



The Ultimate Guide to B2B E-commerce

Insights and strategies to help you navigate
the new digital landscape



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The Ultimate Guide to B2B E-commerce

The B2B world has undergone a digital revolution. Traditional methods of B2B operations – from sales to customer interactions; from fulfillment to order delivery – have moved online, driven, in part by COVID-19, but also a new influx of millennials in key decision-making roles.

It's a paradigm shift for the industry, and B2B businesses who want to make the most of cross-border opportunities will need to adapt to these changing buying behaviors – and fast. Research from McKinsey¹ found that “customers are more willing than ever to switch suppliers to gain exceptional omnichannel experiences” – meaning the need for B2B businesses to invest in self-serving digital order infrastructure has never been more integral.

As the B2B sector continues to grow, this guide will help your business adapt to the new digital landscape, meet customers' expectations, and maximize every sales opportunity.

What you'll find in this guide:

- The key growth opportunities in B2B e-commerce
- Which B2B online marketplaces to consider if you're a new player
- Key strategies to enhance your B2B e-commerce channel(s) – including how to leverage AI to deliver a better customer experience

80% of B2B sales will be generated digitally by the end of 2025 – compared to just 13% in 2019²

What is B2B e-commerce?

Think of e-commerce and your mind probably goes straight to direct-to-consumer sales, pulling out your smartphone and ordering something from Amazon with a few clicks.

But B2B e-commerce is having a big moment. Also known as business-to-business electronic commerce, it describes order transactions between a manufacturer and wholesaler, or a wholesaler and a retailer, via an online sales portal.

The B2B industry has traditionally been associated with in-person sales and catalogue orders, but its “digital revolution” is growing – and fast.

B2B e-commerce brings with it several benefits – including enhanced buying efficiency, a shorter sales cycle, and reduced operational costs. And, due to the capabilities of e-commerce platforms, the end customers (B2B buyers) enjoy a seamless and personalized experience.

The share of B2B organizations' revenue that comes from digital channels is estimated to reach

56%

in 2025 – up from 32% in 2020³



Growth opportunities in B2B e-commerce

A snapshot of the global B2B industry

In 2024, the worldwide B2B e-commerce market was worth an estimated US\$30.42 trillion – a 16.3% rise over 2023⁴.

The three largest B2B e-commerce markets, by share of total global gross merchandise volume (GMV)⁵



Leading B2B e-commerce sectors in 2024 (by market value, US dollars)

Wholesale:	\$53.8 trillion ⁶
Automotive parts and accessories:	\$2.36 trillion ⁷
Construction and building materials:	\$2.04 trillion ⁸
Pharmaceuticals:	\$1.15 trillion ⁹
Industrial machinery:	\$693.7 billion ¹⁰ (In 2023)
Software as a Service (SaaS):	\$328.2 billion ¹¹

The new B2B decision makers

Millennials, also known as Generation Y, now account for 73% of all B2B purchasing decisions¹². Growing up with the internet and smartphones, they are digitally native and more technology oriented than their predecessors. B2C customer experiences in their personal lives heavily influence what they expect from B2B transactions.

Think about what features you value when placing a B2C order – speed, convenience, flexible delivery options...these are what your B2B customers are looking for when considering doing business with you.

Millennial buyers are more likely to avoid engaging with salespeople early in the process, instead preferring to carry out their own extensive online research before making purchasing decisions – mimicking the behavior that is so natural to them in their personal shopping habits.

Online is fast replacing sales teams as the place to educate, engage and build brand trust with new customers before a purchasing decision is made – or even considered. Therefore, it is vital your B2B company invests in a digital presence that feels familiar to these new B2B buyers.

B2B buyers were asked: what is your top criterion when choosing a new supplier?

52%

Not having to wait for a sales rep to get in contact

39%

Online order tracking

38%

The ability to place orders via an online sales portal

Types of B2B e-commerce

There are many types, but your business likely falls into one of the following categories – or perhaps more than one simultaneously! Each model has its unique role and function within the business ecosystem.

Manufacturer to Business

In this model, manufacturers sell their products directly to other businesses, which may include wholesalers, distributors, or other companies needing raw materials or finished goods for further processing. The manufacturers bypass traditional retail channels to establish a direct business-to-business sales relationship.

An example may be a car parts manufacturer producing and selling pieces to various car brands for assembly.

Distributor to Business

Distributors act as intermediaries between manufacturers and other businesses, typically reselling products to wholesalers, retailers, or end-users in larger quantities. This model works well for manufacturers that don't want to worry about processing orders, packaging and shipping – instead the distributor holds inventory and manages fulfillment.

For example, a distributor might source vitamins from a manufacturer, package and label them, and then sell the finished product in bulk to pharmacies and health stores.

Wholesale Business to Business

Wholesalers purchase products in bulk from manufacturers or distributors and sell them at a markup to other businesses (such as retailers, online sellers, or other wholesalers) in smaller quantities.

A good example is Alibaba¹⁴. This is a platform where businesses (especially retailers and online sellers) can buy products in bulk from manufacturers and wholesalers at lower prices.

B2B2C (Business to Business to Consumer)

This is a hybrid e-commerce model where one business (B2B) sells products or services to another business, which in turn sells those products to consumers (B2C). This model facilitates partnerships between businesses to reach a wider consumer base.

An example may be a business which buys luxury bed linen from a manufacturer in bulk, and then sells it in much smaller quantities to customers via its own e-commerce store.

Software as a Service (SaaS)

SaaS B2B e-commerce refers to businesses selling software solutions on a subscription basis to other businesses. This model allows companies to use cloud-based software without the need for installation or infrastructure, offering solutions like customer relationship management (CRM), enterprise resource planning (ERP), accounting tools, or project management software to enhance business operations. SaaS companies typically provide ongoing support and updates to their software as part of the service.

A good – and common – example of SaaS is Zoom. The video tech company – which enjoyed a huge boost during Covid – lets customers access user-friendly collaboration tools on a subscription basis.



B2B vs B2C: what's the difference?

There are some key differences between B2B (business-to-business) transactions and B2C (business-to-consumer) transactions – as the table below shows.

As B2C transactions are predominantly online, there is more allowance for speedy, flexible services. But as the B2B sector digitizes, its sales features will begin to align with B2C's.

	B2B	B2C
Target audience	Businesses selling to other businesses, e.g. manufacturers, wholesalers and distributors.	Typically, this involves a business selling goods or services to an individual consumer for their personal use.
Transaction volume	Larger, bulk orders.	Smaller, individual orders.
Order frequency	Often recurring or repeat orders.	Usually one-time or occasional purchases.
Sales process	Long, complex sales cycles involving many decision makers.	Simpler, often involving a single consumer making the purchase decision.
Price negotiation	Negotiation is a big part of B2B sales. It is based on order volume, terms, or contracts.	Fixed pricing, with occasional discounts or promotions.
Payment terms	Often includes credit terms, invoices, or payment plans.	Payments are typically made immediately via credit cards, PayPal, or other instant methods.
Product customization	Customization or bulk orders are common, as businesses may need specific product features.	Limited customization, with most products sold as-is.
Platform features	Detailed catalogs, bulk ordering systems, and integration with ERP systems.	Simpler, user-friendly interfaces with features like product recommendations and fast checkout.
Customer support	Often includes dedicated account managers, personalized customer support, and after-sales services.	Customer support is typically more automated, with chatbots or standard email support.

B2B customer features

Now you know that B2B customers are migrating towards online channels to make their purchasing decisions, how can your business make an impact there?

Much more than just another touchpoint, a well implemented e-commerce platform will open new opportunities and help your business reach and engage new customers easily and effectively.

The major features influencing the customer journey on B2B e-commerce platforms can be grouped into five categories, outlined below. To shed light on these categories, DHL's research team conducted extensive research, supported by primary, qualitative data gathered from in-depth interviews. (Further details can be found in the appendix.)

Consider these five categories as your guide to implementing a digital channel that will drive value for your customers and increase your profitability through higher market share and operational efficiency.

1. Digital infrastructure

A key feature highlighted by interviewees was the need to heavily invest in digital infrastructure. They drive real value for their businesses and customers by incorporating technologies such as artificial intelligence, machine learning, big data analytics and business intelligence insights. These technologies allow the streamlining of internal and external business processes to improve the accuracy of demand planning and forecasting.

Leading B2B providers integrate cloud-based e-commerce platforms with their Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) and operational systems. This facilitates better real-time visibility and alignment across the supply chain, making it easier for them to exploit new business opportunities and capture difficult to reach, low-volume customers across the world.

Top tips for your e-commerce platform

You can enhance the customer experience across your end-to-end business processes by incorporating functionality and technologies. Digitalization of your full product catalog, for example, and the inclusion of a simple-to-use and powerful search engine to find those products are fundamental features. Additional features such as mobile/tablet responsiveness, strong data protection, secure online payments and chat functionality have also become standard expectations for most users of e-commerce platforms, whether B2C or B2B.




2. Customer experience

The research pointed to a simple but effective on-site search engine as essential to enable customers to find and view the products on offer. The more sophisticated B2B players integrate a more comprehensive suite of tools to help their customers navigate their sites and find detailed information about the products, including mega menus, video product demonstrations, website tutorials and competitor comparisons. Some e-commerce platforms incorporate live online support to assist with any queries or issues, which improves conversion levels and facilitates buying decisions.

3. Personalization

Customers want personalized solutions and B2B e-commerce companies are offering those via customer portals with content organized around a number of parameters: past purchase history, price optimization algorithms that meet customized product price requirements, and configure-price-quote (CPQ) software to make online quotes and prices that are adjusted on the basis of the relationship. Examples of price optimization and CPQ software include Vendavo¹⁵, Blue Yonder¹⁶ and Oracle¹⁷.

The research found that most advanced B2B companies are using the latest technologies to combine knowledge from both human and machine in order to identify patterns




Top tips for your e-commerce platform

B2B buyers are increasingly placing more importance on experience than price. So, whether it's a complete digital transformation or just a refresh of your website, make the customer the center of your focus. Every new feature and every new project should start with the question, "how does this improve the customer experience?"

of human behavior. This moves them into the cognitive commerce' space, where the platform can predict and anticipate future behaviors of customers and use those learnings to personalize the experience for specific customers. IBM Watson¹⁸ and Cognitive Scale¹⁹ provide cognitive commerce platforms with wider applications across sectors.

Customer Relationship Management (CRM) systems are used to deliver dynamic pricing and support customers by offering commercial credit. In many instances, buyers are permitted to customize the final configuration of purchased products, such as the packaging, handling, and loading of products.



Top tip for your e-commerce platform

21st century customers are looking to source globally, so your e-commerce platform should be able to handle payment in any currency. Improve customer satisfaction by providing clarity around the associated costs for a cross-border transaction, such as duties and taxes.

4. Omni-channel

The research found that integration was most successfully carried out through B2B omni-channel commerce; a multi-channel sales approach combining traditional online, bricks and mortar stores, tablet and/or smartphone options. This seamless integration increases customer engagement and helps B2B companies to amplify their business goals and targets by reaching business customers globally.

Webrooming is another interesting customer behavior that B2B customers are practicing

(it's otherwise known as ROBO – Research Online, Buy Offline). As individual consumers, we're used to cruising the internet for information before going in store to make a purchase. Now, this behavior is becoming more and more popular within the B2B environment: researching online, deciding on a purchase, and then reaching out to a sales rep to place the order. The different touchpoints with the customer need to be managed so that the overall customer experience, right through to the final purchase, is seamless, irrespective of the channel used.

Top tip for your e-commerce platform

The customer experience is not over after a B2B buyer clicks the 'Buy Now' button. To ensure a truly seamless end-to-end process, don't neglect the delivery options you offer your customers. Based on the experience of the B2C sector, there is clear recognition that the customer experience can be damaged by poor management of the last mile delivery process, so invest to ensure that your final touchpoint with the customer is a positive one.



5. Synchronization of logistics

Perhaps unsurprisingly, many interviewees identified the critical role of logistics in B2B cross-border e-commerce. This is not just about last-mile delivery, but also the overall fulfillment strategy.

To increase their competitiveness and address different customer requirements, B2B e-commerce businesses are emulating the strategy of online retail platforms by providing multiple transport and delivery options to meet different cost, transit time and/or service requirements. Thanks to integration with the

systems of transport providers, their customers can select their preferred solution with full visibility of the costs involved.

Synchronization of logistics operations in a cross-border context is crucial and can be achieved through the integration of the right technologies and data applications with the logistics service provider. In today's competitive world, these integrations enable B2B businesses to offer cross-border solutions with the flexibility to meet ad hoc or latent requests.

Top tip for your e-commerce platform

Think about what you expect from a B2C e-commerce service – this should influence the build of your B2B platform. Speed, reliability, traceability, convenience and an effective returns and exchange policy should be top priorities.



Spinning the e-commerce flywheel

The Flywheel Effect is a concept which says that “good to great” transformations don’t happen instantly; instead, as with flywheels, they require turn upon turn, building momentum until a point of breakthrough and beyond. To support you on your journey towards having an optimal e-commerce sales channel for your B2B company, we have analyzed the four phases which play a vital role in getting your own “flywheel” spinning:

1 Start to spin the flywheel by migrating your customers from offline to online channels. If your team is implementing a new e-commerce channel, be sure to communicate early and often with your customers. Ensure your online platform is user friendly with how-to guides and FAQs. Think of the ease at which you can navigate B2C websites – this is the new baseline.

3 Make your e-commerce flywheel a vital part of your business model. Align business processes and teams to scale. Review your current organizational structure and re-align roles and resources, hiring from outside your organization if necessary. Once that structure is in place, have a charter over budgeting and management decisions that impact the digital team.

2 Keep the flywheel spinning. Customer experience is now key – roll out programs that spur loyalty, higher order values, and increased purchasing frequency. By allowing both subscription-based and traditional one-off purchases, you can lock in buyers and yield higher customer lifetime values. This will also produce data which can help your sales teams better understand your customers’ buying behavior. Integrate partner software like Rebilla20 to manage saved credit card information for individual customers, or technologies like PayWhirl²¹ for recurring billing.

4 Have your e-commerce flywheel connect with others. Internal channel conflict is a common pain point for B2B organizations, so work to ensure your e-commerce platform complements all your other sales channels. Your digital team, alongside sales leadership, should champion the benefits of technology-based customer self-service and how it can actually help sales members retire and exceed quotas. Only if and when a customer becomes complex should an actual sales representative take over the account; an approach that allows the team to focus more on selling and less on order taking.

Major challenges of B2B e-commerce

Despite the benefits of introducing an e-commerce platform to your business, it's important to consider some of the risks and challenges that sectors operating in the new B2B e-commerce environment will face.

Employees will be required to upskill to accommodate the changing business and supply chain landscape. A 'digital first' mindset and being open to innovation is required to drive success.

Exchange rates, customs requirements, duties and taxes, and less developed infrastructures can be challenging to deal with – take time to understand the implications of cross-border shipping to your primary markets.

Transport networks need to be agile to accommodate the new logistics demands. Large companies with well-established

B2B platforms will find it challenging to compete with agile, start-up companies. Partnering with an experienced and reliable logistics partner will help them navigate and adapt to the new path quickly.

Pricing will present further unique challenges. B2B buyers are used to negotiating discounts for bulk or repeat purchases with sales reps. If pricing is to be moved online, B2B businesses will need to consider alternate ways to incentivize buyers – an easily implementable 'buy more, pay less' pricing strategy, for example, or bulk discounts.

As with any new venture, the key to mitigating risks is to be aware of them, and plan accordingly. Your e-commerce strategy should turn risk analysis into actions – such as adopting alternative approaches for achieving the same objective, or leveraging the expertise of third-party partners such as DHL.



Five great B2B online marketplaces for SMEs

B2B online marketplaces bring corporate sellers and buyers together in a single dynamic platform, streamlining the sales and procurement processes.

You may recognize some of these names from your B2C transactions. They can be an easy way for your business to enter the B2B market and connect with a wide range of wholesalers, manufactures, suppliers and customers.

eWorldTrade	This leading B2B wholesale giant simplifies international trade with its user-friendly platform that connects buyers with sellers quickly. It has over 7,000,000 registered users and is briskly expanding its database of manufacturers, suppliers and companies from all over the world.
Amazon Business	Amazon's vast reach and brand recognition are arguably unrivalled. Buyers can enjoy great discounts on over 4 million products from the most trusted brands. For sellers, there are features including business-specific pricing, multi-user accounts, and analytics tools. They can also use the Fulfilment by Amazon services to handle the storage, packaging and shipping.
Shopify	Shopify's B2B commerce platform allows users to run their wholesale and direct-to-consumer businesses from a single place. Sellers can create curated catalogs, custom pricing, personalized storefronts and flexible payment terms for customers.
BigCommerce B2B Edition	With this platform, sellers can offer personalized pricing options, quotes, and discounts to foster customer loyalty. Cross-border sellers can craft buyer-specific experiences across segments, locations, languages and currencies by easily launching and managing new storefronts from a single back end.
Alibaba	One of the largest wholesale marketplaces in the world, Alibaba has over 2 million suppliers offering over 1 billion products. Buyers can find everything from home appliances to apparel to vehicle parts with heavy discounts from global sellers.

Three key strategies to engage your customers with B2B e-commerce

1. Optimize your online platform

As we've explored, B2B online buyers now expect a user journey that mirrors their B2C experiences. Whether you opt to sell on an online B2B marketplace, or invest in your own digital infrastructure, these are the key things to deliver:

- **Intuitive navigation:** Use clear menus, categories, and filters to help customers quickly find products.
- **Responsive design:** Ensure your site is mobile-friendly, as B2B buyers often research and make purchases on-the-go.
- **Product information:** Provide detailed descriptions, specifications, high-quality images and videos to help buyers make informed decisions.
- **Self-service features:** Provide tools for account management, order tracking and reordering.
- **Personalization:** Tailor recommendations and pricing based on customer segments, purchase history, and industry needs.

Enhance your checkout process with:

- **Custom pricing and bulk discounts:** Offer tiered pricing models and discounts for large orders.
- **Flexible payment options:** Include invoicing, credit terms, and other payment methods commonly used in B2B.
- **Quick reordering:** Enable customers to save and reorder frequently purchased items with minimal effort.

2. Leverage AI to enhance your efficiency

Your business can tap into AI to improve its processes and offer customers a better service. Some examples include:

- **Website chatbots and virtual assistants:** These can respond to customers' queries, 24/7, in multiple languages – ensuring a sales lead is never missed.
- **AI-driven recommendations:** AI can suggest products based on a user's previous browsing behavior and purchase history – personalization that increases their likelihood of buying.
- **Demand forecasting:** By analyzing historical data and market trends, AI can help your business accurately predict future demand, enabling it to make informed production and inventory decisions.
- **Automate your content creation:** Generate personalized emails, product descriptions, and marketing campaigns tailored to individual buyers.

3. Foster relationships

Historically, B2B transactions have been built on personable relationships nurtured over time. But this doesn't have to be lost as your business moves online. Here's how to foster customer relationships for long-term loyalty:

- **Offer clear and transparent policies:** Clearly communicate your shipping, return, and privacy policies on your e-commerce website to build trust.
- **Invest in your customer support:** Offer dedicated account managers and robust support channels, including live chat, email, and phone.
- **Remember the post-sale engagement:** Follow up with customers after purchases for feedback. What did your business do well? Where can it improve? This feedback is vital to improve your offering.



Your B2B e-commerce journey starts now!

As we hope this guide has demonstrated, the pace of the B2B sector's e-commerce transformation should not be underestimated. Of course, there are challenges when adopting new B2B digital processes – even B2B players already established within their sectors will need to invest to optimize their cross-border e-commerce channels, but the payoff in growth opportunities is unlimited.

As an international shipping specialist, DHL Express has the knowledge and global presence to help you realize your cross-border e-commerce ambitions. By partnering with us, you'll benefit from:

- A global network of Certified International Specialists with the expertise and local knowledge to support your business to target overseas customers and navigate across borders.
- The minimizing of possible financial risks by enabling easy Duty and Tax payment options and tracking and tracing of products.
- Brand name recognition, providing credibility and trust for transactions between companies involved in the supply chain.

Reach out to one of our Trusted Advisors today to discover how B2B e-commerce could transform your business.



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APPENDIX – LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

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