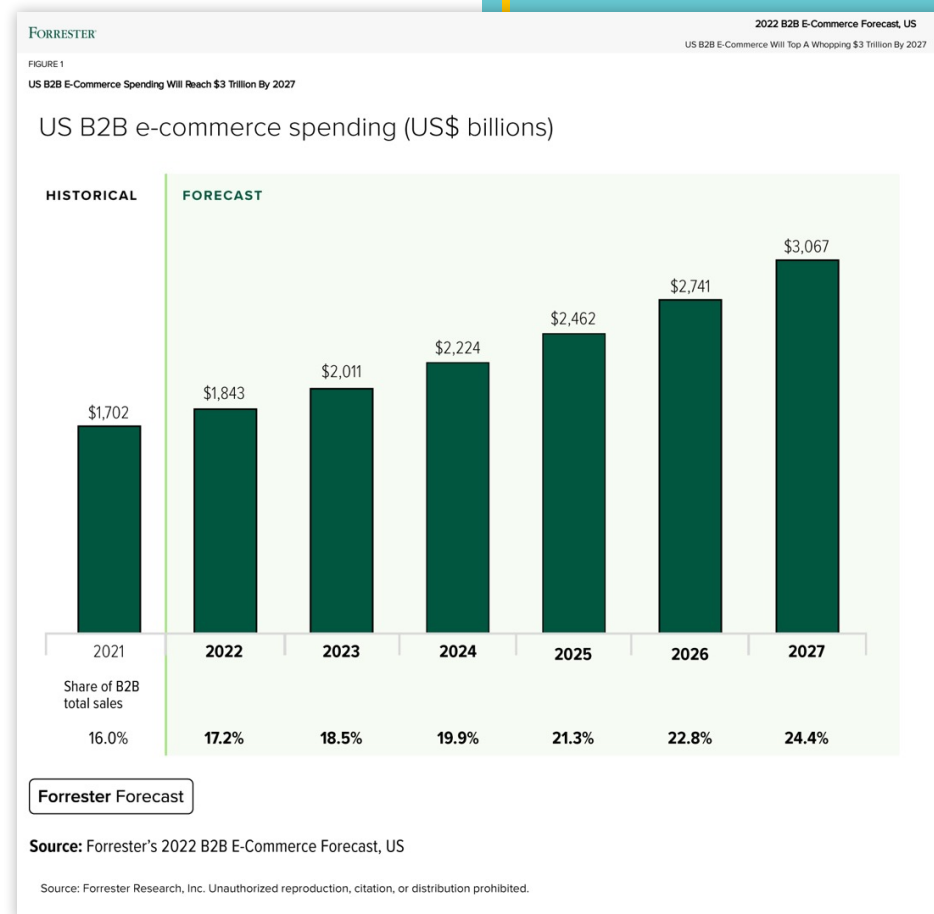




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Meeting the Higher Expectations for a Complex B2B Buyer Journey

The new dominance of digital means that B2B online offerings are more important than ever. Simply adding shopping cart functionality to existing static sites isn't enough. Amazon's role as a standard-setter in B2C eCommerce is now crossing over into corporate purchasing, with the company's B2B unit, Amazon Business, growing faster than the company overall. There's now an inherent expectation among B2B buyers the buying experience should be quick and convenient.

B2B buyers seek out vendors with sophisticated online offerings in part because their purchase journey has grown more complex. Gone are the days of the linear purchase funnel. Now, B2B buyers undertake extensive online research and often follow an omnichannel buying journey. They backtrack to consider new potential vendors discovered via word of mouth. And they navigate multiple internal stakeholders prior to purchase.

In a recent interview, Brian Beck, Managing Partner at Enceiba and author of the book *Billion Dollar B2B Ecommerce*, said, "I believe that there's the same level of expectation in B2B for fulfillment, inventory visibility, and other things as there is for the front-end storefront experience," said Brian. Accurate inventory visibility and fast delivery are no longer differentiators, they're an expectation of how B2B organizations run their business.

When considering what to prioritize, Brian recommends identifying where the friction is in the end-to-end buying process. "You must differentiate on the digital experience that can go to the next level. If you're a distributor, that means how do I deliver something which is unique and conveys my knowledge of the product and conveys my knowledge of how to use the product in your business."

According to Harvard Business Review, the number of channels B2B buyers use has doubled from 5 in 2016 to 10 in 2021.



Does Headless Have a Home in B2B Commerce?

Headless commerce is the separation between the frontend user interface and the backend commerce functionality, allowing for greater functionality and customization. This type of architecture has been a common topic of discussion in commerce technology for several years now. But very few companies know why they should 'go headless' or if it's even the best decision for their company.

There are several benefits of a headless commerce solution for a B2B company:



CUSTOMIZATION AND FLEXIBILITY: If a B2B company requires a highly customized user interface or needs to integrate with other systems, headless commerce can provide the necessary flexibility to achieve these goals.



SCALABILITY: Headless commerce is beneficial for B2B companies that are scaling their business, as it allows for more rapid deployment of new features and functionalities.



COST REDUCTION: Headless commerce can reduce the cost and complexity of managing multiple storefronts for different regions or brands.

However, headless commerce may not be necessary or feasible for all B2B companies. If a business has simpler requirements for their commerce platform or is not prepared to invest in the additional development required for a headless commerce architecture, then a traditional commerce platform may be sufficient.

There is a third option for B2B businesses that want to go headless without the significant development work. Pre-packaged storefronts enable headless architecture and simplify the process of optimizing and launching frontend customer experiences. Pre-packaged solutions typically come with pre-built integrations, workflows, and processes so you can quickly deploy the storefront and integrate with a best-of-breed content management system (CMS).



When to Buy an All-In-One Platform vs. Best-of-Breed

ALL-IN-ONE SOLUTIONS are great for...

- ✓ Businesses with simple selling models and product catalogs
- ✓ Those that need to get to market quickly
- ✓ Companies that want to simplify the training and adoption of a single platform

BEST-OF-BREED SOLUTIONS are great for...

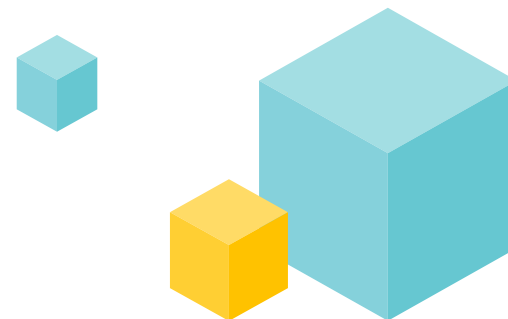
- ✓ Companies that have complex workflows and requirements regarding pricing, inventory, ordering, product management, etc.
- ✓ Those that sell highly customizable products which cannot be supported by a standard commerce platform
- ✓ Businesses in highly regulated industries that need solutions that comply with specific standards

When deciding between using an all-in-one platform or best-of-breed solutions for B2B commerce, there are several factors to consider. All-in-one platforms are pre-built and come with standard features and functionalities that can work for a variety of businesses. On the other hand, best-of-breed solutions are typically more specialized and offer enhanced capabilities in a specific area.

If the business requires basic features and functionalities, an all-in-one platform may be sufficient and cost-effective. However, if the business has unique requirements that go beyond the standard features, such as complex product data management, a best-of-breed solution may be necessary to meet their needs.

Furthermore, if a business is looking for a comprehensive solution that can handle multiple functions, an out-of-the-box solution may be preferable. However, if the business requires specialized features that aren't available in the out-of-the-box solution, then multiple best-of-breed solutions would be necessary.

Ultimately, the decision between out-of-the-box and best-of-breed solutions will depend on the specific needs and goals of the business, costs, and how quickly they need to go to market.





Core B2B Ecommerce Platform Functions *that will Simplify the Complexities of B2B Selling*

B2B eCommerce platforms are designed specifically to meet the needs of B2B companies. This means they offer features such as custom pricing, bulk ordering, and advanced inventory management that are essential for B2B transactions. We've outlined the top B2B eCommerce platform functions and capabilities to look for when evaluating vendors. For each function, we've provided the top three questions you should ask to ensure it can meet your company's requirements. Focusing on these core commerce functionalities when evaluating platforms will make it easier for B2B companies to bring back-office capabilities to the digital storefront and bridge the online and offline customer service gap.



PRODUCT CATALOG

The product catalog manages detailed product information, such as specifications, pricing, and availability, and supports other functions, such as site search, to improve product discovery. B2B companies often have large, complex product catalogs to accommodate detailed product information and specifications and a large number of SKUs. When evaluating a product catalog for a B2B company, there are several important factors to consider.

- ✓ **Comprehensive and Accurate Information:** The product catalog should provide detailed and accurate information about each product, including specifications, features, pricing, availability, and any relevant technical data.
- ✓ **Rich Media and Visual Content:** High-quality product images, videos, and other visual assets play a crucial role in B2B buying decisions. A good product catalog should include visually appealing and informative media that effectively showcases the products from different angles, highlights key features, and demonstrates their practical applications.
- ✓ **Integration and Real-Time Updates:** Seamless integration with other systems, such as inventory management and pricing databases, is essential for maintaining accurate and up-to-date information.
- ✓ **Visual Merchandising:** Merchandising plays a crucial role in B2B eCommerce, serving as a powerful tool to engage customers, optimize sales, and drive business growth. By strategically curating and presenting products in a compelling manner, merchandising enhances the overall user experience and influences purchasing decisions.

TOP 3 QUESTIONS TO ASK:

- 1 Does the vendor's product catalog solution support our specific industry and product types?
- 2 How does the vendor handle the process of importing and managing product data? Can it accommodate our existing data structure and formats?
- 3 Can the product catalog process thousands of unique vendor-supplied product attributes into a normalized set of attributes?



SECURE PAYMENTS

Integrating functions such as PO processing, credit authorization, and stored card information enables B2B buyers to complete purchases seamlessly and comply with their own internal purchasing rules and PCI regulations.

Here are a few key features to look for:

- ✔ **Security and Fraud Prevention:** Look for a payments solution that prioritizes robust security measures to protect sensitive customer payment data. Ensure it complies with industry standards such as PCI DSS (Payment Card Industry Data Security Standard).
- ✔ **Payment Options and Flexibility:** Consider a payments solution that offers a wide range of payment methods, including credit cards, debit cards, ACH transfers, and digital wallets.
- ✔ **Scalability and Future Growth:** Ensure the payments solution is scalable and capable of handling increasing transaction volumes as your B2B business grows.

TOP 3 QUESTIONS TO ASK:

- 1 What security measures are in place to protect customer payment data and ensure compliance with industry standards such as PCI DSS?
- 2 What payment methods does the solution support, and can it accommodate the specific payment needs of B2B transactions, such as invoicing, ACH transfers, or purchase orders?
- 3 Does the payments solution integrate seamlessly with our existing eCommerce platform and backend systems, such as ERP or order management systems?



SEARCH CAPABILITIES

B2B companies often have large product catalogs, but they can use site search to help buyers narrow down their search and filter through thousands of SKUs. For buyers, time is money, which means anything you can do to hasten the search process will improve the likelihood of a satisfied customer.

Here are a few key features to make the search experience as convenient as possible:

- ✓ **Accurate Results:** The search results should be relevant to the keywords entered by the buyer and provide the most relevant product options available. It's also important to allow buyers to search for products based on SKU or part number.
- ✓ **Filter Options:** Filtering results based on product category, price, product specs, and industry ensures the buyer finds a product that best matches their needs.
- ✓ **Educational Content:** Buyers will use the search function for more than finding a product. It can be useful to include educational content, such as installation instructions or how-to videos, that will help the buyer make an informed decision.
- ✓ **Leverage Inventory and Fulfillment Data:** Consider how you can tie in inventory and fulfillment data to search results. With a seamless integration between the eCommerce platform and order management system, you can present relevant inventory data to help buyers make informed decisions. For example, you could show local inventory availability based on the buyer's chosen store location, or allow buyers to filter results based on fulfillment options (i.e., pick-up at a local branch location vs. ship to job site).

Keep in mind that buyers won't be the only people using the search function. Think about how you can optimize search for your sales reps to help them find in-stock products for buyers in real-time.

TOP 3 QUESTIONS TO ASK:

- 1 **What type of search algorithms does the solution use? How accurately does it return relevant results?**
- 2 **How does the solution handle synonyms and related terms? Can it recognize and suggest alternative search terms?**
- 3 **What type of filtering and sorting options are available? Can buyers easily refine their search results based on criteria such as price, availability, and product specifications?**



According to Accenture

92%

of B2B purchases start with search, so it's important to help buyers find what they're looking for quickly.





COMPLEX PRICING & DISCOUNTS

An eCommerce platform that can handle complex pricing and discounts can offer a clear and transparent pricing structure, leading to a better customer experience and improved customer loyalty.

Look for an eCommerce platform that can handle:

- ✓ **Custom pricing:** B2B transactions often involve custom pricing structures based on factors such as volume, frequency, region, industry, and specific customer needs. An eCommerce platform that can handle complex pricing allows B2B companies to offer customized pricing options to their customers.
- ✓ **Negotiated pricing:** B2B transactions often involve price negotiations between buyers and sellers. An eCommerce platform that can handle complex pricing allows B2B companies to offer and manage negotiated pricing agreements with their customers.
- ✓ **Pricing transparency:** B2B buyers expect pricing transparency and accuracy. An eCommerce platform that can handle complex pricing allows B2B companies to provide detailed pricing information to their customers, including discounts, promotions, and other pricing factors.

TOP 3 QUESTIONS TO ASK:

- 1 What type of pricing rules and logic does the engine support? Can it handle complex pricing scenarios, such as volume discounts or contract pricing?
- 2 How does the engine handle real-time pricing and inventory updates?
- 3 Can you create price lists based on specific criteria, such as customer segments, order volume, and location?



ACCOUNT MANAGEMENT TOOLS

Customer-specific catalogs and pricing add another layer of relevance to the buyer experience. B2B companies should also look for capabilities that enable assigning purchasing roles for employees of customer companies, with authorizations and spending limits set at the individual user level.

Specifically, look for a B2B eCommerce platform that allows you to:

- ✓ Set permissions to view, edit or approve customer account data, quotes and contract management.
- ✓ Create orders, complete draft carts, or allocate inventory in transit for purchase.
- ✓ Enable sales reps to handle replacements, offer substitutions, and give appeasements.

TOP 3 QUESTIONS TO ASK:

- 1 Can the platform handle customer account hierarchy and allow buyers to define spending limits, credit limits, and approvers for each account?
- 2 What type of communication and collaboration features are included in the tool? Can buyers share information like requisition lists with other accounts and review order history?
- 3 How does the tool handle customer service and support?

CHECKOUT BUILT FOR B2B BUYERS

The checkout should offer the ability to tailor the checkout process to suit the company's specific needs, allowing customization of fields, pricing rules, and shipping methods. It should also support various payment options such as invoicing, purchase orders, credit lines, and online payments to accommodate different B2B transactions. Integration capabilities, a user-friendly interface, and security measures are also important considerations.

From a sales and customer service perspective, a “cart takeover” feature can be important to ensure a smooth checkout process. Cart takeover allows a sales rep or customer service rep to access a buyer's cart and assist in completing the purchase.

TOP 3 QUESTIONS TO ASK:

- 1 What type of cart and checkout features are included in the solution? Can it handle complex B2B transactions, such as purchase orders and contracts?
- 2 What type of payment options are available in the checkout process? Can it handle different payment methods, such as credit cards, ACH, or wire transfers? And does it maintain top-level PCI compliance?
- 3 What type of security and fraud prevention features are included in the solution? Can it protect against unauthorized access and fraudulent transactions?

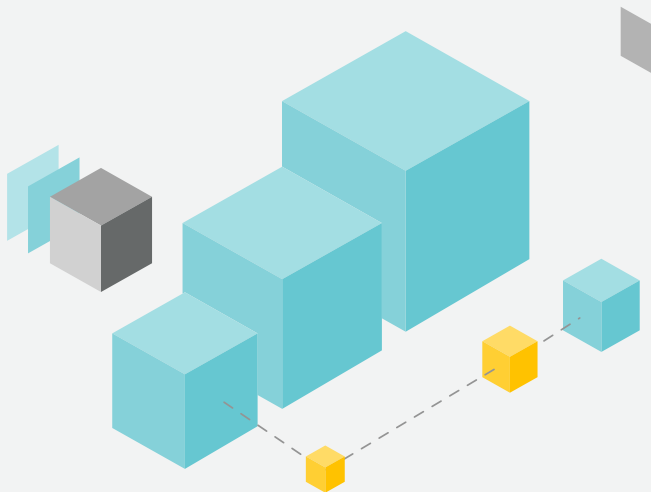


QUOTES

Quotes serve as customized offers or proposals provided to potential customers or existing clients, outlining the pricing, product details, terms, and conditions specific to their requirements. A quotes function allow buyers and sellers to create, request, and negotiate quotes based on roles and permissions, even multiple quotes at the same time.

TOP 3 QUESTIONS TO ASK:

- 1 Do quotes allow you to engage in negotiation and provide personalized pricing based on factors such as order volume, contract terms, or special promotions?
- 2 Can quotes facilitate complex configuration and variants and provide accurate pricing for the desired configurations?
- 3 Can customers access quotes within their account and establish approval processes to ensure they comply with compliance policies?



24/7 SELF-SERVICE

According to Mckinsey & Company, 71% of B2B buyers are willing to spend more than \$50,000 and 27% are willing to spend more than \$500,000 in a self-service model. With a significant portion of orders and reorders occurring without the assistance of live sales reps, vendors that offer end-to-end eCommerce enable B2B buyers to buy whenever is most convenient and efficient for their schedules.

A self-service corporate account feature provides important functionality that enables sellers to create and manage corporate accounts for multiple buyers across an organization. Buyers can access specific pricing and purchasing options unique to their account and assign user roles to various buying team members within their organization.

Self-service accounts empower buying groups to independently manage their buying needs. By providing account and order data in one central location. It's all about simplifying the purchase process so that complex orders that require multiple decision makers can be completed more quickly.

TOP 3 QUESTIONS TO ASK:

- 1 What type of self-service features are included in the tool? Can it handle different types of customer needs, such as order tracking, negotiating prices, and customized discounts?
- 2 What type of access and security features are available? Can it provide different levels of access and permission for different users?
- 3 How does the tool handle customer service and support? Can it provide self-service options for customers to manage their accounts?



BULK ORDER AND QUICK ORDER

B2B buyers are looking for a seamless purchasing experience. Bulk order and quick order features can help businesses differentiate themselves by offering a convenient and efficient ordering process, leading to higher customer loyalty and satisfaction.

One of the most significant benefits of these features is time-savings. B2B buyers often need to purchase large quantities of products on a regular basis. Bulk order and quick order features allow them to quickly add multiple items to their cart and checkout in a fraction of the time it would take to individually select each item.

TOP 3 QUESTIONS TO ASK:

- 1 What type of bulk order and quick order features are included in the platform? Can it handle different types of bulk ordering needs, such as SKU-based ordering or CSV file uploads?
- 2 How does the platform handle real-time data synchronization during bulk orders? Can it quickly update inventory, pricing, and discounts based on changes in supply and demand?
- 3 How does the platform handle pricing and discounts during bulk orders? Can it ensure consistency with pricing and discounts set for individual orders?

SUBSCRIPTION & RECURRING ORDERS

A B2B subscription model allows buyers to pay a recurring fee to access a specific product or service. The subscription may cover various offerings, such as software licenses, cloud-based services, professional memberships, maintenance and support contracts, content subscriptions, or access to specialized tools or resources.

The benefits of the B2B subscription model include predictable and recurring revenue streams for the provider, as well as convenience and cost-effectiveness for the customer. B2B buyers can access the subscribed products or services on an ongoing basis without the need for frequent repurchasing, streamlining procurement processes and budgeting.

For businesses with more complex subscription models, it's essential to find a true subscription management tool rather than a simple recurring billing solution. With a modern subscription management tool, a company can handle scenarios like offering both digital and physical product subscriptions or managing one-time inventory and recurring subscription orders in a single platform.

TOP 3 QUESTIONS TO ASK:

- 1 How does the subscription management platform handle different pricing models and billing cycles? Can it support our specific pricing structures and billing requirements?
- 2 Can the platform handle complex subscription scenarios, such as tiered pricing, usage-based billing, or customized subscription plans? Does it offer the flexibility to accommodate our evolving business needs?
- 3 Is the platform capable of handling different subscription lifecycle events, such as onboarding, trial periods, or contract management? Does it offer features for customer self-service, account management, and subscription upgrades or add-ons?



UNIFIED UI FOR STREAMLINED OPERATIONS

There are many complexities in managing B2B eCommerce operations, from managing large and detail-rich product catalogs and pricelists to customer management and shipping automation. **We recommend looking for an eCommerce platform that makes daily operations smoother with a unified dashboard:**

- ✓ Aggregate and analyze data across all inventory locations, sales channels, and customer accounts in real-time.
- ✓ Track & manage revenue, inventory, fulfillment rates, product performance, and more.
- ✓ Receive automated alerts when the named conditions on a given report are met.

TOP 3 QUESTIONS TO ASK:

- 1 What distinct features and functionalities does the unified UI encompass to effectively address the requirements and demands of the day-to-day business user?
- 2 Does the UI provide pre-configured dashboards, and to what extent can these dashboards be tailored to align with our organization's distinct business objectives?
- 3 What is the frequency of data updates from each data source within the dashboards, ensuring the displayed information remains timely and relevant for decision-making processes?

MULTI-SITE MANAGEMENT

With multi-site management, B2B buyers can manage multiple websites or online stores from a centralized location, making it easier to update product information, pricing, and promotions across multiple sites.

Some of the benefits include being able to:

- ✓ Mirror the in-store and online experience by enabling store-level pricing and catalogs.
- ✓ Eliminate the burden of managing multiple channels with automated workflows & processes, pre-built integrations, and reliable solutions.
- ✓ Provide a holistic view of business performance across channels to facilitate better visibility and data-driven decisions.

TOP 3 QUESTIONS TO ASK:

- 1 Will the platform provide a unified view of all sites or require separate logins for each?
- 2 How does the platform handle pricing across multiple sites? Is there a centralized pricing repository, or will pricing need to be managed separately for each site?
- 3 Can the platform provide insights into the performance of each site, as well as the overall multi-site strategy?



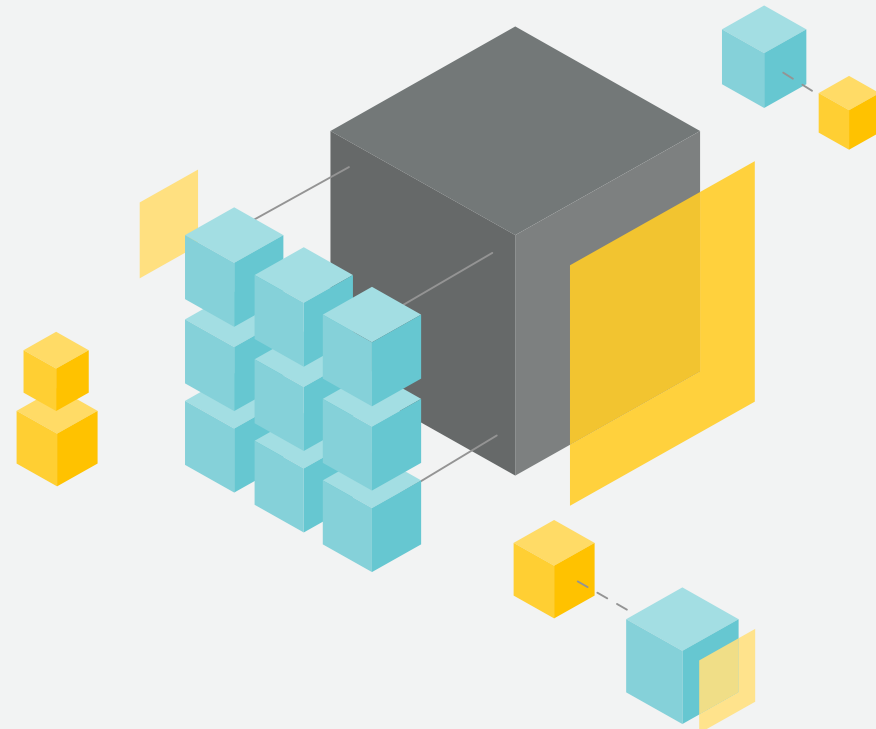
SEAMLESS INTEGRATION BETWEEN ECOMMERCE PLATFORM AND ORDER MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

Fulfillment plays a pivotal role in shaping the buying experience, particularly in the fast-paced world of B2B transactions. Time-sensitive B2B buyers place great importance on product availability and reliable delivery within specified timelines. **To provide a seamless and transparent delivery experience, it is crucial to consider the following key features:**

- ✔ **Inventory Visibility:** Enables the ability to allocate, segment, track, view, update, and balance inventory by product location, status, and more to manage real-time demand and place orders.
- ✔ **Intelligent Order Sourcing and Orchestration:** Sources and routes inventory from any supply chain location based on pre-defined business logic or custom extend attributes.
- ✔ **Order Fulfillment:** Helps improve fulfillment with pick-lists, wave-picking, and custom fulfillment flows, such as handling perishable or fragile stock.
- ✔ **Seamless Integration:** Ability to seamlessly integrate with the broader technology ecosystem, such as the ERP for pricing and financial management, carrier integrations for tracking shipping, delivery, cross-border needs, and last-mile delivery, and warehouse management systems.

TOP 3 QUESTIONS TO ASK:

- 1 How does the integration handle order processing, fulfillment, and shipment tracking? Can it provide a unified view of the order lifecycle from the eCommerce platform?
- 2 How seamlessly does the integration function? Is there real-time data synchronization between the two systems?
- 3 What type of reporting and analytics does the integration offer? Can it provide insights into order volume, customer behavior, and sales trends in the eCommerce platform?



The Importance of Platform Architecture in the Selection Process

By considering platform architecture, B2B companies can ensure they select an eCommerce platform that aligns with their current and future needs. A well-designed, composable architecture provides the foundation for scalability, customization, integration, performance, security, and adaptability, enabling B2B companies to drive growth, deliver a superior customer experience, and stay ahead in the ever-changing digital landscape.



CLOUD HOSTED: Cloud hosting promotes scalability and enhances agility. Look for a platform delivered on a secure public cloud platform across multiple regions and deployed on a containerized infrastructure.



MICROSERVICES-BASED: Microservices are distinct commerce services that can be assembled together to perform a specific eCommerce function. An eCommerce platform with microservices-based architecture will make it easier for future custom development with reusability of the microservices. Look for a platform that provides access to the microservices to be extended and modified without breaking the core code of the platform.



API-FIRST: API-first is an architecture approach in which APIs are built before the business functionality as opposed to building the product first and later adding API layers. API-first promotes productivity, scale, and agility; and is a key component of a “future-proofed” platform. Look for an API-first vendor who prioritizes full coverage of capabilities with their APIs and has publicly available documentation.



MODULARITY: Modular capabilities are a set of microservices packaged together to perform a certain commerce function. This architecture model greatly limits or abolishes dependencies between services, making it easier to take a phased approach to implementation and make updates or maintain the platform without the risk of breaking the entire solution. Look for a vendor who thoughtfully packages modules with the right level of granularity to balance development flexibility and agility with complexity and costs.






HEADLESS WITH STOREFRONT OPTIONS: Headless architecture separates the backend commerce functions from the frontend presentation layer for agility and modern manageability. Look for a provider who supports headless deployments with pre-packaged storefronts out-of-the-box or pre-built storefront accelerators in popular programming languages like React or Vue.js.

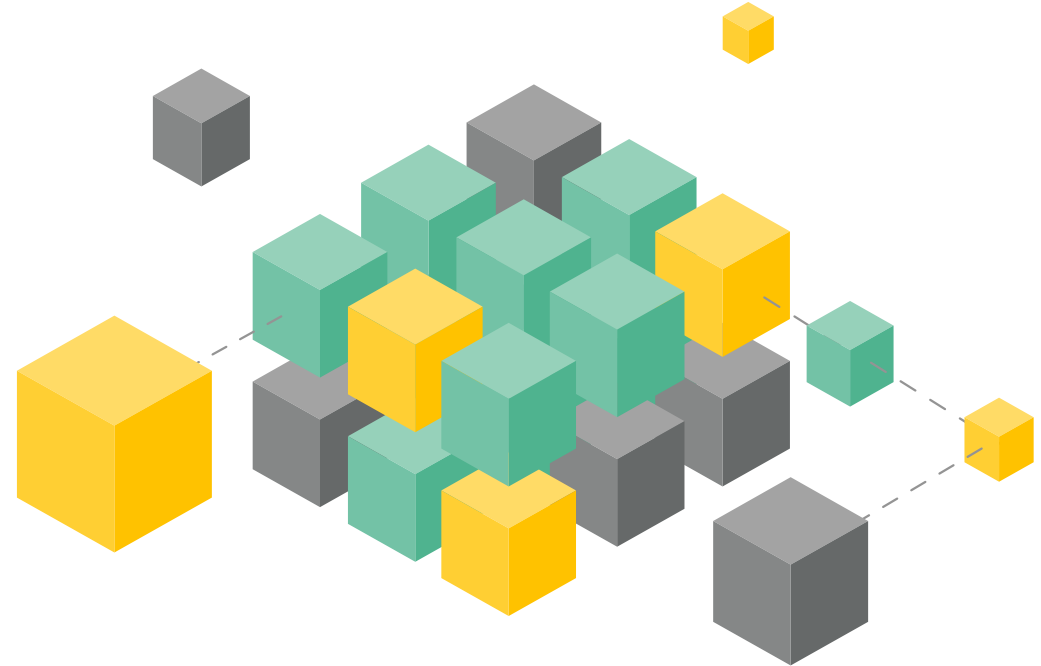


THINKING AHEAD: COMPOSABLE COMMERCE

A composable commerce platform allows B2B companies to view each component of the commerce framework as a self-contained unit that can be deployed, updated, extended and replaced without disrupting the others. This is particularly attractive to B2B companies because “it’s able to more effectively tie into existing systems, but also in many cases more nimbly launch eCommerce,” said Brian Beck.

There are several benefits for a B2B company when using a composable commerce platform:

-  **GREATER FLEXIBILITY:** You can add or remove individual components, such as a product information management (PIM) solution or personalization engine, without ripping and replacing the entire platform.
-  **SCALABILITY:** A composable commerce platform can scale up or down based on the volume of transactions and traffic, ensuring you never compromise on site performance.
-  **CUSTOMIZATION WITHOUT SIGNIFICANT COSTS:** With a composable commerce platform that comes with rich out-of-the-box functionality and 100% API coverage, you can customize the platform without significant development costs.



Want to learn more about composable commerce?

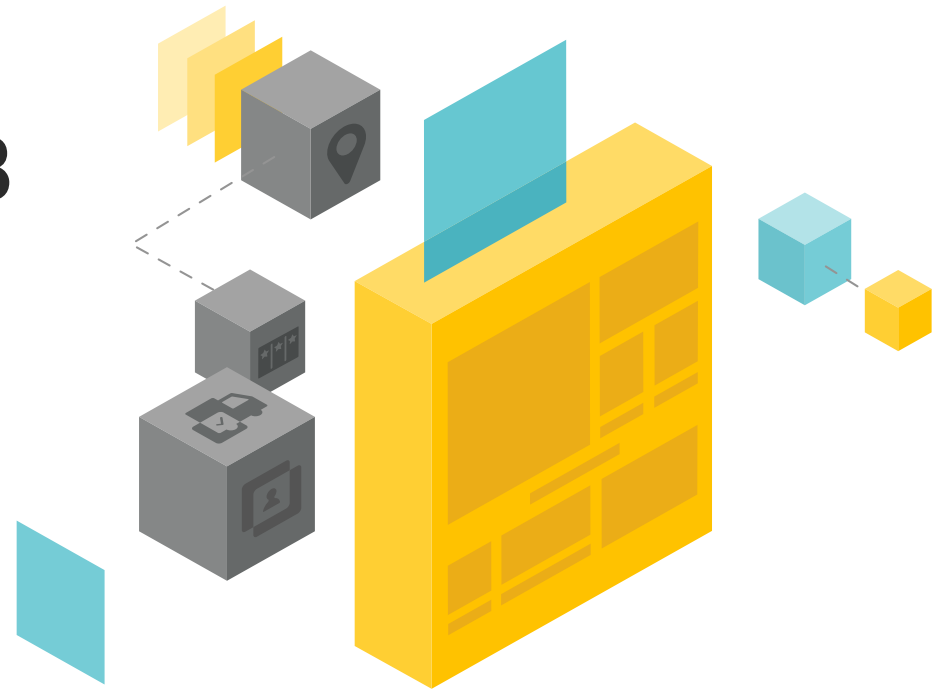
[Check out our composable commerce eBook.](#)



Finding a Commerce-Centric Platform for B2B

Launching a frictionless B2B eCommerce website requires a commerce-centric platform that can simplify the complexities of B2B purchases. By investing in a platform that comes with commerce-centric functionality out-of-the-box and scalable, flexible architecture, you can future-proof your eCommerce business and ensure long-term growth. As you're evaluating platforms, investigate the vendor's implementation partners and integrations ecosystem and validation from reliable third parties, such as Gartner and Forrester.

With the right B2B eCommerce platform, businesses can emulate offline B2B relationships and handle the complexities of corporate purchasing while delivering relevant experiences at scale.



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COMPLEX COMMERCE, SIMPLIFIED

Kibo Commerce is a composable digital commerce platform for retailers, manufacturers, distributors, and wholesalers who want to simplify the complexity in their businesses and deliver modern customer experiences. We are the only modular commerce platform supporting experiences that span Order Management, eCommerce, and Subscriptions. Companies like Zwilling, Ace Hardware, and Coastal Construction trust Kibo to bring simplicity and sophistication to commerce operations and exceed customer expectations.

