



WHITE PAPER

New rules for B2B buying

The pandemic rewrote how B2B organizations buy – do you understand the new rules of selling online?

New rules for B2B buying

There is no doubt the pandemic has changed the way we buy – that’s true for consumers, and it’s true for businesses, too.

Accelerating existing trends

The pandemic fast-tracked many trends that were already in play, including the move to online purchasing. McKinsey & Company believes that the pandemic accelerated digital transformation by five years. Bain & Company puts the figure at three years. Our own research reveals that 58% of B2B buyers are using e-commerce for more of their purchasing since the pandemic started.

Presenting new challenges

It has also raised entirely new challenges. On a micro level, B2B organizations like manufacturers, wholesalers, distributors and retailers have had to contend with remote working and fewer face-to-face dealings with customers. On a macro level, they are having to adapt to new global challenges, like supply chain disruption, spikes in commodity prices, and extreme staff shortages.

But what exactly is the impact on B2B buying?

At Sana Commerce, we interviewed over 1,200 B2B buyers across seven countries. They told us about big shifts in their buying behavior. They also told us about deep frustrations with some suppliers’ web stores. And we concluded that many B2B sellers have had trouble adapting.

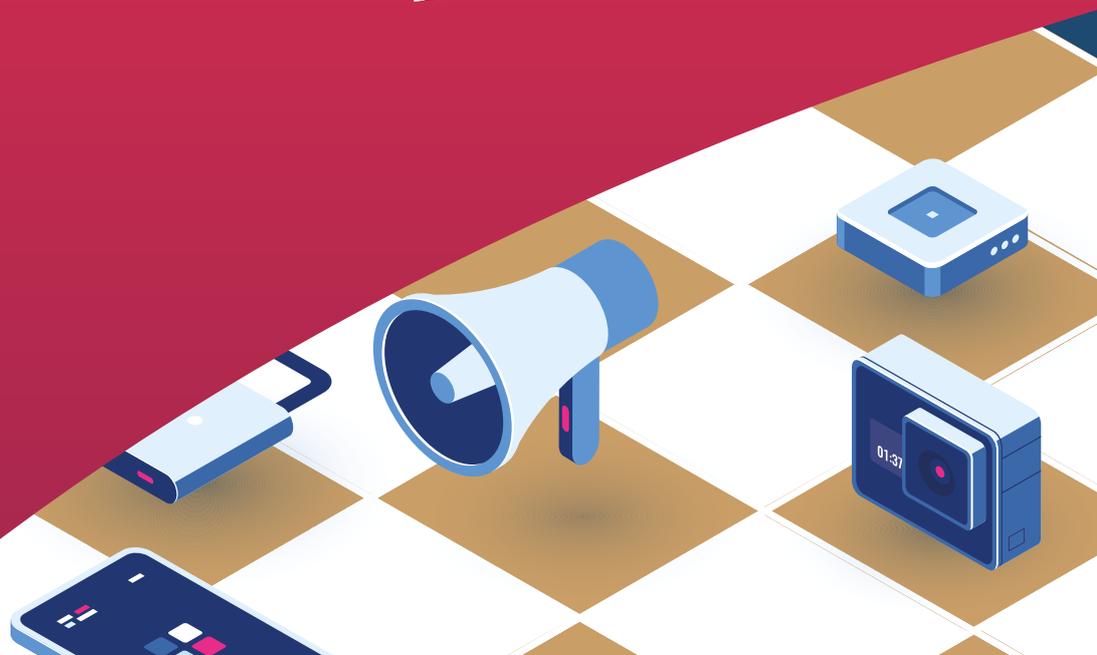
Providing practical solutions

We want to help B2B sellers adapt to the new rules for B2B buying – by putting added emphasis on their online channels, optimizing their e-commerce operations, and stepping up to meet heightened customer expectations.

This guide looks at the changes witnessed by B2B buyers over the past couple of years and considers what the playing field will look like in the future. Will it level as B2B e-commerce continues to adapt and what will be the new rules?

Michiel Schipperus - CEO, Sana Commerce

Michiel



The **post-Covid** playing field

Our research reveals a dramatic shift in the behavior of B2B buyers.

Post-Covid, they are going online for many more of their purchases, using supplier websites across their purchasing journey, and they now regard e-commerce as their primary buying channel – irrespective of how complex or customized their purchase may be. **But, clearly, some B2B sellers have had trouble adjusting.**

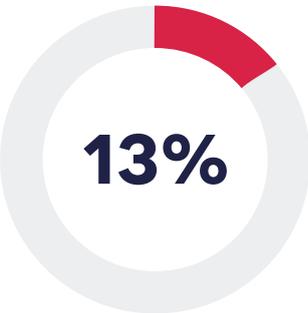
The pandemic has triggered a large uptick in online B2B buying – and reset the attitudes of B2B buyers.

Overall, two-thirds of B2B buyers are spending more online now than pre-pandemic. On average, they have increased their online spend by **45%**. And the percentage of products bought online has increased from **51%** to **67%**.

These are not small incremental changes – they are significant shifts.

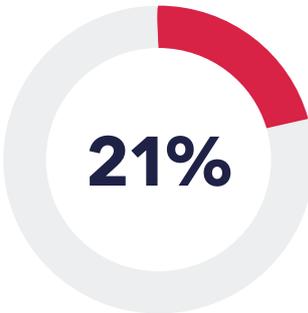
Also, B2B web stores are used well beyond the point of purchase. They are the primary point-of-call across every phase of the B2B buying journey. And, each step of the way, they are being used more extensively post-pandemic.

Q. Are you spending more or less online than you did prior to the pandemic?



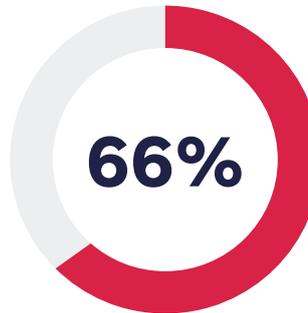
13%

Less



21%

The same



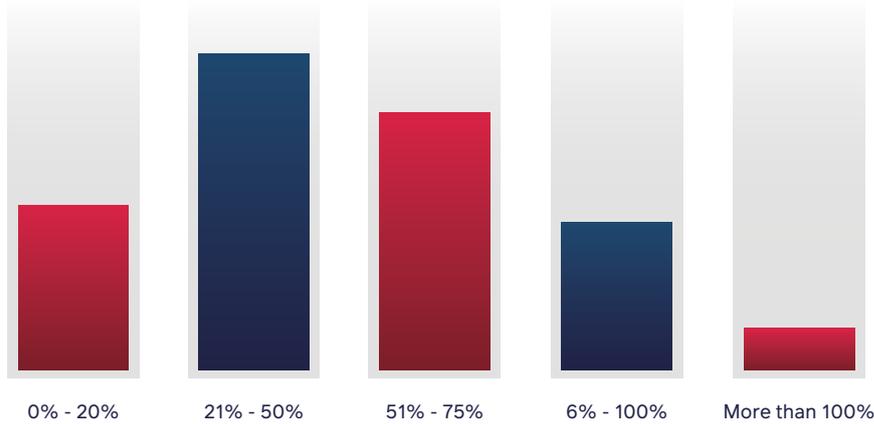
66%

More



Those spending more have increased by an average of 45%

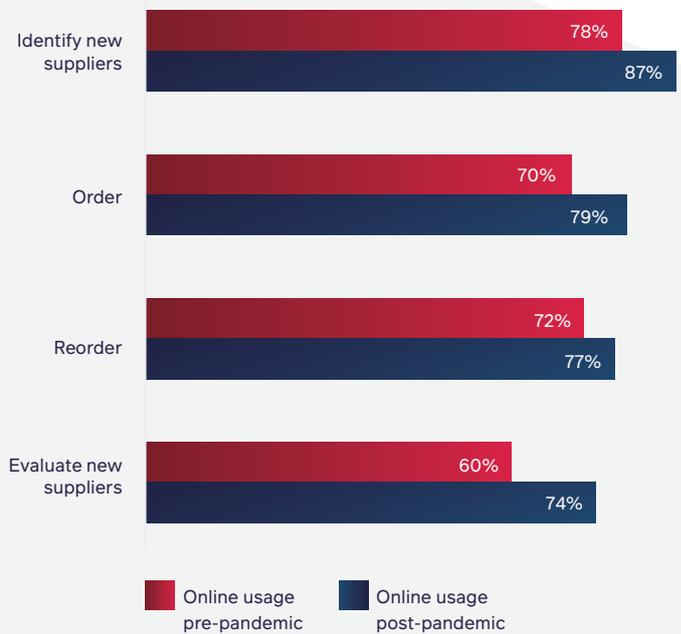
Q. How much more are you spending?



For example, 87% of B2B buyers will go online to identify new suppliers (up from 78%), 74% will review a company's web store to evaluate them (up from 60%), 79% will place their order online (up from 70%), and 77% reorder online (up from 72%).

This means that B2B web stores have several key roles to play – from the initial recruitment of new customers right through to their successful retention.

Q. Where did you go to get information at each of these stages during the buying process pre- and post- pandemic?



E-commerce has moved further into the mainstream – and is now established as the primary B2B purchasing channel.

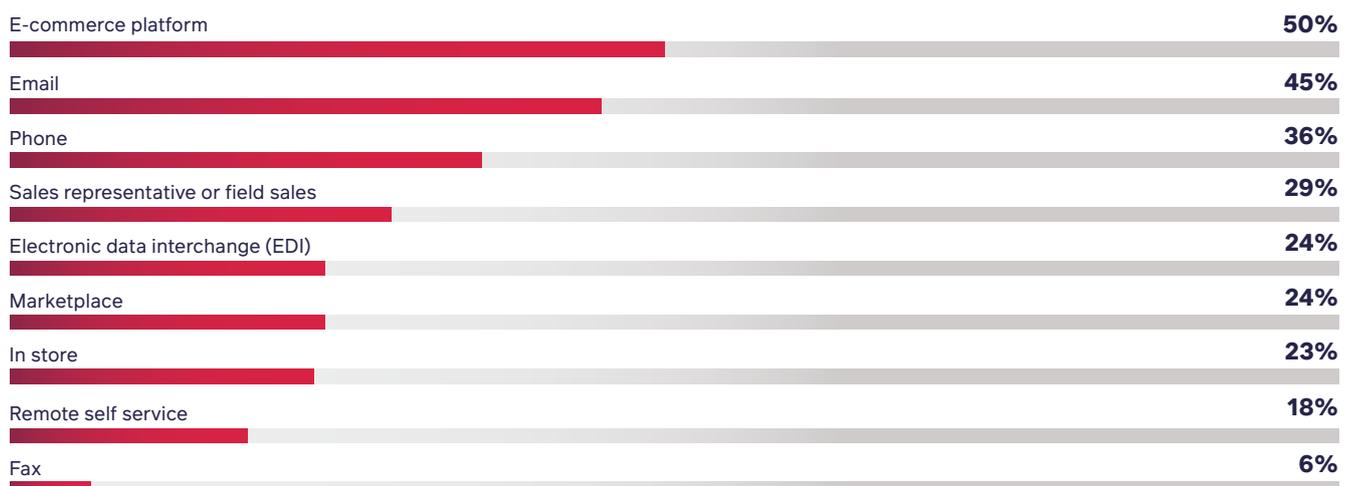
Although B2B web stores play a pivotal role in the B2B buying process, they don't operate in isolation. Instead, they are used in combination with several other channels and mechanisms, such as email, telephone, visits to physical stores, and visits from field sales representatives.

During the pandemic, the relative importance of these different options shifted – with less emphasis on the physical (such as stores and field sales) and more on the virtual (such as the web store and email).

But, of all the options, web stores have seen the most significant change. Half of B2B buyers say that web stores are now their most frequent channel through which they place an order, and **58%** say they are using web stores more frequently since the pandemic.

Q. Which channels do you use most frequently for placing orders?
Please select up to three channels.

Half frequently use e-commerce platforms for placing orders, with another 45% using email.

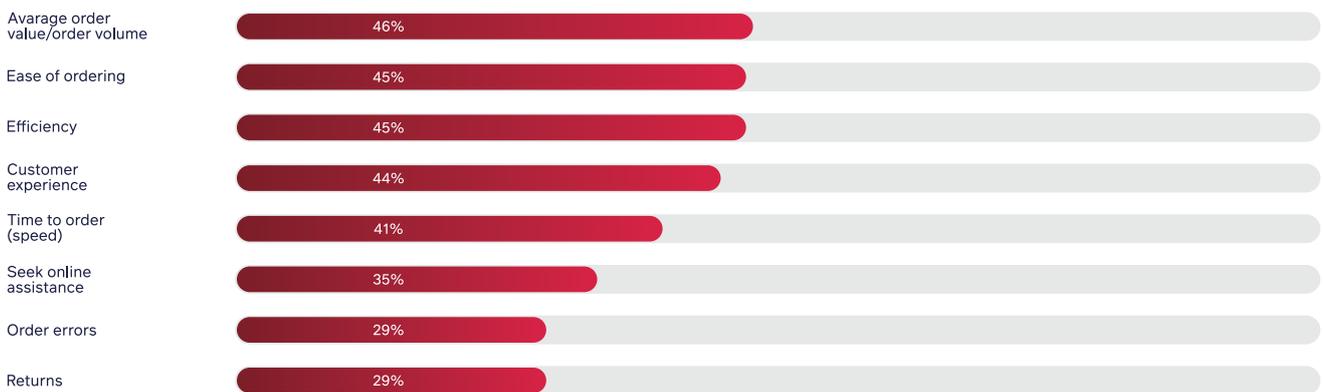




Arguably, some pandemic-related buying challenges have been eased by the e-commerce evolution. For example, **46%** of B2B buyers say the pandemic impacted their average order value/volume, and **45%** say it has impacted the ease of ordering.

These changes are common to all types of B2B purchases, including high-value, complex and customized products and services. In all cases, the majority of B2B buyers rely on online channels to research, reach and follow through on their buying decisions.

Q. In what way has the pandemic impacted your work?



 INCREASED



B2B buyers are frustrated by the e-commerce experience – which presents an opportunity.

The rise of B2B e-commerce has been accompanied by some real frustrations among B2B buyers.

Our research reveals that **50%** of B2B e-commerce sites are not fully meeting customer expectations, while **94%** of B2B buyers are still encountering some type of customer convenience challenge.

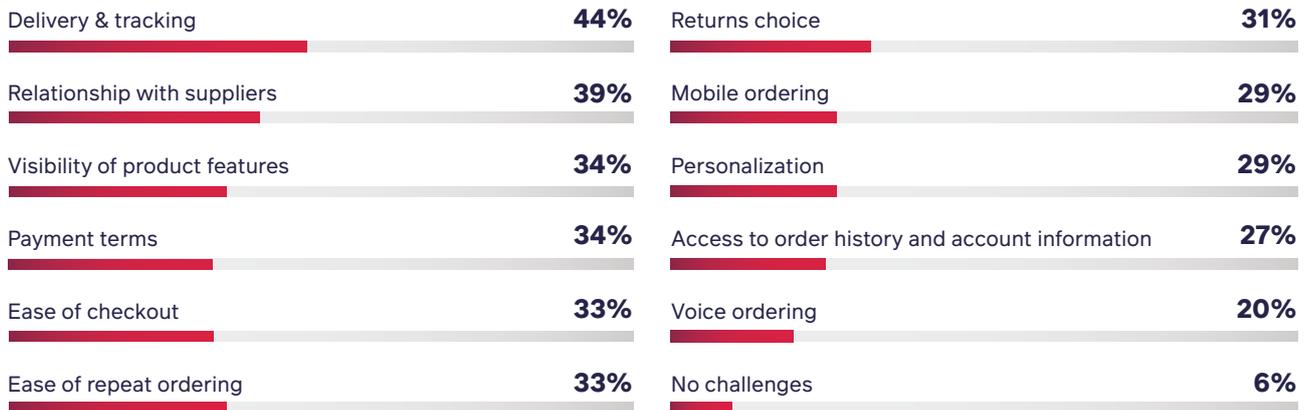
Meanwhile, the most frequent customer experience issues include delivery and tracking challenges, the visibility of product features, difficulties around checkout and payment, and the process for repeat ordering. All of these are issues faced by at least a third of B2B buyers.

Key areas of concern include:

- Availability of offline assistance
- Prevalence of order errors
- Ease of the returns process



Looking in more detail at B2B web stores, the research identified several areas which need to be improved – like navigation, product imagery/videos, stock information, and order status.

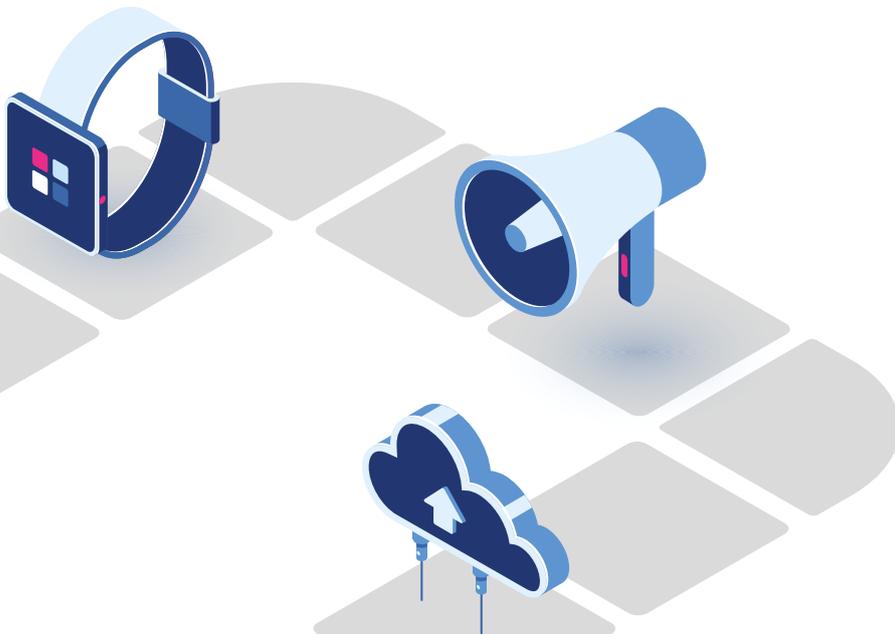


Q. What customer experience challenges are you still seeing in the online B2B buying process?

Clearly, there are some new rules for B2B buying. It is inevitable that the game will continue to change as post-pandemic macro issues intensify. So the game plan for B2B sellers needs to change, too.

This is just a brief summary of the findings.
For more detail, you can download the full B2B Buyer Report.

[Download the report](#)



Rethinking your **B2B e-commerce game plan**

After analyzing the research results, and comparing them with post-pandemic macro trends, there are three clear plays that B2B sellers need to include in their new game plan:

1

Know your data inside out – and act on it

One of the big advantages of B2B e-commerce is the ability to harvest data and reach evidence-based insights.

With customer journey analytics, you can track every customer visit, interaction and transaction. You can analyze your customers' behavior, optimize their online journeys, and personalize their experiences. You can also assess, with extreme accuracy, the effectiveness of your marketing campaigns and make astute decisions about your future spend.

But this is only part of the picture.

Things get interesting – and more effective – when you combine your e-commerce data with your enterprise data. In the B2B world, with its multifaceted relationships and complex buyer journeys, it's important to maintain a 360° view of customers, irrespective of channel. And with post-pandemic supply chain disruptions, it becomes even more critical to provide real-time certainty and clarity on stock levels, as well as restocking timescales.

With investments in customer data platforms, plus the integration of ERP and e-commerce systems, it becomes possible to take customer relationships to a whole new level.

2

Make your checkout smarter – and slicker

Never underestimate the critical nature of the online checkout.

In the world of B2C ecommerce, the need for a quick, slick, elegant checkout is widely understood – and checkout optimization is proven to increase conversion rates by more than 35%.

In the B2B world, buyer needs are more nuanced, and the need to support or integrate additional payment mechanisms often more acute. In our research, 41% of B2B buyers said payment terms are a top reason for buying from a supplier, and 36% said they would like to see easier, faster checkouts. Also, checkouts are an ideal place to relieve the potential concerns of B2B buyers by offering reassurance on return policies, for example, or transparency on tax data and shipping.

Meanwhile, the adoption of wallet-based solutions (like Amazon Pay and Apple Pay) has reached 26% of B2B merchants. And legacy payment mechanisms like checks and bank transfers remain vital for a majority of B2B buyers.

3

Personalize, personalize, personalize — and personalize again

Personalization is a critical tool to defend and extend customer relationships.

By offering Amazon-like recommendations, B2B sellers can introduce customers to additional products. By offering product bundles, upselling becomes easier. And, in our research, the ability to quickly and easily make repeat purchases is a necessity for many buyers.

Especially in today's environment, with the rapid expansion of inflation, contextualized real-time pricing is another way to strengthen relationships, facilitate competitive price matching, and reserve your best pricing for your best customers.

Similarly, in the face of supply chain disruptions and commodity shortages, personalization is a way to alert customers to the stock levels of frequently purchased items (adding urgency to purchasing decisions), inform them of restocking schedules (encouraging forward orders), offer direct-from-the manufacturer drop shipments (to speed up the click-to-customer cycle), and keep aside a reserve stock of scarce items for your most important customers.



The evolution of B2B e-commerce

Digital technology is becoming more accessible, customer expectations are rising, and the wider economic environment remains uncertain. All the factors mean the rules of B2B buying continue to change. So, it's critical for sellers to keep pace – reviewing their strategies, extending their capabilities and staying ahead of customer needs.



2017
The year of UX

The emphasis of B2B sellers began to shift from having a prominent online presence to delivering an elegant and personalized user experience.



2018
The year of digital-first commerce

Online began to take priority over offline, as millennial B2B buyers demanded digitalization, and sellers grasped the power of conversion rate optimization (CRO).



2019
The year of connected omnichannel and automation

Omnichannel finally began the transition from theory to reality, as multichannel B2B operations morphed into true interconnected, seamless experiences.



2020
The year of smart, predictive and anticipatory commerce strategies

Personalization reached a new level, as smart analytics and AI began to anticipate future customer requirements, understand unmet needs and influence buying behavior.



2021
The year of acceleration

The shift to digital was fast-tracked, its importance in the B2B space was put beyond doubt, and enhanced techniques (like progressive web apps and the metaverse) began to be integrated.



2022
The year of distinction and differentiation

Forward-looking B2B sellers will use online channels to achieve new levels of intimacy, insulate key customers from supply chain disruption, and consolidate already strong relationships.



Prioritize relationships, not just transactions.
E-commerce for SAP and Microsoft Dynamics.

www.sana-commerce.com

White paper: New rules for B2B buying
Version ENG 1.0 11/2021

© 2021 Sana Commerce. All rights reserved. This document contains proprietary information protected by copyright. No part of this document may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording for any purpose without the written permission of Sana Commerce.

