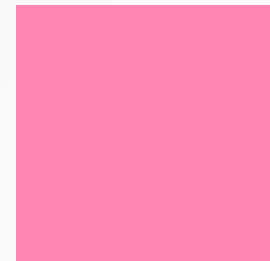


Driving Digital Growth in the B2B Customer Journey



How B2B Companies Are Driving Cross-Functional Alignment to Capitalize on Buying Behavior

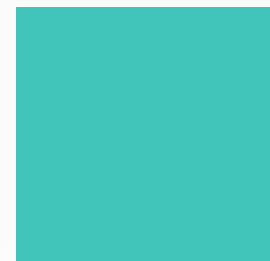
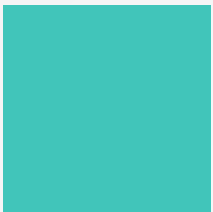


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Executive Summary ■

B2B buying behavior is now aligned with consumer buying behavior—there is an increasing demand for digital sales and interactions. Many B2B buyers are now digital natives and expect the same level of speed, personalization, and intuitiveness they’ve become accustomed to when making purchases for themselves.

B2B companies must drive digital growth in the customer journey, especially as younger buyers begin to take control of company budgets.

According to Gartner, B2B buyers already only spend 17% of their total purchase journey with a sales rep, and 44% of millennial B2B buyers prefer no sales rep interaction at all.¹

This report explores how B2B companies are driving cross-functional alignment to expand digital growth and capitalize on changing B2B buying behavior. It also provides readers with details about the latest innovations in B2B sales and customer journey development.

¹ Ramazwami, Rama. “Future of Sales 2025: Deliver the Digital Options B2B Buyers Demand.” Gartner. <https://www.gartner.com/smarterwithgartner/future-of-sales-2025-deliver-the-digital-options-b2b-buyers-demand>

About the Respondents



The WBR Insights research team surveyed 100 leaders from B2B companies across the U.S. and Canada to generate the results featured in this report.

In each case, about one-third of the respondents are B2B manufacturers, B2B distributors, or both B2B manufacturers and distributors.

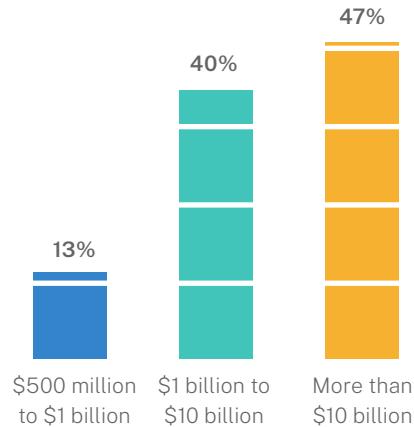
What type of company do you represent?



- 34% B2B manufacturer
- 33% Both B2B manufacturer and B2B distributor
- 33% B2B distributor

At 47%, almost half of the companies in the study make more than \$10 billion in annual revenue. Another 40% make \$1 billion to \$10 billion.

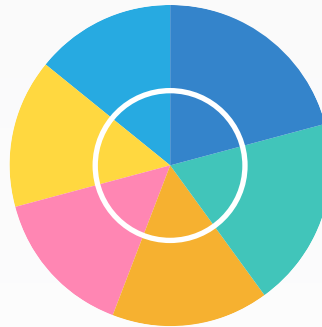
What is your company's annual revenue?





The respondents occupy roles in sales (21%), marketing (19%), eCommerce (16%), business (15%), strategy (15%), and digital (14%).

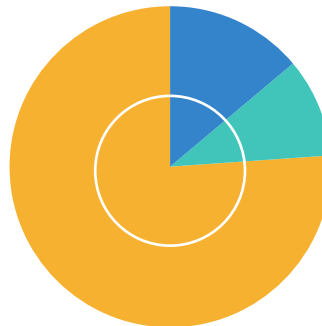
What is your role?



- 21% Sales
- 19% Marketing
- 16% eCommerce
- 15% Business
- 15% Strategy
- 14% Digital

Most of the respondents are directors (76%). The remaining respondents are vice presidents (14%) or department heads (10%).

What is your seniority?

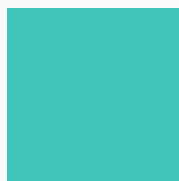


- 14% Vice President
- 10% Head
- 76% Director

Key Insights ■

Among the respondents:

- **33%** are not very satisfied with their organization's **ability to provide an excellent digital buying experience** to customers — 41% are only somewhat satisfied.
- **90%** say the **demand for digital B2B buying experiences has increased** either somewhat (54%) or substantially (36%) over the past two years.
- The **most important solutions and technologies** to their customers' digital purchasing journeys are:
 - Supply chain management systems (87%)
 - CRM solutions (76%)
 - Third-party eCommerce platforms (53%)
 - Mobile and smartphone apps (51%)
- **40%** claim their customers have **difficulty finding what they're looking for** when making a B2B eCommerce purchase at least somewhat often.
 - Among only these respondents, the two most common issues causing this problem are limited search functionality (60%) and lack of personalization (60%).
- **72%** believe **AI will make their work more accurate**, while 63% believe it will speed up their output.
- **80%** believe it is very important to have a **rich API library** that easily integrates with their ERP, CRM, payment gateway, content management, and other systems.
- **91%** believe **built-in marketing automation capabilities** that leverage customer data to automate targeted email campaigns are at least somewhat beneficial.





7 Ways Artificial Intelligence will Reshape B2B Ecommerce

By Joel Farquhar
VP Architecture, Pivotree

In the ever-evolving landscape of ecommerce, staying ahead of the curve is crucial. Generative AI sets itself apart from traditional machine learning by creating new content rather than making predictions based on existing data. While AI is developing into a transformative power in the ecommerce sector, transparency is key — reliable providers showcase technology, real results, and technical expertise to verify AI authenticity. Industry leaders are actively seeking substantive ways to harness AI capabilities and elevate their operations.

1. Rapid Integration of Generative AI

Generative AI opens up a realm of opportunities for ecommerce directors, offering potential benefits that directly influence revenue, customer experience, and operational efficiency. The opportunities are diverse, including product enrichment and content creation, customer service and AI chatbots, personalized product recommendations, image manipulation and creation, and specific avenues tailored to retailers' needs. In the context of B2C retailers, generative AI can enhance customer experience and personalization, while in the B2B sphere, it can streamline intricate processes like product information management and CPQ logic.

2. Elevating the Customer Experience through AI

Generative AI enhances the customer experience in numerous ways, such as real-time personalization. AI can customize experiences and adapt to customer preferences through developing real-time personalizations, like creating individualized styling and grocery lists.

Additionally, generative AI enables interactive product visualization for customers to digitally inspect products as immersive 3D models, transcending the limitations of conventional product images. Furthermore, the evolving understanding of emotion by AI introduces improved customer service through the recognition and appropriate response to customer moods and emotions.

3. Revolutionizing Chatbots and Customer Service

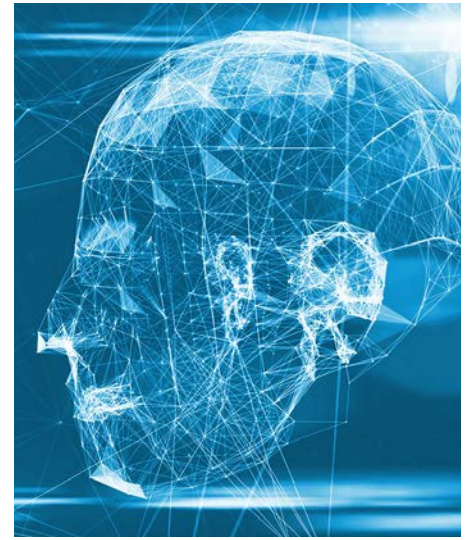
Generative AI revolutionizes AI-driven chatbots, offering human-like interactions. This technology goes beyond scripted responses, with context comprehension and memory, improved multilingual support, and continuous learning for enhanced responses. Integrating with other systems allows for accurate real-time information sharing.

4. Generative AI's Role in Back-End Operations

Beyond customer-facing applications, generative AI transforms back-end operations. It proves invaluable in product information management, efficient inventory forecasting, and supply chain management. AI's efficiency in data normalization, transformation, and classification streamlines these processes, offering better insight into demand forecasting.

5. Deploying Generative AI in Ecommerce Strategies

For ecommerce managers keen on adopting generative AI, exploring existing applications is a starting point. While customers are already exploring OpenAI's ChatGBT and other LLM offerings from Google, Amazon and Microsoft, there are other commercially available products claiming to leverage AI. Dresma for photo optimization, Liveperson for AI chatbots, Vui-ai for personalization and image creation, Rich Relevance (Algonomy) for personalization and product recommendations, Emersys for customer engagement and personalized marketing and Revionics for optimizing pricing strategies. However, foundational AI understanding is crucial, along with ethical considerations. Training should focus on the organization's needs and existing skills.



Deploying generative AI requires a strategic approach. Identify business goals and challenges, prioritize areas that require labor-intensive tasks, and evaluate existing solutions. Pilot projects help assess viability, scalability, and ROI. Collaboration with AI specialists offers expert insights.

6. Balancing AI Autonomy and Human Oversight

While generative AI enhances decision-making, maintaining human oversight is vital. AI responses lack real-world experience and can hallucinate or exhibit biases. Striking the right balance between AI automation and human judgment is crucial for effective decision-making.

7. Navigating the Future: AI's Impact on the Workforce

Generative AI's impact on jobs is transformative. Routine and mundane tasks may be automated, leading to job displacement. However, new opportunities will emerge, with humans and AI collaborating to enhance productivity.

Generative AI's potential in ecommerce is limitless. From improving customer experience to revolutionizing operations, this technology offers a world of possibilities. By understanding its applications, exploring existing solutions, and embracing strategic implementation, ecommerce directors can harness generative AI's power to stay ahead in an ever-evolving digital landscape.

Pivotree enables B2B organizations to design, build, and manage frictionless commerce experiences for their customers.

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The Current State of B2B Digital Purchasing



The realm of B2B commerce has witnessed a significant shift towards online purchasing. With traditional face-to-face transactions becoming less prevalent, businesses are seeking to understand and adapt to the new norms of customer buying behaviors, and many are using examples from the thriving consumer eCommerce sector as a blueprint.

Indeed, plenty of B2B companies have in the past said they wanted to create an “Amazon-like” experience for buyers on their websites and buying platforms. This idea has quickly become a reality, with many B2B brands leveraging first- and third-party marketplaces to sell both products and services to other businesses.

The shift toward digital B2B purchasing is showing no signs of slowing down, either.

In your view, how has the demand for digital B2B buying experiences changed over the past two years?

Demand has increased substantially.



Demand has increased somewhat.



Demand has remained about the same.



Demand has decreased somewhat.



Almost all the respondents (90%) agree that demand for digital B2B buying experience has increased over the past two years, including 36% who say it has increased substantially. Meanwhile, only 9% say demand has remained about the same over the past two years and only 1% say demand for digital B2B buying experiences has decreased.

A typical digital B2B buying experience begins with the buyer identifying a need within their organization. They then proceed to conduct online research, looking for potential solutions and vendors. This phase may involve visiting vendor websites, reading reviews, and downloading relevant resources such as whitepapers or case studies.

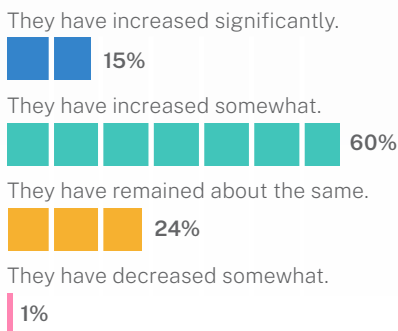
Once they have narrowed down their options, the buyer may reach out to their shortlisted vendors, typically through a contact form or email. The vendor responds by providing a product demonstration or a detailed proposal.

Negotiations ensue, focusing on aspects such as pricing, delivery timelines, and post-purchase support. Once an agreement is reached, the purchase is made digitally, and the product or service is delivered or implemented. The buying process concludes with post-purchase follow-up or support, ensuring customer satisfaction.



This entire process can be longer or shorter depending on the context and the parties involved. For example, a B2B company selling office products may have relatively short sales cycles, allowing customers to purchase products through an online marketplace the same way they might purchase home goods from Amazon as a consumer.

How have your online B2B sales changed over the past two years?

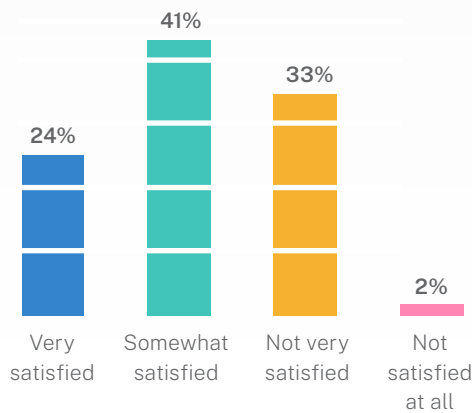


Aside from an increase in demand for digital purchasing from customers, in practice, most of the respondents (60%) say their online B2B sales have increased somewhat over the past two years. Another 15% say their sales have increased significantly, while 24% say their online sales have stayed about the same.

Notably, only 1% of the respondents say their online B2B sales have decreased somewhat. Among these respondents, 100% say they are in the process of improving the online B2B buying experience in direct response to their decrease in online sales.

These results suggest that most B2B sellers are all-in on digital sales. They've seen substantial growth in digital over the past two years, and they are preparing their next round of investments to shore up the customer experience.

How satisfied are you with your organization's ability to provide an excellent digital buying experience to customers?



At a total of 65%, most of the respondents are at least somewhat satisfied with their ability to provide an excellent digital buying experience to customers. This includes about one-fourth of the respondents (24%) who say they are very satisfied with their organizations' capabilities.

These results come after years of optimization in the digital B2B buying journey following the advent of digital B2B sales.



Digital B2B transactions were already becoming prevalent in the late 2010s. However, according to McKinsey & Company, the pandemic sped up the process by forcing B2B buyers and sellers to conduct more of their business safely online. Since then, “What started out as a crisis response has now become the next normal, with big implications for how buyers and sellers will do business in the future.”

Even in 2020, more than three-quarters of buyers and sellers said they preferred digital self-service and remote human engagement over face-to-face interactions, McKinsey & Company said.²

Opportunities and Challenges in the Digital B2B Buying Journey ■

Now that digital B2B sales have normalized, B2B companies are faced with the challenge of improving and optimizing the buying experience for customers. Again, there is much they can learn from consumer markets to improve the efficiency and simplicity of buying B2B products and services online.

For example, companies can start by optimizing websites for a seamless user experience and ensuring each channel is integrated with the buyer’s journey. This prevents the buyer from having to submit duplicate information or repeat themselves, even if they decide to switch channels during the buying process.

Other critical practices that the B2B sector can use are personalization, secure check-out, offering reliable customer support channels, and using data analytics to understand buyer behavior.

Achieving sophistication and optimization in the B2B buying process inevitably depends on what technologies companies have at their disposal and how effectively they can use them. Some technologies will be more critical than others.

According to the study, 87% of the respondents say supply chain management systems are very important to the customer’s digital

²Bages-Amat, Arnau, et. al. “These eight charts show how COVID-19 has changed B2B sales forever.” McKinsey & Company. <https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/growth-marketing-and-sales/our-insights/these-eight-charts-show-how-covid-19-has-changed-b2b-sales-forever>

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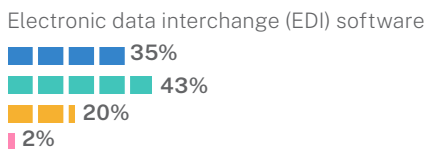
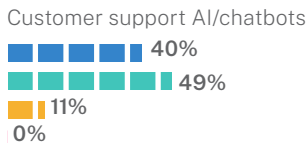
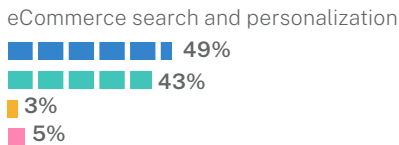
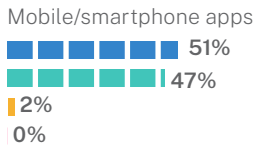
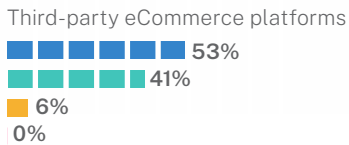
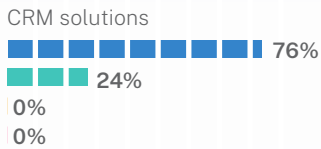
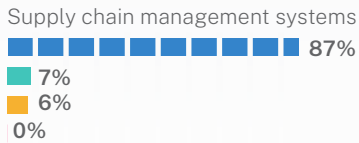


 Find out more



In your view, how important are the following solutions and technologies to the customer's digital purchasing journey?

- Very Important
- Somewhat Important
- Not Important
- We don't use this.



purchasing journey. This is likely because companies rely on these technologies to ensure products are available for purchase and that they can be delivered to customers when they need them.

An IT infrastructure provider, for example, could leverage its supply chain management system to give customers real-time data on what products are in stock and where. They could then provide customers with real-time tracking of their orders, so they know when their purchases will arrive.

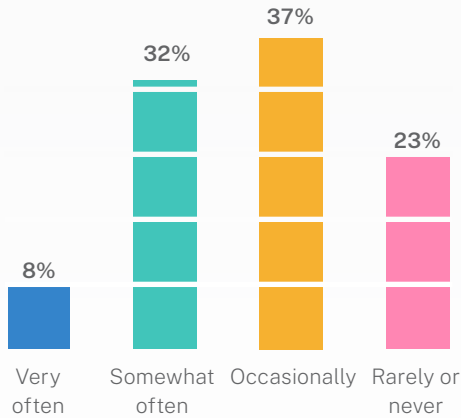
Meanwhile, 76% of the respondents agree that CRM solutions are very important to the B2B buying process. Many companies depend on their CRM technologies to both manage and shepherd the customer throughout their journey, from marketing to sales.

Other very important technologies include third-party eCommerce platforms (53%) and mobile or smartphone apps (51%).

Third-party eCommerce platforms are increasingly popular, as they provide a centralized location where customers can purchase products from multiple vendors. For B2B companies, this type of platform offers a convenient way to reach and engage with potential customers who may not have been aware of their services before.



From your experience, how often do your customers have difficulty finding what they're looking for when making a B2B eCommerce purchase?

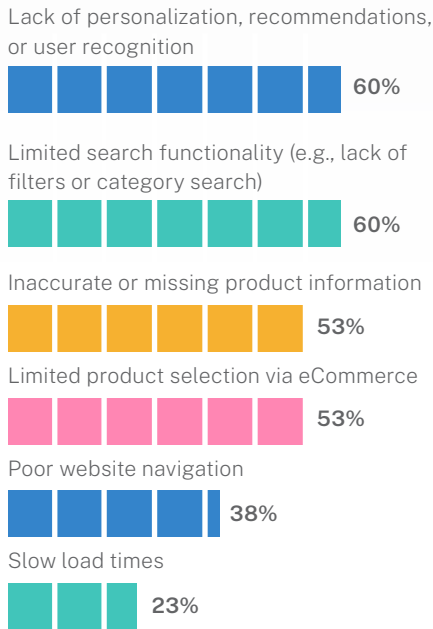


Mobile apps also play an important role in the digital experience. With the right apps, customers can quickly and easily find information about products from any location. They can even access their account information from anywhere in the world and track their orders on the go.

Despite the many advances B2B companies have made in the digital buying experience, challenges remain. B2B buying processes tend to be long, and many B2B companies have vast warehouses of sophisticated products that aren't easy to present in an online marketplace. In some cases, a B2B company may struggle with a user interface (UI) that is not intuitive or doesn't have the same capabilities as some consumer marketplaces and eCommerce stores.

More than one-third of the respondents agree that their customers have difficulty finding what they're looking for when making a B2B eCommerce purchase either somewhat often (32%) or very often (8%).

Since you said customers have difficulty finding what they're looking for "very often" or "somewhat often," which of the following are issues that are causing this problem?



Among these respondents, most say their customers struggle with limited search functionality (60%), lack of personalization (60%), limited product selection (53%), and inaccurate or missing product information (53%).



B2B companies could improve site searchability and usability by investing in features such as predictive search, autocomplete, and a personalization engine. Some CRM solutions offer personalization tools, and they could be linked to an eCommerce platform via application programming interfaces (APIs) or customer integrations. Additionally, a comprehensive digital product catalog with plenty of descriptive information and visuals is essential for helping customers quickly find the products they need.

To reduce the complexity associated with B2B buying processes, companies should also consider using video tutorials or short modules to help explain complex products or services. Providing customers with educational materials, knowledge bases, and self-service solutions could go a long way to reduce friction in the buying process.

In conversations with researchers, the respondents provided an in-depth overview of their adaptive strategies in the face of a rapidly digitizing B2B market.

Their transformations were primarily facilitated by the integration of advanced technologies, robust analytics, and talent acquisition. They highlighted the alignment of a more agile and extensive supply chain, signifying an active response to the rising demand for digital B2B buying. The development of

a digitized inventory management system was also cited as a significant enhancement in the digital buying journey.

The respondents say they have leveraged advanced analytics to identify buyer needs more accurately.

For example, one vice president from a B2B distributor says, “We have improved our data streams and analytical capabilities in support of our digital buying journey functions.”

The respondents have also included AI-based solutions and automated certain business units to expedite processes and support the digital buying journey. They are making significant strides to bring communication and analytics closer to their buyers, resulting in a more personalized and interactive client experience.



“We have created a new digital support system for digital buying,” says a vice president of marketing at another B2B distributor. “There is more automation and predictive selling getting involved.”

Overall, the respondents emphasized their commitment to digital transformation. They underscored the importance of customer insights and personalization, setting the stage for an even more customer-centric digital B2B buying journey in the future.

Leveraging Integrations for a Better Customer Experience

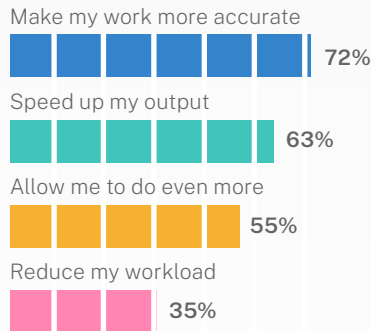


Integrating digital B2B strategies with other technologies can significantly enhance the customer experience. For example, marketing automation tools streamline repetitive tasks, allowing businesses to send targeted content based on user profiles and behaviors, and ensuring a personal touch in every interaction. This results in better customer engagement and loyalty.

On the other hand, artificial intelligence (AI) technologies, including generative AI, can deliver real-time, personalized customer service, efficiently handle queries, offer product recommendations based on past interactions, and automate many back-office processes. Generative AI accelerates these capabilities by creating new content; not just text, but also images, videos, code, etc. It can bring a conversational element to search and product recommendations and even summarize a B2B customer's interactions across channels—contact centers, chat, email, and others.

Consequently, these integrations can drive customer satisfaction, retention, and ultimately, business growth.

How do you think AI will impact your role at work in the next five years?



Most of the respondents agree that AI will have a significant impact on their work in the next five years, especially as it pertains to the B2B buying experience. Specifically, 72% of the respondents expect AI to make their work more accurate, 63% expect it to speed up their output, and 55% expect it to allow them to do more.

As such, many B2B leaders have a positive view of AI.

“By dramatically accelerating automation capabilities and code development, AI offers double duty: Improve and scale existing capabilities, and add new functionality that can move the business into another category altogether,” says Forrester.³

³ Davidson, Phyllis. “AI And B2B Marketing: Three Opportunities And Challenges To Ponder.” Forrester. <https://www.forrester.com/blogs/ai-and-b2b-marketing-three-opportunities-and-challenges-to-ponder/>



Nonetheless, many B2B leaders still have concerns about AI and its future impact, both internally and on the customer experience. For example, generative AI has been known to make mistakes, produce false information, and even produce bias in its results. AI has the potential to revolutionize B2B eCommerce through its online and on-site search capabilities, but it will need to be implemented carefully and intentionally.

Researchers asked the respondents to identify and describe any concerns they have about the future of AI in their company's search and knowledge discovery functions, and the results were split.

Many of the respondents say they have no concerns whatsoever about AI's impact on these areas.

"AI will only improve this function and not create any challenges," says a business director from a B2B manufacturer.

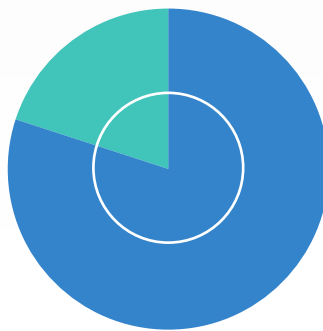
Others, however, say they are concerned about issues like data quality, biases, and the elimination of human participation in certain processes.

"AI overpowering human thinking is my biggest concern," says a vice president of marketing at one B2B company.

Similarly, a strategy director at a B2B distributor says, "My only concern remains of businesses trying to overindulge in the use AI which could lead to mass reduction in human participation."

These responses indicate that B2B leaders are currently thinking a great deal about some of the biggest questions facing AI in the current business environment. Namely, they are concerned about how much scope companies will give AI and what that could mean for the future of the human element in B2B business.

How important is a rich API library to easily integrate with your ERP, CRM, payment gateway, content management, and other systems?



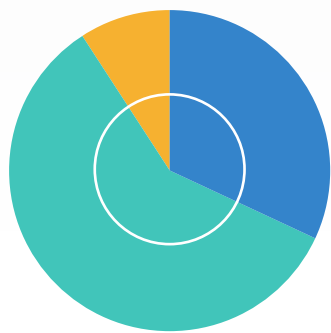
■ 80% Very important
■ 20% Somewhat important

Aside from AI, all the respondents agree that other integrations are critical to their operations. Specifically, 80% believe a rich API library that easily integrates with their ERP, CRM, payment gateway, and other systems is very important. The remaining responses consider such a library somewhat important.



This suggests that businesses need to treat the integration of different systems as a strategic priority if they intend to drive digital growth in their sales channels. Such integrations would enable them to increase operational efficiency, reduce manual processes, and improve customer service over these channels.

How beneficial are built-in marketing automation capabilities that leverage customer data to automate targeted email campaigns?



- 32% Very beneficial
- 59% Somewhat beneficial
- 9% Not beneficial

Finally, most of the respondents also agree that built-in marketing automation capabilities that leverage customer data to automate targeted email campaigns are a useful function of their digital B2B platforms. Specifically, almost one-third of the respondents believe this type of email integration is very beneficial, while 59% believe it is somewhat beneficial.

Email automation isn't a new capability, but companies still recognize its value in driving digital growth, since it allows them to optimize marketing campaigns without having to constantly monitor and update them. By leveraging customer data generated across the enterprise and integrating it with an email platform, B2B marketers can engage the right audiences with relevant and personalized content.

With this type of automation in place, companies can increase customer engagement and promote more effective lead generation.

Conclusion: The Next Three Years of B2B Innovation ■



In their final line of questioning, researchers asked the respondents to describe how they expect to innovate over the next three years to improve the B2B online buying journey.

A key vision shared by many of the respondents is the idea of a comprehensive, omnichannel environment for B2B online purchasing. They plan to digitize their sales operations even further and potentially add predictive solutions to the process to bolster both personalization and sourcing. Their strategy emphasizes continuous digital improvements and focuses on enhancements to the customer experience.

“We wish to add personalization solutions that will help improve the B2B buying experience over the next three years,” says one director of strategy at a manufacturer and distributor.

Other respondents say they expect to incorporate experiential technologies into the customer experience, including augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR). They are also planning investments into Internet-of-Things (IoT) technology, not to mention AI.

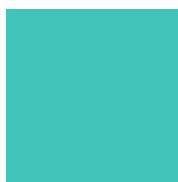
“Our innovation journey will include new digital tools that maximize our services and capabilities in the B2B market,” says a business director at another manufacturer and distributor.

B2B companies expect to be more customer-centric over the next few years. The respondents say they are seeking to generate better visibility into their customers’ purchasing journeys, so they can deliver more personalized recommendations and other features. Many agree that they need a comprehensive B2B platform to manage future customer journeys.



“Our aim is to improve our performance in digital sales with the assistance of sales platforms that can support predictability,” says a sales director from a B2B distributor

Overall, B2B distributors and manufacturers will implement a mixture of internal and customer-facing solutions to increase digitization, produce insights, and optimize their supply networks for the next phase of B2B eCommerce.



Key Suggestions ■

■ **Embrace the power of AI:**

While AI can present certain challenges, its growth potential is immense. It can streamline processes, improve efficiency, and greatly enhance decision-making capabilities. AI adoption also opens doors for predictive analysis, a powerful tool for future-proofing business strategies.

■ **Prioritize system integrations:**

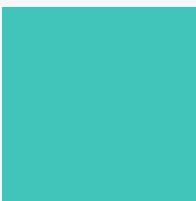
To drive digital growth, B2B companies need to view the integration of different systems — including ERP, CRM, payment gateways, and others — as a strategic priority. This not only increases operational efficiency but also improves customer service channels. A smooth and efficient system integration is key to ensuring seamless data flow and communication between different business operations, thus enhancing overall business performance.

■ **Invest in marketing automation:**

Built-in marketing automation capabilities are an asset in any B2B solution, and they are especially important in CRMs and B2B eCommerce solutions. For example, leveraging customer eCommerce data to automate targeted email campaigns can optimize marketing efforts and free up resources. This not only ensures relevant and personalized content reaches the right audiences but also promotes effective lead generation and customer engagement, which are crucial for digital growth.

■ **Aim for a comprehensive**

omnichannel environment: The future of B2B online purchasing lies in creating a comprehensive and predictive omnichannel purchasing environment. As businesses plan to digitize their sales operations further, they should work towards offering a cohesive customer experience across all platforms and touchpoints. This includes investing in experiential technologies like AR and VR, IoT technology, and AI. A well-integrated omnichannel strategy can lead to a more personalized customer journey, leading to improved customer satisfaction and loyalty.



About the Authors ■



WBR Insights is the custom research division of Worldwide Business Research (WBR), the world leader in industry-driven thought-leadership conferences. Our mission is to help inform and educate key stakeholders with research-based whitepapers, webinars, digital summits, and other thought-leadership assets while achieving our clients' strategic goals.

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Pivotree, a leader in frictionless commerce, designs, builds and manages digital platforms in Commerce, Data Management, and Supply Chain for over 250 major retail and branded manufacturers globally. Pivotree's portfolio of digital solutions, managed and professional services help provide retailers with true end-to-end solutions to manage complex digital commerce platforms, along with ongoing support from strategic

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Spryker was recognized by Gartner® as a Visionary in the 2022 [Magic Quadrant™](#) for Digital Commerce and was also ranked as a Strong Performer in The Forrester Wave™: [B2B Commerce Solutions, Q2 2022](#). Spryker is a privately held technology company headquartered in Berlin and New York.

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