

TECHNOLOGY ROADMAPS FOR DIGITAL GROWTH

As manufacturers and distributors push ahead with growth plans, they're finding the best mix of digital commerce technology to lead the way.

NOVEMBER 2021



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TO WIN ONLINE, IT TAKES A B2B TECHNOLOGY ECOSYSTEM

From artificial intelligence (AI)-powered personalized web

content to effective site search, digital supply chains and robotics in fulfillment centers, practitioners of B2B ecommerce have much to consider and to deploy to build and maintain a loyal customer base.

To be sure, the evolution of digital commerce technologies and the means for integrating them have come a long way in recent years, providing ecommerce practitioners with the tools and platforms to build an effective customer-serving digital presence.

Still, B2B companies must work out the business processes that best serve their customers in the most efficient and rewarding way. And they must figure out how to match their digital technology and strategies to how they need to connect with both their customers and suppliers.

This report provides an inside look at the technology and strategy of manufacturers and distributors, how they've identified their customers' needs and addressed them with digital commerce that works for both buyer and seller. A common challenge these companies have faced: dealing with the market disruption as well as the new market opportunities presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. Their right mix of technology backed by effective strategies have kept them on a course to grow, innovate and even disrupt their markets.

Take Anheuser-Busch InBev. The international brewing and beverage company is using ecommerce and marketplace technology to cater to the changing demands of retail consumers as well as the restaurants, bars, and retail stores it sells to.

Among the manufacturers covered in these pages, National Marker Co. is benefitting from its deployment of headless commerce technology to adjust to changing demand for its workplace safety products. Prysmian Group, a maker of cables and systems for the energy and telecommunications industries, is managing rapid growth in ecommerce sales to industrial customers with a technology stack configured with a strong core of product information management. Melissa & David, a toymaker with licensing deals with TV's Nickelodeon, has built out its ecommerce site and integrated B2B portal to grow sales to small and midsize merchants as well as the largest retailers.

In this report's cover story, Parts Town—a distributor of parts that commercial kitchens need to keep their ovens, refrigerators and other equipment running—discusses how it uses a mix of digital technology and strategies, from warehouse robotics to a microsite for its service-company partners, to manage rapid online growth that has spurred it to more than \$1 billion in total sales.

We trust you'll find this report useful and insightful. We welcome your comments.

ONE DISTRIBUTOR'S TECH RECIPE FOR SURPASSING \$1 BILLION

Pushing fast orders for demanding restaurant customers

In the restaurant business, minutes of downtime in the kitchen because of broken or missing parts in cooking equipment can sour the best recipes and stifle peak periods. In the replacement parts distribution business, figuring out innovative ways to expedite delivery of parts and service to commercial kitchens has led distributor Parts Town to more than \$1 billion in sales—with 70% handled digitally.

At Parts Town, a billion-dollar distributor of original equipment manufacturer (OEM) parts for commercial kitchens, a new robotic-driven automated distribution system hovers high over the center of the more than 200,000-square-foot distribution center.

This AutoStore robotics system—a computerized track grid supporting more than two dozen robotic carts—automatically fetches parts like oven switches and refrigerator components from thousands of bins stacked 16 bins high beneath the grid and re-routes them to the right worker below fulfilling orders.

The system, which covers about 75% of the company's customer orders, is critical to Parts Town in multiple ways: making it possible to quickly move its most popular products; meeting its promise of same-day shipping for orders placed by 9 p.m. Eastern Time; getting maximum use of its one main distribution center; easing workloads for personnel; and keeping up with the distributor's rapid growth spurred in recent years by its aggressive push into digital commerce.

And yet the AutoStore system—as useful, striking and innovative as it is—is but one of the innovative approaches Parts Town has taken since the early 2000s, when it kicked off a steady rise in business and



'We're a distribution company, but we're really more of a digital technology company that has distribution.'

Emanuela Delgado, who holds the unusual title of senior vice president of the revolution but also acts as Parts Town's senior vice president of growth and innovation.



The top grid of Parts Town's AutoStore robotic-driven automated distribution system, where robotic carts automatically fetch parts from thousands of bins and route them to workers below the grid fulfilling customer orders.

a 30% compound annual growth rate that transformed it from five people and less than \$3 million in sales in 2004 into a billion-dollar-plus company with thousands of employees today—and with a workplace culture highly supportive of innovation.

“We’re a distribution company, but we’re really more of a digital technology company that has distribution,” says Emanuela Delgado, who holds the unusual title of senior vice president of the revolution but also acts as Parts Town’s senior vice president of growth and innovation.

Now, Parts Town is looking ahead to even faster growth as it finesses and builds on the technology improvements and customer-serving business practices Delgado and her colleagues have fashioned and tweaked in an ongoing effort to innovate. It’s a growth plan that will rely on the coordinated ecosystem of critical technology applications

and skilled personnel Parts Town has assembled, including:

- ▶ The AutoStore automated distribution system, which integrates with the Exacta warehouse control system to update inventory records;
- ▶ The customer-facing ecommerce site PartsTown.com, built on SAP Hybris technology and a homegrown mobile app;
- ▶ Rich product imagery, including 360-degree spins of hundreds of thousands of products;
- ▶ A “Parts In Town” marketplace developed on software from Mirakl that connects customers with Parts Town partner service companies located nearest a customer’s location and integrates with the PartsTown.com ecommerce site;
- ▶ Syspro enterprise resource planning software, which among other things covers the processing of EDI orders;
- ▶ Punchout software from PunchOut2Go for connecting PartsTown.com to customers’ procurement/spend management software; and
- ▶ Business intelligence software from QLIK that provides customers with personalized dashboards showing data on their spending records, including what they spend on next-day air, to help them better plan their purchases.

The ongoing goal is to continually improve how Parts Town serves its customers through their preferred means and with integrated systems that foster transparency in customer and product data.



'Our digital marketing, digital selling tools and ecommerce really paved the way for us.'

Linda Ramsey,
senior vice president of
marketing

ROOTS AS A FAMILY BUSINESS FOUNDED 90 YEARS AGO

With its roots as a family business started in 1930, Parts Town took on its current name in 1987 and built a reputation as a supplier of OEM (original equipment manufacturer) parts that commercial kitchens in the Chicago metropolitan area needed to keep their ovens, refrigerators and assorted other tools and equipment humming along.

In 2004, the distributor took a turn toward a more technological and innovative strategy under its then-new top executive, Steve Snower, who came from the perch of digitally experienced electronic components distributor Newark Electronics (now part of Avnet Inc.) and continues to lead Parts Town today as CEO, and chief enthusiasm officer.

At the time, Delgado recalls, the commercial kitchen equipment parts industry was lacking business focus on customer service, and ecommerce and digital marketing appeared to be non-existent. So, Parts Town and its new CEO saw an opportunity to go more digital and differentiate. “We saw all the opportunity in an industry that had a lack of customer service-oriented business and virtually no ecommerce,” Delgado says.

“Our digital marketing, digital selling tools and ecommerce really paved the way for us,” says Linda Ramsey, senior vice president of marketing.

Parts Town also provides more than 100 customized microsites for many of its largest customers, and it has launched Parts In Town as an online marketplace linked from PartsTown.com where restaurants and other end customers can purchase parts and services directly from Parts Town’s partner service firms.



A Parts Town worker fulfills a customer order with parts forwarded by the AutoStore robotic-driven automated distribution system.

ENCOURAGING INNOVATION

The company's senior management encourages its teams to innovate, take risks and learn to make adjustments—a policy that has paid off multiple times in multiple ways. “We have to constantly change and pivot,” Delgado says.

When Parts Town introduced its mobile app in 2010, it considered it a game-changer in how customers could identify the right parts for the job with online product images. But it kept improving it and added ecommerce transactions two years later. Customers have downloaded the app more than 160,000 times.

And when Parts Town launched 360-degree spin and zoom technology in 2013 in partnership with Snap36 to display its products online, it took a risk in deploying such imaging on its inventory of mostly small parts—not knowing whether customers would find a benefit from a full view of small items. But it found that buyers received crucial information visually, such as by zooming in to view the types of fasteners a part uses and the small print on a specifications label.

The distributor has also built out a site search and navigation system to help customers choose the right part from among the millions of SKUs it features on its ecommerce site. With its information technology team of some 40 developers, it has worked with the open-source Solr site search technology to help customers search for the right by part number, 30-character descriptions, abbreviations, price and product diagrams. On the customized microsites it builds for corporate clients, it works with customers to incorporate their own wording, product numbers and categories into the search system.

FOCUSING SPECIAL SERVICES

On the Parts In Town marketplace, which is located at PartsTown.com/parts-in-town, the distributor tweaked it to accommodate the special services it offers. To ensure a smooth process when end customers request same-day delivery, for example, it built in functionality to automatically send alerts to suppliers and customers if a supplier doesn't send an order acknowledgment within a specified time.

Parts Town figures its innovative push extends to its third-party marketplace sellers, helping Parts Town to expand the range of products and services offered to end customers. "We are giving independent local service companies access to an ecommerce solution through Parts In Town," Ramsey says.

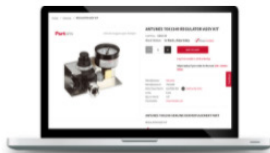
Parts Town is also expanding internationally. It has operations in Germany and the United Kingdom, and it has hired Martin Rhode, a former ecommerce executive at Amazon Business and Hewlett Packard Enterprise Co., to build its international markets.

And to get even more use of its 200,000-square-foot distribution center in the Chicago suburb of Addison, Illinois, Parts Town plans to expand the AutoStore system.



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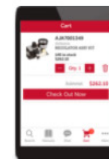
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The AutoStore automated distribution system, which Parts Town deployed with systems integrator Bastian Solutions, is designed to help the distributor get maximum use of its distribution center for storing new inventory arriving from suppliers as well as quickly fulfilling orders to customers.

As some robots scurry along the grid to retrieve parts to send customers, other robots hurry along to grab bins of newly arrived products shipped from Parts Town's suppliers and send them to the right worker placing them in stock for future customer orders.

In each case where a robot retrieves products and re-routes them, a robot finds the right square on the grid where more than a dozen bins may be stacked vertically; the robot then fetches the bin with the right equipment parts.

When a customer order comes through, a robot follows the grid to find the bin in which the item is stored. If that bin is below others, it places the extra bins on top of the grid, retrieves the right bin, and delivers it to the employee filling out the order. Another robot then places the displaced bins back into their original positions.

The system keeps bins that contain the more popular products as close as possible to the top of the grid so robots can more easily retrieve them.

On the Parts In Town marketplace, Parts Town is using marketplace services firms like MarketPush and ChannelAdvisor to onboard more sellers. And to increase services to buyers, it is working with QLIK business intelligence software to provide customers with an online dashboard that shows such information as the number of purchases they've made for particular brands and how much they spent on next-day air for expedited shipments. "So, customers can see if one item started to fail, and make better decisions," Delgado says.

Parts Town is also improving in other areas. It is building new online tools, such as an application for processing online product returns for customers with technology from Narvar Inc. And it is looking into deploying a new system to expedite last-mile deliveries to customer job sites.

And there is more to come. Delgado says the distributor is happy with its Hybris ecommerce technology from SAP SE integrated with the Syspro ERP system. Still, it is considering adding new yet-to-

be-named features in its customer-facing interfaces, relying heavily on technology backed by artificial intelligence and application programming interfaces (APIs).

The new features, Delgado says, will support Parts Town's goal of developing new ways to connect with customers as it pushes ahead with its growth plans based on an ever-improving digital commerce system.

"We're looking to be a \$3 billion company within a handful of years," she says.

It expects to get there by continuing to invest in growth and innovation, "primarily in digital," Delgado says, adding, "The industry is evolving, and we want to be on the front end of that evolution."

With Parts Town's record, there's no apparent reason to doubt that plan.

A UNIFIED ECOMMERCE PLATFORM WITH THE RIGHT TOOLS CAN BE A B2B CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT GAME-CHANGER

Bachir Kassir,
president,
WebJaguar



Customer engagement is challenging in any area of ecommerce, particularly for B2B companies. The complexities built into B2B shopping, combined with many companies' disparate systems being unable to communicate with each other, make B2B companies struggle to engage customers. To discuss how using the right tools in one platform can help B2B companies streamline their processes and create better shopping experiences, Digital Commerce 360 spoke with Bachir Kassir, president of WebJaguar.

DC360: What tactics should B2B companies be using to effectively engage B2B buyers online?

Kassir: Personalization and leveraging ecommerce data to drive engagement is a must. Companies should be able to leverage data to identify customers who haven't logged in for a while, those who purchased a specific product or customers who spent more than \$10,000 in their last transaction, for example. Then, they can send those customers personalized offers to promote engagement.

Another way to engage buyers is through shipping rule technology. Inform customers of their different shipping options, including less-than-truckload (LTL) and standard carrier costs based on cart value, so they can make the right decisions. An abandoned cart is common with any ecommerce platform, but what isn't common is building business rules around it and embedding dynamic promotions and incentives to convert customers.

If these tools aren't part of the platform, it will be difficult and expensive for B2B companies to engage buyers.

DC360: What customer engagement challenges are most problematic for B2B companies now?

Kassir: Different tools are used for different types of engagement. And there are so many tools available. The challenge is making all of them work together to provide effective B2B buyer engagement. This is very hard to do unless these capabilities are native to the ecommerce platform companies are using.

For example, say a company is using a third-party email marketing program. How does that email marketing tool know the highly personalized data about the B2B buyer? It doesn't. This knowledge of personalized data must be real-time to be effective. Integrating B2B customer data in real time with third-party tools is not only challenging but also but costly.

DC360: What strategies and technologies should they implement to overcome these issues?

Kassir: Having the right ecommerce platform that combines these tools under one roof will solve all these challenges. On a single platform, these tools will have instant access to highly personalized customer data such as orders, logins, purchase level, cart abandonment, and purchase history, among others.

Regardless of their platform, B2B companies should have at least one knowledgeable person on staff to run and manage their ecommerce platform. This lets them maximize their benefit.

They should also work with a vendor, such as WebJaguar, that offers a platform that encompasses all the essential B2B tools and can support them with all their B2B ecommerce needs—rather than work with so many disparate vendors and extensions that don't communicate well together.



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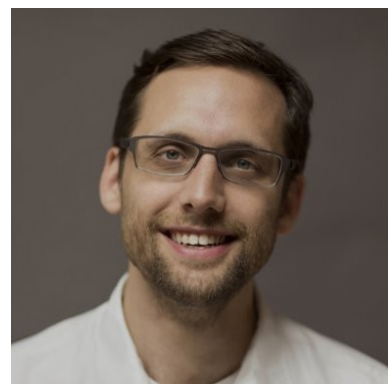
Q&A WITH ANHEUSER-BUSCH INBEV: HOW THE BREWERY AND DISTRIBUTOR IS GROWING GLOBALLY VIA ECOMMERCE

Q&A: France Roy, global vice president, direct-to-consumer technology at brewing and beverage company AB InBev, discusses how the provider of more than 500 beer brands is growing its B2B and direct-to-consumer sales operations with digital commerce technology.

Anheuser-Busch InBev, the Belgium-based international brewing and beverage company, recorded strong growth in the second quarter of 2021—when total revenue increased year over year by 27.6% to \$10.3 billion—as the company continued to increase investments in “customer-centric capabilities, innovation, and digital transformation.” In this Q&A interview, France Roy, global vice president of direct-to-consumer technology, shares how AB InBev is working with ecommerce technology to build sales and improve interactions with businesses and consumers.

DC360: Please briefly describe AB InBev’s global growth in recent years and your expected growth over the next several years. How important is a digital commerce/marketplace strategy to your growth plans?

Roy: We had incredible growth in the direct-to-consumer space over the past couple of years. With consumer behavior changing due to the pandemic, consumers are ordering more online. We expect this trend to continue in the future and are placing bets on our businesses that will grow with this trend. Having a digital commerce strategy has been key to our growth plans. We are focusing on expanding our courier businesses internationally using VTEX as our digital commerce platform.



‘Having a digital commerce strategy has been key to our growth plans.’

France Roy, global vice president, DTC technology, Anheuser-Busch InBev

DC360: Do your business customers include restaurants, bars, grocery stores and convenience stores? Any others?

Roy: Our direct-to-consumer business involves both end consumers as well as our customers like convenience stores, restaurants, and bars. We've also built digital capabilities to help our own on-trade bars and restaurants outside the U.S., which gives a touch-free menu experience to our users. Building a direct-to-consumer ecosystem involves optimizing every part of the experience, and this ranges from the end consumers' experience to the customer delivering that to them. *(Editor's Note: "On-trade" refers to sales of beer and other alcoholic beverages through such businesses as restaurants and bars, while "off-trade" refers to sales through retail stores.)*

DC360: Please comment on some of the ways AB InBev's customers' needs changed during the pandemic, and how your B2B2C marketplace strategy is addressing their needs.

Roy: During the pandemic, consumers had a very high demand for products at home. Any way they could save time by having their products delivered to them had a huge boost during the pandemic. Being able to meet those consumer needs has allowed us to continue to grow our number of orders as well as innovate new ways of serving consumers. We've had to look at our coverage and expand that both internationally and within cities so that we cover a broader customer base. We've also had to increase the number of couriers and inventory available for these new channels.

DC360: Please describe how your businesses' customers and end customers interact with this B2B2C marketplace and benefit from it.

Roy: Consumers can get cold beer at grocery store prices delivered to them within 60 minutes. This value proposition has really resonated with consumers because it solves several problems for them. For example, they don't have to carry beer from the grocery store home;

they can ensure their beer is cold when they need it and they are able to trust they are getting it at the best price available.

DC360: Please comment on the benefits and significance to AB InBev of the VTEX fully integrated marketplace commerce order management system.

Roy: Having our platform on VTEX has allowed us to quickly meet the needs of consumers and expand internationally. Launching a marketplace in a matter of weeks was critical for us as there is a lot of competition in this space. Being able to have one codebase and team that we use to then deploy this platform to many countries is a huge benefit to us. We can stand up technology platforms with relatively small teams and allow those teams to focus on building custom capabilities that are critical to the business function. Building a platform that scales from scratch is a big undertaking, and that level of customization takes a significant amount of time and money. What VTEX allows us to do is not worry about the basics of an ecommerce and marketplace platform and to focus on delivering value with our technology and product teams where it really benefits the consumer.

DC360: What are the expected benefits to your business of using such offerings as machine-learning services Amazon Forecast and Amazon Personalize, Amazon's fulfillment services and Amazon Pay?

Roy: We're not expecting to use the DTC launchpad; however, we do use many AWS services with our ecommerce platforms. The forecasting and personalization services on AWS allow us to get access to the amazing ecommerce capabilities and services that Amazon itself uses. We can then take these and integrate them into our VTEX instances as needed. We prefer to have a degree of customization available with more of an integration/plugin-and-play approach.

DC360: What are some examples of how the VTEX headless commerce solution supported and expedited your marketplace development and integration with store point-of-sale systems?

Roy: The VTEX headless commerce solution allows us to have a very high degree of control and customization of the consumer experience. It allows us to build a mobile responsive website so consumers could shop on their desktop or phone. It also allows us to create a user experience that leveraged our learnings and best practices from our past experience in the courier space.

VTEX integrations also allowed us to use other SaaS providers to maximize our speed to market. Instead of building a delivery-person app from scratch, we simply integrated one into the VTEX instance to allow us to have full management of delivery within weeks.

DC360: What are examples of other customized solutions AB InBev developed for customers?

Roy: In the direct-to-consumer group of AB InBev, we have developed many different customized solutions for consumers. In addition to our courier and ecommerce sites, we've also created a slew of digital capabilities that will allow us to continue innovating in the future.

For example, we have created a digital menu solution for our own brewpubs that allows us to offer menus online and lets consumers submit orders from their phones. This is important during the pandemic for creating a touchless and safe experience at our locations, and it allowed us to learn about digital capabilities we can continue to use to expand these businesses. ■

SHARING SUPPLY CHAIN DATA TO GET THROUGH THE NEXT MARKET DISRUPTION

The pandemic forced manufacturers, suppliers and distributors to rethink the entire supply chain. The flaws in widely accepted best practices such as just-in-time delivery, global sourcing, and an emphasis on low costs, were exposed when COVID-19 struck.

“Everything was designed to be the lowest cost. Some of our competitors had entire teams just looking at low-cost producers and tax strategies,” said Mike McCullough, vice president, North America Supply Chain Lead at Capgemini Invent, part of the IT services and consulting company Capgemini Group.

That emphasis on cost worked fine. Until it didn’t.

“For a while they (logistics departments) were able to manage the problems with brute force,” finding workarounds by spending heavily on transportation and supplies, etc., McCullough says. “Now they’re struggling. They can’t do it.”

In its recent “Fast Forward” report on the state of the supply chain, Capgemini says companies’ “ability to withstand disruptions rests on building a range of capabilities” in which technology will play a key role.

One such capability involves having “visibility into the upstream and downstream supply network and emphasis on data-sharing with partners.” According to Capgemini, only 9% of organizations demonstrate strength in that area.



‘Control tower visibility solutions are going to be more critical.’

Mike McCullough,
vice president, North America
Supply Chain Lead at
Capgemini Invent

That may be a surprise to many B2B logistics executives. Manufacturers, suppliers and distributors invested heavily in freight and distribution management software systems. Those systems are usually managed from either the point of origin or product destinations.

But while those systems work well for material requirements planning (MRP) and enterprise resource planning (ERP), companies “still struggle to understand where a product is,” Capgemini says.

SEEING AND OPTIMIZING

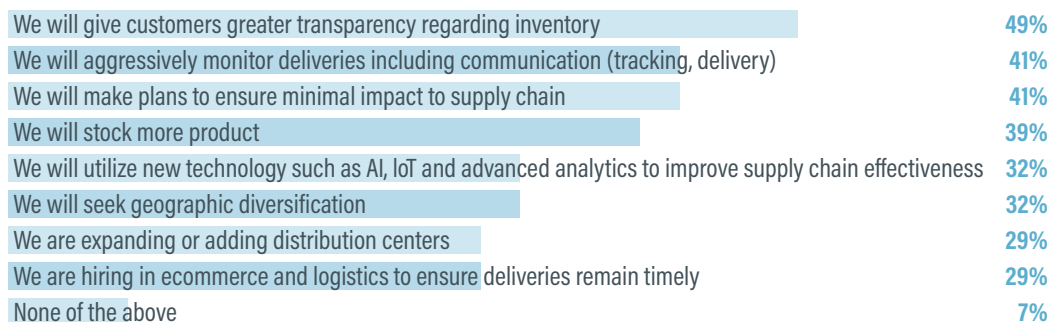
By contrast, a newer approach involves the use of “control towers”—dashboards that display data, critical business metrics and events across the supply chain. Multiple technology companies such as IBM, Blue Yonder Group, Inc, SAP and others provide control towers to logistics departments.

The latest versions of these control towers use artificial intelligence/machine learning to run real-time analytics to help decision makers optimize transportation and solve supply issues as the need arises. And the next generation of the towers promises to take over many of the human-driven decision making by spotting a problem, finding the solution, and implementing it.

COMPANIES' PLANS FOR SUPPLY CHAINS

WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING SUPPLY CHAIN-RELATED ACTIONS WILL YOU CONTINUE TO DO IN THE COMING YEAR?

Please select all that apply.



Source: Digital Commerce 360

“I think control tower visibility solutions are going to be more critical. I think you’re going to see those getting smarter as well in terms of not just the dashboard but in terms of analyzing data, understanding where there’s an issue in the supply chain, particularly upstream, from ocean carriers from factories, etc., in terms of where products are, and able to monitor that, even go into a smart factory and the Internet of Things on the floor and understand where a given product is in the line and be able to manage that,” McCullough says. “Then there’s another planning layer on top of that that lets me quickly pivot and understand my supply and how do I optimize costs given the constraints.”

The result for B2B companies will be something like a hyper-automated network of self-driving vehicles, decision-making control towers, and people-less warehouses.

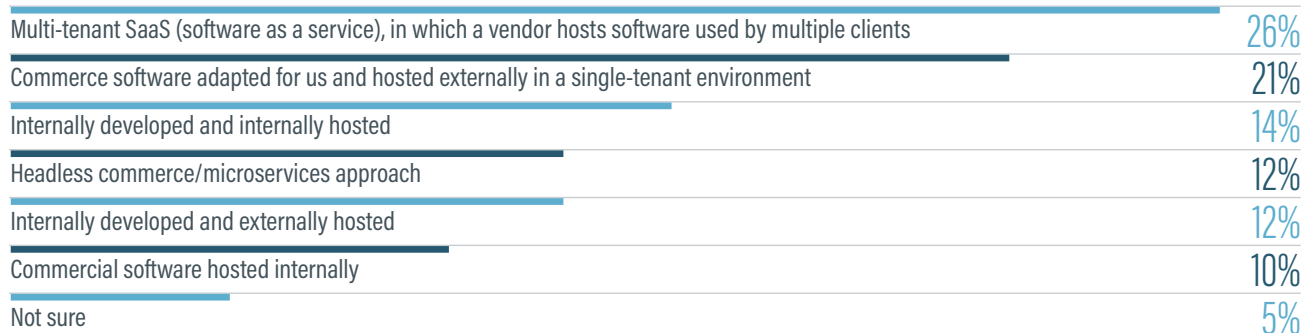
“Everyone wants to know ‘how do we run a more automated facility?’ They’re looking for ‘lights out’ type of warehousing,” he says. And this change is going to happen fast. “In a year or two I think you’re going to see heavy automation, particularly in the warehousing space as labor continues to be a challenge.”

Research suggests that B2B executives are indeed moving quickly toward this new world. Roughly one-third of the respondents to the recent Digital Commerce 360 B2B Distributor/Wholesaler survey said they planned to use new technologies such as artificial intelligence, IoT and advanced analytics to improve supply chain effectiveness this year. ■

TRENDS IN B2B TECHNOLOGY INVESTMENT

A PREFERENCE FOR MULTI-TENANT SALES

WHAT TYPE OF TECHNOLOGY ARE YOU MOST LIKELY TO CHOOSE FOR A NEW PLATFORM?



Source: Survey of 110 B2B sellers, first quarter of 2021, Digital Commerce 360

UPGRADING MARKETING AND COMMERCE

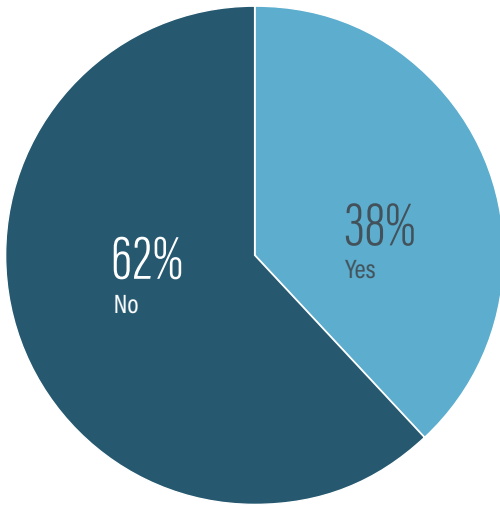
WHAT LEVEL OF INVESTMENT WILL YOU MAKE IN EACH OF THE FOLLOWING BUSINESS AREAS IN 2021?



Source: Survey of 110 B2B sellers, first quarter of 2021, Digital Commerce 360

DEPLOYING A BETTER PLATFORM

ARE YOU LOOKING TO SWITCH OR UPGRADE YOUR ECOMMERCE PLATFORM IN 2021?

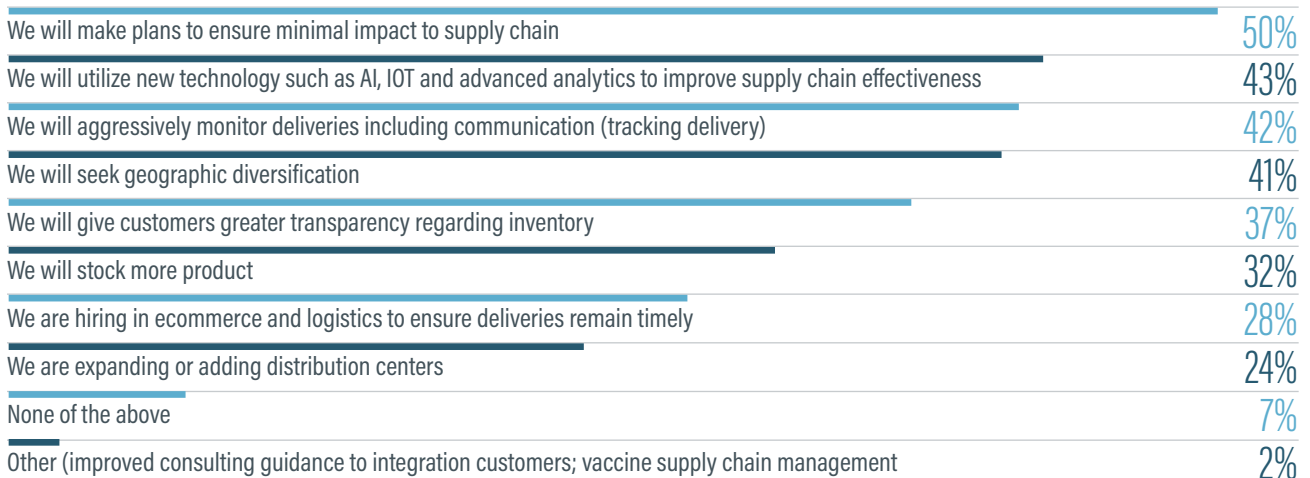


Source: Survey of 110 B2B sellers, first quarter of 2021, Digital Commerce 360

ENSURING SMOOTHER SUPPLY CHAINS

WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING SUPPLY CHAIN RELATED ACTIONS WILL YOU BE TAKING GIVEN THE CURRENT BUSINESS CLIMATE?

Please select all that apply.



Source: Survey of 110 B2B sellers, first quarter of 2021, Digital Commerce 360

ABOUT THE EDITOR

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