Unlocking
B2B CUSTOMER EXPERIENCES

Slatwall Commerce & Amplience
B2B Report

Amplience

Slatwall Commerce

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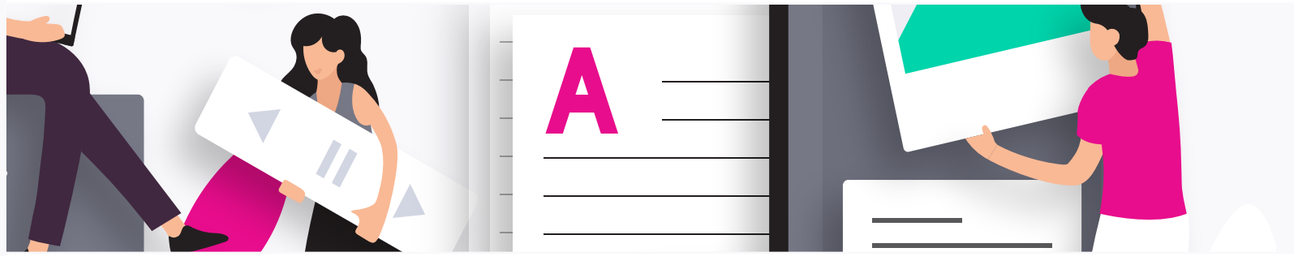
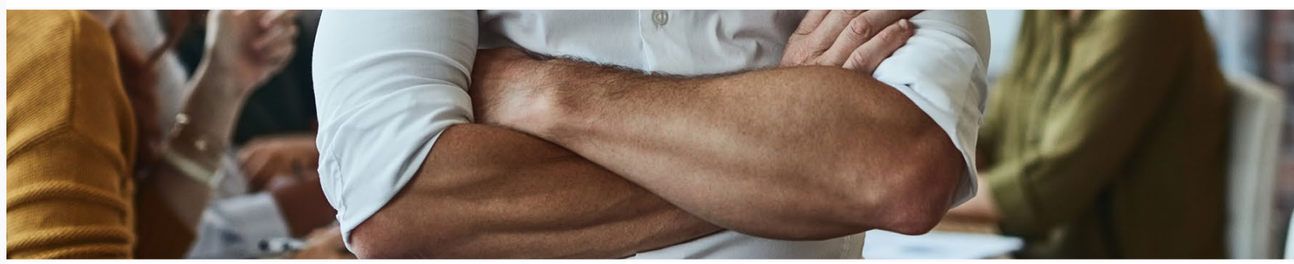




The B2B Evolution

It's no secret that the eCommerce landscape has shifted dramatically over the past few years, and not just for B2C businesses.

Even before the pandemic hit, B2B businesses were contending with the disruption of traditional sales channels and methods, looking at how they can adapt and keep pace. Covid-19 did strike though, ultimately exasperating the need for many to pivot their resources and efforts to keep up with the change in customer expectations and buying behavior. Digital was brought to the fore far quicker than many had planned for.

We're taking a look at how B2B businesses have gotten to this point, but most importantly why **digital adoption is now a must for any B2B business and how businesses can look to transform their approach through better content and commerce experiences.**

The Personal Touch

Historically, B2B sales processes have been different from B2C. It's natural given the difference in audience, products, order size etc. B2B has relied heavily on field sales representatives to bring in new customers and to also drive loyalty and repeat purchases from enterprise accounts. Showrooms, trade shows, and in-person sales and onboarding have been the norm, as has printed material like catalogs for marketing and distributing product information.

While these methods were tried and tested, the reliance on them has meant B2B businesses have been generally slower to adopt new digital technologies throughout the sales process, especially in comparison to B2C. A lot of that hesitancy has come from the idea that online commerce models and online storefronts would mean replacing the sales teams, but in fact it doesn't have to be a trade off at all.

B2B Customer Expectations Are Changing

A new generation of buyer is starting to take over within the organizational structure at many B2B businesses. These buyers are a lot more digitally savvy and have less (or no) inclination to continue to do business as it has always been done. When business buyers were surveyed by Salesforce after the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, 85% of business buyers placed the same emphasis on flawless engagement as they did on product quality, noting these buyers' "high standards underscore the critical nature of customer experience for B2B and B2C companies alike."[1]

> "B2B businesses have been generally slower to adopt new digital technologies"

The unique position of B2B companies is that B2B buyers are, first and foremost, B2C buyers with the same digital commerce expectations that they see from the brands and retailers they love. They look for products and services online just as they would if it was for their own personal consumption. But in doing so, they're bypassing the traditional sales route and the chance for salespeople to lend their expertise and experience to the process or to build traditional relationships with them.

This has meant that the interest in trade shows and face-to-face sales meetings has been waning. And now with Covid making in-person meetings essentially impossible at times over the past year, the traditional sales process, timelines and flow have been completely disrupted.

All of this is also coming to the fore when competition is rife. With new players in almost every industry, B2B marketplaces for small businesses like Faire, JOOR, and Abound, not to mention the behemoth that is Amazon, always looming, the technical B2B marketplace is as competitive as ever.

1. https://www.salesforce.com/resources/research-reports/state-of-the-connected-customer/

So now when we look at it, B2B businesses are staring at newly empowered buyers, a disruption in sales channels, and new and increased competition. It all adds up to a bit of chaos, and a lot of change.

> "B2B buyers are, first and foremost, B2C buyers with the same digital commerce expectations that they see from the brands and retailers they love"

Is B2B Really That Different From B2C?

eCommerce is eCommerce, right? To a certain degree of course, but selling to B2B and B2C customers comes with a number of differences and nuances that mean a business' goals, strategy and approach are actually fundamentally different.

This is why many have argued that how a B2B business constructs its customer experiences both offline and online will follow suit and be different also. Here, we're going to look at some of the differences between B2B and B2C, mainly in a digital sense, so businesses can start to think about how each factors into their strategy and how they're looking to deliver the brand and customer experiences as a result – whether it's overlapping with B2C or not.

Connecting With Customers

B2C buyers are buying for personal consumption whereas B2B buyers are purchasing for their organization. Stating the obvious yes, but with that comes a distinct difference in emotion attached to the purchase. B2B purchases are driven by a specific business need, and are therefore more transactional. There's little emotion nor any impulse buying that comes into the mix.

B2C on the other hand, can be both. Yes, B2C buyers will buy for need but they'll also buy a lot for want, attaching a lot more feeling into their purchases, building more emotional connections and relationships with the brands they are shopping with.

So, B2B businesses will need to focus on streamlined ordering, getting relevant and contextual information and account-specific pricing direct to the buyer as efficiently as possible. Re-ordering will need to happen in the same manner.

> "B2B purchases are driven by a specific business need, and are therefore more transactional. There's little emotion nor any impulse buying that comes into the mix"

B2C however, businesses will be focused on building that meaningful relationship and connection with a buyer. Of course, helping a customer to checkout as easily as possible also rings true, but there will be a need for a lot more compelling content and product information that enforces that connection and isn't just matter of fact. They'll be focused on building brand loyalty and drawing the buyer back more often, time and time again.

Digital Functionality

As a result of the above, and the typical differences in audience and purchasing behavior, the way B2B and B2C businesses set up their technology stacks, platform features and user experience capabilities will be tailored also. Included in these are:

ACCOUNT HIERARCHY AND APPROVAL MANAGEMENT

B2C buyers are just one person buying. B2B however, are account based and resultingly will have a number of stakeholders involved in the purchase. There could be different ordering and approval workflows for each account, adding a different layer of complexity to the platform setup and user interface.

CHECKOUT AND PAYMENT

The B2B checkout process typically has more complexities than the typical B2C process, due to approval management, cart quantity, order size, as well as payment and shipping options. Whereas B2C checkout may have complexities around in-store pick up, split shipments, or complex promotions, a B2B checkout flow must include features like Configure Price Quote (CPQ), purchase on credit, and purchase approval.

Secondly, given the difference in order size and value, many B2B accounts simply won't checkout instantly using a debit or credit card like B2C. Instead, a business' checkout process will need to handle different payment options for B2B including account credit, and involve those authorization steps as outlined above. As a result, inventory will need to be held while invoices are generated and processed, as opposed to a simple click, pay and ship method.

CART QUANTITY AND ORDER SIZE

It's a simple one in that most B2B buyers will be buying much larger volumes than individuals, but carts need to be able to handle this order size, both at the line-item level and the overall purchase quantity.

PRICING MODELS AND VOLUME ORDERING

B2C purchases do involve loyalty-based pricing or discounts sometimes, but mostly there will be a fixed retail price. With B2B, however, each account is likely to have a tailored pricing structure relevant to their contract, so it can differ by account, by volume and other factors. A business' storefront needs to be able to handle all this different pricing and data per account.

SHIPPING AND DELIVERY

Shipping options will need to be broader given B2B businesses may require orders to be sent to multiple warehouses, distribution centers or stores, often a combination of all these.

Marketing Efforts

B2C marketing approaches are more widely known in that businesses are looking to build brand awareness before drawing the shopper in and converting. They are utilizing an array of channels in order to get cut through in a crowded market, social media a major one recently, and similarly B2C buyers are taking advantage of all these channels to research and purchase products.

> "B2B marketing is more unique and tailored. There's little casting of a wide net to find customers"

B2B marketing is more unique and tailored. There's little casting of a wide net to find customers. And given B2B has much longer lead times than B2C, they are looking to manage the relationship and transition in-person sales and physical contracts to more self-service and guided buying within the website more so.

How Content Can Play a Bigger Role in B2B

With B2B businesses typically being more transactional in their approach to digital technology, their content offering has been limited.

The emphasis within digital and eCommerce has instead been on product and the overall catalog count, with most B2B businesses looking to build out and optimize their product data and search experiences more so than looking to leverage content across the customer journey. **Content can and should play a much bigger role in the B2B commerce experience.**

B2B Content Is Not the Future, It's the Now

As mentioned, the expectations and behaviors of B2B buyers are changing. They are more digitally savvy and want to be met with the same digital experiences for B2B purchases as they would B2C ones. Good B2C experiences already encompass a vast array content across the buyer's journey, and across multiple channels. It's educational, inspirational and practical, it's relevant and contextual to the buyer, and it's delivered at the right time in the purchase cycle. This is where B2B businesses need to be.

> "The B2B purchase journey, just like the modern-day B2C journey, is not linear"

The B2B purchase journey, just like the modern-day B2C journey, is not linear. For B2B, complexities arrive in different ways, with multiple decision makers, a lot of different products and likely higher order values. But the current availability of quality information digitally makes it harder for B2B businesses to influence purchase decisions. There are more cracks along the digital B2B sales cycle that can make prospective customers go elsewhere or turn off long-standing customers.

Harness Your Knowledge

So many B2B businesses have argued that the rise of digital commerce will see the demise of sales roles and in-person sales opportunities. But actually, they can complement each other nicely too. One way in which to do this is to look to leverage the abundance of knowledge and expertise businesses already have internally. And it's not just salespeople, other areas of the businesses such as marketing will all have knowledge, for example around product-customer fit, that can be implemented throughout the eCommerce journey. It's just a different channel or outlet in which to transfer it to.

B2B Content In Reality

So, what does B2B content actually look like in practice? Well, here are a few areas of the customer journey where it can be easily supported, and where it can make a big difference in the customer experience.

PRODUCT DISCOVERY

Previously very much limited to practical information on product listing pages (PLP), B2B businesses can look to B2C in how they can incorporate a lot more content and information within these pages. Product listing pages can really showcase not just the product itself but the knowledge the business has surrounding it with supporting content. Areas where B2B businesses could start would be to look at adding and elevating key features and product specs, to add videos, tutorials, or perhaps measuring guides for larger items. And, to create urgency, badges or contextual messaging could be added, for example "high sell through for your region" or "only 100 cases left".

SUPPORTING CONTENT

B2B can look to build out supporting content pages that can be easily woven into the customer's journey to help guide and educate throughout the purchase process. This can be anything from PDFs to videos.

But perhaps also, it's time to think beyond simple product resources too, and create and incorporate for example, resources that link to a category or broad selection of products across the catalog, helping to further showcase the business' product range to the buyer. For B2B retailers this could be categories of curated collections, whereby the products are typically purchased and sold together. Whereas, for manufacturers, this may be more like a category or set of recommended parts that are made specifically for a piece of machinery, or a complementary set of products that could be upsold or bundled.

ACCOUNT SPECIFIC CONTENT AND PROMOTIONS

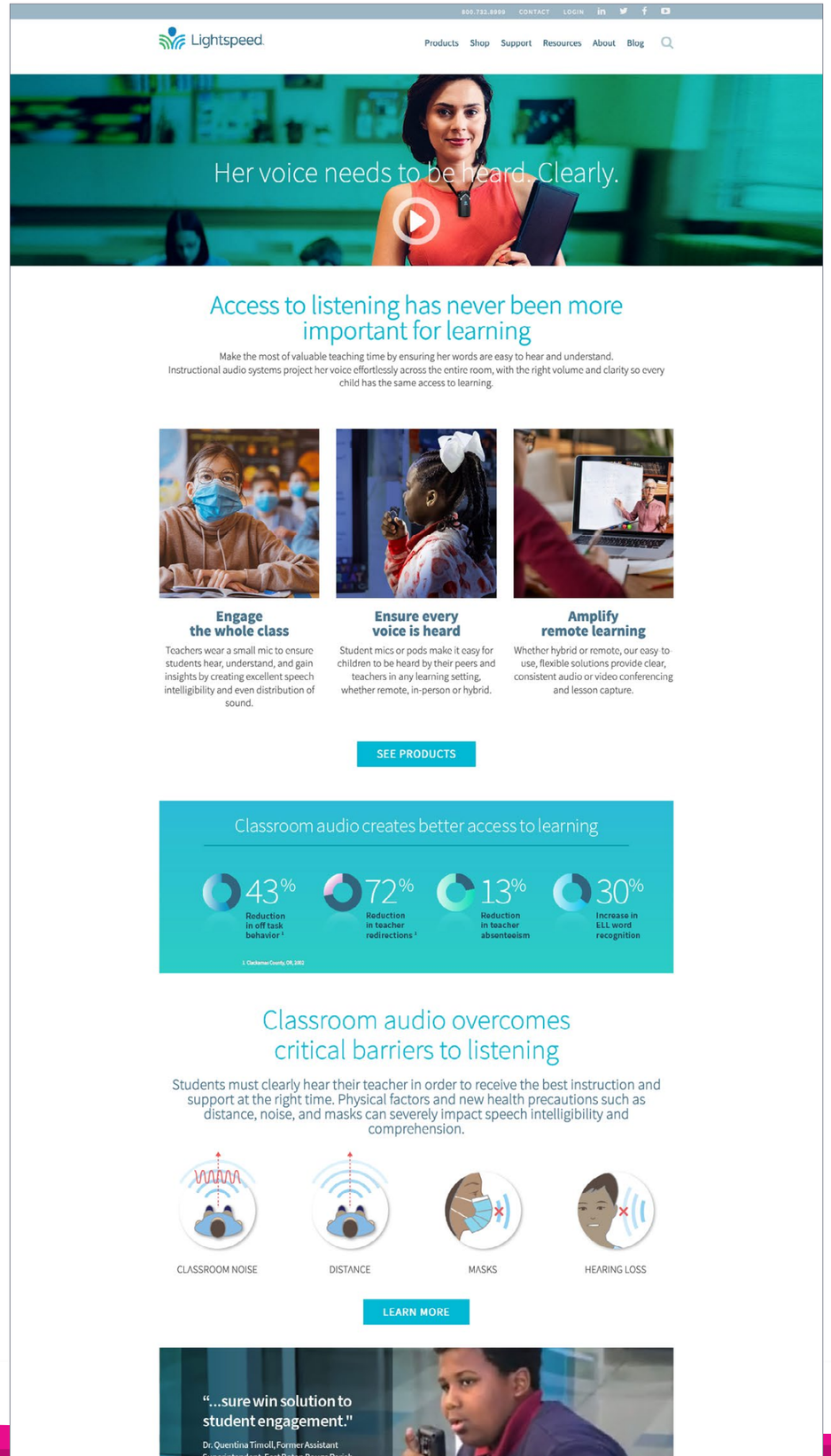
With the right digital commerce technology, B2B businesses have the ability to really personalize the experience for the buyer. They can create and deliver content that is specific to certain accounts, based on previous purchases for example, and also tailored campaigns and promotions that will help entice buyers even more. With added personalization and contextualization, buyers are more likely to feel valued and more likely to engage with the content given its relevancy. A win on all accounts.

> "Being able to deliver targeted messages to your buyers can deliver significant increases in AOV and purchase behavior"

However, this type of targeting isn't necessarily the easiest thing to implement as it requires heavy coordination of an ERP and PIM. But being able to deliver targeted messages to your buyers can deliver significant increases in AOV and purchase behavior. In a practical sense, these messages may look something like "other retailers in your area are purchasing this at a high sell-through rate" or "top seller for your region".

POST PURCHASE

When the purchase is complete, the job is definitely not over. Developing content that serves a specific purpose after the fact is a way to keep engaging with the customer and cultivate loyalty and long-term relationships. This could come in the form of email content or within a "My Account" section of the website that could offer say personalized buying recommendations or accessory information relative to what they've just purchased. Or, with retailers for example, this may look to include a PDF of a store layout, or an endcap configuration.



B2B Content In Actuality

To see how some of this can be put into practice, we've turned to Lightspeed, a leader in providing classroom audio solutions to learning environments around the globe.

The challenge Lightspeed faces is that they are selling complex instructional audio and video systems for learning and need to explain to the consumer how it works in a visual way as well as describe the benefits and accessibility they will bring to the classroom.

Of course, like any technical product that involves "systems", the challenge is to describe the whole unit while helping the end user to understand how they will have to set it up, use it and become comfortable in front of a room of students.

THE COPY AND CONTENT NEED TO DO TWO THINGS:

- Sell the overall concept of the product line
- Describe each of the individual products and systems including exact features, benefits, specifications, accessories and support.

In trying to achieve the above two things, Lightspeed is also faced with deciding how users are going to locate and find the resources they need. Will it be pre-sale, looking to answer questions like "What's available and how can I train my team?" Or will it be post sale, whereby a customer has already purchased the item but now needs to know how to use it, and how they can troubleshoot or access helpful tutorials if they need them.

With each product requiring both shared and unique product content, the team has a fixed list of product data types that can be uploaded or linked to each product page.

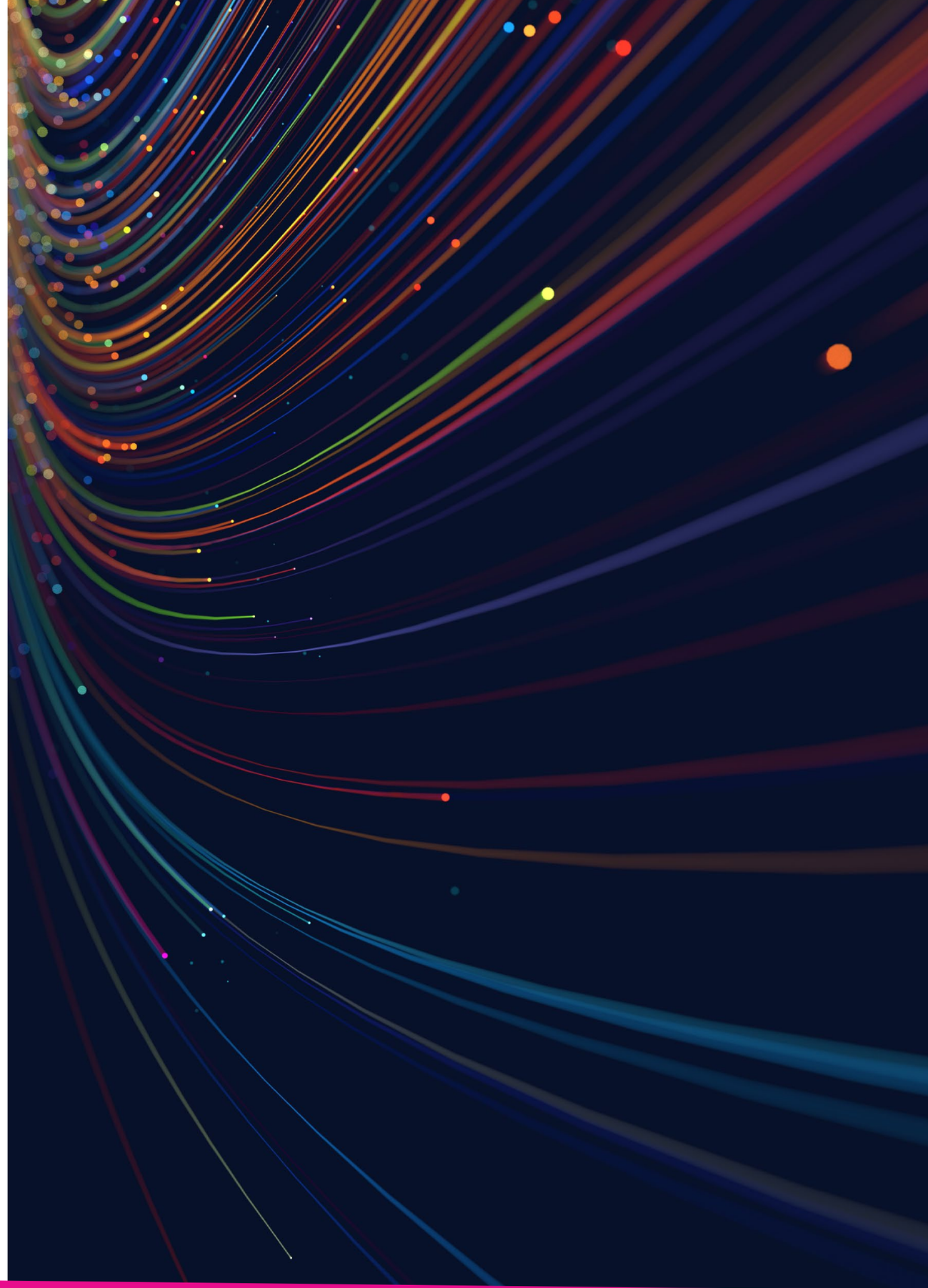
The outcome for Lightspeed is being able to create customized content and resources that can be assigned to products combining rich product details and a searchable support and training center. They're also able to create and upload resources but use them in more than one place on the site.

Preparing for The Future of Commerce

The “future” of B2B commerce is actually now.

Yes, we can anticipate trends and certain things B2B can look at a few years down the line, but in reality B2B must do the work now. They must put the right technology in place, as well as the right internal systems and workflows, to ensure they are prepared for the present, the future and anything that gets thrown at them along the way.

Here’s where B2B should be looking to next in terms of commerce, and the architecture they’ll need to both scale and become agile.



B2B Businesses Must Digitally Mature

Given B2B customers have evolved to be a lot more digitally native, their expectations are forcing B2B business to play catch up with their digital channels. They're now expected to offer the types of digital experiences that are inherent in the B2C world – connected, relevant and content-rich experiences that help buyers get to what they want quicker than before, that help buyers find new products even easier, and that ultimately build trustworthy and meaningful relationships online instead of in person.

> "A headless approach should be the foundation for any business"

Essentially the need for B2B to digitally mature is paramount. It's no longer a nice to have, it's a must have.

The Future of B2B Commerce, It's Headless

So how do we make it all happen and where should B2B businesses be looking next?

Well, to start off with a headless approach should be the foundation for any business. By leveraging a headless architecture, B2B businesses can take advantage of an API-first model whereby they can utilize and configure best-of-breed systems that will work for their specific requirements. This means they can plug in a headless content management system (CMS) alongside their PIM, ERP platform and/or a digital asset manager (DAM) to name a few. All this allows for easy management and publishing of content alongside product data, catalog information, pricing etc. It allows B2B to display more personalized and contextual information when a buyer needs it most, and ultimately it allows businesses to start to create more enriched customer experiences across digital channels, meaning they don't just have to rely on field sales.

One example whereby a headless approach can help B2B is through the introduction of artificial intelligence (AI) for inventory. With this added layer of intelligence configured into the architecture, businesses will have access to more analysis and insight, and in real-time. This can be used to help with the likes of offering automatic re-ordering for buyers, whereby the data is used to anticipate what the buyer needs based on say their order history, and offer a pre-populated cart so the buyer can purchase a lot quicker.

Other examples whereby headless can come into its own for B2B business, not just in the future but now, is through voice recognition, searching for parts through imagery, or integrations with marketplaces and point of sales systems. It's all about letting the business pick the tools that align with their objectives and that will add value where they need it.

> "It's all about letting the business pick the tools that align with their objectives and that will add value where they need it"

Facilitating D2C and Marketplaces

Direct to consumer (D2C) is becoming increasingly popular with B2B businesses as they look to cut out the middlemen and distribute to the end customer directly. With it obviously comes different complexities, not least how you create and publish content, how you market to and facilitate ordering for a completely different audience.

A headless approach makes this a lot simpler. If a B2B business is already headless, essentially the backend systems are near enough ready to go. They can add on and spin up frontends and storefronts to suit the consumer market a lot easier because they are already leveraging the backend data like inventory and product information. It's just being displayed in a different channel. This also means B2B can change out branding, or add in other consumer-facing tools without affecting their other B2B systems and processes.

D2C won't be for every business. But another option that allows many, especially smaller businesses, to get to the end customer quicker is marketplaces. Marketplace distribution again is made easier with headless, especially a headless CMS, as businesses can easily leverage the systems they have, and distribute the same content and information to their marketplace listings. This means they are able to present a consistent brand experience across all their channels and remove any duplication of work internally so content production is more efficient.

In essence, through headless B2B businesses can support both B2B and B2C needs, and can easily publish content across different channels, storefronts and to marketplaces. It's an all-in-one style option but with the flexibility to allow B2B to choose which channels they want to be present in, which tooling they want to configure and how they create customer experiences.

It’s Time to Go Headless.

We can see that B2B can learn a lot from B2C both in terms of how to anticipate buyer needs and how new technology can help enrich the purchasing process. It’s time to unlock B2B commerce and customer experiences.

If you want to discuss how to elevate your B2B commerce and content, or you think headless commerce may be the right option for you, then get in touch with either Amplience or Slatwall Commerce.

Amplience powers digital-first brands and retailers with the freedom to do more. Our low-code CMS, DAM and Digital Experience Management platform allows more than 350 of the world’s leading brand teams to manage content, not code. The result is a rapid ROI for our clients who are delivering data and insight-driven customer experiences that drive deeper, more valuable customer relationships.

Amplience supports the industry’s transition to Microservice, API-first, Cloud and Headless (MACH) technologies, is MACH certified and an executive member of the MACH Alliance.

For more information on the Amplience platform, including Dynamic Content and Dynamic Media, please visit **www.amplience.com**.

Slatwall Commerce is the only headless commerce platform that works for both business and technical teams. Marketers and business teams can design and quickly launch the storefronts they want with the business tools to promote, analyze and manage their business. Developers can easily access commerce services to build storefronts without development challenges, hacks and workarounds.

For more information, please visit **www.slatwallcommerce.com**.

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Named a Strong Performer, Amplience was recognized by Forrester in The Forrester Wave™: Agile Content Management Systems (CMSes), Q1 2021 report with the highest possible scores attained in the criteria of decoupled delivery, deployment and system performance, components, and marketplaces.

Powering customer experiences for the world's most innovative brands, Amplience's customers include Ulta Beauty, Coach, GAP, Crate & Barrel, Harry Rosen and Missguided.

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