

B2B is not B2C

Top 10 Differences in Ecommerce Platforms



Introduction

Today's leading B2B ecommerce websites and customer portals provide much more than the Amazon-like experience. They are powerful online tools designed to improve speed and accuracy, as well as make it easier for people to do their jobs. Basic tools like intuitive search are important, but B2B sites require many more complex capabilities like ability to manage complex pricing, quote workflows, advanced product configuration, branded micro-sites and even global inventory allocation. In the hands of your users, these tools become more of an enterprise solution which automates procurement functions between both B2B buyers and sellers.

Far too often, B2C ecommerce platform providers claim to be experts at B2B ecommerce, simply to capitalize on the growing needs of B2B focused companies. Many agencies are jumping on the bandwagon and telling their clients that they are experienced in B2B with promises such as “...no problem, it's just like B2C...” or “...the B2C and B2B buyer patterns are converging anyway...”. They are telling clients that they can simply do a few customizations to popular B2C ecommerce platforms and it will work perfectly for their B2B clients and needs. Unfortunately, that scenario never ends well. When companies heed this advice, they often end up pouring a significant amount of money into customizations, only to find out that they have a less than desirable solution that is difficult to maintain.

While it is not uncommon for an organization to launch both B2B and B2C ecommerce solutions, most often the B2B side carries the most complexity and when done correctly, can serve as the foundation for a future B2C solution.

So how does one sift through the noise of companies promising B2B functionality on a B2C platform? Start with validating platforms against this short list of requirements which any strong B2B vendor should be able to demonstrate easily and **without customization**.



Top 10 Differences

B2C [Retail] Platform vs. B2B [Enterprise] Platform

1. Customers

This is the most obvious difference. B2B companies have many different people, with different needs and roles. One size does not fit all. Can a user be assigned to multiple accounts? How about shipping out of different warehouses? Or multiple Ship-To and Bill-To combinations? Will pricing and availability update as you change these selections?

The complexity and difference of customers between B2C and B2B commerce experiences are due to the many-to-many relationships that occur in a B2B buying environment. Most B2C transactions are simply a shopper purchasing from a merchant, and that ends the transaction. In B2B buying situations, often a purchase can involve a subject matter expert researching products to fit their need, a job site supervisor influencing when shipments need to arrive to keep jobs moving, a procurement employee placing an order for a product they are asked to purchase, and more. Each one of those roles has a distinct need that a B2B ecommerce site should be able to address by making it easy to search, purchase, and manage the account on the same site.

B2B ecommerce platforms also need to be flexible enough to provide tooling that external purchasers may never use themselves. A strong internal sales portal or channel marketing portal powered by a robust B2B ecommerce platform enable internal and external sales representatives, as well as internal customer service representatives better serve their customers.



2. Payments

B2C platforms are often credit card only out-of-the box. B2B needs to provide the option for purchase orders, order approval options and budgeting workflows, payment on credit, and even the ability to check available credit.

Many B2B customer relationships have special pricing arrangements, whether across-the-board or volume-based discounts. B2B platforms are built to handle these customer-specific pricing scenarios, no matter how complex or how many unique pricing constructs exist across your customer-base. Pricing adjustments may change based on changing bill to and ship-to information, and often need to be presented to the user as quickly and accurately as possible.

Additionally, integration with various payment management solutions and providers is a critical part of B2B ecommerce in order to serve customers with credit limits, invoice history, and payment options.

3. Products

B2B products are complex because they can range from simple consumable products to technical and highly configured products. It is not uncommon for products to have many variants, and they may require advanced quoting or custom configuration.

Advanced product attributes aren't just a nice-to-have feature in B2B ecommerce, rather they are table stakes. Some manufacturers have products that aren't sold directly to an end-consumer, rather their products are used to make another product or system. The application details, dimensions, specifications, warranty information, service

manuals, optional accessories, or alternate parts and finishes are all things a B2B buyer needs to know. This gets even more complex as configurable, custom, or kitted and bundled options are available.

Managing supporting content for products can also be cumbersome. PDF documents of warranty information, installation guides, MSDS sheets, and other product information need to be readily available on the product pages. Multiple product images, both of different angles and applications, as well as more in-depth options such as 360° rotators and videos can help assist buyers in making more informed decisions.

4. Performance

Most companies don't learn this until it's too late. B2B sites often need to handle much larger SKU counts and order volumes than B2C sites, sometimes reaching into the hundreds-of-thousands of items, containing many attributes each. Couple this with the fact that product inventory across multiple warehouses changes frequently and needs to be accurately reflected to any and all customers who are utilizing the site, and you have a lot of data flowing back and forth at any given time.

B2B companies may also have customers who may not need (or shouldn't have access to) the entire catalog. Whether it's due to what industry they are serving or product restrictions by geography, a B2B ecommerce site needs to be able to render the proper catalog on the fly. Strategic customers may also have their own customer-specific product identifiers, which they likely will want to use to quickly find and order products. All of this data must be stored or retrieved in real-time to best provide the correct experience for individual customers.

5. Search

All ecommerce sites need a great search but B2B often needs to personalize the search to each user type and even to the specific company ordering. Multiple product identifiers, attributes, measurements, and even customer-specific part numbers need to be able to be indexed and searched upon. The search experience should also be easy to tune on the backend, as well as easy to filter and refine by the customer.

Creating an experience that helps all stakeholders (from researchers to procurement) find what they need when they need it is critical. This includes indexing on many attributes beyond name and identifier, but also size attributes, materials, and more. Searcher-friendly features such as auto-complete or suggested spelling corrections can also help speed up the searching experience. Rich search results faceting options empower the searcher to narrow down many items to ones that are sure to work for their application. Even “search within a

search results page” can assist in narrowing down the field of possibilities. Often times, B2B buyers are required to order the same products over-and-over again. Advanced B2B search capabilities may allow for that buyer to filter their search results by if they’ve ever ordered the items before or not.

Utilizing a platform with rich B2B search features should also include business-user friendly tuning tools. Easily adding search synonyms to help direct those who search for industry-specific terms or jargon can help tune the searchers experience and avoid the dreaded “no results found” screen. The ability to also adjust results rankings by burying and boosting results based on any criteria is helpful in refining the results page. Consider adding in search redirects to take searchers directly to any page when they search a specific term to minimize click paths. These adjustments are needed to serve the B2B buying needs of the searchers, and should be easily adjusted on the fly by marketers, merchandisers, and developers alike.



6. Multi-Site

B2C platforms typically offer a single site per instance. Leading B2B companies often want to provide customer-branded microsites and ordering portals for their key accounts, utilizing the same or subsets of a catalog offered on another site.

For many distributors, the ability to create a separate branded instance of their ecommerce site for strategic accounts proves to be a valuable differentiator. Whether it's purpose is to show a tailored catalog, expose customer-specific items, or simply serve as a branded experience for their employees to shop from, quickly creating this experience with the same powerful backend and integrations of your main ecommerce platform is often a value-add feature.

Have a customer that buys equipment or clothing items on behalf of their employees on a regular basis? Utilizing a B2B ecommerce platform to spin out a customer-branded site experience can enable your customer to have their employees self-serve their orders. This helps minimize miscommunications on sizing and other options, while still enabling the customer to control what approved items their employees can choose from.

As distribution mergers become more frequent in the marketplace, the need to run separate branded ecommerce experiences while leveraging the same robust integration architecture can prove invaluable. Quickly create online experiences for new acquisition brands while the migration of crucial backend infrastructure is occurring. Once all systems have been migrated, leverage the integration work already done and quickly enable ecommerce capabilities to the new brand.



7. Check-out

The B2B checkout process can be quite complex. Multiple order approvals, billing and shipping combinations, payment complexity and credit limits make it harder than B2C.

B2B checkout processes need to be able to allow for the complexities of B2B customers (multiple ship-to, bill-to, credit limits, etc.) and B2B pricing (volume discounts, contract pricing, etc.), while not becoming cumbersome or too difficult to use causing buyers to abandon their purchase. Since manufacturers create products of all sizes and weights, managing multiple freight and shipping options by integrating with specialty freight providers is often required.

Some items, such as configured, backordered, or otherwise custom may need to be quoted. A B2B ecommerce experience should allow customers to specify as much information as possible and submit a request for quote. A sales or customer service representative could then return the quote via the same ecommerce platform, and allow that customer to add to cart and checkout through normal processes.

Larger purchasers from distributors may wish to utilize PunchOut to order online. A B2B ecommerce platform needs to offer cXML support or PunchOut provider integrations to enable distributors to offer PunchOut solutions to their customers who wish to order through procurement systems.

8. Globalization

Many B2B companies today are global, and many more are expanding across the globe. This means not only multi-lingual and multi-currency options need to be supported, but also the platform needs to

be flexible enough to handle international shipping and tax issues.

Whether the company wishes to utilize multiple websites to address its globalization needs, or have a configurable experience on their main site, robust globalization features in a platform can save a lot of time standing up a world-wide ecommerce experience.

Complexity of channel across many global markets may also pose a challenge. One company may go to market through distributors in one market, but may sell direct in another. A B2B ecommerce platform should be flexible enough to utilize shared product data, but deploy in models that match each market's need. Additionally, different markets operate at different levels of autonomy, and may have different technology in place. A flexible integration architecture may be needed to integrate with varying back-office systems of various markets to help those markets get online quickly.

9. Integrations

A critical feature of a B2B ecommerce platform is a flexible integration architecture. Many B2B ecommerce projects fail or go way over budget on integration. Do not underestimate the importance of a strong integration toolset. Whether it's ERP integrations, PIM, DAM, or payment & invoicing providers, a robust framework and API-first approach is crucial.

B2C platforms don't require the same level of complex integrations. While B2C platforms may focus on shipping provider integration, or credit card processors, B2B platforms need to be ready to integrate with important back-office systems, both on current versions, as well as older versions.



A B2B platform should have robust product catalog and content management toolsets built-in, but should also expect some businesses may need a more advanced solution, and allow for PIM and DAM integrations. PunchOut, EDI, and automated order entry systems are all integration needs that just aren't accounted for on B2C platforms. Regardless of what the specific integration need is, an API-first oriented platform with well-documented architecture should allow for the flexibility needed to provide a no-compromises ecommerce experience.

10. Developer Tools

The platform must have strong B2B features out-of-the-box but also allow developers the ability to extend and scale the platform, all while staying on the upgrade path to minimize friction and compatibility issues with the latest versions.

An API-first integration architecture should allow developers the flexibility needed to customize the platform to the more unique needs of individual manufacturers and distributors. Regardless if the platform is hosted on premise, in the cloud, or via a SaaS deployment model, a well-documented extensible B2B platform should allow for

customization and integration without impacting the upgrade path or compromising core components of the platform.

Most importantly, it is critical to challenge any vendor to prove these features for your specific use-cases in a live demonstration. If they can't easily create an experience that shows strong B2B functionality, it's likely time to find a different "expert" to help you with B2B. While this is by no means an exhaustive list, starting validation of any platforms with these ten differences can go a long way to avoiding a long and costly experience with a platform that is not a good fit for your company and its customers.

Solutions Built for Any Industry

It's clear B2B and B2C ecommerce are NOT the same. Episerver has experience serving many industries including retail, financial services, high tech, healthcare and manufacturing and distribution. In December 2019, Episerver acquired Insite Software, a leader in B2B ecommerce to strengthen our B2B ecommerce offering. We've added more than 150 manufacturers and distributors to our roster of customers.

About Episerver

Episerver empowers businesses to scale through the most customer-centric approach to digital experiences. Its Customer-Centric Digital Experience Platform™ features best-in-class content management, robust commerce and intuitive data and personalization solutions. The platform has consistently earned industry, analyst and media recognition for its vision, capabilities and customer commitment. Episerver's 900+ partners and 825+ employees in offices around the globe are proud to help more than 8,000 customers enrich their customer lifetime value, increase revenue and grow their brands.

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