

# 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 midsized 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](https://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.

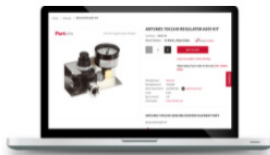
Parts Town is also expanding internationally. It has operations in Germany and the United Kingdom, and it has hired Martin Rhode, a former ecommerce executive at Amazon Business and Hewlett Packard Enterprise Co., to build its international markets.

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.



PartSPIN is our revolutionary 360 degree image technology. These interactive images allow you to see a part from the front, the back, and up close. However you spin it, you'll leave the guesswork behind, and buy a part with total confidence.

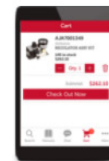
### Take a Turn: Here's How



Search for your part on partstown.com or on our mobile app. Look for the PartSPIN® image and click it.



A new pop-up will appear with your part. Use your cursor or finger to drag over the image to see your part spin around. Click or tap to zoom in.



Add to your cart and feel good about buying the right part.  
Nice work!

Ready to get movin'? Let's go!

[SHOP NOW](#)

A Partspin video on PartsTown.com provides a 360-degree view.

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.

# MARKETPLACE TECHNOLOGY FOSTERS B2B ECOMMERCE GROWTH

Ryan Lee,  
CEO,  
Nautical Commerce



COVID-19 accelerated ecommerce buying by a decade, and the impact on B2B organizations has been profound. Those that had already embraced digital transformation—including the widespread shift to marketplace commerce—reaped the rewards while others struggled to stay afloat. To discuss how B2B companies can implement marketplace technology not only to survive these unprecedented times, but also to grow their business, Digital Commerce 360 B2B spoke with Ryan Lee, CEO of Nautical Commerce.

## **DC360: What are the most pressing ecommerce challenges B2B companies face?**

**Lee:** B2B commerce has traditionally been relational—conducted through phone calls, email and fax. But now, there's a generational shift coming with digital natives and millennials entering the B2B workforce. With that shift has come the demand for a new buying experience. And it's all about removing that friction to buy.

The challenge is digitizing the business rules and agreements that exist between buyers and B2B companies. There are substantial constraints in the ability to scale when you don't have these business operations orchestrated in a systematic workflow.

## **DC360: How do marketplaces help B2B companies effectively engage B2B buyers online?**

**Lee:** In B2B, the buying process itself is essentially an offline marketplace. It starts with emails and phone calls and then works its way through accounts payable. It's incredibly inefficient. B2B companies can reduce this friction to buy by bringing sales online and leveraging

marketplace technology. The in-person relationship doesn't go away. It just becomes more efficient and requires less manual processes.

B2B companies can take one of two approaches to launching a marketplace—horizontal or vertical. With the horizontal approach, you will build a B2C marketplace open to consumers, capturing a wider market than just B2B customers. The vertical approach is more exclusive. You would launch a private marketplace for approved buyers and sellers. Then you augment the catalog by bringing in distributors and partners to increase the inventory options.

## **DC360: Why is now the time to build an online marketplace?**

**Lee:** Prior to companies like Nautical, marketplace technology had been relatively unapproachable and unaffordable, and the timelines were way too long to implement. That's no longer the case, thanks to the maturity of marketplace technology.

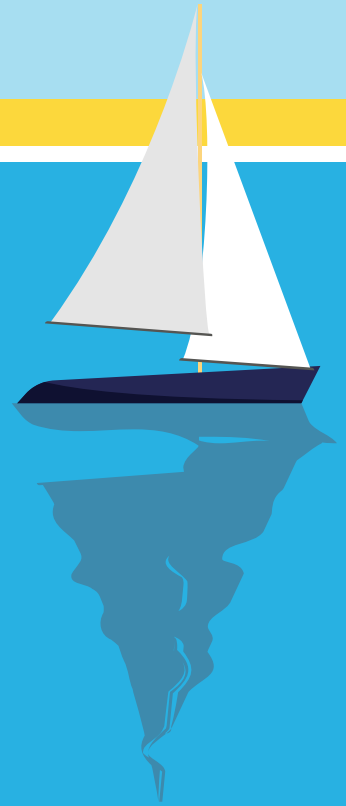
A marketplace is a function of commerce, fintech and logistics. Nautical, for example, is built at the intersection of commerce, fintech, and logistics with capabilities to create operational efficiencies across all three dimensions of operating that marketplace. The platform offers approachable pricing and the ability to launch quickly—under 90 days. And you can integrate it without having to blow up your existing system. You can stand it up in tandem and eventually open up new channels that will ultimately generate more revenue going forward.



# smooth scaling

when you use Nautical  
as your multi-vendor  
marketplace platform

- ✓ Grow your customer base by modernizing your current business model
- ✓ Build closer relationships with your current customers
- ✓ Increase revenue by increasing your product offerings
- ✓ Launch your marketplace in days, not months



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# 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.

We will give customers greater transparency regarding inventory	49%
We will aggressively monitor deliveries including communication (tracking, delivery)	41%
We will make plans to ensure minimal impact to supply chain	41%
We will stock more product	39%
We will utilize new technology such as AI, IoT and advanced analytics to improve supply chain effectiveness	32%
We will seek geographic diversification	32%
We are expanding or adding distribution centers	29%
We are hiring in ecommerce and logistics to ensure deliveries remain timely	29%
None of the above	7%

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.

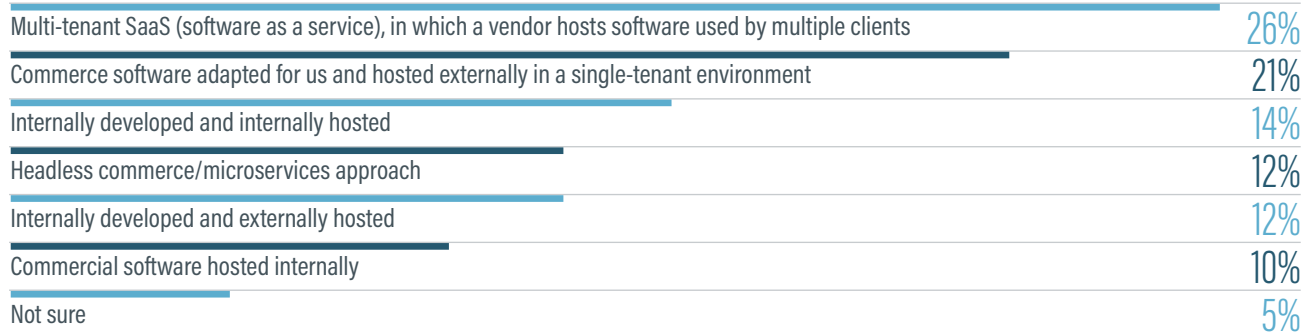
“Everyone wants to know ‘how do we run a more automated facility?’ They’re looking for ‘lights out’ type of warehousing,” he says. And this change is going to happen fast. “In a year or two I think you’re going to see heavy automation, particularly in the warehousing space as labor continues to be a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

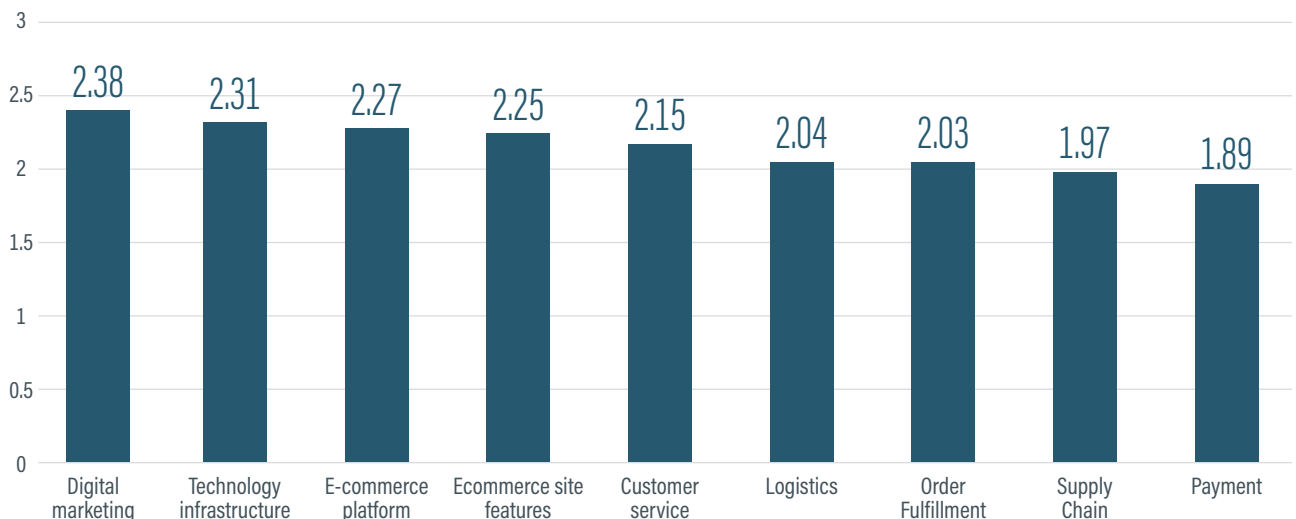
WHAT TYPE OF TECHNOLOGY ARE YOU MOST LIKELY TO CHOOSE FOR A NEW PLATFORM?



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

## UPGRADING MARKETING AND COMMERCE

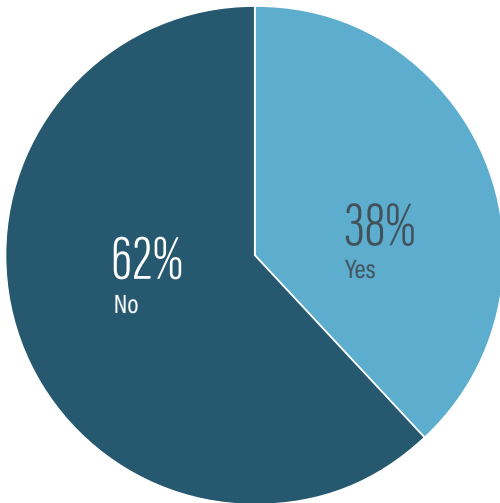
WHAT LEVEL OF INVESTMENT WILL YOU MAKE IN EACH OF THE FOLLOWING BUSINESS AREAS IN 2021?



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.

We will make plans to ensure minimal impact to supply chain	50%
We will utilize new technology such as AI, IOT and advanced analytics to improve supply chain effectiveness	43%
We will aggressively monitor deliveries including communication (tracking delivery)	42%
We will seek geographic diversification	41%
We will give customers greater transparency regarding inventory	37%
We will stock more product	32%
We are hiring in ecommerce and logistics to ensure deliveries remain timely	28%
We are expanding or adding distribution centers	24%
None of the above	7%
Other (improved consulting guidance to integration customers; vaccine supply chain management)	2%

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



## ABOUT THE EDITOR

Paul Demery is editor of Digital Commerce 360 | B2B. Prior to DC360B2B, he was managing editor of Internet Retailer magazine. In earlier work, he was editor-in-chief/associate publisher of Electronic Commerce World magazine, which covered business-to-business applications of internet technology in multiple industries; he also covered various industries for other magazines and newspapers.



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