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Frictionless B2B Customer Experience Guide

Capturing market share and revenue by optimizing product discovery and digital commerce

Executive Summary

This guide for B2B leaders looks at the most crucial interaction between a company and its business customers: the buying experience. Discover how creating a frictionless buying experience drives brand reputation, digital revenue, customer loyalty, and share of wallet expansion. This guide explores two key opportunities in frictionless buying: **product discovery** and **online purchasing**, and how **generative AI** has changed the game for both.

Understanding the B2B Buying Experience

As B2B ecommerce evolves, companies are finding inspiration in classic B2C shopping experiences like Amazon. While some specific functions that make a buying experience seamless and efficient for business buyers will always remain distinct — custom pricing, different purchasing roles and approval structures, and potentially millions of alphanumeric SKUs — B2B companies that have been thriving in the digital space are creating more human, natural, "B2C-like" experiences for buyers.

At the same time, however, the elements that make a buying experience seamless and efficient for B2B customers differ from B2C. Creating a strong and seamless buying experience that accounts for the complexity of B2B often means taking the strengths of your offline sales channels into the digital experience. That means translating the product and solutions knowledge housed within your sales team's heads into the content presented on your site. Your buyers want to search for and readily locate products they need using familiar terminology.

And because they're business customers, they need personalized product catalogs, pricing, and discounts, as well as the ability to buy with the same payment methods and terms that they are used to. B2B buyers also often require products to be delivered within an expected timeframe as clients need them to be able to run and predict normal operations.

> " At Fisheries Supply, we hope to have the best selection of products, the best customer service, the best online user experience, and the best delivery service. ... At the end of the day, what a wholesale customer cares about is being able to find the products they need and receive them quickly.
>
> **Kyle Sutter,** VP Technology, Fisheries Supply

Creating a buying experience that is integrated, seamless, and optimized isn't easy. It requires a deep understanding of your customers' needs and priorities; the services, products, and content that will resonate best with them; and requires that the underlying technology and architecture is flexible, scalable, and easily extensible to make this experience frictionless for both the customer and for your employees.

Thankfully, by adopting some best practices from B2C product discovery and online purchasing, B2B companies can create frictionless, delightful shopping experiences that build brand loyalty and capture market share.

> **B2B winners accelerate and sharpen personalization for every customer at each stage of the buying journey, and ensure the right message, call to action, and set of products and solutions are presented when customers have a problem to solve.**
>
> McKinsey

Product Discovery: Make It Easy for Buyers to Do Their Job

B2B buyers, unlike consumers, are evaluating and purchasing products as part of their job, which means that finding the right products and services quickly and error-free impacts their professional performance and overall business operations. At the same time, however, B2B buyers are also humans who are exposed to frictionless B2C shopping experiences every day in their own personal lives. These preferences and expectations then translate to their B2B purchasing behaviors.

As such, it's critical to offer product discovery experiences that anticipate their needs, intuitively personalize the search results they see, and help them find the right products easily no matter where they are on your site (search, Quick Order, category pages, etc.).

> **Because B2B vendors carry large product assortments that can return mammoth sets of search results, B2B buyers need to find products in a personalized and intelligent way. That's important because B2B buyers often look for specific products for which there is no substitute. As a result, data-driven and personalized search engines are becoming a necessity for B2B ecommerce sites.... 92% of B2B buyers expect a B2C experience when making online business purchases.**
>
> Digital Commerce 360

> **Use Case: Search Efficiency and Error Reduction**
>
> A new hire at a construction company needs to place an order for parts for a job site. He is given a detailed purchase list with SKUs and needs to quickly search for each item with the exact specifications, such as common terms and sizing. Once he has his list of order items in the cart, he requests a quote from the seller. When the quote is received, he then can choose to accept or reject it. If accepted, the quote will go through an approval flow, allowing his boss (and potentially boss' boss) to approve or reject. When finally approved, the quote gets converted into a placed order with the seller.

B2B buyers report that they buy where they find the broadest selection. But as your product catalog grows, discoverability challenges become amplified and getting product discovery right becomes more critical. Without a discovery path built in, increasing your product catalog may only serve to make your products harder to find. If your products can't be found through straightforward navigation, a typical human language search, or critical component filtering, they might as well not exist.

In this regard, many organizations still face challenges: A staggering 61% of sellers said they lost sales because their site search wasn't good enough. When you factor in that 75% of B2B buyers prefer a rep-free sales experience, it's evident why product discovery ranks among the top three factors for global B2B buyers when making purchase decisions online.

Fundamentals Required for B2B Product Discovery

Clean, comprehensive, and organized product data:
- Provide detailed and accurate product data for the attributes that matter to your users (e.g., colors, sizes, compatibility, voltage).

Robust onsite search:
- Enable search that returns the right products for queries that contain highly detailed product information.
- Implement robust product filtering so users can perform more targeted searches.
- Leverage type-ahead, predictive responses, and synonyms at scale.
- Allow buyers to search for partial SKUs and highly numeric, measurement-based products.

Holistic, sitewide discovery opportunities:
- Weigh search results and products on category pages based on users' real-time clickstream data (the actions customers take on your site like searching, clicking, adding to order, and purchasing) in addition to past browsing and purchase history, highest converting products, or other KPIs.

- Feature recommendations for related products, alternative products, or those products frequently purchased together.

B2B-specific features:
- Ingest and maintain large product catalogs while upholding system performance and scalability.
- Provide the ability to showcase customized pricing, product catalogs, and promotions based on business unit or other criteria.
- Manage user permissions based on purchasing role.

For B2B businesses and suppliers, the goal of product discovery is to make users' jobs as error-free and easy as possible, especially since the overall operational efficiency of their businesses is impacted by time savings. The status quo is that B2B buyers spend about a third of their time researching independently online — the less time they can spend researching online for products to support, the faster they can achieve business objectives.

Your vendor should also help you tackle unique challenges like returning correct products for complex measurement-based search queries and handling account-based purchasing, among others.

 Constructor

A holistic, AI-powered search tool like Constructor enables fast, efficient, and personalized product discovery that facilitates B2B buyers' jobs and helps you hit key business goals — now and into the future.

Use Case: Fast Filtering, Payment on Terms

A textile testing company is hired to test for color fastness for a new apparel line. The lab needs to order 500 pieces of a specific fabric type for testing. The buyer needs to be able to quickly find the exact fabric type, finish, color, threadcount, weave, and weight that their customer is using, either by quick ordering via SKU or by using the search and filter functionalities on the site. Once the exact fabric is found, the buyer needs to be able to place their order with their company terms: discounted shipping, reduced pricing for bulk orders, and 30-day payment terms.

Frictionless Commerce: Capturing Revenue from Your Online Channels

Gartner predicts that 80% of B2B sales interactions between suppliers and buyers are expected to occur in digital channels by 2025, so doubling down on digital commerce is vital for B2B organizations. To succeed, B2B companies are increasingly marrying the rising expectations of digitally-savvy buyers with B2B-specific features, which may include customizable products, buyer approval flows, and omnichannel selling.

Use Case: Shopping and Shipping at Scale

A marketing manager needs to purchase branded jackets for an upcoming event. To do so, they need to upload their logo and then add a number of sizes and quantities. Once they have compiled their order, they need to ship out jackets to each employee's home address. While billing is centralized, the marketing manager needs to identify where the product should be shipped by each order line. Once the order is placed, they need the ability to return to the website and see their order history for a record of the recipients. With multiple shipping options supported, the marketing manager can ship each product to multiple locations and track each shipment seamlessly.

Empowering B2B organizations behind the scenes to create B2C-like experiences, all the while leveraging customizable and extensible B2B-specific functionalities, is a truly composable commerce engine.

Composing B2B commerce

Creating frictionless journeys from search to loyalty no longer has to be a complex endeavor for B2B organizations, thanks to composable commerce. Unlike rigid legacy solutions, a composable approach enables businesses to select and integrate best-of-breed commerce components — such as search, checkout, and promotions — according to their needs. This legacy-to-composable shift means businesses have the flexibility and freedom to add, swap, and even discard components to meet their evolving business requirements and create outstanding customer experiences.

For the B2B sector, this shift represents an easier and faster route to digitize commerce across the entire buyer journey without the complexity and cost associated with legacy platforms.

Using an API-first, composable approach, managing components becomes plug-and-play: Integrating a new solution, such as search or payment method, becomes a much more straightforward and risk-free process for your business.

But that's not all: A composable approach also leverages the full power of cloud-native SaaS to achieve exceptional scalability and reduced costs. This is particularly important for B2B players to scale ecommerce performance during traffic peaks or high SKU processing times.

> **By 2024, the mantra for new SaaS will be 'composable API-first and API-only,' relegating traditional SaaS vendors as 'legacy.'**
>
> **Yefim Natis,** Distinguished VP Analyst, Gartner

The benefits for B2B companies moving to a composable approach are many:

- Become more adaptable and resilient to new customer demands and market change.
- Automate resource-intensive processes such as ordering.
- Enable omnichannel selling without friction.
- Scale the performance and speed of ecommerce.
- And innovate faster.

A leading platform like commercetools Composable Commerce for B2B enables manufacturers, distributors and wholesalers to deliver exceptional customer experiences across all channels at speed and scale.

Fundamentals Required for Digital Commerce

A composable, API-first commerce platform:
- Seamless integration with digital storefronts, systems of record (e.g., ERP, OMS), and fulfillment
- Omnichannel selling and backend integration with ERP and CRM systems.
- Customizable and extensible APIs: Insert custom logic, model data flexibly and integrate best-of-breed solutions with ease.
- Leverage business unit and user-group specific product catalogs, pricing, promotions, and purchasing rules.
- Support for complex, configurable, and customizable products.

Cloud-native SaaS:
- All commerce services in the cloud to eliminate dependencies on servers, including storage, hosting, scaling, etc.
- Automatic vendor updates and auto-scaling support a seamless commerce experience, even during traffic spikes.

Robust cart, order and fulfillment management:
- Cart freezes to retain pricing throughout complex approval scenarios.
- Creating a cart and placing an order on behalf of a business supported.
- Multiple shipping methods and locations supported.

Robust self-service and support for multi-layered organizations:
- Efficient buyer approval flows, quote generation, reorders, and subscriptions.
- Help customers implement purchasing checks and balances with buyer approval flows to ensure authorized purchases based on specific criteria (i.e., order totals, roles, etc.).
- Create, share, manage, and approve quotes in a fully automated manner.

Use Case: Quick Purchase with Approval

Architects in charge of building a new hotel need to purchase 350 identical toilets. They know the exact product. So, they want to be able to use a Quick Order to enter the SKUs and quantities. However, all purchases have to be approved by the property management company. The architects create the order request and then submit it to the property management company, which reviews, approves, and completes the order.

Generative AI and the B2B Buying Experience

Generative AI technology, like transformers and large language models (LLMs), have quickly multiplied the opportunities for optimizing and accelerating product purchasing. Modern product discovery tools like Constructor and commerce platforms such as commercetools have natively integrated robust AI solutions to offer faster and more customized shopping experiences, including:

- **Product data cleanup:** Product attribute enrichment and optimization to make product data more timely, relevant, and accurate.
- **More compelling product descriptions:** Product description creation and refinement based on brand, user, promotion, and performance.
- **Assisted shopping:** Intent-based recommendations and integrated shopping assistance to serve up products and services based on natural language prompts (e.g., "I need white, square, matte tiles to cover a 10x10' bathroom floor").

Generative AI tools within existing platforms and new technologies provide new levels of scalable, dynamic, and omnichannel buying experiences — without the time and resources previously required.

However, it's important to navigate the generative AI hype cycle. A pragmatic approach is to introduce AI tools with a proven track record of improving overall buyer experiences with composable, API-first foundations. Can the solution prove its value and ROI ahead of time? Have its features been A/B tested, and have they resulted in measurable lifts that matter to B2B businesses? Only then will B2B organizations truly advance their business objectives — while simultaneously steering clear of tools that put form over substance.

The Technology Foundations for the Evolution of B2B Buying

Creating a frictionless customer experience doesn't have to be a complex undertaking for B2B firms any longer. Utilizing a composable architecture-based approach, your business is best positioned to create, adapt and evolve its digital footprint across the buyer journey, no matter if they're exploring ways to boost product discovery and/or leverage generative AI opportunities.

Because composable platforms are built to be flexible, scalable, and interoperable, businesses can experiment and implement new technologies without disrupting daily operations, while releasing new features to respond to customer feedback or market changes.

For B2B leaders, this approach minimizes the risk associated with adopting new technologies. It also creates a culture of iterative optimization, where testing new features and functions to improve the shopping experience doesn't accrue technical debt while reducing total costs of ownership (TCO).

> **Composable business is a natural acceleration of the digital business that you live every day. It allows us to deliver the resilience and agility that these interesting times demand.**
>
> **Daryl Plummer,** Distinguished VP Analyst, Gartner

To support your digital journey, commercetools and Constructor provide a modular, easy-to-integrate, and AI-powered product discovery solution with a composable commerce platform under the hood.

This combined solution effectively reduces the distance between product discovery and checkout. In a few clicks, the B2B buyer can find the right products, get all the information needed, and check out without hassle. Together, **commercetools Composable Commerce for B2B** and **Constructor Product Discovery** allow B2B companies to deliver exceptional customer experiences across all channels, at scale.

Frictionless B2B Buying Experiences Start Here

commercetools

Constructor

commercetools is the leading composable commerce platform, allowing companies to dynamically tailor and scale shopping experiences across markets. We equip some of the world's largest businesses with tools to future-proof digital offerings, reduce risks and costs, and build outstanding experiences that drive revenue growth.

Headquartered in Munich, commercetools has led a global renaissance in digital commerce by combining cloud-native, technology-agnostic, independent components into a unique system that addresses specific business needs. We empower brands — including Audi, Danone, Eurorail, NBCUniversal, Sephora and Volkswagen Group — to stay ahead of changing consumer and buyer behavior.

To learn more, visit commercetools.com.

Constructor's holistic product discovery software allows B2B manufacturers, distributors, and wholesalers to create better purchasing experiences across distribution segments.

Our proprietary technology is built to handle the complexity of B2B ecommerce, from large catalogs to complex business models to easy implementation.

Evaluate Constructor on your own data with our free live value assessment:

See our proof schedule