Introduction:

The most common thing I hear from CEOs and senior business leaders is this:

> "Just show me how digital can grow the business.
> Explain it without the tech speak—so I can actually understand it."

And that's fair.

Because for most executives, digital still feels abstract.
Is it a website? A portal? An app? A new cost center?

But here's the truth:

> For business leaders, providing digital self-service channels to customers and partners is no longer optional—
> It is quickly becoming an essential part of a **resilient, scalable business model**.

This book is about helping you see why—and what to do about it.

Not in theory. In practice.
Not from a software vendor's perspective—but from the seat you sit in every day.

I've spent the last decade helping some of the largest manufacturers and distributors in the world build their digital strategy. And no matter the company size or industry, the story is almost always the same:

Digital teams are speaking in platforms, UX, and integrations.
Executives are thinking in P&L, margins, cash flow, and customer retention.

> They are both right, but you are talking past each other.

This book is about closing that gap.
About giving you the strategic clarity and business-first language you need to lead this transformation with confidence.

Originally, this started as a video series published by the B2B eCommerce Association (B2BEA.org). But I realized: this message needed something you could highlight, share, and bring into your next leadership meeting.

So here it is. Clear, direct, and written for the people responsible for the future of the business.

I hope you enjoy this book.

— Justin King

The Digital Wake-Up Call

Let's start with a simple truth:

eCommerce is not the point.

Yeah - I know the title of this book has the word "eCommerce" in it. But seriously, eCommerce is not the point.

Helping your customers do their job easier. That's the point.

In fact - it is the driving statement of this book.

And right now, the companies who make that job easier, they win.

But here's the challenge:

- Too many executives still think of eCommerce as a side project. A digital catalog. A bolt-on channel.
- They assign it to the "digital team" or spin up a task force, and assume their job is done.
- That mindset is exactly why so many digital initiatives stall.

Because transformation is NOT a website. It's a shift in how your company creates value, engages customers, and operates at scale.

And that shift starts at the executive level.

This Book Is for You. Not Your Digital Team

If you're a CEO, COO, CIO, CFO, President, or other executive leader at a manufacturer or distributor, this book was written for you.

Not because you need to become a technologist.
But because your company needs you to lead.

You don't have to know how to configure a platform or write a product taxonomy.

But you *do* need to know:

- Why your ERP isn't your eCommerce platform
- How digital can lower your cost to serve and speed up quote-to-cash
- Where to invest—and where most companies underinvest
- What metrics actually matter
- How to remove friction for your customers and your team
- And most importantly: how to create alignment and momentum across your organization

This book will walk you through those ideas, clearly, simply, and in plain executive language.

No jargon. No marketing fluff. Just what you need to make smart decisions and lead well.

What You'll Learn

Each chapter is built from real conversations with B2B leaders like you. From companies navigating the messy middle of digital change, you will learn:

- Why deeply understanding your customer journey is the foundation of digital success
- Why simplification across processes and functions is key to making it easier to buy from you
- Why transformation must be owned by the business, not outsourced to IT
- How sales roles are evolving in a digital-first world
- How to connect eCommerce to financial and operational outcomes
- Why bad data and organizational silos quietly derail digital success
- How to build AND LEAD a successful digital team.
- What your executive role actually looks like in driving this forward

You'll also get a practical readiness framework, case examples, and the executive playbook for leading real transformation, not just launching digital window dressing.

Why Now

Because the market isn't waiting.

Your customers aren't comparing you to your competitors anymore.
They're comparing you to every digital experience they have, at home, at work, and on their phone.

They want answers at midnight.
They want to know what's in stock, what it costs, and when it ships. All without picking up the phone.
They want tools that help them do their job faster, easier, and with fewer surprises.

If you can't deliver that, someone else will.

But here's the good news:
You don't have to get everything perfect.
You just have to get moving with the right mindset, the right investment, and the right leadership.

Let's get to work.

Chapter 1: The Strategic Imperative

Let's kick things off with a clear statement:

"While eCommerce should not be the strategy, it is a strategic capability."

When you truly understand your customer's experience, where the friction is, what they're trying to get done, you start to see where digital can make the biggest impact.

That clarity is what drives real prioritization.
Not guesswork.
Not noise.

Just a focused strategy to make it easier to buy from you, and harder to leave.

And when done right, it becomes one of the most powerful levers you have for growth, margin, retention, and customer experience.

The problem?
Most executive teams still treat it like a project. A website. A cost center.

That mindset is not only outdated, it's dangerous.

In this chapter, we'll explore why eCommerce is now a central part of your business model. Why it's not just about competing online, it's about staying relevant. And why the companies that embrace it strategically are pulling away from the pack.

From Relationship-First to Digitally-Enabled Relationships

If you've built a successful distribution or manufacturing business, odds are you did it the right way:

You built relationships.

You showed up.

You solved real problems for customers.

But the way those relationships start, and how they are maintained, has changed.

Today's B2B customer doesn't want to call a rep just to place a reorder.
They don't want to email a PO and wait two days for confirmation.
They want to find what they need, get their price, see inventory, and place the order, on their time.

That doesn't mean relationships are dead. It means they are digital-first.

Your website is now the *front door* of your company.
It's where trust is built (or lost).
It's how customers start relationships, and increasingly, how they prefer to manage them.

The Executive Lens: Digital as a Margin Lever

However, we have to be realistic here.

If you're a CEO or part of the executive team, your job isn't to "do digital." It is to drive the business.

So here is the business case:

Every time a customer reorders a commodity SKU by phone, you lose margin.
Every time your site can't show accurate availability, they pick up the phone, or worse, go to a competitor.
Every time your internal teams re-key orders, chase invoices, or answer "Do you have it? / what's my price?" calls, you're spending labor on tasks that should be automated.

Digital helps you:

- Reduce order entry errors
- Lower your cost to serve
- Increase customer lifetime value
- Protect margin by simplifying reorders
- Free up sales reps to focus on high-value opportunities

A benefit of eCommerce is you can control margin by suggesting the right product, with the best margin, to the right customer, at the right time.

This isn't about having a flashy front end. It's about running a smarter business.

What Customers Actually Want

Here's what your customers are *not* doing:

They're not browsing your website for fun.
They're not there to be "engaged."
They're not looking to be wowed by your homepage.

They are WORKING!

They want to:

- Find the right product
- See if you have it
- Know what it costs
- Place the order
- Get back to their job

If your digital experience slows that down, they bounce.
If it makes their job easier, they stay.

This is not a funnel. This is a fire drill.
And the companies who remove the most friction—win.

The Companies That Win Are Doing This

In working with hundreds of B2B organizations, we've seen what separates the companies that succeed in digital from those that stall:

Winners:

- Treat eCommerce as a business capability, not a project
- Involve executive leadership early and often
- Integrate digital deeply with ERP, CRM, and operations
- Align digital KPIs with financial and operational outcomes
- View digital as a lever for customer loyalty—not just acquisition

Strugglers:

- Treat eCommerce as a side project owned by IT
- Think a "launch" is the finish line

- Underinvest in people, data, and content
- Never align digital efforts with sales, product, customer service, supply chain or finance
- Focus on the website instead of the full experience

You don't need to be Amazon.
You just need to help your customer do their job—faster, easier, and more reliably than anyone else.

> "For years we treated eCommerce like a feature request. What finally changed? Our board started viewing it as infrastructure—just as critical as logistics or supply chain."
> — CIO, Mid-Market Electrical Distributor

What This Means for You

As an executive, you have a choice:

You can treat digital as a bolt-on feature—something your team "does" while you focus on the "real business."

Or you can lead it.
You can see eCommerce for what it really is:
A core capability that touches every part of your business—and that only works when it's aligned with leadership, investment, and clear strategy.

This is not about becoming an expert in platforms or pixels.
This is about owning the outcomes.

The Strategic Question

Here's the question we'll return to throughout this book:

Does this make it easier for our customers to buy from us?

If the answer is yes—invest.

If the answer is no—fix it.
If you don't know—find out.

That's the filter. That's the playbook.
That's how you lead B2B eCommerce from the top.

Chapter 2: You Can’t Outsource Transformation

Let’s start with a hard truth:

You can outsource execution. You cannot outsource transformation.

Yes, you can hire consultants.
Yes, you can build a digital team.
Yes, you can bring in agencies, vendors, and advisors.

But the responsibility to lead digital transformation? That belongs to you.

And if you hand that off—if you treat digital as “someone else’s job”—your transformation will stall. Or worse, it will look good on the surface but fail to create real business impact.

Digital is not a department.
It’s a mindset. A new way of thinking about how your business creates value. It's a way of doing business that underpins every function in your business.

And that mindset has to start in the C-suite.

The Myth of the “Digital Team”

We see it all the time:
A company hires a VP of eCommerce, spins up a new team, maybe even invests in a platform.

Check the box. Done.

Except it’s not. Because while the digital team might *build* things, they don’t run the business.

- They don’t own your sales pipeline.
- They don’t manage product data.
- They don’t control inventory or fulfillment.
- They don’t approve capital investments.

They can recommend strategy.
They can enable tools.
But they can't lead change across your company without you.

If each executive doesn't own digital in *their* function, the transformation fails before it starts.

What Ownership Looks Like

So what does executive ownership of digital actually look like?

Let's break it down by role:

- CEO: You define the role digital plays in growth, in your value proposition, and in how the company evolves. Your clarity (or lack of it) sets the tone for the entire org.

- COO: You ask: How can digital streamline fulfillment, automate customer service, and improve speed to delivery? You ensure operations are ready to support what digital promises.

- CFO: You evaluate how digital improves quote-to-cash, reduces billing errors, increases payment speed, and brings transparency to forecasting and spend.

- CMO: You lead the shift from top-of-funnel campaigns to programs that drive adoption, loyalty, and customer lifetime value. You tie marketing to revenue.

- Head of Sales: You reposition reps to be consultants. You enable sales teams with digital tools and teach them how to win in a hybrid model.

Each executive asks the same question:
How can digital help my function serve the customer better?

The Digital Team's True Role

If the executive team owns the "what," the digital team owns the "how."

They're your internal consultants. Your integrators. Your builders.

Their job is to:

- Recommend platforms

- Enable data visibility
- Implement tools
- Drive internal adoption

But they cannot decide which KPIs matter to the COO.
They cannot design the sales comp plan.
They cannot choose where to invest and where to hold the line.

If the business leaders don't lead, the digital team is stuck making decisions they're not empowered—or equipped—to make.

> "We tried to buy our way into digital maturity. Platforms, consultants, agencies—you name it. But it wasn't until we owned it internally that things started to move."
> — CIO, National Building Materials Distributor

What Happens When You Delegate Strategy

Here's what happens when executives try to delegate transformation:

- The digital team builds what they can, but it doesn't align to core priorities.
- Sales resists because they weren't included early.
- Ops says "this isn't how we do things."
- Marketing still works in a campaign silo.
- IT becomes the gatekeeper—or worse, the scapegoat.

And eventually, leadership pulls the plug.
Not because digital didn't work—
But because the org never really committed.

The Future Belongs to Digitally Fluent Leaders

You don’t have to be technical.
You don’t need to know the difference between headless and monolithic.
But you *do* need to be fluent in what digital means for your business.

That means:

- Understanding how your customer wants to buy
- Knowing what systems and data sit behind your experience
- Asking smarter questions about ROI and platform investment
- Helping your team move from fear to fluency

Digital transformation succeeds when executives own the vision—and the outcomes.

Not as side support. As leaders.

Your Playbook

If you're wondering where to begin, here’s the short list:

1. **Claim ownership.** Don’t hand this off. Make it your priority.
2. **Align your peers.** If the C-suite doesn’t agree on the goal, your teams won’t either.
3. **Make digital part of your strategic planning.** Not a line item—an embedded lever.
4. **Redefine success.** Move beyond “launch” metrics. Focus on adoption, efficiency, and customer value.
5. **Model the mindset.** When you talk digital, your teams pay attention. When you don't—they don’t either.

One Final Thought

You can’t outsource transformation.

You have to lead it.
With clarity, consistency, and courage.

This isn't about launching a website.
It's about running your business better—with better tools, better data, and better outcomes.

And it starts with you.

Chapter 3: What We Don’t Say Out Loud About Change

THE EMOTION NO ONE TALKS ABOUT IN BUSINESS

When we talk about digital transformation, we usually talk about strategy, platforms, integrations, metrics.

But beneath all that—the real reason many organizations stay stuck?

Fear.

Fear is what keeps transformation from taking root.
Fear of being wrong.
Fear of breaking something that works.
Fear of not knowing enough.
Fear of being left behind.

Until we name it, we can’t lead through it.

EXECUTIVE FEAR – WHEN SUCCESS BECOMES THE RISK

If you’re a CEO or business leader reading this, the odds are high that you’ve built something successful.

You’ve built a business based on relationships, operational excellence, and deep product knowledge. It works. It’s grown. And it’s profitable.

But here’s the uncomfortable truth: that business—the one you built—wasn’t designed to thrive in a digital-first world. Not because you did anything wrong. But because the game has changed.

And now, the very model that brought you success can also hold you back.

That realization creates fear:

- What if I change the machine I built… and break it?
- What if I invest in digital, and it doesn’t work?
- What if I don’t understand this world well enough to lead it?

So we delay. We delegate. We dabble.

But what feels like protecting the business can actually put it at risk.
Because while you're standing still—your customers are moving on.

DIGITAL LEADER FEAR – THE CAREER THAT FEELS LIKE A GAMBLE

Digital leaders have their own fears—often unspoken, but always present.

Most were brought in with a vague mandate: "Make us digital."
But without clear executive backing, budget, or alignment, they're stuck trying to build a future inside a company still clinging to the past.

They fear:

- Being seen as the website person, not a business partner
- That their work won't be adopted, and their roadmap will gather dust
- That their career is riding on the hope that someone finally "gets it"

Digital leaders want to make an impact—but many feel like they're pushing uphill, constantly asking for permission, constantly trying to prove the value of something others don't fully understand.

The unspoken question:
"If this doesn't work—what happens to me?"

WHAT FEAR CREATES IN THE BUSINESS

Fear doesn't just live in people. It shows up in the business.

- We invest in technology, but not in training or adoption
- We build digital "side projects" that never scale
- We resist org structure changes—even when the model no longer fits
- We hold off on tough calls because we don't want to disrupt what works "well enough"

And in doing so, we let the status quo win.
We mistake activity for progress. But nothing truly changes. Does it?

WHAT LEADERSHIP REQUIRES

Here's what great leaders do with fear:
They acknowledge it—and lead anyway.

Leadership isn't about avoiding fear.
It's about moving through it.

- Vulnerability: "I don't know everything, but I'm committed to learning."
- Clarity: "This is where we're going, and this is why."
- Empowerment: "You have permission to do the hard, necessary work."

You don't need to become a digital expert overnight.
But you do need to become a digital leader.

That means asking hard questions.
Supporting bold ideas.
And backing the people you hired to take you somewhere new.

THE FUTURE WON'T WAIT

If you've felt afraid of making the wrong decision—you're not alone.
If you've hesitated because digital feels like a risk—you're in good company.

But here's the truth:
Staying the same is the riskiest move you can make.

The world has already changed.
Your customers have already changed.
The expectations are here.

This isn't about catching up.
It's about building the business you'll be proud of five years from now.

Digital transformation doesn't require you to have all the answers.
It requires courage.

And that starts by naming the fear—and leading anyway.

Chapter 4: The Fallacy of the “Consumerization of B2B”

You’ve probably heard it.
I have definitely said it.

> “B2B is becoming more like B2C.”
>
> Or
>
> “We want an Amazon-like experience”

Except—it’s not. And your customers don’t.

Yes, your customers expect modern, digital experiences.
Yes, they use Amazon, Uber, and Netflix in their personal lives.
And yes, they bring those expectations with them to work.

But that doesn’t mean B2B buying is now “just like” consumer shopping.

The idea that B2B is being ‘consumerized’ is a fallacy.
And believing it leads to costly mistakes—like copying design patterns that don’t fit, oversimplifying the buyer journey, or ignoring the true complexity of your customers’ needs.

First Principle: Your Buyers Aren’t Shopping—They’re Working

Let’s get this straight:

A B2C customer might shop on their couch, on a whim, looking for a new jacket or a gadget. They’re exploring. Browsing. Clicking for fun.

But your B2B customer?
They’re working. They’re on your site because something broke. A job needs to get done. A machine is down. A project’s behind schedule.

They’re not there for the experience.
They’re there to get what they need and move on.

> The consumer is inspired.
> The B2B buyer is under pressure.

> "We kept comparing our experience to Amazon until we realized—our customers aren't shopping, they're working. The moment we embraced that, we stopped chasing trends and started solving problems."
> — VP of Sales, Construction Supply Company

The Buying Team ≠ The Individual

In B2C, one person decides.
They choose. They buy. Done.

In B2B, it's a team:

- The engineer wants CAD drawings and spec sheets
- Procurement wants accurate pricing and PO tracking
- Finance wants spend visibility
- The end user wants reliability and support
- Legal might even need to sign off

And the person placing the order might not be the one who did the research—or the one who pays the invoice.

If your digital experience only works for one person, it doesn't work.

This is why B2B sites must serve multiple roles, not just personas.

Complexity Is Not the Enemy—Friction Is

One of the most misunderstood ideas from B2C is that simplicity = better.

In B2B, complexity is a feature—not a flaw.

Your buyers don't need fewer options.
They need better tools to navigate complexity:

- Configurators
- Cross-reference tools
- Inventory visibility by location
- Flexible quote and approval workflows
- Saved lists by project or location

The goal isn't to remove complexity—it's to remove **friction.**

Why Copying B2C Backfires

When companies blindly copy B2C design or features, here's what happens:

- A beautiful homepage—with no quote workflow
- Great lifestyle photography—with no spec sheets
- A simplified cart—with no ability to apply customer pricing or tax exemptions
- A streamlined search—with no synonym matching for technical terms

These aren't upgrades. They're liabilities.

Your buyer doesn't need inspiration. They need answers.
Copying B2C patterns without adapting them to B2B needs creates frustration, not delight.

Where B2C *Does* Apply

So does this mean you ignore everything from B2C?

Not at all. There are valuable lessons:

- **Speed matters.** B2C taught us that people won't wait. Fast load times, quick paths to checkout, and real-time updates all matter in B2B too.
- **Mobile matters.** Your buyers may not be buying on mobile, but they are checking inventory, looking up specs, and tracking orders while in the field.

- **User experience matters.** Clean layouts. Intuitive navigation. Smart search. These all reduce friction.

- **Self-service matters.** B2C has trained people to do things themselves. B2B buyers expect that control—but with the right business context.

So yes, take cues from B2C. But translate them.
Don't mimic. Adapt.

Your Strategic Imperative

If your executive team is using "we need to be more like Amazon" as your digital north star, pause.

What does that actually mean for your business?

Amazon works because it's simple—for simple purchases.

But your value isn't just price and speed.
It's support, service, technical depth, and relationship.

Your job is to bring that value into the digital world—without losing what makes B2B different.

Bottom Line

B2B isn't becoming B2C.

It's becoming **digitally enabled B2B.**

Your buyers expect speed, visibility, and control—but within the context of how they already work.

The most successful companies aren't copying Amazon.
They're building digital tools that reflect the realities of their customers' jobs—and making those jobs easier.

That's not consumerization.

That's transformation.

Let's keep going.

Chapter 5: Why the Sales Model Must Change

This is the conversation that's whispered in hallways… but rarely said out loud:

> "Is digital going to replace our sales reps?"

Let's be clear:

No.

But digital *is* going to change what your customers expect from them.
And it's going to change how your business supports them.

If your eCommerce strategy doesn't align with your sales strategy, both will fail.

This chapter is about how to evolve—not eliminate—the sales role.

Because the future of selling isn't digital-only. It's **digitally-enabled humans**—working smarter, faster, and more strategically than ever before.

From Transactional to Consultative

In the traditional model, sales reps owned the order:

- They took reorders over the phone
- They visited job sites to collect purchase lists
- They fielded calls about pricing, inventory, and tracking

> "In the past, my customers treated me like their personal assistant. It was reactive and transactional, and I was still placing the order via customer service which would take time. When they realised an order could be confirmed faster with a clear ETA by ordering on the website, they made the shift. We have an even better relationship now focused on future business together."
> - Sales Account Manager, Enterprise Manufacturer Building Products.

That model worked when access to products and information was hard.

But now?
That information is everywhere.
And the order? It can—and should—be placed without human intervention.

First principle: If a customer can place the order themselves, they should.

If your reps are still focused on order entry, you're wasting talent.
The real value isn't in taking orders—it's in building relationships, solving problems, and driving growth.

The future of sales is consultative.
It's about customer success, long-term partnerships, and helping buyers do their job—not just closing the next transaction.

What Customers Want From Reps Now

Your customers don't want to call for the basics anymore.

They want to:

- Look up inventory and availability
- Check their specific pricing
- Place a reorder
- Receive order confirmations
- View open invoices
- Track shipments
- Manage credits and returns

They want to do all of that—on their own time, without needing a rep.

So what's left for sales?

A lot.

Reps are more valuable than ever when they focus on:

- Helping customers discover new product categories
- Guiding complex or multi-site purchasing
- Supporting negotiations and pricing programs
- Offering strategic advice
- Assisting with technical specs or compliance
- Solving problems that the website can't

The value has moved up the chain.
Reps are no longer the source of access. They're the source of insight.

Understanding the True Omni-Channel Journey

Here's what often gets overlooked:
Customers don't use one channel. They often use all of them.

They might:

1. Start their journey online—researching product types, specs, availability, and pricing.
2. Talk to their end customer, get clarification, then return to the site for updated pricing or alternatives.
3. Call a rep or visit the branch to confirm delivery timing or compatibility.
4. Place the order online—or through customer service—depending on urgency, context, or preference.
5. Use a mobile app to track the order while walking into a job site.

In reality, your website, mobile app, phone system, branches, and reps are all service channels—and your customer expects to move between them seamlessly.

If those touchpoints don't work together?

- You create friction.
- You lose trust.
- You slow down your customer's workflow.

Omni-channel isn't about channels. It's about continuity.
Customers aren't thinking, "I'm using digital."
They're just trying to get their job done.

Your role is to unify those touchpoints and make the service experience feel effortless, regardless of how they interact.

Digital Doesn't Disintermediate—It Unlocks Capacity

There's a fear that if customers can self-serve, they'll stop engaging with sales.

The opposite is true.

When customers can self-serve the basics, they come to reps for bigger conversations.

One distributor we worked with launched a self-service portal. Within months:

- Call volume dropped 22%
- But quote activity increased 36%
- Reps spent more time on strategic deals
- Customer satisfaction went up

Digital removes friction. It doesn't remove people.
It frees them to do higher-value work and lifts the capability of the sales team..

Branches, Inside Sales, and the New Sales Stack

This shift isn't just about field reps.

It affects your entire sales ecosystem:

- Branches become service hubs—not just will-call centers.
- Inside sales becomes proactive—not reactive.

- **Customer service** shifts from order-taking to solution support.

Your sales infrastructure must evolve alongside your technology.
That means training. That means tools. That means a new mindset.

You need to equip every sales role with:

- Visibility into customer activity
- Access to digital tools and quoting platforms
- Real-time pricing and inventory
- Collaboration across departments

Because when digital and human work together—that's when the magic happens.

Aligning Comp Plans and Metrics

Here's a practical issue that kills adoption:
Misaligned compensation.

If your sales reps lose commission when customers order online, they will resist digital—no matter how good your platform is.

You need to:

- Protect commission for self-service orders from existing accounts by recognizing digital sales for sales reps
- Incentivize adoption, not just transactions by rewarding reps whose customers not only have an e-comm account but regularly order online monthly
- Measure reps by account growth, retention, and margin—not only closed quotes

This isn't just a sales issue—it's an executive one.

You cannot drive transformation if your incentive model is stuck in the past.

> "Once we aligned our sales comp with digital adoption, everything changed. Reps stopped fighting the platform and started using it to drive bigger deals."
> — President, Mid-Market Plumbing Supply Distributor

Sales Enablement in the Digital Era

Sales teams need more than tools—they need **enablement**:

- Clear messaging about how digital supports their role
- Training on how to sell with digital, not against it
- Content that is channel-ready and customer-focused
- Data that helps them spot opportunities—not just defend accounts

Your sales team should be your biggest champions of digital—not its biggest blockers.

That only happens when leadership sets the tone.

Bottom Line

Digital doesn't kill the sales model.

It makes it smarter.
Faster.
More aligned to how customers actually want to work.

If you're asking your reps to do what a website can do, you're wasting talent.

But if you give your reps and branches the right digital tools?

You unlock capacity. You build trust. You win more business.

This is the future of sales.

And it's not five years away. It's already here.

Chapter 6: The Financial and Operational Case

Let's strip out the buzzwords for a moment.

eCommerce isn't just about customer experience.
It's not just about "going digital" or "modernizing your brand."

If you're an executive, here's what you need to know:

Digital is a lever for margin.
For speed.
For efficiency.
For cash flow.
For retention.

This isn't theory. It's math.
And in this chapter, we'll walk through exactly how B2B eCommerce impacts the financial and operational core of your business.

Lowering Cost to Serve

Let's start with the simplest—and most overlooked—benefit:

Cost to serve.

Every time:

- A sales rep keys in a manual order
- A customer emails a PDF PO
- Customer service checks stock manually
- A quote is built in Excel and emailed back

You're spending money.
Worse, you're adding risk—of errors, delays, and rework.

Now contrast that with digital self-service:

- Customer places their own order

- Customer gets fast order confirmation
- System checks contract pricing and availability in real-time
- Order flows straight into ERP
- No re-keying. No phone call. No mistake. This results in less waste and rework for you and the customer on credits and returns

First principle: The most profitable orders are the ones that require no human intervention.

Self-service doesn't just "feel modern."
It lowers your cost to serve—at scale.

> "Our website isn't just a channel—it's an operational advantage. Lower support costs, faster payments, fewer errors. That's what gets the exec team's attention."
> — COO, Electrical Products Manufacturer

Speeding Up Quote-to-Cash

Cash flow is not just about sales—it's about how fast you convert quotes to cash in the bank.

Slow quote approvals.
Emailing back and forth.
Manual invoicing.
Paper checks.

All of it delays revenue and frustrates customers.

Here's how digital shortens that cycle:

- Instant quote generation from saved configurations

- Online quote approvals with workflows
- Real-time invoice visibility
- Digital payment and credit automation
- Fewer disputes, faster reconciliation

Revenue doesn't matter until it's collected.

eCommerce doesn't just help you sell—it helps you **get paid faster**. Velocity of cash.

Retaining Customers with Better Tools

It's easy to think of eCommerce as a customer acquisition tool.

But in B2B, the biggest win is **retention.**

When your platform remembers preferences, simplifies reorders, and gives buyers control over their data, history, and orders—they stick around.

Think about it:

If your site:

- Knows their pricing
- Saves their job-site lists
- Lets them reorder in one click
- Gives them real-time order status

You're making them **better** at their job.

And when you help customers do their job better, they reward you with loyalty.

Digital tools create **switching costs**—and that's a powerful moat.

Real-Time Inventory and Smarter Pricing

Digital isn't just about the front end. It's about **integration.**

When your systems are connected—ERP, CRM, PIM, eCommerce—you unlock operational value:

- Real-time inventory visibility (by branch or warehouse)
- Accurate contract pricing and tiered discounts
- Dynamic promotions based on behavior or geography
- Prevention of quoting items you don't have in stock
- Fewer "do you have it?" calls to customer service

Your sales team stops wasting time.
Your customers trust what they see.
Your pricing strategy becomes a revenue engine.

This is how you move from **reactive** to **real-time commerce. And more so - this is how you build trust between your business and customers.**

The KPIs That Actually Matter

Let's talk measurement.

Forget vanity metrics like website visits or bounce rate.
You need to track what moves the business.

Here are the KPIs that matter:

- **Digital revenue share**: What % of your sales are flowing through digital channels?
- **Average order value (AOV)**: Are digital customers buying more?
- **Conversion rate**: Are visitors turning into buyers?
- **Customer churn**: Is retention improving?
- **Quote-to-cash cycle time**: How fast are you moving from quote to payment?
- **Cost to serve**: Are you reducing rep time and order entry labor?

You don't need 50 dashboards.

Just a few metrics that connect digital performance to financial results.

One More Thing: It's Not IT's Job

Here's where this all comes together:

Digital isn't just a technology project.
It's a **business transformation tool.**

If you treat it like an IT initiative, you'll underinvest.
If you delegate it to a team without operational ownership, you'll stall.
If you fail to tie it to core metrics, it'll never be a priority.

You wouldn't roll out a new branch without a financial model.
You wouldn't launch a new service line without a business case.

So don't launch digital without treating it the same way.

Bottom Line

eCommerce isn't about "having a site."
It's about **running your business better.**

- Lower cost to serve
- Faster cash collection
- Higher customer retention
- More accurate inventory and pricing
- Smarter operations and sales support

This is the financial case for transformation.

And it's the case your board, your CFO, and your operations team will get behind—**if you tell the story the right way.**

Let's keep going.

Chapter 7: Organizational Readiness and Roadblocks

Let's say you're sold.
You see the financial case.
You understand the strategy.
You're ready to lead.

But here's what happens in company after company:

The transformation *stalls*.

Not because of the wrong platform.
Not because of bad design.
But because the organization wasn't ready.

If you don't align your people, your structure, your data, and your mindset—digital becomes just another tool that no one really uses.

In this chapter, we'll show you what readiness really means—and what roadblocks to expect (and remove) before they derail you.

Why Most B2B eCommerce Fails

Let's be blunt:

Most failed digital initiatives didn't fail because of bad tech.

They failed because:

- No one owned the outcome
- The project wasn't funded properly
- Sales and customer service weren't bought in
- Product data was broken
- The ERP couldn't support what was promised
- The strategy wasn't anchored to business goals, vision and mission.
- Change management was an afterthought

Digital transformation isn't a software project.
It's a business-wide behavior change.

> "We had flatlined at 20% adoption levels after re-platforming and we were still sending customers to sales and customer service for all their actions. Once we interviewed customers and aligned digital with customer experience and an obsession with creating ease, we had buy-in and a breakthrough. We are now at 58% of total sales and still growing."
> - VP Digital + CX Transformation, Enterprise Manufacturer.

ERP ≠ eCommerce. CRM ≠ Customer Experience.

Here's a trap we see too often:

Companies think, "We already have an ERP and a CRM. We're covered."

But your ERP was built for internal control—not customer-facing experience.
And your CRM was built to track pipeline—not enable ordering, quoting, or self-service.

So what happens?

- The ERP can't return inventory by location in real time
- The CRM doesn't integrate with quoting tools
- Product content lives in spreadsheets
- No single system can answer "What's my price?"

You end up duct-taping systems and calling it digital.

That's not transformation. That's friction.

The Four Teams You Must Align

Digital success doesn't belong to the "digital team."
It depends on getting four core functions aligned:

1. Sales

- Fear of being replaced is real.
- Include them early. Show how digital supports—not replaces—them.
- Align compensation and incentives to digital adoption.

2. Product Management

- They own product content, specs, images, and taxonomies.
- If they're not engaged, your digital shelf will be empty or broken.

3. Marketing

- Digital is not just lead gen—it's about driving adoption, retention, and engagement.
- Marketing must shift from campaigns to tools.

4. IT

- They don't own the project—but they are critical.
- They must move from gatekeepers to enablers.

When these teams are rowing in the same direction, digital works.
When they're not—it doesn't matter how good your platform is.

And... this is just the start. The minimum alignment.
If this is a strategic initiative, you need to align the entire organization including Supply Chain, Operations, and Finance.

The Hidden Cost of Delay

Many executives underestimate the cost of *not* moving.

Here's what delay really costs you:

- Rising support costs as more orders stay manual
- Slower cash flow from quote-to-cash friction
- Lost business when buyers can't find what they need
- Talent drain as modern employees leave outdated systems
- Margin erosion from pricing inconsistency and errors

The longer you wait, the more expensive the gap becomes.

Standing still is not safe. It's a strategic risk.

How to Know If You're Ready

You don't need to be perfect. But you do need to be honest.

Here's a quick readiness checklist to evaluate with your leadership team:

1. **Customer:** Can buyers find what they need and place an order without help?
2. **People:** Are your teams aligned, trained, and bought in?
3. **Platform:** Does your current tech support your digital vision—or hold it back?
4. **Process:** Do you have a clear roadmap, KPIs, and governance?
5. **Product Content:** Is your data complete, structured, and consistently maintained?

Score yourself. Identify gaps.
Then choose one area to make meaningful progress on this quarter.

Funding the Work

Here's a hard truth:

Most companies underinvest in digital—because they treat it like IT.

But this isn't infrastructure. It's **customer-facing capability**.

You need budget for:

- Technology
- People
- Product content
- Data cleanup
- Change management
- Training and adoption programs

If you only fund the software, you've already set the team up to fail.

Bottom Line

Organizational readiness is the make-or-break factor in digital transformation.

You don't need perfection. You need alignment.
You don't need every answer. You need shared accountability.
You don't need to boil the ocean. You need to pick a place and move.

Because transformation is not about platforms.
It's about people.

And the companies that win are the ones that get their people on board—early, often, and all-in.

Chapter 8: Building, Organizing, and Inspiring Digital Teams (With the Talent Challenge in Mind)

INTRODUCTION: YOU'RE NOT GOOGLE—BUT THAT'S OK

Let's be honest—hiring top digital talent isn't easy in manufacturing and distribution.

You're not Google. You're not Amazon. You probably don't have a West Coast zip code, a ping-pong table, or a brand that gets digital natives lining up at your door.

But here's the good news: **you don't need a 100-person engineering team to win in digital**.

What you need is a **practical, empowered team** that understands your customers, your business model, and how to use digital to make it easier to buy from you.

If you get the team right—everything else gets easier.

START WITH THE WORK, NOT THE ORG CHART

Before you hire anyone, pause and ask:

What work actually needs to get done?

Use *first principles thinking*. Don't start with job titles or org charts. Start with problems:

- Can customers easily place a reorder?
- Can they see inventory and price?
- Can sales reps generate quotes on the fly?
- Can product content be trusted?

From there, define the capabilities required to solve those problems:

- Platform ownership (eCommerce, PIM, search)
- Product content and data governance

- UX and customer experience
- Analytics and reporting
- Change management and training

Then ask: **what do we need to own internally—and what can we outsource?**

Maybe you need an internal product owner—but can outsource UX or development. Maybe content is in-house, but analytics lives with IT.

Design your team around the work—not the buzzwords.

BUILDING THE TEAM YOU CAN ACTUALLY HIRE

Let's talk talent.

The reality is: most distributors and manufacturers aren't hiring elite developers away from Meta.

And that's OK.

Because the secret isn't finding unicorns—it's hiring people who can **translate**: people who understand systems *and* customers.

Look for:

- Internal high performers who "get it"—and can be trained
- Customer service reps who've lived the pain points
- Product managers who know the SKUs inside out
- Business analysts with curiosity and hustle

You can also expand your reach:

- Tap local universities and regional talent pools
- Offer remote or hybrid roles

- Hire for **potential**, not perfection

And remember: **people join missions, not companies**.
If you want talent, sell the *vision*.

ORGANIZING FOR EXECUTION

Once you've got people, you need structure.

There are a few common models that work in B2B:

- **Centralized Digital Team**: Controls the roadmap, owns platforms, defines standards.
- **Embedded Experts**: Digital talent sits within functions (Marketing, IT, Product) but is coordinated by a central lead.
- **Digital Center of Excellence (CoE)**: A small senior team provides tools, playbooks, and support to business units executing locally.

Whichever model you choose, make sure your digital team is **cross-functional by design**.

That means:

- Weekly standups with Sales, Ops, IT, and Customer Service
- Shared KPIs
- A single source of truth for backlog and priorities

And **governance matters**:

- Who owns the digital roadmap?
- Who approves feature requests?
- Who ensures alignment between departments?

Without governance, your digital team becomes a ticket taker.
With it, they become a strategic asset.

INSPIRING, ALIGNING, AND RETAINING

You don't inspire digital teams with free snacks or ping pong tables.
You inspire them with **impact**.

Give your digital team:

- Access to customers
- Visibility into metrics that matter
- A seat at the strategy table

Involve them in big conversations:

- Quarterly business reviews
- Product roadmapping
- Customer experience initiatives

Invest in their growth:

- Conferences
- Certifications
- Peer groups and roundtables

Recognize success:

- Celebrate adoption wins
- Publicly highlight team contributions

- Reward outcomes, not just effort

And most of all: **treat them like strategic partners—not support staff.**

FINAL THOUGHT: YOUR DIGITAL TEAM IS NOT SUPPORT. IT'S STRATEGIC.

Digital teams should not be stuck "updating the homepage" or fixing broken buttons.

They should be helping you **increase margin**, **reduce cost to serve**, and **build customer loyalty**.

So give them problems worth solving.
Give them leadership support.
Give them space to think and move.

If you want your digital team to act like owners—**treat them like owners**.

And they'll help you build a digital business you can be proud of.

Chapter 9: Finding Digital's True Home – Where Should the Digital Team Report?

Introduction: You Put It in the Wrong Place

When most manufacturers and distributors finally make the decision to invest in digital, the first question is often:
"Where should it sit?"

For years, the default answer has been IT—because digital involves technology.
Or marketing—because it includes things like websites, emails, and content.

But if you've followed along in this book, you know our First Principle:

> Digital transformation is about helping your customer do their job more easily.

So why wouldn't the team that owns the customer journey own digital, too?

That's why the most forward-thinking companies are starting to anchor digital initiatives inside customer success or customer service.

Because when digital lives closest to the customer, it becomes what it was always meant to be:
Strategic. Cross-functional. And experience-driven.

NOTE: For this topic there aren't any real best practices. There is no right or wrong place to put the organization. However, like the rest of the book, I am trying to helpgo help you re-think digital's role in your organization.

Why IT and Marketing Aren't Enough (Sometimes)

Let's start with the obvious.

Yes, digital includes platforms, integrations, and data. That's why IT is often tasked with leading the charge. But IT's primary objective is stability and risk mitigation—not innovation, iteration, or customer empathy.

So when digital sits solely in IT, you often get technically sound projects… that no one uses.

Marketing, on the other hand, brings creativity and communication. That's useful. But in many manufacturing and distribution companies, the marketing team is small,

underfunded, and often focused on top-of-funnel activity—not end-to-end customer experience.

In both cases, digital becomes a **project** instead of a **program**.

It's either a tech build… or a lead-gen campaign.
Neither is enough.

The Case for Customer Success

Here's why digital belongs in customer success (or a customer journey team):

- **They're closest to the pain.**
  They hear the complaints. They know where the friction is. They deal with the aftershocks of poor digital experiences every day.

- **They understand the end-to-end journey.**
  From quoting to ordering, from invoicing to support, customer-facing teams are the connective tissue.

- **They're already cross-functional.**
  They collaborate with sales, product, operations, and IT to solve real customer problems. That's exactly what digital transformation requires.

When digital sits in customer success, the focus shifts from "what do we want to build" to "what does the customer need right now?"

That's the shift that drives results.

Building a Customer-Centric Digital Function

So what does this look like in practice?

- **Start with a small, empowered team** that sits inside—or works alongside—your customer success or service group.

- Give that team ownership of the **customer digital experience**:
  ordering, quoting, tracking, invoicing, self-service, and adoption.

- Staff it with people who understand both your customers **and** your internal systems.

- Connect them to IT for execution.
  Connect them to marketing for content.
  Connect them to sales for insight.
  But let them **own the journey**.

And most importantly—**make sure it reports to someone with influence.**
Not buried three levels down in the org chart.
This is strategic. Treat it like it.

Elevating Digital to a Strategic Function

When digital is owned by the customer success team, something subtle—but powerful—happens.

Digital stops being a cost center.
It becomes a **growth engine**.

Because now you're building tools that:

- Increase retention

- Reduce cost to serve

- Drive upsell and cross-sell

- Improve onboarding

- And make life easier for both your customer and your team

You're not "doing digital."
You're making your business **easier to buy from**—and easier to love.

Final Thought

If digital still lives in IT or marketing in your org, that doesn't mean you're doing it wrong.

But it's time to rethink the org chart.

Because if the goal of digital is to serve the customer…
Then the team that understands the customer **should lead the way**.

Chapter 10: From Build to Influence – Elevating the Digital Team

DIGITAL TEAMS AREN'T SET UP TO SUCCEED

"We can't get executive buy-in."

That's the most common frustration voiced by digital leaders—and it's real.

But here's the harder truth: many digital teams haven't been equipped to earn influence.

They were hired to manage platforms. Launch portals. Keep the lights on.

But driving digital transformation? That's a different skill set.

This chapter is about making that shift—from builders to business partners. From executing requests to shaping strategy. And how executives can support that evolution.

Because if you want transformation to take hold, your digital team can't just be good at delivery. They need to be great at influence.

FROM EXECUTION TO INFLUENCE

Most digital teams know how to ship code, manage sprints, and run vendor reviews.

What they often lack is organizational influence:

- The ability to align stakeholders across functions
- The skills to diagnose business friction and frame it as opportunity
- The credibility to speak in financial and operational terms

Without that, even the best digital team ends up stuck in a support role—pushing uphill.

If you want transformation to accelerate, your digital team has to become more than executors.
They have to become educators, bridge-builders, and trusted advisors.

WHAT DIGITAL TEAMS MUST LEARN

A. Customer Experience (CX)

Digital isn't just about the website—it's about the end-to-end journey.

Digital teams must:

- Map key customer and employee touchpoints
- Identify friction and effort
- Leverage support calls, ticket data, and NPS feedback
- Show how digital tools can eliminate pain and improve retention

B. Change Management

Digital teams often underestimate resistance.

To lead change, they must:

- Understand stakeholder concerns
- Run pilots that show quick wins
- Use communication strategies that speak in business language
- Partner with Sales, Ops, and Service early and often

C. Business Translation

Features don't drive buy-in—**outcomes do**.

Digital leaders must:

- Tie platform improvements to business impact
- Show how automation reduces rework and errors
- Quantify how self-service reduces cost to serve

- Translate UX changes into measurable KPIs like AOV, churn, and quote time

D. Influence Without Authority

Most digital leaders don't "own" any operational functions. But they need to influence them.

That means:

- Building relationships across departments
- Facilitating tough conversations with curiosity, not control
- Earning trust through credibility, insight, and follow-through

WHAT EXECUTIVES MUST DO TO SUPPORT

To unlock this shift, executives must stop treating digital as just a technical function—and start developing it as a business function.

That includes:

- Investing in skill development: CX, storytelling, change leadership, and analytics
- Embedding digital leaders in sales meetings, service reviews, and strategic planning
- Creating a safe space for them to challenge the status quo
- Holding them accountable not just for delivery—but for adoption and impact

Support them not just with budget, but with belief.

THE HARD WORK DIGITAL TEAMS MUST EMBRACE

Transformation happens in the trenches—not the boardroom.

Digital leaders must dig into:

- Where support calls spike

- Where employees are rekeying orders or chasing invoices
- Where customers drop off in their journey

Then combine those insights with:

- NPS trends
- Customer complaints and verbatims
- Internal bottlenecks and manual workarounds

That's the story the business needs to hear.

Elevate it clearly:

- "Here's where we're behind."
- "Here's where we're wasting time."
- "Here's where we can leap ahead."

THIS IS THE BRIDGE YOU'VE BEEN MISSING

Most digital efforts stall because of a disconnect between business strategy and platform capability.

The digital team can be the bridge—**if you empower them**.

If you train them not just to build, but to influence.
Not just to implement, but to inspire.

When you develop your digital team into strategic leaders, you don't just get better tools.
You get better decisions. Better alignment. And better business outcomes.

That's how transformation takes hold.

That's why this chapter matters.

Chapter 11: Distributors: The Digital Branch Is Your New Branch

If you're a manufacturer or distributor, this analogy should hit home:

You've spent decades investing in physical branches—buying property, hiring people, stocking inventory, creating experiences.

Now ask yourself:

Would you open a branch that had no inventory, no signage, no salespeople, and no way to take an order?

Because that's what most companies are doing with their digital branch.

> "The moment we stopped treating our website as a project and started treating it like a branch—with staff, budget, and ownership—was the moment it started producing results."
> — CEO, Mid-Market Industrial Distributor

Why This Analogy Works

The digital experience isn't a side project anymore.
It's not a marketing tool. It's not "just a website."

It's your front door.
It's your most visited location.
And it might already have more traffic than any physical branch in your network.

So treat it like one.

A real branch has:

- A sales team that understands the customer
- Clear signage and navigation

- Up-to-date inventory and pricing
- Reliable service and support

Your digital branch should do the same.

But most don't.
Why?

Because leadership still thinks of digital as an initiative—not a location.

What the Best Branches Do

Your best physical locations run like machines.
They're staffed, maintained, and constantly improving.

You know the metrics:

- Revenue per branch
- Cost to serve
- Repeat business
- Revenue per customer

You review them constantly.

You invest in them without hesitation.

Now imagine if you applied the same thinking to your digital branch.

The Reality of the Digital Experience

Here's what most digital branches look like today:

- Search doesn't work
- Inventory isn't accurate
- Pricing is missing or inconsistent

- Customers can't track an order or view past invoices
- There's no "salesperson" to guide or recommend

If your physical branch performed like that, you'd shut it down.

Yet many companies launch eCommerce sites with broken basics—and then wonder why adoption is slow.

Customers walk into your digital branch expecting it to work. When it doesn't, they walk out.

And they don't always come back.

Staff It Like a Real Branch

Would you open a new location without a team?

Of course not.

But most companies "launch" digital without:

- A digital merchandiser
- A product content owner
- A UX manager
- A digital analyst
- A customer success function trained to support online tools

You wouldn't expect one person to run an entire branch—and yet, the digital branch often gets a skeleton crew (if anyone at all).

You don't need a massive team. But you do need the right people with clear roles.

Hold It Accountable Like a Real Branch

Branch leaders get KPIs. They get budgets. They get support.

Your digital branch needs the same:

- Revenue targets
- Adoption metrics
- Conversion rates
- Cost to serve reductions
- Satisfaction scores

And those metrics need to roll up to the executive level.

Because digital isn't "extra."
It's a core part of the customer experience. And it deserves visibility and investment at the top.

Connect Digital and Physical—Don't Compete

This isn't about shutting down locations or forcing customers online.

It's about integration.

When done well, digital makes your branch staff more effective:

- They have better visibility into customer behavior
- They can see quotes and order history
- They spend less time keying in repeat orders
- They can focus on real conversations, not just transactions

When digital and human channels are aligned, your customer wins—and so does your bottom line.

Think Like a Branch Leader

As an executive, here's your shift:

Stop thinking of digital as a cost.
Start thinking of it as a location.

Ask yourself:

- Would I fund this if it were a new branch?
- Would I staff it this way?
- Would I allow this level of customer experience in a physical location?

Your digital branch is open 24/7.
It serves thousands of customers.
And it influences every deal—even the ones that close offline.

It's time to give it the investment, attention, and accountability it deserves.

> "This chapter reframed how we talk about digital across our leadership team. It's not an add-on—it's our most scalable branch."
> — VP of Operations, Building Supply Distributor

Chapter 12: For Manufacturers, Digital Strategy = Distributor Support

First things first:

Not every manufacturer should go direct-to-customer.
In fact, for most, that's the wrong strategy entirely.

Your greatest digital opportunity isn't bypassing your distributors.
It's making them stronger.

The best manufacturers aren't trying to replace the channel.
They're building digital capabilities that make their channel partners more effective, more modern, and more loyal.

That *is* your digital strategy.

Why Going Direct Isn't Always Strategic

There's been a lot of noise over the past decade about manufacturers needing to "go D2C" or "own the customer."

But here's the reality for most manufacturers:

- Your product requires technical selling
- You rely on distributors for reach, credit, service, and logistics
- You don't want to alienate the channel that built your business

Trying to copy a consumer model creates channel conflict.
And worse—it distracts you from your real competitive advantage.

So instead of asking, "How do we sell direct?"
The better question is:
"How do we help our distributors sell better, faster, and more often?"

The Distributors You Rely On Are Struggling Digitally

This is where it gets real.

Many of your distributors—especially the small and mid-size ones—are behind:

- Their product content is incomplete or inconsistent
- Their eCommerce sites are hard to navigate
- Their teams are stretched thin
- Their data is siloed and outdated

They want to modernize.
But they lack the budget, the talent, and sometimes even the understanding of where to start.

And that's your opportunity.

How to Win: Become the Digital Backbone of Your Channel

What your channel partners need isn't a new sales rep.
It's a digital infrastructure they can plug into.

Here's what channel support looks like in practice:

Product Content Syndication

- Provide complete, enriched, normalized data.
- Deliver it in formats that match distributor systems.
- Maintain consistency across categories and updates.

Shared Digital Assets

- Videos, images, spec sheets, CAD files.
- Pre-built product bundles and category templates.
- Campaign kits for SEO, paid ads, and email.

White-Labeled Portals or Hosted Sites

- Give smaller distributors a turnkey digital storefront.
- Let them go to market under their own brand—but powered by your content and tools.

Joint Digital Campaigns

- Co-fund paid search and retargeting.
- Share leads and insights.
- Build programs where both parties win.

Treat Your Distributors Like Strategic Partners

The best manufacturers now treat distributor enablement like a go-to-market function—not a side program.

They segment their partners by digital maturity.
They assign channel marketing managers to support the top tier.
They create enablement playbooks.
They fund pilot programs.
They track shared KPIs.

They don't just sell through the channel. They invest in it.

> First principle: The more digitally mature your distributors become, the stronger your market position grows.

> "Digital transformation for us meant giving our channel the tools they need to succeed—better product data, easier syndication, shared analytics. That's the real play."
> — VP of Channel Strategy, Industrial Manufacturer

What About Direct-to-Customer?

Does this mean D2C is off the table?
Of course not.

Direct-to-customer might make sense in select cases:

- Niche brands or product lines
- Long-tail SKUs that distributors don't carry
- Marketplaces like Amazon or Zoro
- Gaining insight into buying behavior

But here's the key:

D2C is a tactic—not the strategy.

It should serve your channel, not compete with it.
Used well, it helps you:

- Test messaging
- Learn from customers
- Support brand awareness
- Fill gaps in the channel

Play Offense, Not Defense

Many manufacturers are still playing defense—waiting for distributors to figure it out, or assuming they already have.

That's a risk.

Because the competitors who play offense—who empower their channel with tools, data, and digital programs—are winning more shelf space, more loyalty, and more share of wallet.

The best channel partners are choosing to work with the manufacturers who make it easier to sell.

And when your products are easier to find, configure, quote, and reorder—**they win. And so do you.**

Your New Role

If you're a manufacturing executive, your digital strategy isn't just about building capabilities for yourself.

It's about extending those capabilities to your channel.

Your success depends on the success of your distributors.

And in this market, enabling your channel digitally is one of the highest-ROI moves you can make.

Because the manufacturer that becomes the easiest to buy, sell, and work with?

Wins.

Chapter 13: The Executive Playbook

If you've made it this far, you already know:
B2B eCommerce is not just about having a website.
It's about how your business will operate, grow, and serve customers over the next decade.

But ideas alone don't drive transformation.
Execution does.

And execution needs a playbook.

This chapter gives you the executive-level blueprint:

- Where to invest
- What to measure
- How to align your organization to drive results

No fluff. Just the levers that actually move the business forward.

Invest Where It Counts: Platform, People, and Data

Executives often ask:

> "Where should we start? Where should we invest?"

The answer is simple—but not always easy:

Platform, people, and data. These are your three core assets.

1. Platform: Build the Right Foundation

Your platform doesn't need to be trendy. It needs to be:

- Scalable
- Flexible
- Integrated with ERP, CRM, and PIM
- Easy to use for customers and internal teams

Avoid custom Frankenstein builds that create technical debt.
Choose platforms that can evolve with your business, not ones that lock you into rigid processes.

Your platform should empower—not limit—your teams.

2. People: Staff Like It's a Branch

Would you open a new physical branch with no team?
Of course not.

So don't launch a digital one without:

- Product content owners
- Digital merchandisers
- UX and analytics leads
- Sales and customer support trained on the tools
- Executive ownership of outcomes

Digital needs talent—not just technology.

3. Data: Clean It Up or Pay the Price

Bad data breaks trust.

If your site says a product is in stock—but it's not…
If pricing is different online than on a quote…
If customers can't find products because of poor taxonomy…

They stop trusting your experience. And they stop using it.

Invest in:

- Data governance
- Taxonomy and schema design
- Enriched product content

- Inventory accuracy
- Contract and customer-specific pricing logic

Data is the fuel. Without it, your platform doesn't run.

Define Success: What to Measure and Who Owns It

Transformation doesn't mean much if you can't measure it.

So what should you track?

Here are the executive-level metrics that matter:

Revenue Impact

- Digital revenue share
- Quote-to-order conversion rates
- Average order value (AOV)

Cost Efficiency

- Cost to serve by channel
- Call deflection rate (via self-service)
- Order entry errors and rework reduction

Customer Behavior

- Repeat purchase rate
- Reorder frequency
- Abandonment rate

Organizational Readiness

- Adoption by sales, customer service, and branches
- Time to onboard new customers digitally
- Internal training and enablement completion

But metrics only work when someone owns them.

Assign KPIs to business leaders—not just the digital team.

If sales owns revenue, let them own digital share of wallet.
If operations owns cost to serve, let them drive order automation.
If marketing owns engagement, let them track digital adoption.

This is how you move from project to capability.

Align the Org: Messaging and Readiness Framework

Change doesn't happen just because you say so.
It happens because people understand why it matters—and what to do.

Here's how to align your org:

Executive Messaging

- Communicate the "why" constantly.
- Connect digital to company values: customer focus, operational excellence, growth.
- Make it clear: This is not an IT project. It's the future of how we operate.

Middle Management Enablement

- Train managers to translate strategy into daily behaviors.
- Give them talking points and KPIs to reinforce the shift.
- Reward action, not just results.

Frontline Adoption

- Make it easy for reps, CSRs, and branch staff to see digital activity.
- Create incentives that support—not fight—digital usage.
- Celebrate quick wins to build momentum.

Use a simple **readiness framework** to assess progress by team, region, or business unit:

1. **Awareness** – Do they know what's changing?
2. **Understanding** – Do they understand how it impacts their role?
3. **Action** – Are they using the new tools and processes?
4. **Advocacy** – Are they promoting digital with customers?

Your job: identify the bottlenecks and clear the path.

The Playbook Is Ongoing

This isn't a one-time launch. Digital is not a project.

This is an ongoing leadership discipline. *Digital is a program.*

- Quarterly reviews of adoption and performance
- Continuous feedback loops between teams
- Regular investment in platform, people, and data
- New goals as customer behavior evolves

Transformation isn't an event. It's a habit.

Bottom Line

You don't need to micromanage digital.
But you do need to lead it—with clarity, investment, and accountability.

- Invest in platform, people, and data
- Measure what matters—and assign owners
- Align your teams through simple, clear messaging
- Build habits that drive momentum

That's the playbook.
That's your job.
That's how you lead this transformation.

A 10-Point Playbook for Leading Digital

This book was written for you—the executive leader who sees the shift happening and knows your organization must move faster, better, and more strategically.

If you've skipped to the end (we get it), or you're ready to take this work from insight to execution, here's your playbook.

1. Declare eCommerce a Strategic Imperative

This isn't a project.

It's not marketing.

It's not a bolt-on.

It's how you will grow, serve your customers, and operate your business in the future. That clarity must start at the top—and be repeated often.

When you name it as strategic, others will treat it that way.

2. Assign Executive Ownership

Transformation without ownership is just motion.

There must be a single accountable leader who owns the full picture:

- Revenue

- Adoption
- Investment
- Cross-functional coordination

It cannot be buried under IT or delegated to a mid-level team.

This is P&L-level responsibility.

3. Fund the Right Things

Don't just fund software licenses and platform fees.

Fund the real drivers of digital success:

- The right people and org structure
- The cleanup and governance of product and customer data
- Integration efforts with customers and systems
- Change management and training

Digital isn't expensive. Underfunded digital is.

4. Get Your Data House in Order

This is foundational.

Without structured, enriched, connected data—your eCommerce experience will underperform, and your AI investments will disappoint.

Focus on:

- Product taxonomy and attributes
- Contract and customer pricing logic
- Inventory by location

- Vendor data
- Ownership and governance

Good data = trusted experiences = adoption.

5. Treat Your Website Like a Branch

Think operationally.

Would you open a physical location without staff, signage, or inventory?

Then don't do that digitally.

- Staff your digital branch
- Measure revenue, AOV, retention, and cost to serve
- Integrate it into sales and service workflows
- Make it clean, fast, and reliable

It's not a marketing site. It's your front door.

6. Align Your Sales Strategy

Your sales team can be your greatest barrier—or your greatest asset.

- Align compensation so they don't lose when customers self-serve
- Train them to use digital as a sales enablement tool
- Equip inside sales and customer service to guide digital adoption
- Set shared targets between digital and sales teams

Don't replace the sales team. Make them more effective.

7. Measure What Matters

Skip vanity metrics. Focus on performance indicators that tie to outcomes:

- Digital revenue share
- Cost to serve
- Quote-to-cash cycle time
- Product returns and error rates
- Sales team adoption
- Customer satisfaction and repeat rate

Make sure these KPIs roll up to leadership—and have owners.

8. Build Cross-Functional Alignment

Digital doesn't work in silos.

You need coordination between:

- Product teams (for content and taxonomy)
- Sales and marketing (for adoption and messaging)
- IT (for integration and reliability)
- Operations (for fulfillment and service)

Start with a shared language. Build with shared goals.

9. Support Distributors (If You're a Manufacturer)

Direct-to-customer isn't the only—or best—strategy.

For many manufacturers, your digital future runs through your channel.

- Provide enriched product content and syndication tools
- Help distributors launch or improve eCommerce

- Offer digital assets, co-branded campaigns, and hosted portals
- Make Punchout and integration easy
- Share KPIs, leads, and digital insights

The more digitally mature your channel is, the more successful you'll be.

10. Prepare for AI—Now

You don't need a chatbot.

You need structured data, connected systems, and cross-functional governance.

Then—and only then—can you layer on AI to:

- Generate content
- Personalize experiences
- Automate quoting and service
- Forecast and recommend
- Drive efficiency

AI isn't the destination.

It's the acceleration of everything you've already built.

Final Word

You don't need to master every detail of platforms, integrations, or taxonomies.

But you do need to lead.

This playbook isn't theoretical. It's been built from years of working with manufacturers and distributors who got it right—and learned from the ones who didn't.

You don't need to boil the ocean.

You just need to move—with clarity, alignment, and commitment.

You’ve got the roadmap. Now it’s time to lead.

Chapter 14: AI, Data, and What's Next

If the first wave of digital transformation was about building a website,
And the second was about integrating operations and self-service tools…

The next wave is about intelligence.

Artificial intelligence isn't a future trend. It's already here—reshaping how your customers buy, how your teams sell, and how your company runs.

For executive leaders, this isn't about becoming data scientists.
It's about understanding how AI will impact your business model—and preparing your organization to use it strategically.

What AI Actually Means for B2B

Forget the hype. Forget the headlines.

Here's what AI really means for manufacturers and distributors:

- Faster content creation
- Smarter product recommendations
- More accurate quoting
- Better forecasting
- Automated support
- Personalized experiences at scale

And above all: data-driven decisions in real time.

Let's break it down.

1. AI for Product Content

One of the biggest bottlenecks in B2B eCommerce is content.

- Thousands of SKUs

- Technical data that's scattered or missing
- Vendor descriptions that aren't customer-friendly
- Manual enrichment that takes months

AI is changing this.

With large language models (like GPT), you can now:

- Generate product descriptions in seconds
- Standardize attributes across SKUs
- Translate content into customer-specific language
- Detect duplicates and normalize taxonomy

> What used to take months can now be done in days—with the right oversight.

This unlocks speed, scale, and consistency—especially critical for manufacturers syndicating to multiple distributors.

2. AI for Quoting and Configuration

Complex quoting is often a pain point:

- Too many variables
- Manual review steps
- Sales reps reinventing the wheel for every request

AI can:

- Recommend configurations based on customer history
- Auto-fill quote fields with predictive logic

- Flag pricing inconsistencies
- Learn from past deals to improve accuracy

Combined with automation, this shrinks your quote cycle—and increases close rates.

3. AI for Service and Support

Your customer support team handles:

- Order status questions
- Pricing and availability calls
- Product compatibility issues

AI-powered chat and self-service tools can now handle a growing share of these interactions—accurately and instantly.

This doesn't replace your team. It extends their reach.

The result?

- Faster answers for customers
- Lower cost to serve
- More bandwidth for reps to focus on complex issues

4. AI for Personalization and Forecasting

The best digital experiences feel tailored—like your company already knows what the customer needs.

AI enables:

- Dynamic product recommendations
- Personalized promotions based on customer behavior

- Alerts for unusual order patterns (good or bad)
- Inventory and demand forecasting based on behavior, geography, and seasonality

These aren't gimmicks. They're operational advantages.

What Leaders Need to Know and Do

You don't need to code.

But you *do* need to ask the right questions:

- Where are we making decisions that could be automated?
- What data do we already have—but aren't using?
- How can we use AI to make our people more effective, not just replace tasks?
- Are our platforms and partners AI-ready?

And you need to prepare your teams:

- Upskill digital and data fluency
- Encourage experimentation—start small, move fast
- Create governance to ensure ethical and responsible use

The companies that win with AI aren't the ones with the flashiest tools.
They're the ones who apply it to real business problems—starting now.

A Word of Caution: AI Is Only as Smart as Your Data

AI doesn't fix bad data. It amplifies it.

If your product taxonomy is a mess, AI-generated content will reflect that.
If your pricing logic is inconsistent, AI quoting tools will confuse customers.
If your customer data is fragmented, AI insights will be misleading.

AI multiplies whatever foundation it's built on.

Clean data, tight processes, and good governance are non-negotiable.

What's Next: Leading Through Disruption

The pace of change is accelerating.

Five years ago, you needed an eCommerce site.
Now, you need real-time data, integrated systems, and AI-powered experiences.

So what's coming next?

- Voice-enabled ordering
- Visual search and product identification
- Predictive maintenance and automated replenishment
- Connected supply chains with real-time transparency
- Proactive digital experiences tailored to job roles

What seems futuristic now will soon become table stakes.

Your job isn't to chase trends—it's to **build an organization that can adapt quickly and responsibly.**

Bottom Line

AI is not magic. It's not a threat.
It's a tool. A powerful one.

Used well, it:

- Increases efficiency
- Enhances experience
- Lowers cost
- Frees up your teams for higher-value work

The future belongs to companies that combine the best of human insight with the power of intelligent systems.

And it starts—not with tech—but with **leadership.**

Let's build what's next.

> "Everyone wants to talk about AI. But no one wants to do the hard work of getting their data house in order. This chapter explains why that work is non-negotiable."
> — VP of Digital Transformation, Global Manufacturer

Bonus Chapter 1: Customer Integration – The Hidden Growth Strategy

If the entire point of B2B eCommerce is to make it easier for your customer to do their job, then:

For many of your best customers, your website isn't actually the answer.

They don't want to log in.
They don't want to browse categories.
They don't want to retype a PO they already built in their own system.

What they really want is for your business to plug directly into theirs.

This is where **eProcurement integration and Punchout catalogs** come in—and why they're not just a technical feature.

They're a strategic capability. A growth lever. A competitive moat.

1. If This Is About the Customer's Job—Integration Is the Job

Your customers are working.
Many of them live in their own ERP, MRP, or procurement platform—like SAP Ariba, Coupa, Jaggaer, Oracle, or Workday.

They're not casually browsing your site during a lunch break.
They're executing a job: issuing a PO, sourcing a part, checking budget codes.

And here's what they absolutely don't want:

> "I have to enter the order in *our* system for approval,
> then retype it into *your* website to place it."

That's double work. It introduces errors. It delays purchasing.

Integration eliminates that friction.

Through Punchout catalogs, hosted catalog files, or API connections, you let your customer:

- Search your catalog inside *their* system
- Create a requisition that follows *their* approval path

- Send the PO electronically to your system
- Get confirmation and invoices back—without leaving their own workflow

It's invisible eCommerce. But it's the kind that gets adopted—and embedded.

Real-World Example: Amazon Business

When Amazon Business launched, they didn't just scale their consumer model.

They listened.

And what they heard from enterprise customers was simple:

> "We live in our procurement systems. Make it easier for us."

So Amazon got to work.
They built **dozens of integrations** with leading eProcurement platforms—so that their customers could buy from Amazon without ever visiting amazon.com.

They knew the modern B2B experience isn't just about having a digital storefront.
It's about meeting the customer *inside their own process.*

If Amazon is doing this—and winning with it—it's not a nice-to-have.
It's a competitive necessity.

2. What Are eProcurement and Punchout?

Let's define the key terms:

- **eProcurement** refers to software systems that large buyers use to manage purchasing, approvals, budgets, and supplier relationships. Think: Ariba, Coupa, Jaggaer, etc.
- **Punchout** is a way to connect your eCommerce site to the customer's eProcurement system. It lets them "punch out" to your catalog, shop as usual, then return the cart into their system—preserving their workflow, controls, and data.

The entire experience looks and feels native to *their* process.
But you still get the order digitally, with fewer errors and faster fulfillment.

3. The Strategic Benefits of Customer Integration

This isn't just IT plumbing. It's a business win.

Customer integration drives:

- **Higher retention:** Once you're embedded, it's very hard to replace you
- **Larger share of wallet:** You become the path of least resistance
- **Lower cost to serve:** Orders are clean, structured, and fast
- **Better forecasting:** Real-time visibility into customer demand and spend
- **Procurement compliance:** You help your customer hit *their* goals

You're not just a vendor anymore.
You're a trusted supplier partner—integrated into their operations.

4. What Customers Expect

Your enterprise customers won't wait 6 months for you to figure it out.

They expect:

- Fast onboarding into their preferred platform
- Support for common protocols (OCI, cXML, hosted catalog)
- Up-to-date, structured catalog data
- Contract pricing, validated carts, tax and freight logic
- Tight SLA adherence, and clear support contacts

It's not "we offer Punchout."
It's "we make it easy to integrate—because we've done it before."

This isn't just about capabilities—it's about confidence.

5. What It Takes to Deliver

To make integration work, you need:

- A product content strategy (taxonomy, attributes, pricing)
- A modern eCommerce platform with integration support
- A team that can manage catalog feeds and schema mapping
- IT and operations resources to configure, test, and support integration
- A clear process for onboarding new customers and maintaining the connection

You don't need an army. But you do need a plan.

And the companies that do this well make it a core part of their key account onboarding—not a side project.

6. Why This Is an Executive Priority

Here's the final truth:

Your biggest customers won't buy from you without this.

Or if they do, they won't buy *everything* from you.

Integration makes your company sticky.
It makes your customer's job easier.
And it builds trust in a way that websites never will.

As an executive, you need to treat this as a strategic investment—not just an IT feature.

This is where real digital transformation happens—quietly, behind the scenes, at scale.

Bottom Line

Customer integration is not the future.
It's the present—especially for your largest, most strategic accounts.

While everyone else is focused on front-end design and mobile optimization, your smartest move may be enabling the back-end infrastructure that keeps customers locked in and happy.

> It's not about logging in.
> It's about plugging in.

That’s the hidden growth strategy.

Bonus Chapter 2: Preparing for AI – Why Data Is Your Most Valuable Asset

Everyone's talking about AI.
But here's what no one says loudly enough:

> AI isn't magic. It's acceleration.
> And what it accelerates—good or bad—depends entirely on your data.

If your data is structured, enriched, and well-governed, AI becomes a force multiplier.
If your data is messy, fragmented, or shallow, AI becomes a liability.

This chapter isn't about hype.
It's about how to prepare your organization for the real value of AI—by getting serious about your data.

1. AI Is Hungry—and It Eats Structure for Breakfast

Large language models like GPT don't just need data—they need **structure**.

If your data:

- Uses inconsistent naming conventions
- Has missing fields or conflicting values
- Lacks relationships between attributes

Then AI can't reliably understand or reason with it.

> You can't automate what you can't explain clearly.
> And data is how you explain your business to a machine.

AI doesn't fix chaos.
It multiplies whatever foundation it's built on.

2. The New Role of PIM in the AI Era

Traditionally, **PIM (Product Information Management)** was seen as a tool for managing catalog content:

- Standardizing product data
- Feeding eCommerce platforms
- Distributing content to partners

But in the AI era, PIM is being redefined.

It's no longer just a publishing tool.
It's a **knowledge system**—a structured, scalable data source for intelligent applications.

A mature PIM can now power:

- AI-generated descriptions and SEO
- Voice search
- Product comparison engines
- Chatbots that know the difference between SKUs, kits, and replacement parts
- Configuration engines and guided selling tools

> The quality of your AI output is limited by the quality of your product knowledge.
> And your PIM is where that knowledge should live.

3. It's Not Just Product Data—It's Knowledge

When people say "we need better data," they usually mean product descriptions or specs.

But real AI-readiness goes deeper.

You need:

- **Vendor data**: Who supplied the product? What are the compliance standards? Lead times? Source of origin?
- **Customer data**: Who buys what? What's their contract price? What products are they likely to need next?

- Transactional history: What's the typical reorder cadence? Which accounts are at risk?
- Behavioral data: What are users searching for? What's being abandoned?

All of this builds up to knowledge—which AI can then tap into to personalize, predict, and recommend.

4. Preparing Your Data for AI Use

You don't need to boil the ocean. But you do need a plan.

Start with a structured readiness checklist:

Audit existing data

- Identify gaps, inconsistencies, duplications
- Prioritize high-impact categories or product lines

Standardize taxonomy

- Create consistent naming and attribute structures
- Define relationships: accessories, alternatives, replacements

Enrich metadata

- Add context: certifications, use cases, industry applications, performance specs
- Include non-product data like location availability, pricing logic, shipping rules

Connect systems

- Ensure ERP, CRM, PIM, CMS are integrated
- Avoid data silos that create version conflicts

Assign ownership

- Define who is responsible for maintaining and governing each type of data
- Make data quality a shared goal—not just an IT problem

5. Use Cases That Depend on Great Data

Without clean, structured, and connected data, AI doesn't work.
With it, you unlock real, tangible use cases:

- AI-generated product content: Descriptions, feature bullets, spec sheets
- Conversational assistants: Smart chatbots that recommend products or answer questions
- Search and navigation: Context-aware filters and suggestions
- Intelligent quoting: Auto-filled RFQs based on buying behavior and configuration logic
- Predictive alerts: "Customers like this one usually reorder in 45 days—send a reminder"

These aren't far-off innovations.
They're being built *right now*—and the only barrier is your data maturity.

6. What Executives Must Understand

AI isn't just a technology initiative.
It's a business capability—and it begins with leadership alignment on data.

As an executive, your role is to:

- Prioritize data investment as a strategic asset
- Fund data cleanup and governance (not just flashy AI tools)
- Assign cross-functional ownership across product, marketing, ops, and IT
- Create a roadmap for turning data into decisions—and then into automation

Your platform doesn't make you AI-ready.
Your data does.

7. From Infrastructure to Differentiator

Ten years ago, having clean product data gave you a better-looking website.
Today, it gives you competitive differentiation.

Tomorrow, it gives you proprietary intelligence.

Companies that treat data as infrastructure will lag behind.
Companies that treat data as **knowledge capital** will build unfair advantages that AI can scale—but no competitor can copy.

Bottom Line

If you're serious about AI, start with your data.

- Get it structured
- Get it connected
- Get it owned
- And get it ready

Because the companies that win the AI race won't be the ones with the most tools.

They'll be the ones whose data is ready to feed the beast.