


Relevant Notes On...

Leveling Up Your B2B Ecommerce Efforts



Relevant Bits



Stay competitive with a **modern** **B2B ecommerce** **experience**

B2B brands have been slowly adopting B2C ecommerce practices and ideas in recent years and forecasters have routinely predicted big growth numbers for B2B ecommerce. But old habits die hard. Surveys of business buyers, academic and industry research and a look at our own behaviors reveal that now is the time for B2B businesses to level up their ecommerce capabilities.

Traditional B2B sales is a sales rep- and phone order-driven system and digitization has been slow. The pandemic made the transformation urgent as business shoppers began working from home and were open to working with brands offering easy, low-to-no contact and fast online buying experiences.

Understand changes in the marketplace

Emerging and continuing trends converge to create a new set of realities:

- Business customers are all-in on shopping online after a year of WFH and are unlikely to go back to old buying habits even if they go back to the office
- They are increasingly willing to take their business to a brand that makes procurement easier
- Cumbersome paths to purchase, limited payment options and no visibility into their orders turn business buyers off
- Millennials and digital natives are a growing percentage of business decision-makers and influencers now and they expect a consumer-level online buying experience
- B2B buyers want the same level of personalization and service that they get from Amazon
- Customers expect the same self-serve experience and instant gratification

These trends have implications for companies operating mostly by the old rules and those who have been serving up ecommerce for years. Regardless of where you are in your digitization efforts, there is one universal truth:

Online buying experiences have to improve to keep B2B customers.





Mini case: leveling up an existing ecommerce platform

Even if your ecommerce operation is making its KPIs now, it's smart to ensure you can meet B2B buyers' evolving needs.

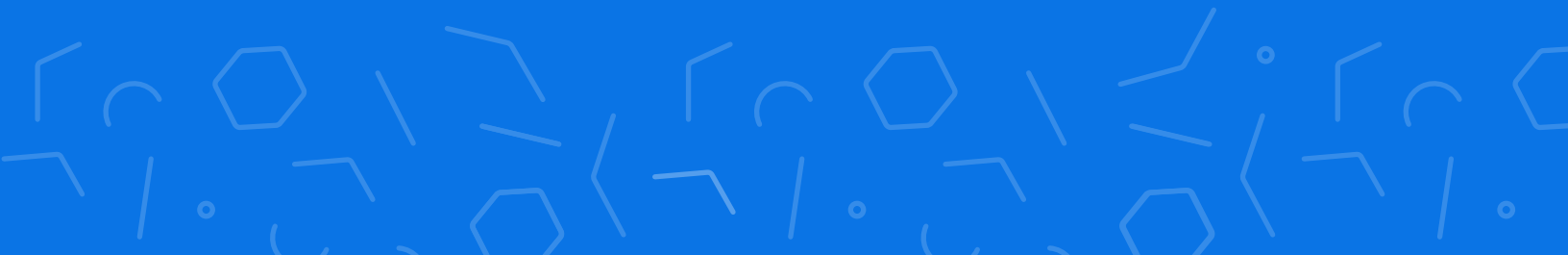
Corevist, a global SAP ecommerce expert, offers cloud-based solutions for enterprise manufacturers that deliver a B2C experience to B2B channels. Though the company has charted year-over-year growth for more than a decade, developing products to meet the continuous demand created scalability issues, UX challenges, design inconsistencies, and mounting technical debt.

“We needed a fresh set of eyes and an objective third-party perspective,” said Ray Mannion, the company's former director of product. So they invested in a complete UX overhaul to its existing infrastructure to create a modern and user-friendly B2B experience from the catalog to final checkout and invoice management.



Support the **B2B buyer journey**

The B2B buyer journey is not, sadly, a straight line. The path to a business purchase weaves forward and back between identifying (and refining) the problem, exploring solutions, building (and honing) requirements and, finally, selecting a supplier. Additional churn is created by the inevitable staff turnover, changing operational priorities, misaligned problem scope or solution and requests for more or different information for others in the decision-making process. If you don't provide the necessary support every step of the way it will be a growing challenge to meet sales goals.



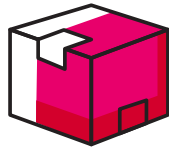
The B2B buying journey is not linear, but it does involve these phases.



**Problem
Identification**



**Solution
Exploration**



**Supplier
Selection**



**Requirement
Building**




**Purchase
Decision**



The backbone of the modern ecommerce experience is formed by user experience (UX) and content.

UX is everything that impacts how buyers interact with your brand everywhere. B2B procurement professionals are no longer content with the old way of doing business – even online. They demand ease of use whether they're perusing your online catalog or placing an order on your mobile app. Looking for increasing sophistication and ease of use when interacting with their vendors. Every process must be as intuitive and simple as the B2C experiences we know so well.

Content is information delivered through various channels purpose-built to meet prospect and customer needs along the entire path to purchase. It includes everything from product descriptions and images, demo videos, email newsletters, mobile alerts, payment terms and SLAs. B2B customers don't need more data and insight because there's plenty already out there. They need highly relevant information that's available wherever they are (there's that ease again) and provides what they need to make smart decisions and complete transactions fast. Learn more about serving up relevant B2B content.

An aerial photograph of a dense, green forest. A two-lane road cuts diagonally across the image from the top left towards the bottom right. A single car is visible on the road, moving away from the viewer. The text is overlaid on the left side of the image, in a white, sans-serif font.

“Looking at the whole
ecommerce journey, whether
it’s B2B or B2C, is a necessary
part of building a successful
business. One place to
start? Acknowledge that
the journey is human (and
therefore unique), prioritize
that human experience, and
reduce as many obstacles
as possible.”

– Edward de Groot, CEO, Relevant Bits

Give the people what they want

UX and content support the capabilities required for a next-level B2B ecommerce experience.

“Rather than moving sequentially through one channel or sales process or marketing medium, buying is now a continuous and dynamic process because customers in most markets work along parallel activity streams to make a purchase decision [and] are online and offline at multiple times throughout their buying journeys,” explains Frank Cespedes, who teaches at Harvard Business School and is the author of *Sales Management That Works: How to Sell in a World that Never Stops Changing*. With so many exposures to information and data, “prospects know more by the time they interact with your salespeople, service groups or ecommerce site. That changes marketing and selling requirements and the desired experience.”

The new table stakes for ecommerce:



- **Multi-channel marketing (MCM)** originated in retail consumer markets and is now used by B2B brands to communicate with and sell to prospects and customers across online, mobile and offline avenues. Multi- or omnichannel marketing is useful at all points on the buyer journey.

Key Tasks: Map buyer journeys. Optimize and connect channels to give shoppers a consistent and seamless experience across all platforms.

- **Personalization** enables you to tailor information to address the pain points of different types of customers and prospects and promote solutions that meet their specific needs. Further customizing the experience based on purchase history and relevant related and social content (from you and other sources) builds credibility, trust and authority. Examples of personalized content include product information based on previous engagement, search/order history and expressed interest; account-specific catalogs and shipping rules; tiered pricing; and product recommendations, deals and promotions.

Key Tasks: Use AI to generate personalized recommendations and predict shopping patterns. Implement a product information management system.

- **Self-service** gives buyers the power to make business purchases in the same way they make personal ones – navigating the process on their own and interacting with a sales expert only when they need higher-level support (and usually only when they are a step or two away from deciding). In an age where business buyers are more digitally savvy than ever before, an intuitive self-service experience goes a long way toward cultivating loyalty by reducing obstacles on the path to purchase.

Key Tasks: Enable customer access to real-time inventory data and order tracking. Allow automated quoting and automatic reorder/restock/replenishment. Explore chatbots and virtual assistants to provide 24/7 support.

- **Alternative payment options** make buying easier. While some customers may still run paper-based operations, most don't want to manage paper invoices and write you a check. That's why the ability to choose how to pay is a key consideration as early in the buyer journey as requirement building and vendor selection.

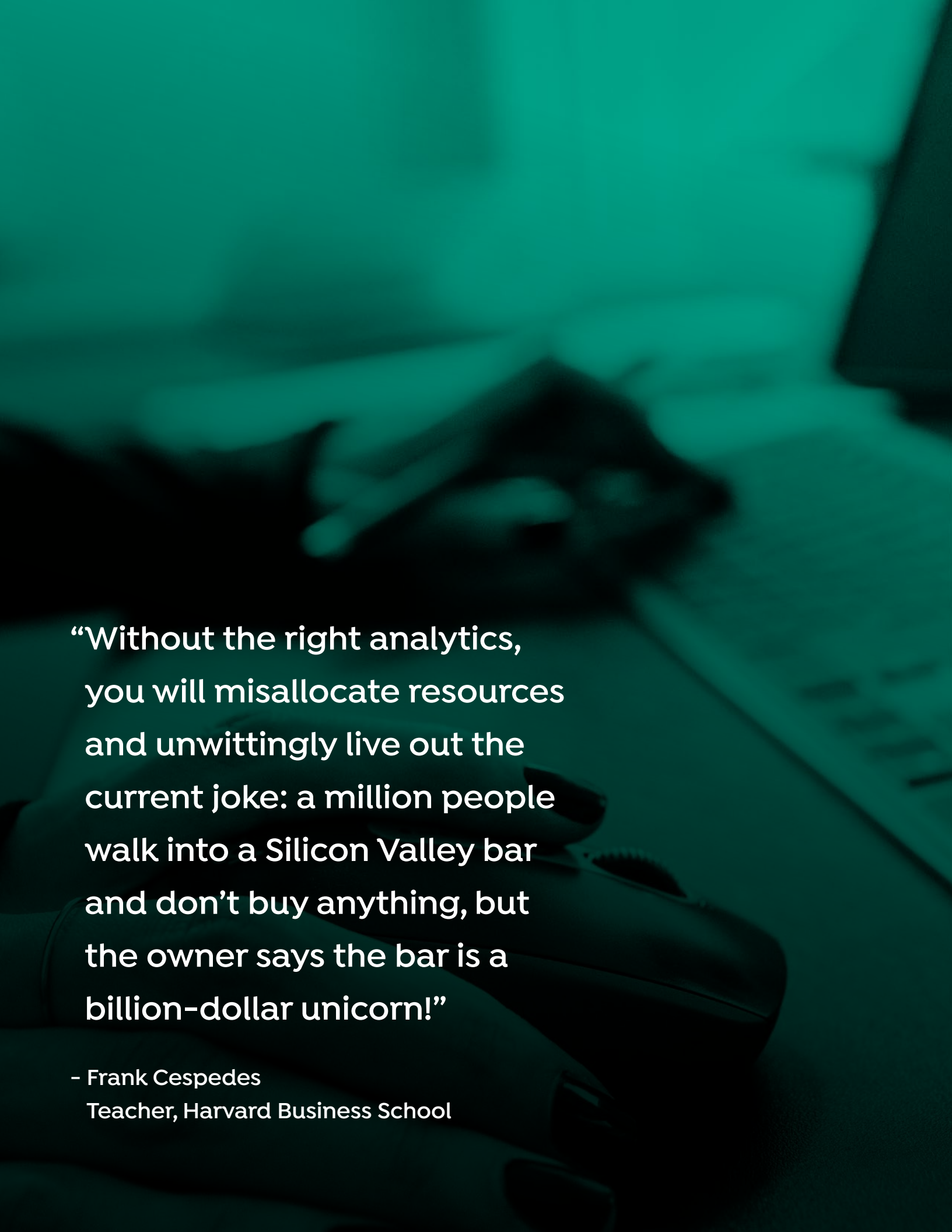
Key Tasks: Enable electronic payments via credit card or ACH transfer. Extend credit and digitize the credit application process to support self-service and speed processing.

Your data could be lying to you

Modern ecommerce generates a lot of data that can be misleading without an assist from analytics solutions.

“Many SaaS businesses brag about visitor time-on-site when analytics indicate that time may simply be the result of a slow-loading site. Or they cite clicks when the volume of clicks is really a function of the increasing proliferation of devices by which B2B buyers search for products and services,” Cespedes explains.

Advanced analytics tools can help you leverage content, personalization and sales support across channels.

A close-up photograph of a person's hand holding a computer mouse, positioned over a laptop keyboard. The entire image is covered with a semi-transparent teal overlay. The background is slightly blurred, focusing attention on the hand and mouse.

“Without the right analytics,
you will misallocate resources
and unwittingly live out the
current joke: a million people
walk into a Silicon Valley bar
and don’t buy anything, but
the owner says the bar is a
billion-dollar unicorn!”

– Frank Cespedes
Teacher, Harvard Business School



Explore innovation

Meeting current expectations is the first step. To create and maintain a competitive advantage, you need to continuously future-proof your B2B ecommerce experience with next-level innovations like these:





1. **Artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML).**

These technologies are currently in use by major B2B brands and analysts expect they will become de rigueur for smaller players in the next five years. AI and ML use all data to drive customer behavior, streamline operations and inform forecasting and decision-making. For example, ML can anticipate customer needs, serve up relevant content and suggest relevant products and alternatives. AI can be deployed to augment product data with additional tagging and categorization and automate ecommerce and back-office processes.



2. Mobile and voice commerce. Mobile can no longer be an afterthought, and not just because of the ubiquity of mobile phones. Many businesses provision tablets to employees, especially those working in the field. Delivering a mobile-friendly experience is vital. With the rise of mobile devices for business and the availability of voice search is available on almost every device, voice ecommerce is coming fast. Further evidence: Amazon has launched Alexa for Business and Salesforce has Einstein Voice. A voice-optimized digital presence will be a key differentiator in the near term and a must-have in the future.



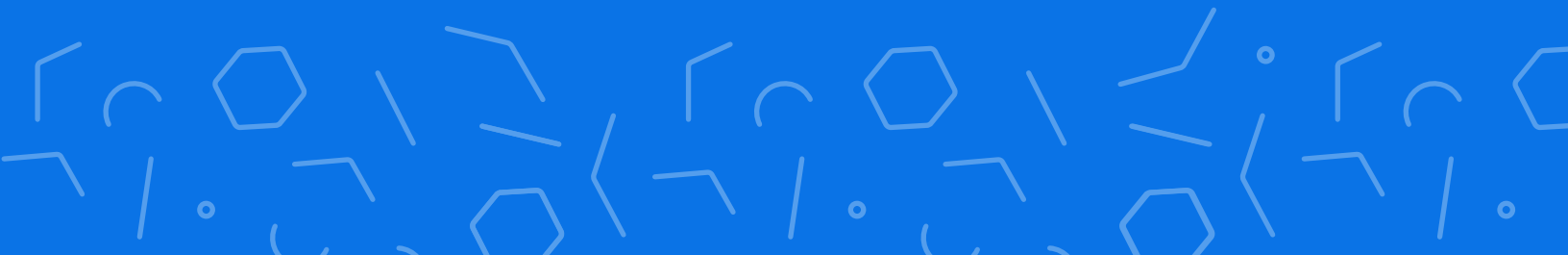
3. Image search. Uploading a photo to search for products is high on every shopper's wishlist. Enabling this capability would improve the overall customer experience and support bundling, next-best suggestions, and cross- and up-selling.


Even though these innovations may not be necessary now, it's not too early to prepare your site to accommodate these advancements so you can deploy them quickly.

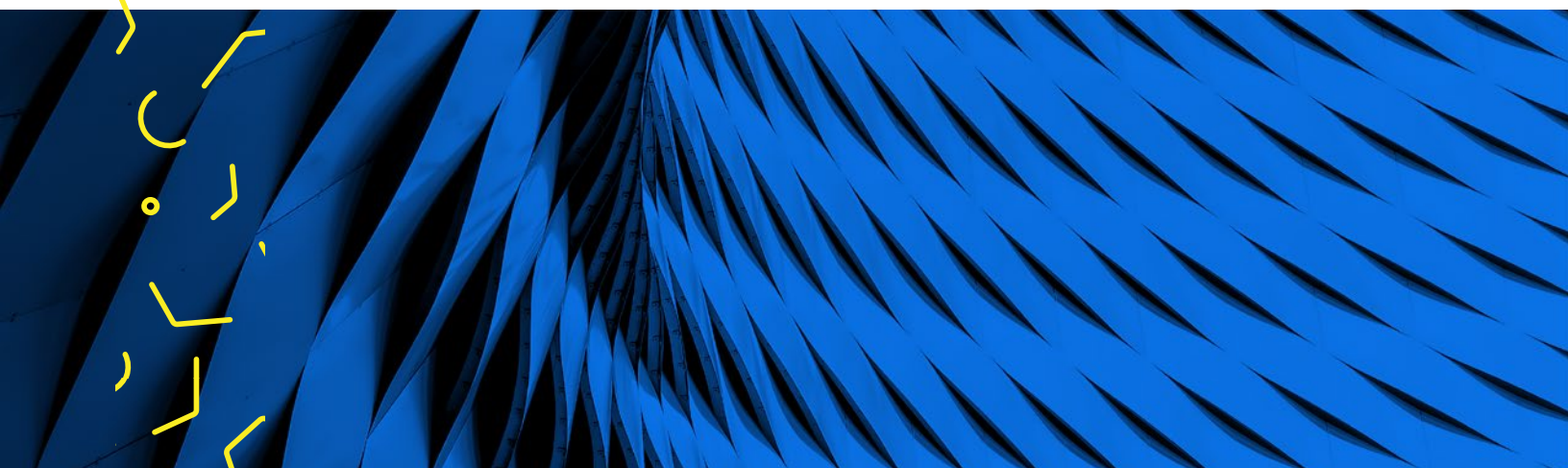


Drive business performance **with** **better ecommerce**

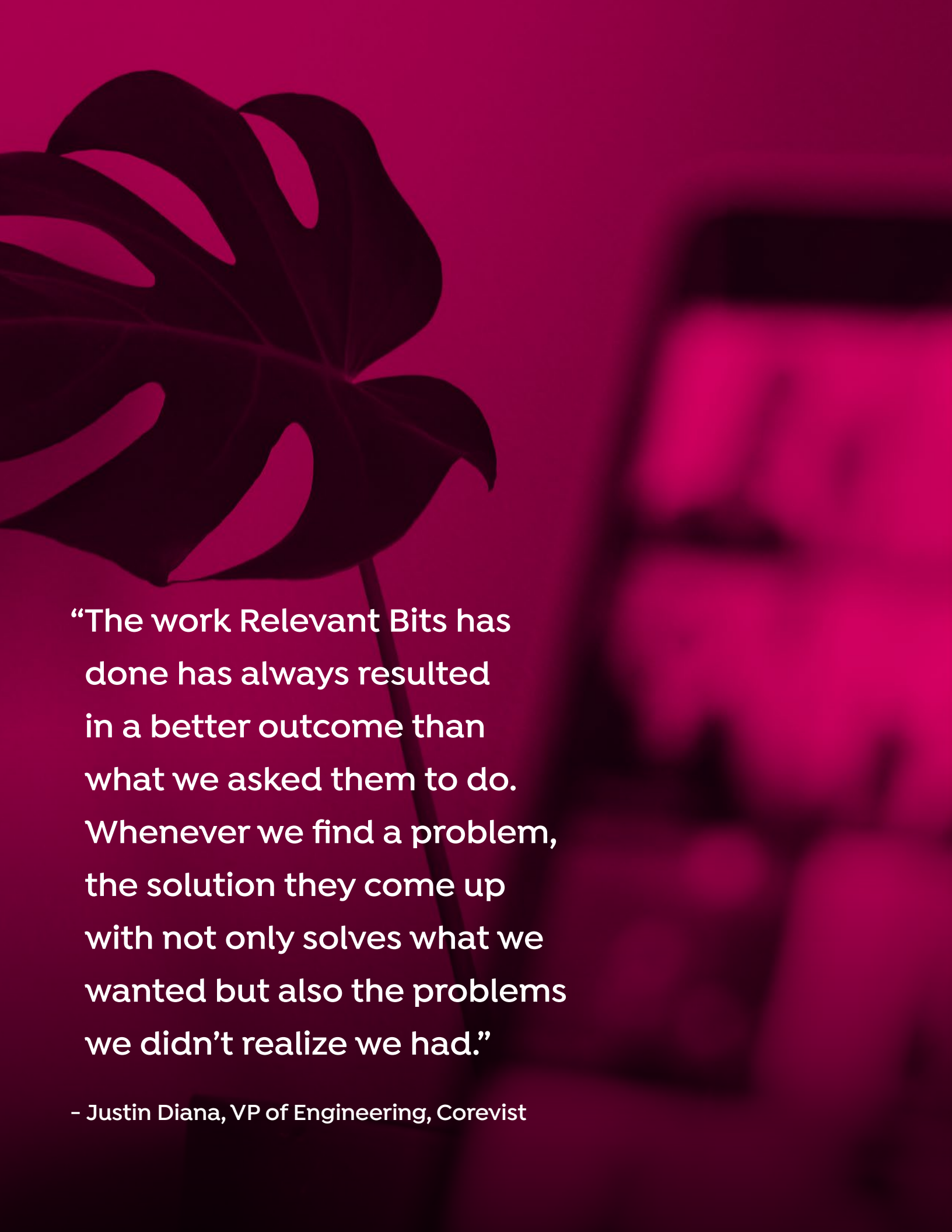
B2B brands have waited long enough to move ecommerce to the next level. Now is the time to invest in a modern, future-ready experience that maximizes your ability to:



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- **Respond rapidly to changing market realities.** The global pandemic is not the only agent of change.
 - **Reduce drop-off between channels.** Exceptional user experience on every platform increases conversions and loyalty.
 - **Boost share of wallet with repeat business.** Automated services and easy reorders are particularly powerful ways to keep customers coming back.
 - **Improve discoverability.** An optimized site boosts organic search making it easier for new customers to find you.
 - **Strengthen referrals, recommendations and reviews.** Valuable content and excellent UX encourage customers to advocate on your behalf.



“The pandemic raises the stakes for getting this right,” Cespedes concludes. “It’s not a digital-eats-physical world, but it is a multi-channel world going forward. Online and offline are complements, not substitutes. Lead generation can be done in many markets via less expensive means than enterprise sales reps. Demos can be conducted online, saving time and money. The issue will be integrating these tools into a coherent go-to-market model. The managerial implication for a B2B brand is to beware of channel inertia. Omnichannel buying requires a multichannel response in your go-to-market initiatives.



“The work Relevant Bits has done has always resulted in a better outcome than what we asked them to do. Whenever we find a problem, the solution they come up with not only solves what we wanted but also the problems we didn’t realize we had.”

- Justin Diana, VP of Engineering, Corevist

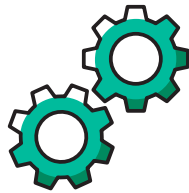


Find a partner

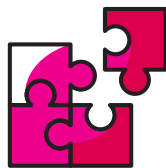
With so many technologies, constructing a modern ecommerce experience that operates seamlessly on the back and front ends is best built by experts. They'll know the most appropriate practices and solutions and have the hands-on skills to do the project fast.



Here are four things to consider when evaluating vendors:



- 1. Capabilities:** It seems obvious, but make sure the potential partner has the skills, talent and technology to do the work you need to be done. Improving a B2B ecommerce system that pulls product information from remote databases requires a web developer plus a team of creative and intelligent thinkers with experience in development, user experience, leadership, customer service and commerce.



- 2. Fit:** You'll be working closely with the team so it's important that you like and trust them, and that you feel they "get" you and your organization. This isn't a quantitative assessment – sometimes it comes down to a gut feeling. Does this really matter? Not so much, perhaps, on a checklist-type engagement, but the work required to redesign customer experience, digital presence and backend processes can get hard and the deadlines stressful. You need a vendor that aligns with you in terms of values, work ethic, personality, etc.



3. Budget: We all like getting a good deal, but it's usually better to shop on value rather than price in the long run. Going with the low-bid vendor may cost less up front but if their execution isn't up to par, you'll end up spending as much or more on revisions and redos. Being transparent about what you can afford saves time in negotiations and empowers the vendor to focus on what they can do for the amount you have available.



4. Communication: Ask vendors how they will communicate with you and how you should communicate with them to reduce back-and-forth and improve quality. A potential partner might talk about the tools they'll want you to participate in like online chat tools (Slack, for example), online project management tools (JIRA, Trello, Asana, for example), video calls, etc. For example, we communicate daily on Slack and weekly in project meetings, which you would join.

Once you have your shortlist, check out online reviews and testimonials, look for awards and accolades, and tap into your network to learn more about what it's like to work with your prospective partners.



We can help.

Relevant Bits is a strategic design and development team, brought together by the desire to do better and be better. Tackling projects that require an innovative, cooperative, and technical approach, Relevant Bits partners with companies that want to solve complicated problems. From manufacturing and retail to community education, Relevant Bits leads projects from initial strategy to launch.

Based in Toronto, Canada, Relevant Bits is entirely remote, with employees located around Europe, the United States, and of course, Canada.

Drop us a line. hello@relevantbits.com

