

Essential Guide to Product Data Management in B2B eCommerce

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SEPTEMBER, 2022



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“Where there is data smoke, there is business fire.”

[Dr. Thomas Redman](#),
teacher, author, innovator,
enthusiast of everything data

You can't build a digital experience without data. Data is like DNA for technology. It provides the essential building blocks to populate solutions for search, merchandising, marketing, bid-quote processes, order management and fulfillment, and customer service. Without product data, potential customers might never discover your company and if they do, they may still not understand how you can meet their needs. On the flip side, you won't know how your leads and customers interact with your website and with your company. You'll never know what tactics work and which ones should be abandoned.

Most companies don't suffer from a lack of data, but they do suffer from a lack of information. When data isn't standardized and integrated effectively, it lacks the necessary context to make it useful. That means you can't rely upon it to create data-driven experiences. For example, why would a hospitality supplier highlight vinyl shower curtains to customers that only buy tablecloths and napkins?

This guide helps you understand why product data management is vital to effective B2B eCommerce, how to develop strategies for managing and integrating data, how to identify and resolve data misalignment, and how successful B2B companies are harnessing their product data.

Chapter 1 - Data Is Foundational to Improving Customer Experiences

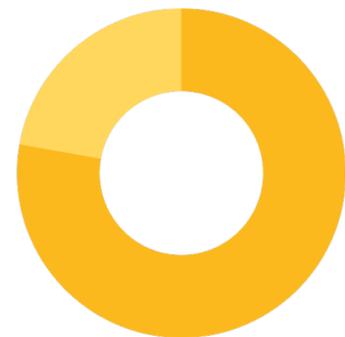
Rich and immersive customer experiences begin with content. And while content may be king, it is still built on data. Because modern buyers want a seamless B2B buyer experience across all channels, data must be omnichannel and mobile-first too. And it must be at home in multiple solutions if it is going to effectively drive business decisions.

Bad data informs bad decisions and creates friction in the customer experience. Friction is the last thing a B2B buyer wants, but it is what they encounter most often. Gartner's research finds that 77% of B2B buyers feel their latest purchase was difficult or complex.

According to a recent [Forbes Technology Council article](#), companies have no shortage of data, but this valuable data is locked up in silos and doesn't flow freely to where it is needed to create great experiences. If data isn't available when and where it is needed, it's no more than a collection of ones and zeroes. It is data - not information.

■ **77%**
of B2B buyers state that their
latest purchase was very complex
or difficult

[Source](#)

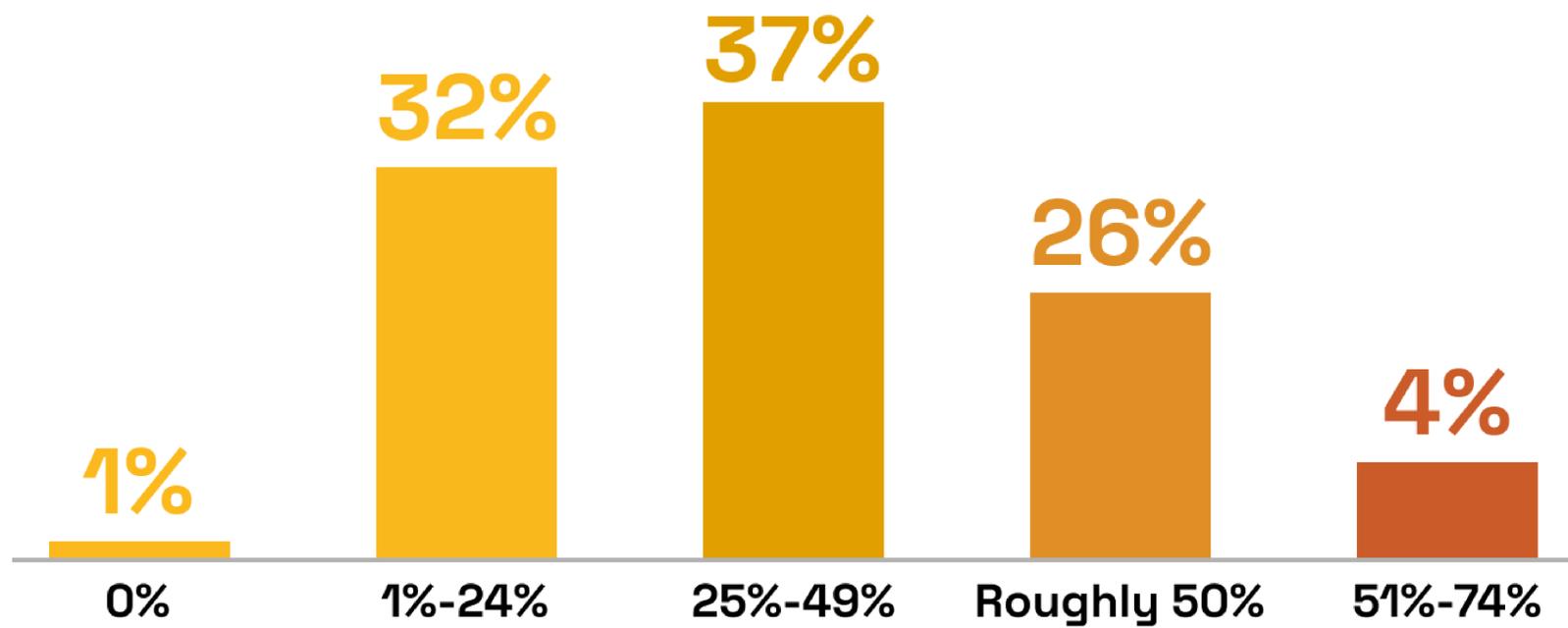


How data improves customer experience

When the right data gets into the right hands at the right time, customers get the frictionless experience they crave.

Oro's research into Modern B2B Buyer Expectations ([download the report for free](#)) finds that the three most-cited pain points buyers experience are lack of customization, localization, or personalization (39%), lack of real-time stock information (38%), and lengthy purchasing

processes (34%). All of these pain points can be addressed with standardized, integrated, and free-flowing product data.



[Source](#)

Buyers also want a customer experience that doesn't include loads of manual work, but few sellers are delivering this experience. Integrating product data, prospect or customer data, and a 360-degree view of every interaction reduces the amount of manual work required by buyers.

Imagine a customer journey where the prospect can visit a website, find all the product information they need to determine if a product fits their needs, place a request for quotation online, receive a digital proposal, sign and accept the proposal, and then place an order all online. No matter if they are on a mobile device or desktop, they can see their unique product catalog, in their language, with their personalized pricing, and get real-time insights into stock quantities and approximate shipping times. If they start an online chat about their order, the agent instantly knows their order history, product usage trends, as well as the status of any open service or RMA tickets.

It sounds like a dream, but when data is handled properly - this scenario is a reality.

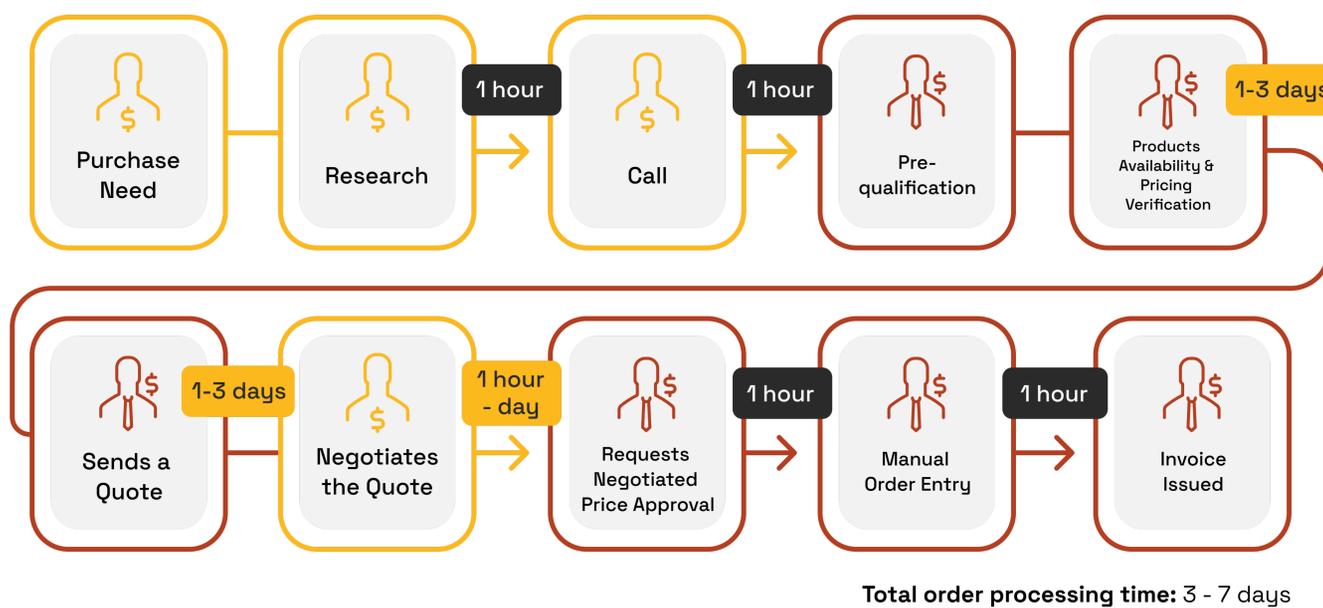
What Happens When Good Data Goes Bad

When data doesn't flow and gets caught in silos, customers and teams experience frustration and friction that may lead them to flee your company.

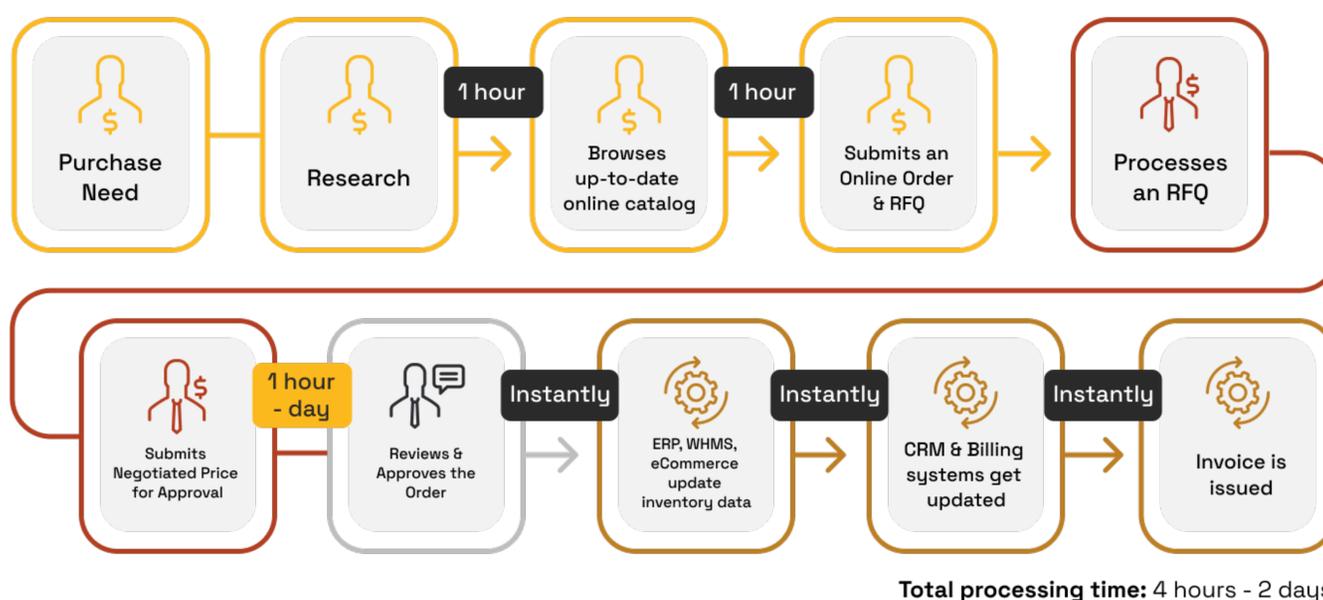
Imagine a potential customer responding to one of your online pay-per-click ads and landing on a product page that didn't contain complete information. They request more information via a contact form that captures their needs and industry. Later, a sales rep calls the lead back and begins the conversation by asking for the same information. It takes 2 days and 3 emails, but the customer finally gets a quote for the item they need. In the meantime, that same potential customer is checking other sources for the product and you can bet that if they encounter less friction they will most likely make a purchase elsewhere. This is frustrating for the sales rep as they continue to compete with other brands operating at the speed of digital.



Traditional Sales Process



Digitized & Standardized Sales Process



Even if you have your products online and offer digital quotations if your data doesn't flow between your ERP and webstore platform you can't tell customers what items are in stock, what quantities are available, and from which warehouse they will ship. You have the data, it's just not information in the hands of your customer.

When good data goes bad, it leads to cart abandonment, negative word of mouth (in person and on social media), team frustration, and lost sales. If existing customers find a better experience elsewhere, you will lose their loyalty.

Chapter 2 - What Time is the Right Time for Product Data Management?

If the goal of effective product data management is to ensure that everyone always has accurate information and a common understanding of the product, shouldn't every day be product data management day?

Sure.

But in reality, B2B sellers such as wholesalers, manufacturers, and distributors juggle so much internal and third-party data that product data management doesn't usually get the attention it deserves until a triggering event. These events can be the result of incorporating new channels, new technologies, or even new companies. They can also come to light as the result of a disastrous customer experience.

Mergers & Acquisitions

Technology and technology infrastructure should play a role in the due diligence process. Technology issues can make or break a deal, and integrating systems and data should add value to the deal, not subtract value.

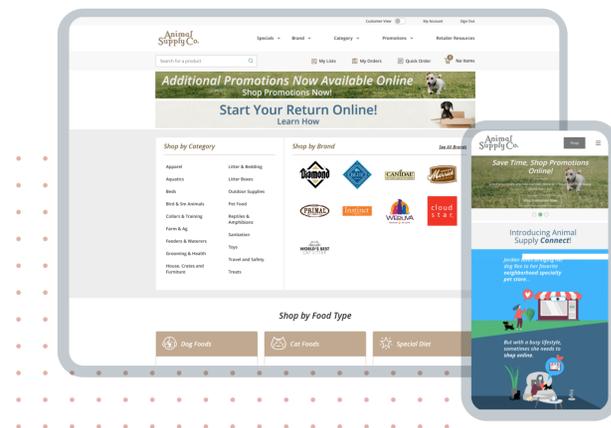
After the deal closes is not the time to find out that key technology can't be transferred or data formats are irreconcilably different.

Preliminary planning and analysis of data should be part of the due diligence process. Create a strategy for post-transition integration before the transition even begins. According to Bain & Company, [70% of technology integrations fail at the beginning](#), not the end.

Mergers and acquisitions can temporarily disrupt the operations of the companies involved if there isn't a product data management plan to support the combined business. Think of it as planning the perfect marriage of two data sets to create a happily ever after for customers and internal teams.

★ Animal Supply Co. Successfully Managing Product Data when Growing Through Acquisition - a Case Study

Animal Supply Company grew to be the leader in pet food and supplies distribution by executing an aggressive growth through acquisition strategy. But every acquisition brought a new ERP, warehouse, and website.



The challenge was to allow customers to access their personalized, regional catalog from a single website on the front-end and routing orders to the proper warehouse for fulfillment on the backend. And the customer experience had to account for the uniqueness of each customer's pricing, promotion, and product availability.

Using middleware, Animal Supply Company merged data from all their ERPs and then integrated with OroCommerce. Now they have the ability to manage catalogs from multiple sources in a single platform. Next they personalized the pricing, promotions, and product availability using OroCommerce flexible price lists. Nightly data transfers keep all systems in sync.

Now, Animal Supply Company smoothly handles over 10,000 price lists and more than 400,000 monthly B2B eCommerce orders across multiple brands and ERPs with no product data snags.

Replatforming

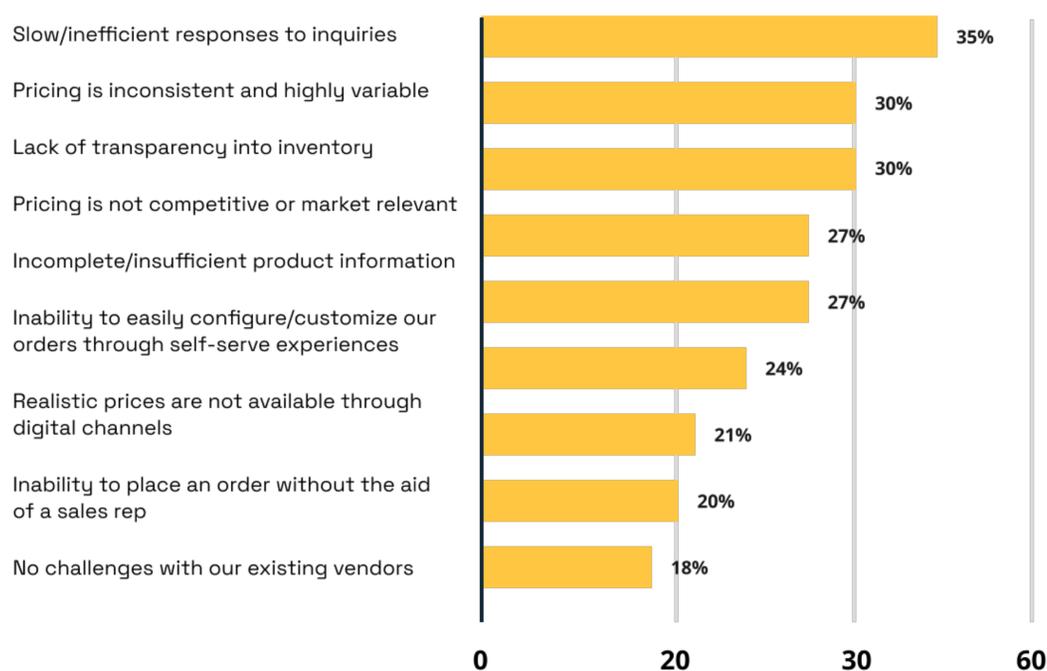
Replatforming is rarely an easy decision. But as technology evolves and buyer expectations increase, replatforming is eventual.

The replatforming process provides an excellent opportunity to execute a product data management strategy as you launch a new website and platform.

A new platform requires new integrations with the ERP, order management systems, warehouse, and shipping systems. Integration breaks down silos and allows data to flow between systems. Now, it's more important than ever that the product data be standardized and flow freely throughout the organization.

Including product data management in the replatforming process brings consistency to the customer experience on and offline.

During the replatforming process, it's not uncommon for previously analog product information to become digitized. Printed brochures, flyers, and catalogs all contain product data and when they are added to the website, it's important that the data be consistent.



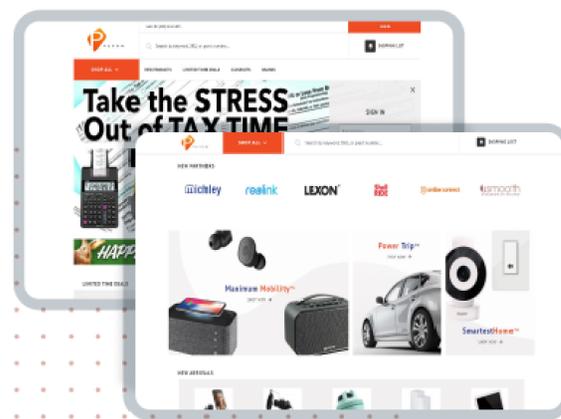
[A survey of 210 professionals responsible for B2B purchases](#) finds that improving product data would decrease their frustrations with existing vendors.

If accurate pricing (30%) and incomplete/inconsistent product information (27%) were addressed along with inventory transparency (30%), 3 of the top 5 challenges could be corrected. All it takes is executing a product data management strategy along with replatforming.



Replatforming to Improve Product Data Management - a Case Study

Petra is a leader in the wholesale distribution of consumer technology brands. They represent over 800 brands and serve tens of thousands of retail and e-tail customers. Ironically, for a company that specializes in technology products, their own out-dated, repurposed B2C technology couldn't provide the seamless customer experience their customers wanted.



When they discovered that they could no longer keep up with growth on digital platforms, Petra decided to overhaul their legacy system with OroCommerce. To make the migration successful, Petra also needed a new PIM system that would allow the company to centralize, organize, handle massive SKU lists, and onboard products faster.

So Petra adopted [Akeneo PIM](#) to help categorize and enrich its product catalog. The product categorization and integration connector between Akeneo and OroCommerce enabled Petra to complete eCommerce replatforming in under a year – a massive feat for a company managing more than 33,000 products from 600-plus suppliers.

Launching a New Channel or Adding a New Product or System

It's amazing how the process of simply adding something new can lead an organization to look at product data in a whole new way.

Whether you are adding a new sales channel, creating a new product, or even integrating a new system, the new addition can cause you to focus on an old problem - a lack of consistent product data.

And these product data inconsistencies create more than frustration, they can contribute to delayed product launches, increased product returns, and strained relationships with your wholesalers, distributors, or retailers.

An [inRiver survey of global B2B manufacturers](#) found that over half cited inconsistent product information as a barrier to getting their products on shelves. Another 33% found their products pulled or delayed for problems with product data.

Provide the wrong product information such as shelf specifications for the new product you are selling through Home Depot stores, and instead of counting sales you'll be paying fines and picking up the product.

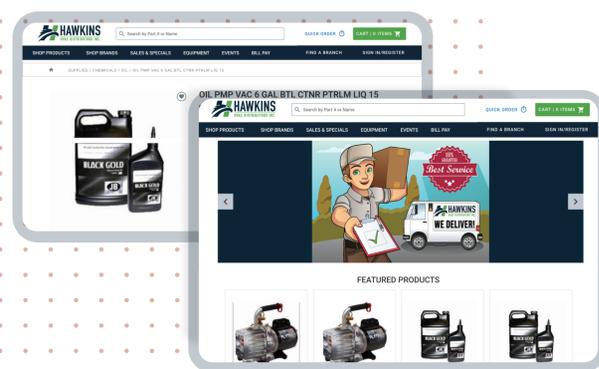
Adding a new business solution can also bring to light product data inconsistencies. When planning to add a new warehouse management system you may discover that your existing ERP and eCommerce website don't have consistent product data. Which is the source of truth?

Adding a new channel altogether, like eCommerce, also requires a hard look at product data. Hawkins HVAC, a family-run business, wanted to service end-user customers in whatever way they wanted to be serviced. Hawkins needed a new B2B commerce platform. As one of the principals [stated](#), "every industry has been and continues to be impacted by digital technology."

As they grew, their clients expected them to have more sophisticated tools. And their advice to other firms?

“It's important to engage with your product information management vendor from day one, not in the middle of the project, to ensure you have plenty of time. We learned to clean up the ERP platform before starting the eCommerce process, to make sure the source system has the data needed.”

In other words, you can never start planning your data flow too early.



Bad Customer/Employee Experience

After the product is delivered is the wrong time to find out that the product specifications on the website are incorrect.

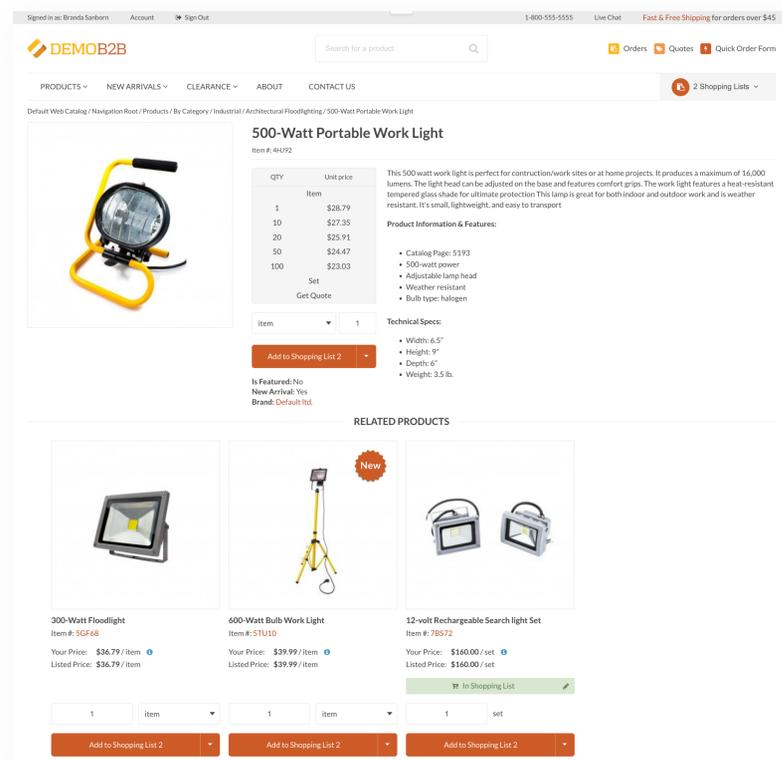
Imagine the dismay of a customer that sees this product listing online and orders 100 of these lights for an outdoor project.

Only to receive the product and discover that they are not approved for outdoor use. If those portable lights were necessary to kick off a new project, the incorrect product data will delay the customer's project and destroy any goodwill you may have banked in the previous years.

That's the kind of error that not only burns up your customer service lines but finds its way into the Twitter-verse and onto other social media.

Maybe the customer negotiated one price for the product through the website but when the ERP generates an invoice another price is billed.

That guarantees a customer phone call or email. And they won't be happy. Inconsistent product data can also cause problems for your employees as well. A sales rep relying on incorrect data sheets can recommend the wrong product for the application. Or if inventory levels aren't kept in real-time, a sales rep can overpromise delivery of an item that's out of stock.

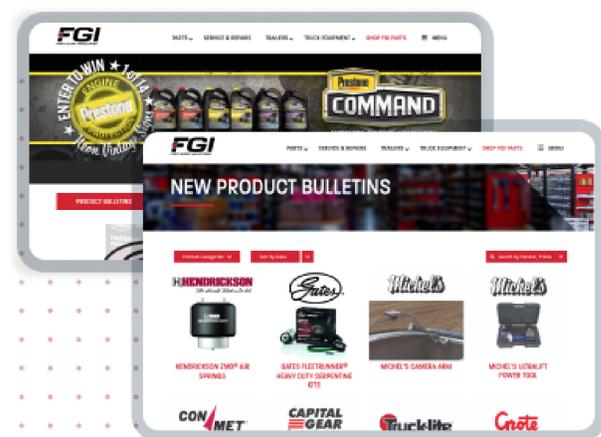


Improving the Customer Experience with Improved Product Data Management - a Case Study

Fort Garry Industries is Canada's most trusted truck and trailer parts, sales, and service provider for major truck fleets, the agriculture community, mining, and other sectors. Their ability to grow and scale was hampered by reliance on an outdated system of digital and automated processes. They needed to improve the customer ordering experience but couldn't bring down a functioning Order Management System.

Xngage worked with [Fort Garry Industries](#) and OroCommerce to build around the existing system. The customer experience was improved by adding product data such as availability and order history and creating more self-service opportunities. When product data was standardized and unified, the employees and customers had a better experience. Now staff can focus less on order entry and more on building strong customer relationships.

In an ideal world, you wouldn't wait for one of these triggering events to reinforce the importance of managing your product data across systems and channels. Most companies don't operate in an ideal world. Build a schedule to regularly review how you are managing data to maintain the value of your data. And when a triggering event occurs - jump on the opportunity to improve data management.



Chapter 3 - How Better Product Data Management Eliminates Friction

How do you know if your product data isn't providing useful information to customers? Look at their behavior. If you see signs of friction you need improved product data management.

What does friction look like? It can be subtle and is often signaled not by what users do, but by what they don't do.

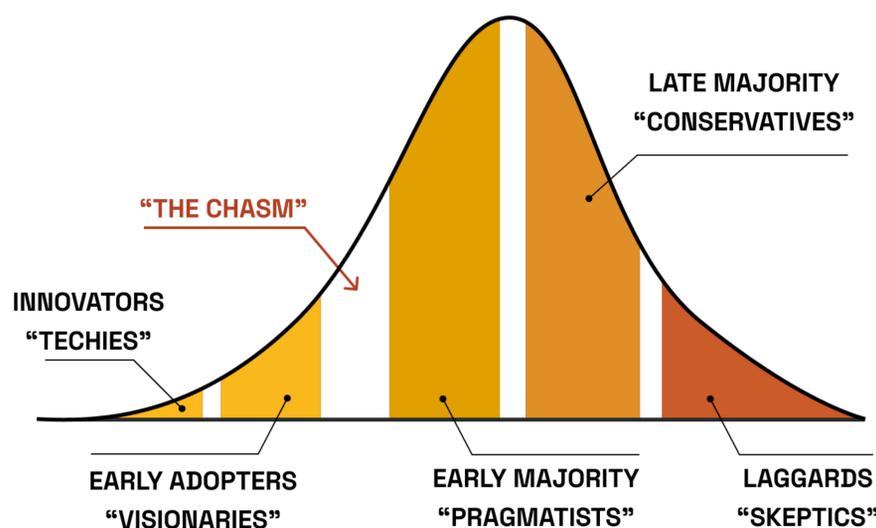
Incomplete Tasks

Map where users enter and exit. If a task has a defined exit point and users aren't completing the task before they exit, there's a sure sign of friction. Are the instructions confusing? Is the wording unclear? Perhaps the entire process isn't intuitive or all the information a user needs isn't present.

If users abandon the reorder from order history workflow and start a new order from the product catalog there's a good chance they aren't finding the information they need.

Adoption

Customers and employees should adopt the website. With any change, there are always the early adopters leading the charge.



It's normal to experience a slight pause (the chasm) before the early majority join the early birds.

However, if you find customers still rely on the telephone and email to request quotes and place orders, it is a sign that the product information they need isn't where they can find or use it.

Low internal adoption can be caused by poor change management or poor product data management. If employees must still log in to multiple sites or applications to get the product data they need, they don't have the tools they need at their fingertips.

When the proper product data is accessible, your sales force views the website as a sales enablement tool, not competition.

Customer Retention

Are your customers sticky? Do they purchase time and again? When your product data is flowing and providing your customers the information they need to inform buying decisions, they buy again.

Smooth onboarding increases retention. [Buyers expect a consistent experience](#) wherever they interact with brands during the onboarding process. Consistency in experience depends on consistency in data. If your customer retention rates are not consistently in the high 70s to low 80s, friction caused by poor product data management could be the cause.

Read [Understanding B2B Customer Retention & 5 Strategies That Work](#)

Chapter 4 - 3-Step Strategy for Successful Product Data Management

Like any other journey, the process of taming your product data will be achieved through a series of steps. You'll review your objectives, determine how data will flow, and then map the architecture.

Step 1 - Review Objectives and Technology

Start planning your data integration with a moment focused on the larger business objectives and their impact on the organization. Good strategy ladders up to a vision. Breaking these objectives into smaller, more tangible goals, and then mapping those goals with technology, will keep your strategy and your technology in alignment.

Your technical experts should design an ecosystem that integrates solutions such as:

- ◆ Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) Platforms
- ◆ Product Information Management Systems
- ◆ Digital Asset Management (DAM) Systems
- ◆ Content and Commerce Management Systems
- ◆ eProcurement and Punchout
- ◆ Plug-ins, like chat services
- ◆ Analytics capture, reporting, and visualization

Step 2 - Identify Data Sources, Processes, and Responsibility

The key to leveraging a strong, integrated tech stack is data integrity. Consider how your data will flow and how it will be maintained and updated. This is the second step in your digital strategy. When data is integrated, unified, and systematically leveraged to support B2B commerce processes, then your digital ecosystem works harder and smarter for the business so objectives are met or exceeded. This is key to your ongoing success.

Decide how your data will flow through the connected systems. There are several types of data sources (see image) and aligning them to downstream middleware, data warehouses and analytics will help your teams achieve key outputs, or business objectives.

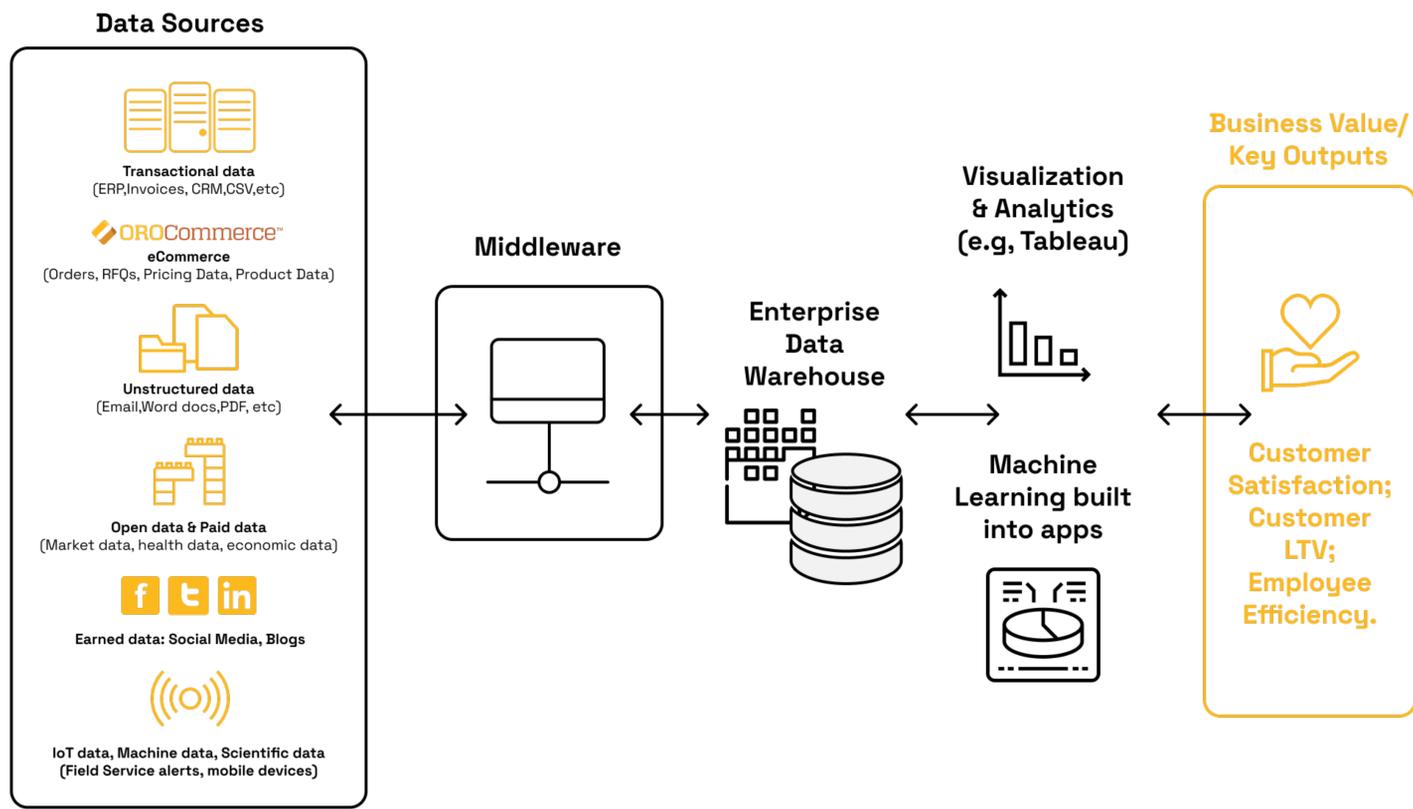
Then decide how it will be managed. This includes ensuring there are systems and processes in place for cleansing, deduping, or adding new features and benefits. Data storage and security requirements must also be determined.

Finally, decide who will lead data management. Data needs an effective owner with the necessary skills and resources to do the job. The goal is strategic maintenance of one of your most valuable assets: the company-wide golden records. When these records also include “business knowhow” then product data transforms into product information and you have a highly competitive asset for your organization.

Step 3 - Create a Visual Model

A Digital Data Architecture, the third step of the digital strategy, provides a visual representation of how all your data connects and flows. A picture is worth a thousand words, and this image brings to life how data sources flow through systems such as data connectors, middleware, enterprise data warehouses, visualization, and analytics systems, as well as any other add-on integrations like machine learning applications.

By creating a visualization of the data flow, each person and technology partner can better understand the big picture of your data process and how it connects to those all-important objectives.



[Learn More About Product Data Unification and Standardization](#)

Conclusion

What's the cost of bad data? According to [Gartner Research](#), the answer is \$15 million per organization, on average, per year. IBM puts the price tag for US businesses at \$3.1 trillion.

How much money can your company afford to lose to bad product data?

Disconnected data negatively impacts your company's ability to innovate, create new products, and improve your customer experience. It is preventing you from engaging, supporting, and meeting the needs of your customers.

If your data is trapped in legacy systems or silos it isn't providing useful information to the people that need it the most.

Get a Competitive Advantage

B2B eCommerce isn't going to wane with the pandemic. It will only become more relevant as business buyers act more like consumers.

Data integration allows you to provide the personalization and self-service experience modern B2b buyers want. Let your customer experience be an important part of how you differentiate your company and your brands.

Improve Productivity

Stop manually moving data from one system to another. Integrate eCommerce with PIM, ERP, WMS, and even your 3PL provider. Maintain consistency of data across platforms, technology, and sales channels.

Automate the request for quotes and quote to cash processes to improve efficiency.

Integrate CRM data along with customer purchase history and preferences and empower your customer service team with a 360-degree of every customer and every transaction.

When it comes to making sense of multiple data sources and creating productive and profitable B2B eCommerce channels you need strategic partners and software providers that understand the unique needs of B2B selling. Oro, Inc. and Xngage are leaders in B2B eCommerce selling because they deliver results. Xngage leverages the Oro ecosystem to help B2B organizations succeed.

Both companies bring years of experience in the B2B space to the table. They help you read your data smoke signals and replace your business information fire with strategies and online experiences for positive impact.

If you are ready to improve your B2B eCommerce experience for users and employees, reach out to [Xngage](#) or [Oro, Inc.](#)



#1 B2B ECOMMERCE PLATFORM

**Built for Distributors,
Wholesalers, Brands,
and Manufacturers**

See It In Action



**Xngage Exists to
Help Organizations
Succeed in B2B
Digital Commerce.**

Contact Xngage

If you want to learn more about the topic of product data management, check out these valuable resources from Oro and Xngage.

Aligning Strategic and Tech Stack Priorities

Your business objectives, B2B eCommerce strategy, and tech stack must closely align to achieve results. Learn more about choosing the right strategic priorities for your company and tech stack.

[eCommerce 2.0: Accelerating Your Channel](#)

Why Data Standardization Matters

Data standardization shouldn't be an afterthought. Discover the foundational importance of data standardization to effective B2B eCommerce.

[Data Standardization Can Give B2B eCommerce Brands a Competitive Edge](#)

Creating Seamless Experiences with Seamless Product Data

Optimizing data flow is essential to creating frictionless customer experiences. Explore how brand management, list management, and product information management elevate online experiences.

[Seamless Management for Seamless Experiences](#)

Product Data Management and PIM Software

Many B2B eCommerce businesses use PIM software as part of their product data management strategy. Download this guide to learn more about the role of PIM in product data management.

[Guide: Product Data Management in B2B eCommerce](#)

