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DIGITAL B2B
COMMERCE 360

A BLUEPRINT FOR B2B TECHNOLOGY

From configure-price-quote systems to marketplace connections to AI-powered site search, flourishing B2B companies are deploying digital technology that connects with their customers and grows sales.

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Compliments of

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COVER STORY

FORGING PROFITABLE TECHNOLOGY PLANS FOR B2B COMMERCE

B2B companies like heavy equipment manufacturer Rotochopper Inc. and plumbing products provider Bradley Corp. are devising the right mix of digital technology — including configure-price-quote systems and headless commerce — to improve customer experience and build sales.

At Granite Partners, a holding company for 10 manufacturers and distributors that sell complex products and systems — ranging from biological products for life sciences laboratories to heavy equipment designed to trash wood and other materials — multifaceted digital commerce and business management technology are crucial to long-term growth.

Granite's portfolio companies include Rotochopper Inc., which manufactures massive machines that shred wood and other landscape material; Microbiologics Inc., which develops and manufactures biological products for life sciences laboratories, manufacturers, and suppliers; and All Flex Solutions, which makes custom flexible electronic printed circuits used in the medical, military, aerospace and other industries. Each of these companies already engages in digital commerce on their corporate websites.

A FAST PURCHASE PROCESS FOSTERS GROWTH

“We’re acquiring growing and profitable companies,” says Rick Bauerly, founder and CEO. “We generally enhance their growth and their profitability through greater investments in people and



Microbiologics Inc., which develops and manufactures biological products, is among Granite Partner's portfolio companies.

process and systems, and we tend to grow in the 20%-plus range each year as a portfolio.”

Critical to carrying out that growth strategy is helping Granite’s portfolio companies — each of which does about \$100 million or more a year in sales — provide a fast and accurate purchasing process for customers buying complex products and systems.

That’s why Granite is rolling out digital technology that connects back-end enterprise resource planning (ERP) systems with customer-facing interfaces. This set-up will foster sales by providing customer-facing information on available products and pricing.

At a time when the market disruptions of recent years are pressuring B2B sellers to serve both new and prior customers more quickly and efficiently, Granite is like other companies who are deploying a roadmap of digital technology applications designed to increase their relevancy and speed in giving buyers exactly what they want.

That’s quite a challenge in B2B commerce. Connecting time-crunched, B2B buyers with the right products or support documents can require using the latest technologies — including practical deployments of artificial intelligence, data management and configure-price-quote systems — to streamline a complicated process of purchasing products and equipment available in thousands of configurations.



Connecting B2B buyers with the right products can require using the latest technologies to streamline purchasing equipment available in thousands of configurations.

TAKING A DEEP DIVE INTO PROFITABILITY

Moreover, B2B sellers are using these technologies along with business intelligence, machine learning and internet-of-things (IoT)



Companies are using business intelligence to take “a deep dive into understanding the profitability by job, by customer, by grouping of customers, by grouping of products.”

—Mark Stevens, principal and manufacturing analyst, Wipfli

technology to better understand how well they’ve satisfied customer demand and produced profitable customer relationships, says Mark Stevens, a principal and manufacturing analyst at Wipfli, a consulting and accounting firm. Companies are using business intelligence to gain insights on the profitability of different types of customers and of the services they provide and the products they produce, he says.

“They’re taking a deep dive into understanding the profitability by job, by customer, by grouping of customers, by grouping of products,” Stevens says.

This process often helps manufacturers understand what has made some customer relationships unprofitable while others were profitable. One common lesson learned, Stevens notes, is how disrupted supply chains may have affected the availability and cost of critical materials used to produce popular products — information companies need to plan production and pricing.

Companies can then decide to fill supply chain gaps or switch to more profitable products and customers — and directly engage customers through self-service ecommerce and sales reps with information on products and pricing designed to both satisfy customers and produce higher profit margins.



Bring the B2C ecommerce shopping experience to your B2B business

An executive conversation
with **Ben Lorenz**,
co-founder, Human Element

B2B companies were only slowly adopting ecommerce strategies before 2020. But COVID-19 came along and forced many to launch or expand digital capabilities quickly. Now, as the pandemic dust settles, companies have time to assess their current systems and make improvements. To discuss how B2B companies can compete in the next phase of business by addressing the digital commerce interests and needs of their customers, Digital Commerce 360 spoke with Ben Lorenz, co-founder at Human Element.

What are some important B2B ecommerce technology trends?

Many ecommerce platform providers, such as Adobe and BigCommerce, are trying to elevate B2B ecommerce. In the past 10 years, B2C ecommerce technology has really matured. With the onset of COVID, a lot of B2B businesses struggled to operate while everyone was working from home. As a result, many platforms began enhancing the types of technology — in terms of features, functionality, and accessibility — they bring to the B2B audience, essentially translating the B2C shopping experience for the B2B customer. Many of these features are centered on the idea of working from home — remote workers being able to log into the back-end system and manage customers, place orders on behalf of customers, and see past order history so they can respond to changing buying trends.

How is technology helping companies stand out from competitors?

B2B companies are becoming more data driven about their decisions. They're beginning to focus on tracking data and customer trends, then mixing that data with data from other systems such as a marketing tool, CRM or ERP. Integrations with ERP systems used to be limited to enterprise-size companies with big budgets. Now, these integrations can happen pretty easily, even for mid-market companies.

What strategies do the most successful B2B companies use to excel at ecommerce?

The most successful companies have been able to connect their marketing systems — email marketing and pay-per-click ads, for example — to their ecommerce system. They're running data analytics on each of those pieces of software, combining the results and developing customer insights. For example, the data might show them that when it rains in Florida, they sell more umbrellas. Then, the business can immediately respond by pushing promotions for umbrellas to their Florida customers. Aggregating the data and gleaned insights help businesses make better business decisions.




How can they put these strategies in place?

To implement the right technology and ensure success, B2B companies should find a partner they can trust. Human Element, for example, works with companies to determine where they fit in the acquisition lifecycle. We build a systems map, defining their current state and future state — addressing their business goals. We determine what software to implement, the best way to execute the project, and whether there are any gaps we need to address along the way. Then we execute — building the ecommerce system and integrating it with the ERP or any third-party system they have. When that's done, we go into maintenance mode for continuous improvement. At the end of the day, your ecommerce system needs to support your business and meet your customers where they are.

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HOW BRADLEY CORP. ENGAGES CUSTOMERS

Providing more useful and accurate content on products and services addresses at least two core demands in today's competitive commerce. For one, they quickly usher prospective buyers to the point where they learn enough about complex products to consider making a purchase. Second, they expedite the cycle time from product discovery to a completed sales transaction.

And with the pressures of disrupted supply chains during the recent pandemic-affected years, buyers and sellers are often even more concerned about completing transactions for the right products quickly before a seller's supply runs out and the buyer heads elsewhere.

Speed in helping channel partners and end customers make and complete purchasing decisions has also been a boon to Bradley Corp., which manufactures commercial washroom accessories and industrial safety equipment like eye-wash stations deployed in customized large-scale corporate installations. Based in the Milwaukee suburb of Menomonee Falls, Wisconsin, Bradley sells through a network of independent sales reps and distributors for customers ranging from Boeing Co. to Walmart Inc. to The Coca-Cola Co. Bradley and its channel partners fulfill orders from a California distribution center and from a nationwide network of consignment warehouses located near major customers.

Bradley manufactures industry safety products like eyewash stations.



HELPING DISTRIBUTORS AND REPS TACKLE PROJECTS

Among its biggest challenges: Handling thousands of requests from sales reps, distributors, and customers for such information as available products, product literature and specification sheets, pricing and shipping status. Bradley's distributors need quick and thorough access to this information to bid on projects. A single sales rep, for example, is typically responsible for about 200 customers, and the rep needs quick access to product and order status information to determine how well they're meeting their sales goals along with customer expectations — and how they may need to react to order disruptions.

Bradley needed its ecommerce platform to make it easier for sales reps as well as distributors and its own customer service agents to quickly access product and shipping information through digital self-service — without having to rely heavily on phone calls.

In addition to managing accurate product information from each supplier, Bradley must also adhere to construction industry categories, including such product groups as plumbing, electrical, and safety. And as the company grew through acquisition of other companies and added to its product lines, it saw the need for a highly flexible commerce technology platform.



Bradley's sales reps, distributors, and customers need quick and thorough access to product information.



“When you’re dealing with independent sales reps, they want to know product availability quickly because they’re trying to get through their project.”

—Dave Leannah, vice president of information technology, Bradley Corp.

“That was important to us because we didn’t know what we would be connecting to,” says Dave Leannah, vice president of information technology.

Bradley’s legacy ecommerce platform at the time, however, made it extremely difficult to manipulate the software code to enhance and quicken the required transfer of information on inventory, pricing, and order status from the company’s back-end Epicor ERP software, he says. For example, Bradley needed a better way to identify the inventory center nearest to a customer’s location to provide the fastest fulfillment and share shipping and delivery schedules.

“When you’re dealing with independent sales reps, they want to know product availability quickly because they’re trying to get through their project,” Leannah says. Moreover, many reps these days want to provide service “better than Amazon.” 📍

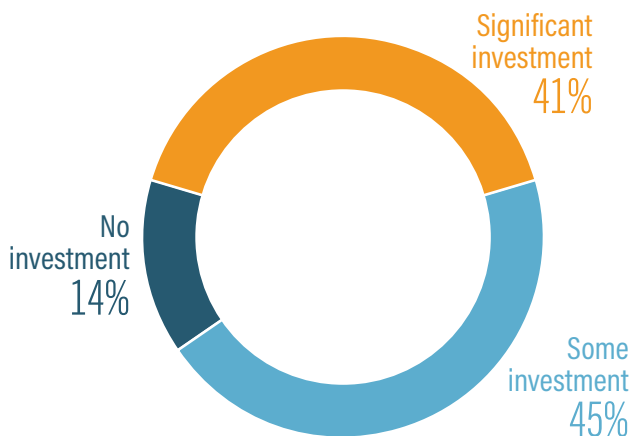
TECH RESEARCH

EYES ON NEW ECOMMERCE TECHNOLOGY

B2B SELLER INSIGHTS

MOST B2B SELLERS PLAN TECH INVESTMENTS

What level of investment will you make in your ecommerce platform in 2022?

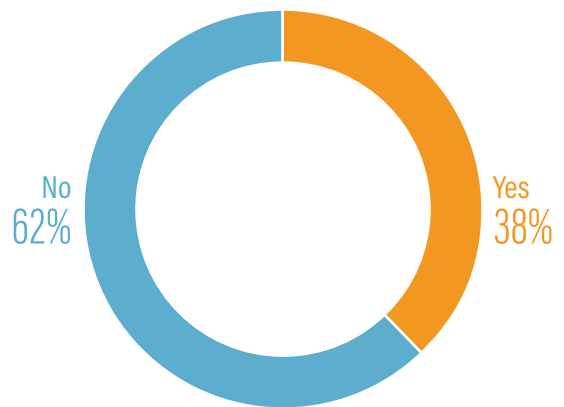


86% of B2B sellers planned to make at least some investment in their ecommerce platform in 2022.

B2B SELLER INSIGHTS

'WE WANT NEW ECOMMERCE PLATFORMS'

Are you looking to switch or upgrade your ecommerce platform in 2022?



38% of B2B sellers planned to switch or upgrade their ecommerce platform in 2022.

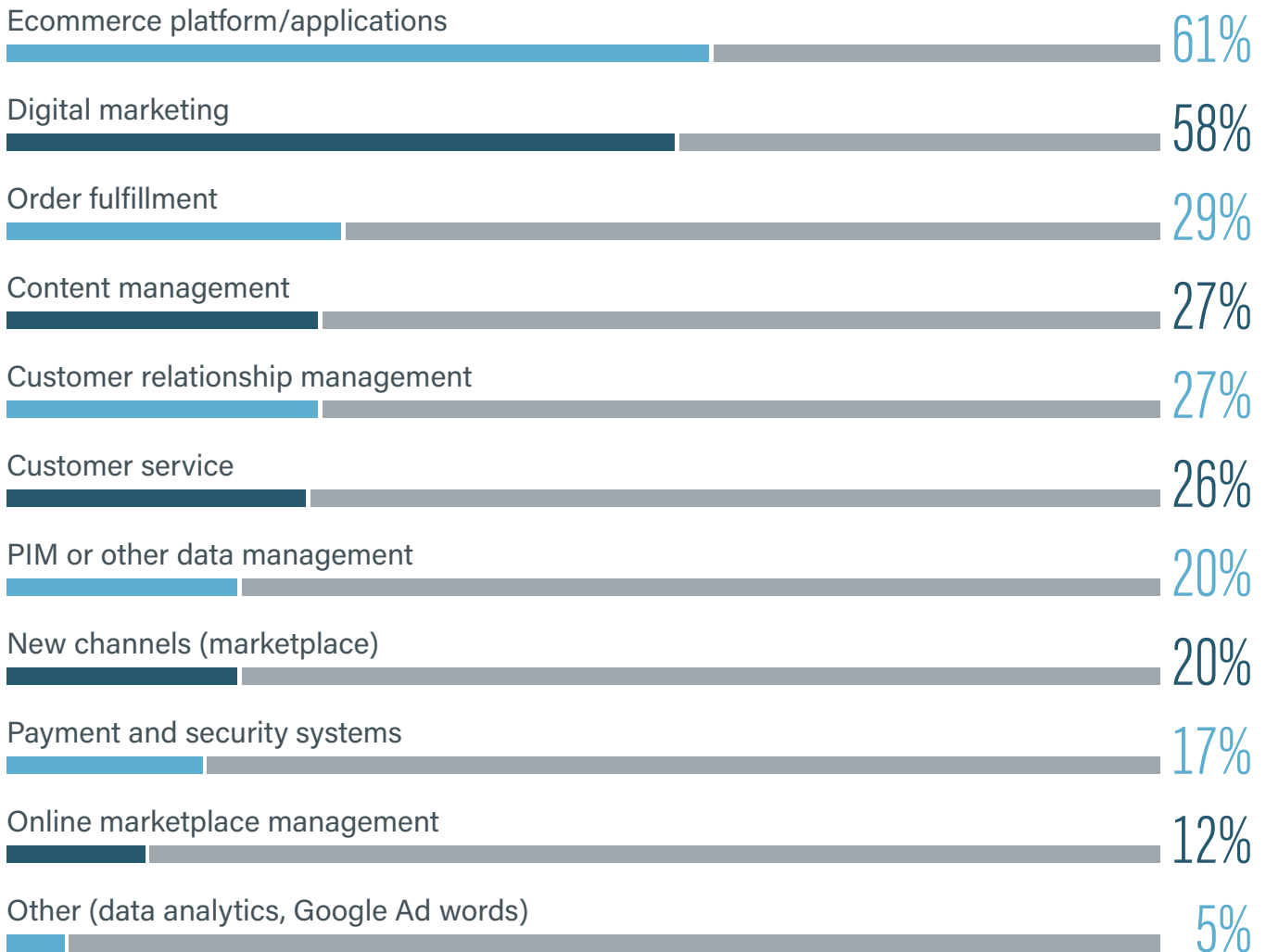
Source: Digital Commerce 360 B2B readiness survey of 66 sellers, January 2022



B2B SELLER INSIGHTS

MAKING THE SWITCH

What are your ecommerce technology budget priorities over the next year? (Top three priorities)



More than half of B2B merchants identified ecommerce platforms/applications and digital marketing as top-three investments for 2022.

Source: Digital Commerce 360 B2B readiness survey of 66 sellers, January 2022

FOR THE FULL REPORT, PLEASE VISIT [DIGITAL COMMERCE 360](#)

ABOUT DIGITAL COMMERCE 360

Digital Commerce 360, formerly Internet Retailer, has been a global leader in retail and B2B ecommerce research and media for over two decades. Our organization provides daily news, trend analysis, and competitive data to a vast community of executives, retailers, financial firms, manufacturers and more. Our team of experienced journalists and researchers publish a multitude of products each year, including dozens of research reports, newsletters, charts and infographics, webinars, live events, and data on thousands of ecommerce companies through its Digital Commerce 360 Research brand. We also founded groundbreaking ecommerce products and events, including Internet Retailer magazine, the Top 500 Guide, the Internet Retailer Conference & Exhibition (IRCE) and, most recently, the EnvisionB2B Conference & Exhibition.

ABOUT DIGITAL COMMERCE 360 B2B

Digital Commerce 360 B2B covers all aspects of how businesses sell to business, government, and other institutional clients via the web, providing intelligence to the executives, managers and professionals at manufacturers, retailers, wholesalers and distributors. We provide business intelligence and industry leading content through research, newsletters, and B2B ecommerce reports focused on trends, marketplaces, technologies, and industry best practices. Plus, the team behind our EnvisionB2B Conference & Exhibition.

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