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Say goodbye to *build vs buy*...

**TO DELIVER MODERN CUSTOMER EXPERIENCES, THE RIGHT CHOICE
IS COMPOSABLE COMMERCE**



Hello!

If there's one thing retailers and digital technology experts all agree on today, it's that commerce is complex – and keeping up with it is complicated. Whenever you think you're up-to-date, boom, another new innovation or disruption appears. The good news is that over the last 10 years, multiple technology advances have emerged to give retailers greater agility and flexibility to continually evolve their commerce experiences, allowing them to retain a competitive edge.

A recent study by Incisiv, an industry insights firm, revealed less than 50% of retail executives feel prepared to manage their commerce growth in the next 12 months. We find this statistic a bit disconcerting, and it got us thinking about how we can help.

As experts in delivering commerce solutions, we understand the challenges and concerns you face when identifying strategies and making technology decisions – and that's why we created this white paper. It presents how choosing a composable “buy and build” approach can enable you to better navigate commerce today and ensure you're prepared for the future – regardless of what happens next.

There's no question composable commerce is the right choice for retailers looking to grow. Even leading analysts see the value and support the approach. What's so great about using a composable “buy and build” model to transition to a more composable environment is you can start reaping the benefits much more quickly and incrementally – in far less time than it would take to build your own solution from scratch.

We hope this paper answers some of your questions, assuages any fears and convinces you to take the next steps toward a future of limitless commerce possibilities.

We look forward to kickstarting your journey,

**The commercetools, Contentstack, Publicis Sapient
partnership team**

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Executive *Summary*

In the beginning of the e-commerce revolution, monolithic platforms enabled the first steps that gave retailers the ability to establish an online presence and process purchases.

This was when consumers were just getting used to the internet and online shopping was limited to visiting an e-commerce site on a desktop computer. Today's consumers can make purchases from their choice of channels and devices, with multiple payment options.

After years of maintaining, updating and working around limitations of their monolithic platforms, retailers are making the decision to adopt new technologies that are better equipped for the constantly evolving world of modern digital commerce.

Retailers moving to a modern e-commerce platform have traditionally had two options: build or buy. Both solutions have advantages and limitations. But there is a better option available: composable commerce.

In this white paper, we'll discuss:

- MACH technologies and how they deliver speed, flexibility and scalability
- Why building or buying may not be a smart business decision
- Best practices for implementing a composable solution

Finally, we offer tips and strategies to help get you on the path to creating a composable commerce solution that's right for your business.



Introduction

“Cloud has given rise to lots of best-of-breed vendors and a very big marketplace. I mean it’s very much a meritocracy out there. There are probably 30 different CMSES retailers can choose from, but there’s only two getting the majority of the business because they’re the ones that are best-in-class.”

Kelly Goetsch, Chief Strategy Officer, commercetools

In case you haven’t heard, monoliths no longer have a monopoly on commerce technology.

They had their time in the sun; they served their purpose when all-in-one was synonymous with best-in-class.

That was when the only online shopping option was to sit down at a desktop computer, connect to the internet via DSL, enter an e-commerce URL and go from there. Back then there was one online shopping channel, one payment method option and every e-commerce site looked pretty much the same. Consumers were just getting used to the concept of the internet, and there was a lot of skepticism in the retail industry. At the time many retailers didn’t believe consumers would ever truly embrace e-commerce and didn’t see any value in adding an online channel.

Today, online shopping is part of our everyday lives. Consumers not only shop online at their desktops, they make purchases from their laptops, tablets, mobile devices, and via in-car consoles. They even instruct their virtual assistants to make purchases for them. They’re not just buying from retail websites either; they’re buying directly from social media sites, videos and while hanging out in the Metaverse. And, regardless of the channel they choose, they have multiple payment options plus a plethora of pickup and delivery choices.

As if enabling all of these things isn’t enough to overwhelm retailers, add coordinating their e-commerce efforts with marketplaces such as Amazon and Shein as well as delivery services like Shipt, Uber, and GoPuff. As Carrie Tharp, VP of Retail & Consumer at Google Cloud recently pointed out, “We used to think two weeks was great, one week was good, then it became two days,

two hours, one hour, and now, down to 15 minutes. So, what does that mean for your business model? Can your technology platform extend into all the other platforms and capabilities to make that a reality for your customer?”

For retailers running on monolith systems, the answer is clearly “no.” After all, they were built for commerce on desktops and designed with the front end (UX experience) tightly coupled to the back end (business functionalities). This rigid architecture, where every function affects another function, makes it incredibly difficult to add or change functionality without disrupting day-to-day operations. In addition, they run on servers, so if their servers hit capacity, glitches and crashes are common.

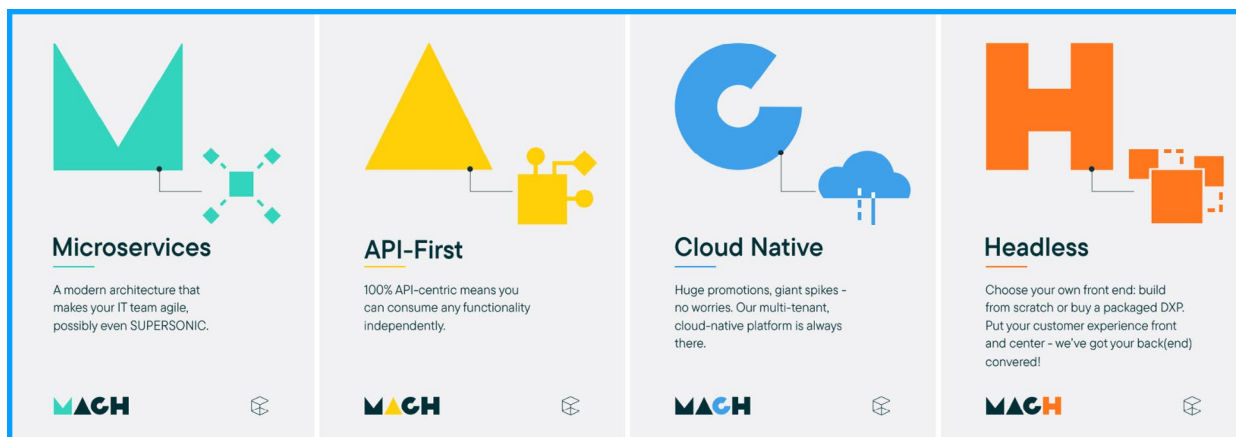
Today there are new technologies that are much more advanced and better equipped to drive the constantly evolving world of digital commerce. Microservices, APIs, cloud and headless technology opened up possibilities for e-commerce solutions. This led to the birth of MACH architecture, a solution designed to deliver flexibility, speed and scalability – the key capabilities needed to support modern commerce.

WHAT'S MACH?

In 2019, commercetools combined the first letter of each of the four technologies the company was using to build its commerce solution – microservices, API first, cloud native SaaS and headless – and introduced the acronym MACH. Synonymous with speed, it was the perfect choice for an architecture approach that makes developing and delivering engaging digital experiences faster, easier and risk-free.

MACH is more than just an architecture approach. It spawned the global community now known as the MACH Alliance™, a not-for-profit, vendor-neutral organization that advocates for the adoption of MACH technologies and provides organizations with resources, education and guidance to help them navigate digital transformation.

The technologies at the core of MACH architecture include:



The Composable *Solution*

“The future of e-commerce is composable. Fusing content with commerce is the way to power the stack your team wants, and the experiences your business needs.”

Nishant Patel, Co-Founder and CTO, Contentstack

All of this innovation makes it an exciting time in the technology industry and in commerce, because with it comes more possibilities and new opportunities to increase revenue and grow your business.



80%

The advantage [Gartner predicts](#) organizations that have adopted a composable approach by 2023 will have over their competition the speed of new feature implementation.

Most retailers today acknowledge the necessity to transition to a modern commerce solution – and that putting it off is just putting off the inevitable. After years of maintaining, updating and working around their limitations of antiquated platforms, many retailers are now making the bold decision to build their own in-house commerce solution from the ground up. They’re looking for brilliant developers to build it for them, even knowing it’s incredibly difficult, time-consuming and expensive.

The question is why would you choose to go the DIY route? The truth is that the build-from-scratch option isn’t realistic unless you’re Amazon or Walmart – and the next section of this white paper is dedicated to exposing this reality for you. On the other hand, the “buy” option is completely feasible. Today, there’s a robust group of MACH-based SaaS vendors able to provide everything you need, more quickly and cost-effectively than you could build on your own – even with an experienced, robust IT team in place.

However, when you choose to go all in with the “buy” option, you have to accept you can’t buy everything you want nor will everything you buy fit your exact requirements. You may also get things you don’t want and have to pay for them, even if you don’t use them.

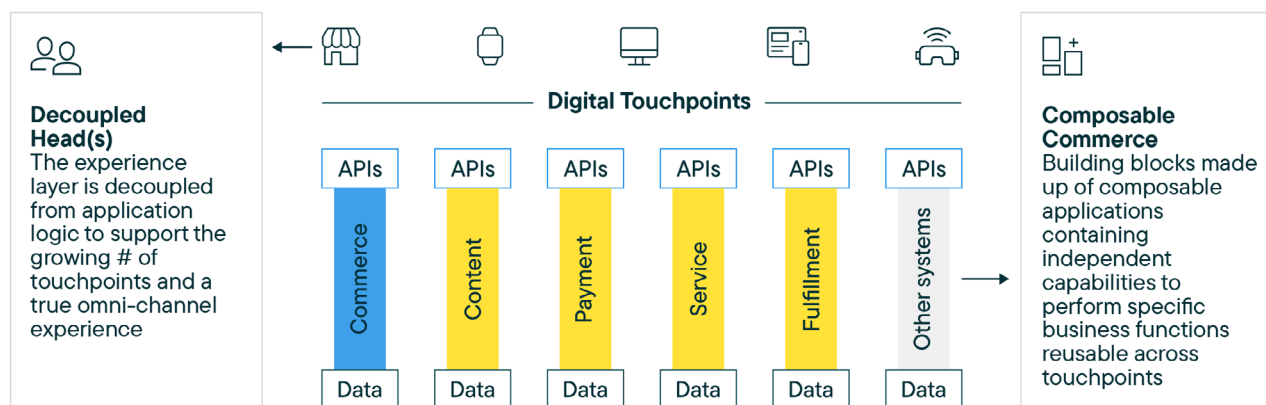
The truth is, there’s a better option available. Large enterprises, including John Lewis, Bang & Olufsen, Express and Academy Sports have discovered that they don’t have to choose; it doesn’t have to be either building from scratch or buying too much. Instead, they are integrating the best of both worlds and embracing the composable commerce approach.

WHAT IS COMPOSABLE COMMERCE?

Coined by [Gartner](#)® in 2020, composable commerce is a development approach that enables businesses to “leverage packaged business capabilities (PBCs) to move toward future-proof commerce.” PBCs are a set of APIs that deliver functions such as search, cart or checkout and serve as building blocks to in a composable commerce solution.

To embrace a composable commerce approach, businesses must have a technology infrastructure that enables PBCs to be integrated easily and without risk. This is accomplished through MACH architecture. This is why composable commerce and MACH architecture are intrinsically connected.

Composable commerce at a glance



THE MYTHICAL CONTROL OF BUILDING YOUR OWN

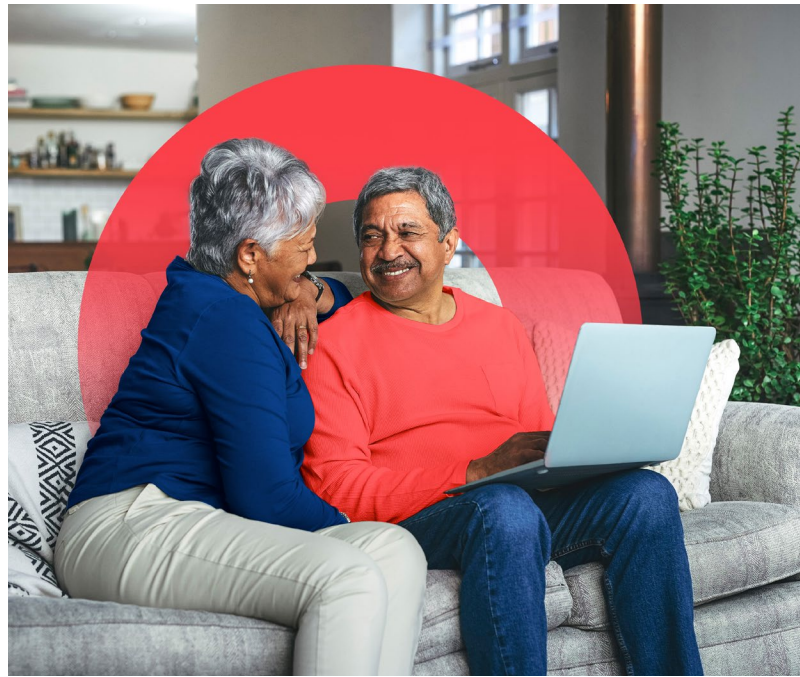
When a retailer announces a strategy to build their own commerce platform it's fueled by the desire to have total control. Many leaders believe the only way to control the destiny of the customer experience and thus the success of their business is by building technology from the ground up based on their knowledge of their brand and their strategic vision.

The fact is as they're the only ones guiding that destiny, they're handicapping it at the same time. What retailers sometimes don't recognize is that with total control comes:

- Lots of testing
- Lots of developers
- High maintenance

In a world powered by modern MACH service-based architecture, there's no reason you can't have total control while side-stepping the fundamental build process. Buying your core components doesn't hinder your ability to control your commerce experience. On the contrary, it gives you more freedom. First, you're not really "buying" anything because all of your components are SaaS-based, so you can swap them out at any time. And, because the environment of composable is MACH-based and therefore agnostic by design, you can make modifications and updates, add custom features and experiment with new capabilities at any time without risk. You can make mistakes and fail fast.

Alex Shiferman, chief technology officer of Nuts.com, a pure-play online retailer, told the audience of a 2022 industry conference, "I come from an older world – the monolithic e-commerce platform world – where essentially most of the decisions are made for you. In a composable world, you have a ton of autonomy at a very granular level. And, that can be exciting, but it's also challenging because you can make a lot of right decisions and you can make a lot of wrong decisions. So, with great power comes great responsibility – this is a perfect example. You have a lot of control, but if you try and that works, great. And, if it doesn't, you've got to learn some from your mistakes."



MORE MYTHS AND MISCONCEPTIONS

Most explanations that brands give for taking the homegrown approach are, at their core, dismissible. There may have been a grain of truth to some of them at one time, but others are simply false – and all you have to do is talk to your peers, industry thought leaders or consult analyst reports to gain insight that will refute any objections you might have. Here are some of the most common myths misleading retailers today.

- **"There's no vendor out there that can provide the best-in-class commoditized commerce components we need at scale."**

While that may have been true for a long time, it's not anymore. The introduction of cloud- and SaaS-based business models gave rise to a new breed of vendors – young companies who focus on doing one thing and doing it well. All you have to do is explore the Gartner® Magic Quadrant for Digital Commerce or the Forrester Wave™ to get confirmation there are qualified vendors out there doing an excellent job providing the commerce solutions retailers need today. They not only offer products better than what you could build yourself, but more importantly, enable you to focus on your unique differentiators and capitalize on the benefits of modern technology much more quickly.

- “The only way to be the next Amazon is to act like Amazon.”

If you do the same things Amazon or Walmart does, your business will suddenly, magically, compete on that scale. Nope. There are many, many companies that have gone down that path and failed. Even Amazon is struggling today. It's having the same issues as most retailers in keeping up with the continual evolution of commerce. As Doug Stephens, the futurist and bestselling author of [“Resurrecting Retail: The Future of Business in a Post-Pandemic World”](#) recently told [Retail Dive](#), “Not only has the retail world closed the gap with Amazon, but the very nature of e-commerce has also fundamentally changed. Increasingly, retail is not something that resides on static, boring, search-driven websites (like Amazon.com). It now lives inside interesting, entertaining and engaging content and communities of interest. All things Amazon has never been very good at developing.”

- “If we want to truly control our commerce experience, we have to build it in-house.”

When you build in-house, you hire developers, architects and engineers, then go to the board and say, “Give me \$100M and I will build everything from scratch and make us the next Amazon.” Once it's built (if it actually gets built) and goes live, those people who supported you are out of there. Maintaining the system, day after day, year after year, becomes somebody else's problem – probably yours – to deal with for the next 10 or 20 years.

- “Managing all those vendors is way too much work.”

If you think about it, you're already managing a lot of vendors. If you are on a legacy system now, you've had to add a CMS and other things because it didn't come with it, or if it did, it's not up to par. The real issue is that retailers don't want to embrace the accountability that comes with a composable solution. You used to be able to go to one rep and they were accountable. If you've got five different vendors, it suddenly becomes your problem. For many leaders, that's a big change. However, the truth is, if you have a good system integrator (SI) partner, you should be able to lean on them for support. They bring your vendors together and will help mediate how they interact. And then there's the MACH Alliance, whose primary mission is to help you navigate this new composable landscape.

- “It's not going to be that hard to build it ourselves.”

Of course, you want to believe that you have the talent to lead the project, and your team has enough experience to handle an internal build. However, there are a plethora of respected commerce leaders out there who have done it, or tried to, and will assure you that it is incredibly challenging. In 2021, [Greg Fancher, chief technology officer of American apparel retailer Express](#), shared how he made the decision not to build a new solution for the brand: “Build the whole thing – test like crazy, move over all the data and pray for the best – I've done that before. I'm not interested in doing the same thing again.”



50%

[Gartner predicts](#) that by 2023, half of all new commerce capabilities will be API-centric SaaS products.

5 QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF BEFORE COMMITTING TO AN IN-HOUSE BUILD



What is our core competency as an organization?

Most retailers, including you, are going to point to brand experience, customer service, great merchandising or whatever it is that brings you customers. You can easily list three things that make your brand unique, and not one of them is going to be “We’re really good at writing lots of code.”



Why do we want to build our own cart? How is our cart going to be different?

You’re never going to differentiate on having a shopping cart. Why choose to spend time and resources building something when the best already exists and is available to you? Vendors whose core competency is building technology made this part easy for you – just pick them off the shelf and use them.



Where are our strengths? How are we different from any other retailer?

Focus on what is different about what you do and what makes you special. Figure out how technology can enable and enhance that. Build that instead of building technology for technology’s sake. As Jozef Stawarz, head of Engineering, International at Alcon pointed out at a 2022 industry conference, embracing the composable approach enable him to “focus on what’s important to us ... our secret sauce, if you will, without having to worry about servers and this and that and everything else.”



How important is the customer relationship to me?

Every retailer understands that 20% of their customers drive 80% of their business. Those loyal customers are the key to everything you do. So, how are you keeping those customers loyal, getting them to come back one more time each year, and put one more item in their cart every time they come back? By leveraging data and using it to deliver hyper-personalization. You need to be able to leverage product, data history, and all the things that bring them together to create a personal relationship with your customer. Are you prepared to build a system with these capabilities? Wouldn’t you rather choose proven services that are already delivering results for other major retailers?



What are your key priorities for 2023 and beyond?

They are probably centered around leveraging your data better by using it to enhance personalization, create AR or VR experiences, improve social commerce and strengthen the connection between your digital and physical experiences. They probably have nothing to do with your shopping cart, your payments, or your product management. That’s because those things have become commodities. It doesn’t make sense to invest money, time and resources into building these standard products. You need to be building and modifying your code to deliver your WOW factor.

The Composable Approach: *Evolution versus Revolution*

“The only reason to build is for differentiation. You shouldn’t be building to build to the standard, you should only be building and modifying your code to differentiate yourself from the competition.”

Jon Panella, Group Vice President, Publicis Sapient

The beauty of embracing a composable approach is that you don’t have that scary, fingers-crossed moment where you shut down one commerce solution and flip the switch on another; there’s no “big bang.” Instead of staging a revolution, you are able to evolve slowly, build your perfect solution over time, and when a piece of it no longer fits your needs, you can choose to make changes to improve it or replace it with something different.

As you start on your evolutionary journey, you’re treated to positive incremental change along the way. You start seeing lower maintenance costs, faster time to market, less customer cart abandonment, higher revenue driven by speedy response times and more engaging experiences – maybe not in that order, but these results and others will show up over time, continually contributing to your business results.

It’s important to recognize that what you’re doing is building a catalog of APIs. Some you will buy and some you will build – think of it as you would updating a library. Why would you throw out every single book in it and replace them all at the same time, when you can take your time and make sure every book has a purpose and a place?

There was no way to take this approach in the past. You couldn’t bring in a set of capabilities and services and take your time replacing parts to ultimately get to your end goal – and this is the key difference between traditional and modern commerce.

EVOLUTIONARY BEST PRACTICES

Now is the time to migrate. What are the fundamentals needed to embrace composable commerce?

1. Define your why

Before embarking on the path to transformation, you must establish your goals and your vision for the future. Take stock of the issues and challenges you face in delivering commerce to customers and include solutions in your end vision. Once your why is defined, share it with everyone in your organization. This will keep you focused and propel the project forward.

2. Gain buy-in (from both sides)

You can’t just shift the technology; you have to shift your organizational mindset. Your goal is to get everyone excited about the benefits of migrating to composable commerce – specifically the freedom it gives nontechnical digital teams to initiate projects autonomously.

It’s critical to involve both business and tech teams at the beginning so they understand “what’s in it for me” and can provide input. If you wait until the end, there’s a great chance you may have to go back and make changes to adapt to the way different teams work and/or details you may not have considered. As [Taher Khaliq, CTO](#) of Trinny London, a UK-based beauty brand, explained, “With black-box platforms, all the decisions are made for you. You just need to fit into their workflow, their journey. What that means is IT needs to be far more aware ... it needs to be owned by the business as a whole.”

3. Do your due diligence

Run a full gap analysis to provide a big-picture view of the scope of the project and use the information to put together a complete plan. Once you have your prioritized list, the next step is to identify where it's possible for you to achieve your ideal with functionality you can buy from best-in-class SaaS vendors. What's left will be the features you'll need to build. Involving a digital consultant or SI in this process can be incredibly helpful. Keep in mind, the migration process opens up multiple opportunities to consolidate and streamline your commerce operation, creating savings across the board.

4. Make commerce and content your core

There are many ways to get on the composable journey. One of the first questions retailers typically ask is, "Do I choose a product first or do I choose an implementation consulting partner first?" That's up to you. Both options work. If you choose a consultant first, they can help you identify the best commerce and content vendors for your specific needs. They'll also work with you to determine what additional capabilities you need and assess which of these are available to buy and which ones you'll need to build.

On the other hand, if you already have commerce and content vendors in mind, you can start there. Make sure you are choosing the most robust, proven vendors as these are the two most important components for your core businesses. Don't be afraid to ask for proof of concept before you make a commitment.

5. Leverage the resources available to you

Considering the complexity of commerce today, along with the fact that there are best of breed vendors out there creating products specifically for modern commerce and multiple industry resources to turn to for guidance, it's perplexing that any retailer would consider DIY as an option.

Take the time to explore the Gartner™ Magic Quadrant for Digital Commerce and The Forrester™ Wave for B2B and B2C Commerce as well as the Paradigm B2B Combine. All of these utilize a combination of data-driven metrics and customer feedback to deliver deep intel into the capabilities of the top commerce vendors, making them invaluable for making informed purchasing decisions.

Connecting with [The MACH™ Alliance](#) should also be included in your migration plans. As the first organization to advocate for MACH-driven architecture, its members have extensive expertise and experience in building composable commerce solutions. Supporting retailers on the path to digital transformation is engrained in the organization's overall mission.

6. Rethink your team structure

Vertically organized teams are better suited for MACH architecture. Bringing together people with different skill sets to deliver and support a feature such as cart, checkout, promotions, etc. not only prevents bottlenecks in the migration process but speeds up releases over the long term.

7. Start small, innovate incrementally

Whether it was a microsite, a sub-brand, or a chunk of functionality that caused issues in the past, tackle your less important assets first and shift your digital business in phases. Employ the strangler pattern to replace pieces of functionality with microservices. Using this pattern, you test the new component in parallel with the old functionality and transition from old to new before eliminating or "strangling" it entirely.

This approach allows you to experiment with components and switch them in and out if they're not meeting your expectations. It also eliminates any potential disruptions to your day-to-day business, giving you more control over the process and allowing you to recognize results along the way.

8. Deliver your differentiation

Always remember that the power behind the composable "buy and build" approach is that it ensures you can keep a razor focus on why customers shop with you. Whether it's loyalty, custom kitting, bulk pricing discounts, fitment guides, virtual try-ons, it doesn't matter, you can build it and deploy it. Plus, you're able to continue to fine-tune and refresh what's successful to continually deliver newness to customers, and you easily remove unsuccessful features. You'll find that empowering your business teams to experiment with creative marketing promotions, expand into new markets, introduce products, host partnerships, add touch points, not only delivers results on your bottom line, it also increases productivity and improves job satisfaction.

The Partner *Ecosystem*

Having the right partners in place is critical to enabling composable commerce. Choose them wisely, which starts with aligning to your business strategy. Focus on vendors that offer stability, expertise, strong support and a proven track record. Once you've identified your top picks, base your final decision on who can best meet your needs and deadlines.

TIPS FOR ASSEMBLING YOUR DREAM TEAM:

Choose the right CMS

A headless CMS is the foundation of your composable architecture. A headless CMS with ready-made extensions will help streamline workflows, accelerate processes and mitigate the risk of human error, speeding up your time to market regardless of channel.

Last but not least, choose a headless CMS with future-proof MACH technology that will scale with your business vs. being restrained by the limitations of a monolithic or legacy CMS.

Select the most powerful commerce engine

You need a truly cloud-native, API-first commerce solution that can deliver the agility, scalability and performance to gain control over your digital future.

Look for a platform that offers catalog and order management, cart and PIM and includes a robust selection of APIs along with developer tools and SDKs. Auto-scaling, automatic updates and machine learning capabilities should also be part of the package. This combination of features will give you the power to seamlessly deliver digital commerce and build out delightful experiences for your customers.

Find the expertise to bring it all together

Choosing the right digital consulting agency to turn your vision into reality is critical to ensuring a stress-free transformation. Look for a firm with expertise in six key areas: 1) strategy and consulting, 2) customer experience and design, 3) technology and engineering, 4) data and artificial Intelligence, 5) innovation and 6) enterprise platforms.

You want a partner with extensive experience in helping commerce-driven organizations unlock value through technology and data. An agency with deep systems-integrating experience will serve as your guide in modernizing your technology and help you set bold but achievable goals for speed and agility. Perhaps most importantly, the right partner will empower you to modernize your organizational mindset – a key factor in the success of any transformation.



Conclusion

Most retailers today understand that a traditional, monolithic platform is not equipped to handle the complexity of digital commerce. Consumers expect to be able to interact with your business on the devices and channels they choose, with highly personalized digital experiences. To provide these experiences, stay ahead of the competition and navigate the ever-changing space of e-commerce requires the speed and flexibility of a MACH-based architecture.

In the past, this left retailers with a difficult decision to make: Build a solution from the ground up or buy a prepackaged platform. Neither option offers a perfect fit. Building your own platform is expensive, complicated and time-consuming. Buying can mean doing without the exact features you want or paying for functions your business may not need.

The good news is that there is now a better option: a composable e-commerce platform with a MACH architecture. With a composable approach, you can avoid the “big bang” of a complete replatforming and instead implement as gradually or as quickly as you choose, with best-of-breed tools that are the right fit for your unique enterprise.

We encourage you to connect with any of our team members to learn more about how you can future-proof your business with composable and get started today on a path toward limitless e-commerce possibilities.

Meet the *Contributors*



Publicis Sapient is a digital business transformation company. We partner with global organizations to help them create and sustain competitive advantage in a world that is increasingly digital. We operate through our expert SPEED capabilities: strategy and consulting, product, experience, engineering and data, which combined with our culture of curiosity and deep industry knowledge, enables us to deliver meaningful impact to our clients' businesses through reimagining the products and experiences their customers truly value. Our agile, data-driven approach equips our clients' businesses for change, making digital the core of how they think and what they do. Publicis Sapient is the digital business transformation hub of Publicis Groupe with 20,000 people and over 50 offices worldwide. For more information, visit <https://www.publicissapient.com>.



The inventor of headless commerce, [commercetools](https://www.commercetools.com) is an innovative technology disruptor that has established itself as an industry-leading e-commerce software provider. Today, some of the world's most iconic brands and growth-focused businesses trust commercetools' powerful, flexible, scalable solutions to support their ever-evolving digital commerce needs. As the visionaries leading the modern MACH (microservices-based, API-first, cloud-native and headless) architecture movement, commercetools provides customers with the agility to innovate and iterate on the fly, merge on and off-line channels, drive higher revenue, and future-proof their e-commerce business.

Based in Germany, with offices across Europe, Asia, and North America, commercetools is singularly focused on leading a future of limitless commerce possibilities. For more information, visit <https://commercetools.com/>.



[Contentstack](https://www.contentstack.com) – the content experience platform (CXP) category leader – empowers marketers and developers to deliver composable digital experiences at the speed of their imagination. Companies such as ASICS, Chase, Express, Holiday Inn, Icelandair, Mattel, McDonald's, Mitsubishi, Riot Games and Shell trust Contentstack to power their most critical content experiences with uncompromising scale and dependability. Famous for its Care Without Compromise™, Contentstack has achieved the industry's highest customer satisfaction rating. Contentstack is also a founder of the MACH Alliance, setting the industry agenda for open and composable technology that is microservices-based, API-first, cloud-native SaaS and headless. Learn more at <http://www.contentstack.com>.