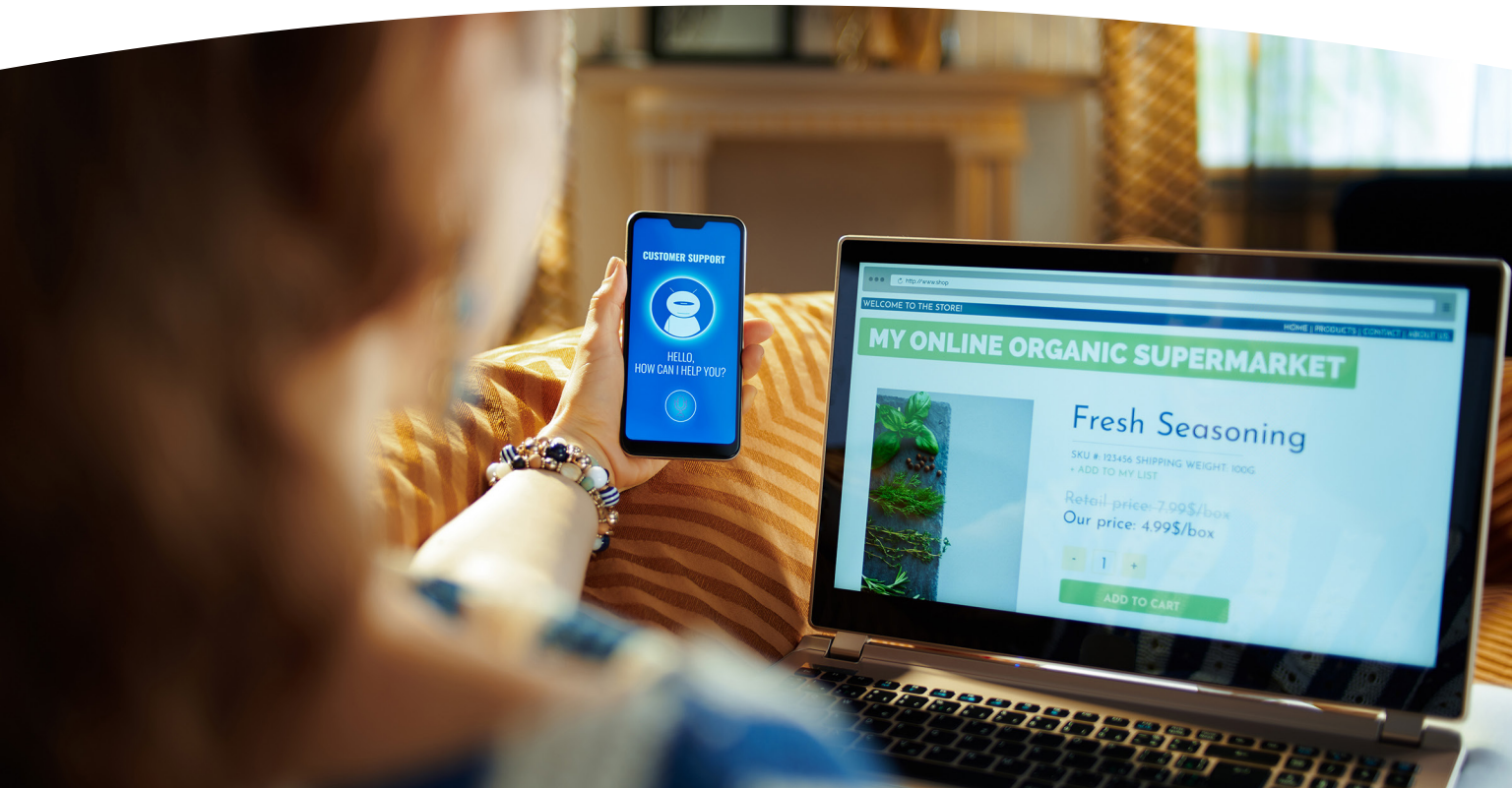


PACING B2B ECOMMERCE TRENDS

With B2B buyers more demanding than ever of a helpful ecommerce experience, B2B sellers are pushing ahead with more unified commerce with assistance from artificial intelligence.

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Human Element

Robust ecommerce capabilities help B2B companies grow their business

OVERVIEW

UNIFIED COMMERCE — DO IT TO COMPETE, WITH HELP FROM AI

As B2B ecommerce technology vendors build out their platforms to support broader and more helpful digital ecosystems, online B2B sellers use this technology to bring more value to their customers via unified commerce — the next level of highly personalized, helpful ecommerce. The alternative is falling far behind the competition. Fortunately, AI is providing them with some help along way.

With products ranging from laptops to data centers and computer network switches, and B2B and B2C customers across more than 180 markets and 60 languages worldwide, Lenovo needed a better way to help its customers find and purchase their items quickly.

The computer manufacturer and marketer realized it needed to upgrade its ecommerce site's search experience — a move that led to a 95% increase in revenue gained through search results.

“We index half a million records every 12 hours,” says Marc Desormeau, head of global search. “Everything from data feed and product information, pricing, catalogs, things we sell.”

“We’re using data captured from our search engagements to inform some of our investments in SEM by looking at customers who are coming to us organically,” he adds. “How are they then engaging with our own site search? How can we start joining some of that data to ultimately present a better experience?”

“So, both in terms of attention and awareness that the search platform is more than just a little box on the screen, it’s actually providing a lot of insights into our customers. People are starting to understand there’s some real data here that’s valuable, and we can use that to present our customers with a better experience.”

Lenovo upgraded its site search experience by replacing legacy technology with site search technology from Lucidworks, a company that it chose partly for its focus on using artificial intelligence in its technology applications.

In addition to helping customers find products — whether it’s a full-featured laptop for a graphic designer or a corporate IT manager seeking the right infrastructure for their company network — the new search application is going a long way toward smoothing out how Lenovo and its customers access information, he says.

Like other companies relying more on ecommerce to engage customers and grow sales, Lenovo faces the challenge of managing enormous data volume to provide a good CX. And it’s finding that digital commerce technology backed by AI is beginning to make a difference for the better.

AI A GOOD FIT FOR SITE SEARCH

To be sure, site search is emerging as a critical tool showing early gains from AI, digital commerce experts say. Yet AI is still in the early stages of emerging as a helpful tool.

Some ecommerce companies are hoping for “an easy button” to quick wins through AI technology, but “there’s way overhype on this,” says Paul do Forno, managing director, commerce practice, at global consultancy Deloitte Digital.



Marc Desormeau, head of global search, Lenovo

But AI-powered site search is showing some of the earliest real benefits in ecommerce, he adds.

“It works in the customized pricing and the customized products that only are applicable to a particular buyer, as opposed to showing the whole catalog,” do Forno says. “That’s where you see real-world cases of reducing friction for the buyer.”

Producing the most ecommerce benefits through AI and other technologies, however, also depends on the overall integrated digital ecommerce technology system and clean data that underlines a company’s operations.

“Customer data and sales data are both ideal platforms for applying AI, because you can identify customers at risk of churn, products that are ‘basket starters’ that attract customers or keep them coming back, and create intelligent customer segments for markets,” says Marta Dalton, vice president of data analytics and customer insight at Amyris, a health and beauty consumer brands manufacturer.

Experts say the more data AI can access and analyze regarding a customer’s interests and work responsibilities, the more valuable it will be in connecting customers with what they need to purchase.

“The predictive aspect of AI is going to understand more about who you are, what role you play, and what your purchasing history looks like,” says Nathan Schatz, a B2B ecommerce veteran who is the chief technology officer of Echidna, a digital agency for manufacturers and distributors. “And it’s just going to add to that. So you’ve got the combination of who I am as a consumer, regardless of B2B or B2C. But the system will also start to understand who I am once I log in, and how I’m tied to certain aspects” of supply and demand.

ROBUST ECOMMERCE CAPABILITIES HELP B2B COMPANIES GROW THEIR BUSINESS

An executive conversation with **Gary Goodman**, ecommerce strategist, Human Element



B2B companies must cater to their customers' demands to compete in today's B2B landscape. As B2B buyer demographics shift toward digital natives, the expectation for self-service online buying capabilities is growing exponentially. A helpful B2B ecommerce site is now table stakes. To discuss how robust ecommerce options will help B2B companies rise above the competition and continue to grow, DC360 B2B spoke with Gary Goodman, ecommerce strategist at Human Element.

Why are B2B ecommerce capabilities so important now?

More B2B buyers want to be able to learn about products and complete transactions without interacting with a salesperson. Companies that provide convenient ways for customers to quickly make purchases online will win out against their competitors. Business buyers are often demanding online access to:

- Custom pricing.
- Bulk purchases with tiered discounts.
- Instant access to relevant documentation.
- Options to quickly reorder common items they purchase regularly.
- Remote order and approval processes for goods.

How have advancements in technology offered B2B companies growth opportunities?

More efficient processes of order taking frees up human resources for higher quality interactions with clients. Less time spent on logistics means more time spent on strategy. Automated communication, collaboration and logistics control systems reduce the amount of sales lost to inventory issues or miscommunication. And improved analytics and AI help companies identify missed opportunities and roadblocks within their current technology that prevent further revenue growth.

How can they make the business case for implementing new ecommerce technologies?

For B2B businesses, having an online commerce solution is crucial, even if transactions aren't web-based. Without

an online presence, you lag and lose potential profit to competitors.

Creating an ecommerce site enhances efficiency, reduces costs, minimizes errors and elevates customer satisfaction through automated processes. Improved sales and marketing, reduced acquisition costs, and better retention result from commerce technologies for lead nurturing and follow-up. A well-structured commerce solution generates organic traffic, attracting new customers. Additionally, ecommerce opens new markets and lead funnels, fostering overall growth.

How can they overcome the challenges they currently face?

B2B companies should start with a broad view of their business and the expected landscape in their industry over the next few years. Then, they can build a roadmap of the capabilities they will need to succeed.




It's also essential to work with a partner, such as Human Element, who can help select a mix of technologies to meet their needs within their budget. There's no one-size-fits-all solution, but they could:

- Use off-the-shelf technologies well supported with third-party solutions.
- Customize only when they need to.
- Keep security in mind and prepare for potential threats to the infrastructure.
- Review their current business practices and make small adjustments to help simplify technology requirements.
- Pay attention to AI and automation and think proactively about how these technologies can improve responsiveness and reduce costs and human error.
- Measure everything to identify opportunities to improve.

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Organized, clean data is a critical foundation.

“The foundation for all of this activity is clean and structured data, meaning that you’ll want to invest time and resources in getting data to a single location, transforming it if necessary, and putting together a good structure to power AI models,” Dalton says, adding, “If you haven’t already looked into data engineering as an internal team or as an external service, this would be the time to do so.”

TUNING INTO BOTH BUYERS AND SELLERS

As ecommerce platform vendors provide built-in flexibility to offer more options to connect multiple applications, they’re targeting the needs of buyers and sellers, says Justin Racine, a former health care industry ecommerce executive who is principal, unified commerce, at global digital agency Perficient.

He asserts that digital commerce technology providers “recognize that not only do the B2B buyers want flexibility and curated experiences, but that the brands and B2B selling organizations themselves are also looking to have the same flexibility with their employees and give marketers or thought leaders the ability to pivot as they see fit with their selling and marketing strategies.”

That flexibility enables companies to quickly shift their selling or marketing efforts between channels, from self-service ecommerce to a sales rep armed with near real-time data via web tablet or smartphone on a customer’s buying behavior and account activity, inventory availability and profit margins.

“Unified commerce is really the path forward, and it’s separating itself out from omnichannel experiences and taking commerce even further,” Racine says.



Marta Dalton, vice president of data analytics and customer insight, Amyris

“Let’s say there’s a medical products sales rep visiting one of their hospital customers, and that customer says, ‘You know, we have 50 hospital beds that are about to be out of warranty, so we’re going to be doing a bid for them in probably two months or so,’” he says.

He suggests that the sales rep enter that information into their company’s CRM, which should be connected to all the other experience touchpoints that customers may encounter, including the ecommerce site, email marketing and customer service. As the customer shows interest in particular bed products or brands, the manufacturer — through the sales rep, email marketing or other channels — can reach out with helpful information about those and related products.

“That creates that connected commerce experience where it’s unique to that individual and their specific needs because of where they are within the buying cycle,” Racine says. “And that really is what the future of unified commerce and B2B looks like — and the level of personalization that these B2B brands should look to adopt because that will increase that close rate tenfold on that 50-hospital-bed order.” ■

MAKING GENERATIVE AI WORK FOR BETTER B2B CONTENT

Generative AI offers a new tool for attracting and converting today's demanding B2B buyers. But marketers face challenges in making Gen AI work, Forrester Research says in two new reports.

Facing a need to engage B2B buyers with effective online content while also dealing with an uncertain economy and limited resources, B2B marketers are exploring the promises of generative AI.

But while Gen AI is a formidable tool, it also presents challenges that marketers must overcome, Forrester Research Inc. says in two new reports.

“Marketers need content to engage audiences across the customer lifecycle,” Forrester says in the report, “Generative AI Ignites Change in B2B Content,” by principal analyst Lisa Gately and other analysts. “However, changing buyer dynamics make this a complex undertaking. B2B buyers are exerting more control over their experience, with self-guided interactions making up 51% of the total types of buyer interaction.”

GENERATIVE AI IN B2B MARKETING

Forrester also notes that 65% of B2B marketers say their companies are investigating, experimenting with, or already using AI to plan and produce content. The plethora of available AI tools, however, requires them to test multiple versions while capabilities and features “change at lightning speed,” Forrester says.

Those tools provide many advantages, Forrester notes in the report, “Generative AI: What It Means For B2B Marketing,” including:

- Generative AI tools help marketers think beyond personalizing to verticalizing, repurposing, repackaging, and refreshing content to meet customers’ needs. Marketers can move faster to create variations of content, and leverage real-time, AI-powered search to find assets or content components by querying a model fine-tuned on their internal data.
- Generative AI expands access to data, allowing non-technical marketers to perform analysis and generate insights using natural language. Gen AI can extract information from massive amounts of unstructured data — such as customers’ digital and recorded human interactions — that often hasn’t been used by marketers to understand buying behavior.
- From helping marketers move past the blank page or conveying ideas when language is a challenge, to automating and scaling content production processes, Gen AI opens new possibilities.

BUILDING EFFECTIVE AI STRATEGIES

To build effective AI strategies for developing content, Forrester advises B2B companies to align content strategy and use the same AI tools among product, marketing and sales teams.

“Organizations with low content maturity or a fragmented approach won’t achieve the intended impact when using Generative AI,” it says.

Forrester advises companies to “develop a clear view of your marketing organization’s content competencies and data management capabilities before adopting generative AI. Like any other form of automation, generative AI will amplify and accelerate what is happening now.”

Forrester also advises businesses to engage senior executives and content team members by identifying how generative AI can solve business problems. For example: using AI across multiple stages of the content lifecycle to repurpose, refresh and personalize it.

B2B marketers should also use AI to differentiate from the competition with content unique to their organization.

“Stories about customer, expert, or partner experiences ... and unique perspectives based on a company’s data or offerings will make content stand out by being specific and authentic,” Forrester says. ■

CASE STUDY: KELE INC.

AN INDUSTRIAL DISTRIBUTOR HARNESSSES NEW TECHNOLOGY AND AI TO DELIVER PERSONALIZED OMNICHANNEL EXPERIENCES

At Kele, a prominent manufacturer and distributor specializing in automated control products for commercial and industrial buildings, the integration of leading-edge, omnichannel personalization technologies enhanced with AI is proving to be a transformative force. With an ongoing evolution of its digital commerce technology ecosystem and strategic growth plan, Kele has already reaped substantial rewards in customer experience enhancement and revenue escalation.

In line with many B2B vendors, Kele Inc. confronts the significant challenge of ensuring a consistent omnichannel experience for customers with whom direct interactions have become less frequent, as noted by John Strawn, chief marketing officer. Strawn emphasizes the necessity for a more relevant customer experience in the evolving realm of B2B commerce.

“Failing to swiftly provide a relevant, personalized experience, whether through self-service ecommerce or telephone interactions, could result in missed opportunities to acquire new customer accounts or expand existing relationships,” Strawn says.

A critical driver behind that experience is a suite of advanced technologies capable of instantly recognizing customers and then presenting them with relevant products aligned with their

preferences. Kele boasts a comprehensive range of over 100,000 SKUs, catering to building automation systems governing operations such as HVAC, lighting, flow, and security in commercial and industrial settings.

Strawn notes that “compiling product and customer intent data across all sources and decisioning in real-time would have been impossible five years ago. AI serves as a pivotal tool in streamlining the connection between customers and these products, ensuring a swift and seamless experience to better understand your customers’ needs and serve them across channels.”

Stephen Rudolph, Kele’s chief technology officer, acknowledges the nascent stage of AI’s development. Nonetheless, he highlights its remarkable potential to impact sectors like marketing and software development, significantly amplifying the efficiency and productivity of respective teams.

The collaboration between Strawn and Rudolph, both with prior experience at FedEx Corp.’s fedex.com, has been instrumental in advancing Kele’s ecommerce and omnichannel capabilities. Alongside tech solutions from industry giants like Salesforce Inc. and Microsoft, Kele’s use of AI technology exists in pieces and parts of many of the platforms they harness, bolstering its ecommerce ecosystem.

Strawn emphasizes the pervasive integration of AI across Kele’s initiatives, as the company executes a multifaceted strategy encompassing personalized online content, refined technology development processes, comprehensive management of product data, and customer engagement.

“We’re seeing that AI applies at multiple levels,” Rudolph says, adding: “We’re very much in the early stages, but it’s very real.



John Strawn, chief marketing officer, Kele Inc.

There are some tangible examples of where we're starting to see AI make a difference.”

One noteworthy example involves the fusion of AI with sales and customer relationship management technologies, strategically aimed at boosting conversion rates and tackling abandoned shopping carts — especially those with a high-value.

Upon a customer's visit to the ecommerce site, Kele recognizes customer behavior pertaining to their searches, click data, viewed products and time spent on specific pages. Strawn elaborates on the creation of a customer profile enriched with interests and preferences, empowering an AI-driven technology to score the customer's affinity and interest by brand, category, SKU preferences, and more. This framework allows the technology to make informed suggestions and provide next best offers/actions based on the customer's interactions, enhancing their experience.

In cases of cart abandonment, the gathered data creates next-best offers/actions for the sales rep to better serve the customer. The sales rep is also passed relevant information such as the job role, cart contents and value, interests, affinities, and spending history. This aids in prioritizing follow-up actions based on customer engagement.

“For a customer who left behind a \$20,000 cart, immediate assistance is crucial,” Strawn says. “We aim to seize the opportunity to provide a tailored solution, as their abandonment might be due to a question they had about a customer's application and whether or not the part was the right fit. In this case, a sales rep needs to help them in a more consultative manner.”

This engagement data is seamlessly integrated into a data cloud, harmonized with other data sources, including a suite of marketing

and personalization technologies, and ultimately pushed into Kele's CRM software, which is accessible to sales representatives. AI further augments this information by suggesting products based on recent clicks, often leading to the conversion of abandoned carts into successful transactions. Strawn emphasizes the swift continuity enabled by this AI-assisted process.

"If we leave the customer (in need of help) to self-serve in this scenario, our conversion rate may be 4% as is typical in ecommerce," Strawn says. "If we pass the relevant cart data to sales with a personalized offer and they get the customer on the phone, we increase our conversion to 30%."

Strawn and Rudolph have already begun to see the expansive and effective nature of AI-fueled advancements, driven by the vast amounts of data available to online merchandising, marketing, and development teams. AI empowers these teams to elevate their performance significantly, transcending prior limitations.

Rudolph draws parallels to the cloud revolution, where IT infrastructure underwent a similar transformation. While he affirms that ongoing AI development, combined with its broader utility, is poised to usher in a new era of opportunity, it also introduces new challenges and considerations. Furthermore, Rudolph envisions a future where online retailers can harness AI to swiftly deliver personalized content and information to customers through avenues such as product recommendations and customer service interactions.

"This shift toward greater efficiency holds immense potential for next-level growth, particularly during this developing, early stage of AI integration," Rudolph says.

That next level, Rudolph adds, means online sellers will have a new ability to access and analyze massive volumes of data to influence real-time customer experiences.

“The challenge for the digital world will be balancing the use of AI to create helpful customer experiences and ensuring safe and responsible data practices,” Rudolph says.

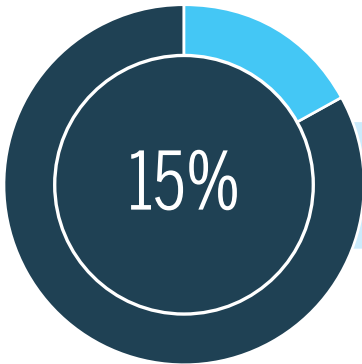
“Kele stands at the precipice of a transformative era, one that promises to redefine customer engagement and operational efficiency through the strategic assimilation of AI,” Strawn says. “This transformation is poised to not only propel Kele’s growth trajectory but also reshape the industry’s approach to harnessing data for informed decision-making and unparalleled customer service.” ■

AI TRENDS AND BEST PRACTICES

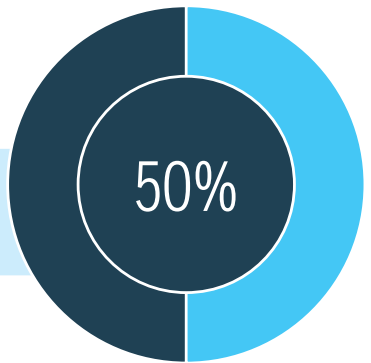
Tips from ecommerce veterans Marta Dalton, vice president of data analytics and customer insight at health and beauty products manufacturer Amyris, and Karie Daudt, director, global commerce, HCLSoftware.

- ✓ **START WITH LEGAL.** Definitely involve your company's legal department to ensure you adhere to any company AI policies.
- ✓ **IDENTIFY YOUR GOALS FOR AI,** be selective in what you're trying to accomplish, and incorporate human intervention to ensure you're using AI correctly.
- ✓ **PULL DATA ON NEW PRODUCTS** through AI from dozens or even thousands of suppliers and highlight those products to your channel partners and customers.
- ✓ **HELP BUYERS OF HIGHLY TECHNICAL, COMPLEX EQUIPMENT** identify and purchase all the components they need and that they are authorized to purchase.
- ✓ **MATCH DISTRIBUTOR CLIENTS WITH** the products and materials they're authorized to deliver in the operating regions.
- ✓ **BUY VS. BUILD.** You can build your own use cases for AI — like customer sentiment analysis, supply chain optimization, or multi-touch marketing attribution, but you'd need a large group of data engineers and data scientists to do so. "Buying" these capabilities by partnering with software vendors (either ones you already use or looking for new ones) is likely the way to go, as they're investing a lot of time/money/resources in building top-of-the-line capabilities in their area of expertise.
- ✓ **SEEK QUICK WINS:** Look for quick wins to show the value of AI — chatbots or personalization systems (both of which can be purchased off the shelf from existing software providers) and enhancing product data are both great examples.

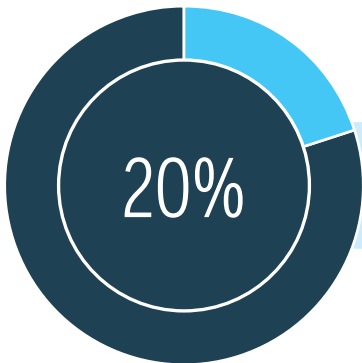
MOVING TOWARD UNIFIED COMMERCE



The share of B2B organizations that, by 2024, will use digital commerce platforms to support both customers and sales reps across all sales activities.



The reduction in IT costs for managing SaaS-based digital technology, thanks to the adoption of composable architecture with best-of-breed applications.



The minimum uplift in total revenue generated by companies offering customers a unified commerce experience.

Source: Gartner Inc.

GEN AI'S PROJECTED GROWTH



SECURITY

The main concern of companies wary of AI.

BUSINESS OPERATIONS IMPROVEMENT

The most commonly expected impact of AI.

Source: Lucidworks
 *Generative AI refers to a subset of artificial intelligence techniques that focus on the generation of new, original content based on patterns and examples found in existing data. Gen AI's key feature is its ability to autonomously create content such as images, videos, music and text. In comparison, traditional AI is primarily used for analysis and prediction.

A SAMPLING OF WHAT'S NEW FROM ECOMMERCE SOFTWARE VENDORS

To help companies connect with customers and drive commerce across multiple touchpoints, ecommerce software providers routinely upgrade their offerings. Here's a look at several recent developments.

Salesforce has released several new applications in its Commerce Cloud ecommerce platform.

The new apps are designed to support sales, customer service and marketing, using artificial intelligence and integration with Salesforce's technology customer relationship management to drive a personalized customer experience, Salesforce says.

"With the latest Commerce Cloud apps for sales, service, and marketing, businesses can take an all-encompassing approach to commerce, transforming every customer touchpoint into a transaction opportunity," says Michael Affronti, general manager and senior vice president of Salesforce Commerce Cloud. "When coupled with data, AI, and CRM, brands gain the ability to anticipate customer needs and build faster, more seamless buying experiences that drive sales."

OUTDOOR BRAND YETI BUILDS A BETTER CX

Vab Dwivedi, vice president of ecommerce at outdoor drinkware and apparel company YETI Holdings Inc., says Salesforce Commerce Cloud's AI-powered capabilities, including data insights and automation, have helped YETI "build a more consistent and personalized customer experience and grow our business."

Austin, Texas-based YETI is a designer, retailer and distributor of outdoor products ranging from coolers and drinkware to carrying bags and apparel. For its fiscal first half ended July 1, YETI reported net sales of \$705.4 million, including \$393.4 million in direct-to-consumer sales and \$312.0 million in its wholesale channel.

Here's what Salesforce is offering with its new Commerce Cloud embedded apps and integrations:

- A self-service Reorder Portal designed with Salesforce's Einstein AI technology that lets customers view their order history details and reorder products without the help of a sale rep.
- An Order Support application with connections to customer service agents, bots, self-service options, and educational content, providing opportunities for cross-selling and upselling while also assisting customers with order management requests.
- A Pay Now payments feature, which lets companies forward "Pay Invoice Now" links when ready to customers via such avenues as customer service chats and field service communications.

In addition, Salesforce plans to soon release Snapchat for Commerce, which will let companies create ads in Commerce Cloud

apps that will direct customers to suggested products available in an online store.

CAPITALIZING ON THE UNIFIED COMMERCE TREND

Salesforce's new Commerce Cloud apps and integrations address a growing need among online sellers and their customers to connect through more effective unified commerce systems that ease the purchasing process, ecommerce experts say.

"Increasingly, organizations are realizing the benefit of features outside of a standard ecommerce checkout flow," says Lori McDonald, president and CEO of Brilliance Business Solutions, a Milwaukee-based digital agency that helps manufacturers and distributors implement and sell through digital commerce technology and strategies. She notes that other vendors are also offering more comprehensive technology applications, including Optimizely and BigCommerce:

- BigCommerce's B2B Edition is designed to make it easier for salespeople to generate quotes, and it provides invoice management (including viewing and paying full or partial invoice payments).
- Optimizely Configured Commerce now offers Vendor Managed Inventory, which allows their customers to manage their inventory using a mobile app and to automatically reorder replenishments. This creates more value for the customer, and it increases loyalty and revenue for the merchant offering it, McDonald says.

In the AI space, McDonald notes that Amelia (Amelia.ai) offers conversational AI that can get customers answers to questions “beyond what you would normally expect a live chat to be able to do, including providing information on product returns and order status.

“Consider how customers interact with your company today and what are common activities they need help with,” she adds. “It could be reordering a product, ordering frequently used products, returning a product, getting information on order status, or viewing and paying outstanding invoices. Some ecommerce platforms build these features into their product, others enable them through a composable approach and integrations to other applications. Which approach is best for you will depend on your current technology stack, your budget, and your strategy.”

Justin Racine, principal, unified commerce strategy, at digital agency Perficient, a global digital consultancy for B2B and B2C companies, says brands are showing strong demand for “curated, enhanced ecommerce ordering ... as their consumers continue to drive multichannel ordering opportunities.”

“Unified commerce puts the customer in the driver’s seat of their own journey,” he adds. “Based on purchases, customer behavior, content engagement, a brand can curate future experiences that are tailored specifically to that individual versus putting them in a cohort of other customers. He adds that Adobe Inc. has also been integrating technology applications for “personalized, curated customer experiences.”

“The integrated, unified approach is the way of the future for what exceptional commerce experiences look like,” Racine says. ■

ABOUT THE EDITOR

Paul Demery is editor of Digital Commerce 360 | B2B. Prior to DC360B2B, he was managing editor of Internet Retailer magazine. In earlier work, he was editor-in-chief/associate publisher of Electronic Commerce World magazine, which covered business-to-business applications of internet technology in multiple industries; he also covered various industries for other magazines and newspapers.



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