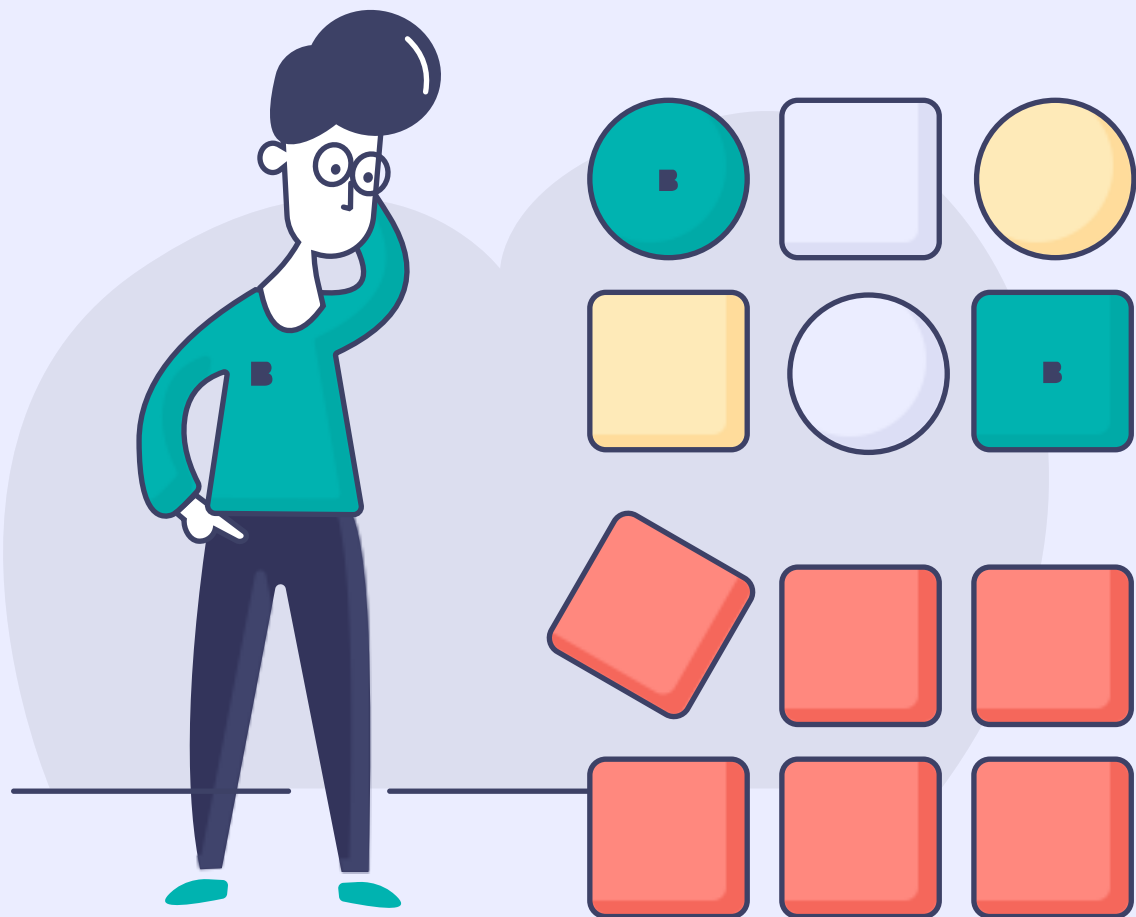


Setting up your technology: The crucial crossroad



Is a complete all-in-one eCommerce platform that comes as a whole package the solution for your eCommerce business, or should you look for a best-of-breed solution where you choose each individual tool?

Many marketers are faced with this question and are not sure what the correct answer for their company is. In this chapter, you can find a thorough examination of both solutions and get a closer look at their implications in eCommerce.

As “content” grows to be the central theme of eCommerce discussions, the questions of its creation, distribution, and engagement subsequently take new priorities. To be more precise, many marketers are asking the question “how to display our product where it’s easily found by our audience?” and “how to make sure our products’ presentation is tailored to our brand’s story?”

Today eCommerce means a strong presence in different platforms, as the consumers’ preference for shopping on different devices grows exponentially. According to Business Insider, **mobile shopping was responsible for 23% of all eCommerce sales in 2018, a number that they predict will rise to 45% by 2024**.¹ At the same time, the growing popularity of voice-activated assistants, AR/VR applications, and IoT indicate an even stronger shift away from the traditional website-exclusive eCommerce.

Likewise the issue of personalization and customization of customer experiences is central in implementing digital strategies. This is not surprising, as 91% of consumers

say they are more likely to shop from brands that offer them personal recommendations.² Perhaps this is why 79% of digital marketers in retail are investing in personalization tools.³

eCommerce companies usually settle on one of the two main options in managing their business (including all issues related to content); some choose a single package of tools known as **all-in-one** suites, and others prefer to pick and choose each tool based on their needs, a system built upon the **best-of-breed** principles.

What is an all-in-one suite?

Before jumping into the specifics of eCommerce, let’s consider the overall philosophy behind an all-in-one strategy. Imagine owning a swiss army knife; you have one device which provides you with a knife, a corkscrew, a screwdriver, a nail file, a pair of scissors, and maybe even a tiny saw. This is the all-in-one in its simplest form, a kit that provides multiple tools that can help you in completely different situations. If you want to slice an apple, you can use the knife, while the same package also provides you with a file for your fingernails!

In the case of eCommerce, an all-in-one eCommerce software suite aims to provide you with all the tools you need to run an online business; this includes content creation and management, payment processing, shipping, customer service, SEO, personalization, marketing, inventory management, creating websites and landing pages, invoicing, and much more.

These suites come as fixed packages from a single vendor and consist of many different products (depending on the vendor). When you acquire a suite, you are paying for the full package and every tool that is included in there. After all, that's the selling point: have everything that you need in one pack.

Can you already see the problem?

Have you ever seen a chef using a swiss army knife to dice vegetables? How about a carpenter using it to file a piece of furniture he is making? Or a tailor using its tiny scissors to cut a piece of cloth?

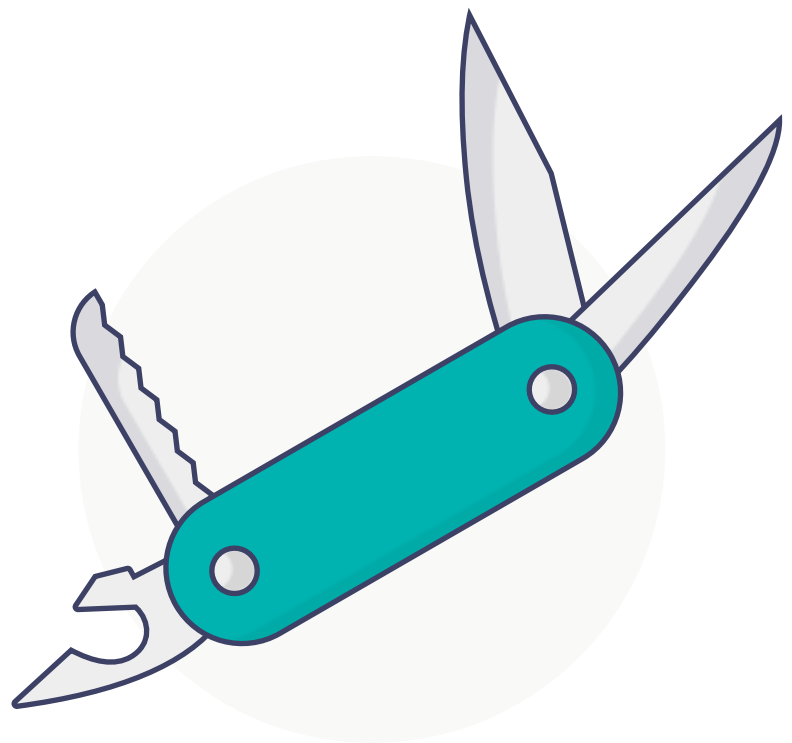
This is the key problem with an all-in-one approach. While you have a wide ranging set of tools at your disposal, none of them work as well as they should. If you are dealing with a small issue like filing your nails or peeling an apple, a swiss army knife is perfect. However, take any case that requires a bit more effort and the tools start to show their shortcomings.

The second obvious problem is that at one point, you are forced to make some sacrifices. There are swiss army knives with different tools, some come with a saw and others with a small hook, some have a fork while others have a scalpel. While there are different packages to choose from, you cannot create your own set with the exact tools that you need. You will probably end up with some tools that you never use, and missing a couple that you would love to have.

An all-in-one eCommerce suite decides what your needs are and offers you a package, instead of you specifically picking up the individual tools that you need.

This results in having technologies that are barely of any use to you, and missing out on others that you know are going to help your business. What is even worse is that you are forced to pay the licensing fees for every single tool in the suite, no matter if you are using them or not!

You can already see how this approach can severely restrain your flexibility. Before going on with a detailed explanation of all the limitations, let's briefly look at the other approach.



What is a best-of-breed solution?

As the name suggests, this approach encourages you to choose the best tool for each need individually. Instead of ending up with a package of pre-set tools, you can make your own package with only the tools that you need. Instead of ending up with a tiny knife, a small file, a corkscrew, and a single-head screwdriver, you can pick up a chef's knife and a chopping board if you are a cook, multiple screwdrivers and a plier if you are fixing something, or a corkscrew and a glass if you are about to enjoy a bottle of wine.

Instead of a single vendor offering all the tools, you can be sure that each tool is made by a group of specialists who are extremely focused on the product that they are providing. Subsequently, each product has been thoroughly examined and is the result of expertise experience.

Naturally, this also means that there is going to be more communication involved in this approach, as you are faced with different vendors instead of one.

In the eCommerce realm, a **best-of-breed solution means - for example - separating your content management from your eCommerce platform**. Companies who use this approach, believe that creating, updating, and managing your content should be kept separated from your payment processing and shopping cart management. Their argument is that issues relating to personalized customer journeys, omnichannel presence, and marketing in general are vastly different than issues related to the eCommerce platform, such as shopping cart and payment processing.

Since different issues require different strategies, fans of best-of-breed argue that technologies and tools for each case should be separated. Likewise, since they require different fields of expertise, they believe the providers should come from specialized backgrounds for each case.



What are the key differences between the two?

Because of the fundamental difference in strategy, implementing these two approaches can result in completely different experiences. While each case should be examined individually, some aspects tend to be applicable to most cases. Let's look at these differences in more detail.



Architecture and integration

It may be hard to adapt with your current system architecture, as the suites tend to be complex and not flexible. Since all tools come in as a package, integrating new tools and technologies depends on the provider. Sometimes the newer tools are offered quickly, other times they are completely ignored.



Due to its separated nature, you can choose each technology so that it would fit with your current architecture. Since each technology is independent and acquired individually, you can choose which ones to implement at any moment. You have complete freedom over your technology stack.

Costs and licensing

The costs can be high as licensing applies to everything in the package no matter if the tools are used or not.



Optimized costs based on utilization, thanks to the flexibility in building your own stack. The user will only pay for the tools that they need and for as long as they need them. If at one point one of the tools becomes obsolete, it can be immediately removed from the stack, avoiding extra costs.

Onboarding and adapting

The complex suite has to be put into place all at once, meaning it can take months for a new suite to be implemented. Adapting to the new suite can be even lengthier, as your teams usually have to go through a steep learning curve just to be able to do their old tasks with a new system.



Since your stack is optimized for your specific needs, there are fewer tools that need to be implemented. Due to the compact and specialized nature of each tool, the onboarding process only takes a short time. Since you are free to choose your technologies, you can choose those that are compatible with your team's previous experience and reduce the initial learning phase significantly.

Updates and security

As the suite is provided by one vendor, updates come in huge sizes and usually affect the whole system. Because of this, even smaller fixes for a minor bug may take a while to be offered by the provider. Likewise, as the whole suite is connected, a security flaw in one part has the potential to affect the entire system. Slow rate of new updates can only worsen the problem.



As each tool is offered by an individual expert provider, updates come regular and in small sizes. As each technology is regularly updated with small batches, it is easy to stay ahead of the curve and quickly respond to newer trends. While regular updates for every technology reduces the overall security risk, if a problem shows up somewhere in the stack, it will not affect other parts of the system. Isolated issues have much lower risks and are easier to control.

What does this mean for eCommerce?

The table above is a general comparison between the two approaches, however in the case of eCommerce, there are more obvious differences that directly impact a business. The questions of customer journeys, omnichannel marketing, and SEO are all related to the capabilities of your content management system (CMS). While a suite includes a CMS as part of the package, a best-of-breed approach allows you to choose a CMS that is specifically made to address the issues of eCommerce.

In any business where content is an integral building block, or in businesses where the rate of content creation is high, the way content is created, managed, distributed, and maintained are all vital to the company's success. If your products are to stand out in a highly competitive market, they should be customized and personalized enough, so they can be always in the reach of your target audience. Likewise, as consumers continue to move to different devices, from phones to voice-activated assistants and smart watches, your CMS should be able to deliver the same quality of content across all devices and platforms.

It is therefore necessary for such businesses to adopt a modern eCommerce CMS, instead of settling for a CMS that is maintained by the same company that processes the payments.

A best-of-breed CMS can outrun an all-in-one suite with CMS capabilities in some of the crucial areas:

1. Delivering highly customizable and personalized content

An independent eCommerce CMS will give your marketing and development teams unlimited customization options. Each component in your storefront can be unique to your own brand. The suite systems usually fall short in this regard, as they come with a series of pre-built themes and templates that only support minor customization. It's not easy to create a personalized journey, when the user interface looks generic and similar to other competitors.

Furthermore, since best-of-breed CMS solutions take advantage of application APIs, the front-end work can be done independently from the back-end, meaning your marketers can quickly respond to demands (product recommendations, launching new lines, etc.) without having to wait for developers.

Some systems like Storyblok also take advantage of modular content blocks. These blocks can be reused in different situations, either as they are or edited to any necessary extent. Content blocks also open up the possibility to automate a portion of your content creation process through using intelligent content.

2. Maintaining a true omnichannel presence

Perhaps the greatest strengths of the best-of-breed content strategy is its platform independence. Since in these systems the front-end and the back-end are separated (learn more here), **the same content** can be simultaneously published on any device/platform, from websites and apps to personal assistants and VR headsets. This means a considerable reduction in effort and costs, as each content has to be created only once, and used everywhere!

3. Integrating the newest technologies

A best-of-breed approach means you have complete freedom over incorporating any new technology immediately. Since each tool functions independently, you can choose to integrate whatever tool your company may need at the moment. In stark contrast, an all-in-one approach puts the control in the vendor's hands. Since all tools are offered in a package, it is up to the provider to choose a new technology to be incorporated in the pack. Even in best case scenarios, you have to wait for extended periods of time for the vendor to offer the new technology. Of course in many cases, you won't even get the perfect tool for your business, as your choices are limited by the vendor's options.

In a rapidly expanding realm like eCommerce, a swift integration of the newest technologies is even more important than usual, as they help companies stay ahead of the curve in a globally competitive market.

4. SEO

One of the biggest factors in showing up at the top of the search results, is having a fast responsive website. The separation of the two ends in a best-of-breed CMS solution also means any traffic on the front-end would not affect the back-end (and vice versa).

Alongside speed, security is a major deciding factor when it comes to ranking higher in the search results. The same separation also contributes to lower security concerns, as a problem in one end would not affect the other end. Additionally, the existence of a central content hub instead of multiple content silos for each device, makes it much easier to monitor the data structure for any potential threats.



Key Takeaway

Choosing the right approach always comes down to your own preferences and the specific demands of your business. While there are major benefits in choosing a best-of-breed solution, there may be some cases where an all-in-one suite would be a better choice. For example, if communicating with multiple vendors is an issue, an all-in-one suite means having a single vendor relationship.

When it comes to content management for eCommerce however, there are specific demands that a generic suite usually is unable to address. As omnichannel and personalization continue to dominate the eCommerce scene, best-of-breed solutions solidify their position as the preferred method. These solutions inherently make omnichannel and personalization tasks easier, due to their architecture and philosophy.



Endnotes

1. Accenture, Making it Personal. 2018, https://www.accenture.com/_acnmedia/PDF-77/Accenture-Pulse-Survey.pdf
2. SmarterHQ, New Survey Uncovers a Rift Between How Marketers Target Consumers & the Way Individuals Expect Brands to Communicate with Them. Jun. 2018. <https://smarterhq.com/blog/b2c-marketing-report>
3. Bigcommerce, 33 Ecommerce Conversion Rate Optimization Steps Guaranteed to Increase Sales in 2020. <https://www.bigcommerce.com/blog/conversion-rate-optimization/#understanding-online-store-conversion-rates>