

Choosing The Right Integration Solution

For Sage 100

A Beginner's Guide To Choosing The Right
Integration Solution For Ecommerce Sites

Celebrating 20 Years!





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Introduction

Over the past 15 years, general retail has grown by 2.5% per year. During the same timeframe, e-commerce sales have grown 20%. The economic outlook for ecommerce looks promising, with sales projected to reach nearly \$500 billion in the United States alone in 2018.

With such robust growth comes challenges: failure to coordinate customer-facing and back-office data on websites, struggles to align data across multiple channels, and difficulties integrating ecommerce platforms with ERP software and third-party logistics. Retailers and distributors, both great and small, including multi-channel retailers with myriad sites and stores and one-site businesses with just a wholesale market, face these challenges. As businesses grow, the challenges multiply.

Another aspect of sustained and rapid growth is the proliferation of competition. Instead of competing with a few shops in your local area as in the days of bricks-and-mortar only retailing, ecommerce companies find themselves competing on national, regional, and global scales unheard of in the history of retailing until the present day. Rapidly changing technology, increased customer expectations, and demands for faster shipping times add to the pressure.

The more you know, the more you'll be equipped to make decisions about inventory, supply chain management, fulfillment and more. Integrated platforms combine enterprise resource planning functions with full-service ecommerce suites to provide a robust technology solution that helps your business manage its operations better. The resulting improvements in planning, purchasing, budgeting and customer service provide exceptional benefits that can help businesses succeed.

Why ERP Integration Benefits Ecommerce Businesses

1. Demand for Better Customer Service

Customers today demand better service. According to Accenture, 52% of customers have switched technology, banking, and other service providers in the past year over poor service. Similar trends can be seen among retailers, who often face steeper challenges because of greater competition.

An integrated ERP and ecommerce solution provides an enhanced level of service to customers that can win their loyalty. ERP systems contains information on pricing, payment, shipping, and past ordering history for customers. They also contain inventory data, manufacturing information, product sourcing information, costs, financials, and other enterprise-wide data. When the two systems are integrated, information that's important to customers can be pulled forward into the customer-facing portion of the website. Customers can then obtain information on past orders, shipping times, and more.

Customers are used to 24-hour access to their ordering information from many retailers. When an ecommerce site fails to provide similar information, they may take their business elsewhere. Adding an integration feature can provide the timely service customers demand.

2. Time-Saving Self Service Features

Another challenge that many businesses face is the need to respond to customer order inquiries. Phone calls and emails into a business to track down orders can be time-consuming. Staff spend countless hours on the phone helping customers with simple questions.

ERP and ecommerce integration can provide customers with self-service portals that enable them to look up their own data. Instead of waiting for the next available operator in the call center to help them, they can quickly look up their orders and track the shipping information to know when to expect them. They can review past order history and re-order favorite products. An integrated ERP and ecommerce solution provides a company with time and cost-savings, and helps customers receive better service.

3. Enterprise-Wide Data for Better Planning

Companies with integrated solutions also have an easier time with business planning. Separate ecommerce and ERP suites involve pulling data and reports from two systems, keying pertinent information into spreadsheets, and reconciling the information manually. This is time-consuming and error-prone; typing errors can lead to faulty data, which in turn generates poor conclusions and projections.

Enterprise-wide data derived from every corner of the business, including front-end ecommerce from an integrated system, provides a comprehensive ‘bird’s eye view’ of the entire business. Information from the warehouse, the website, the customer service portal, operations, manufacturing, sales, marketing and finance are all drawn into one system. The resulting data provides real-time insights into the company’s profitability, growth and needs which can be used for improved planning.

4. Improved Communication

Another area that benefits from ecommerce and ERP integration is communications. Many companies struggle with the so-called “silo mentality” where departments do not communicate well with one another. Some departments may contain data that can benefit others throughout the company, but the data isn’t shared or is difficult to access. Integration can improve this.

When all systems, including front-end ecommerce, is integrated within the ERP system, communications are improved throughout the company. Departments can no longer protect valuable information in silos. This new, shared information can then be used to spark inter-departmental conversations and planning. Front-end data from the website, back-end office data, warehouse data and other important business information can be used for all types of planning including marketing and sales plans, customer service plans, and overall business plans.

5. Improved Operational Efficiency

Many departments benefit from the improved operational efficiency of an integrated ERP and ecommerce solution. Marketing and sales can analyze shopping trends and patterns to improve their own campaign ROI. Finance obtains accurate and timely information to evaluate costs, follow cash flow, and manage assets. Operations, including manufacturing and warehousing, obtain accurate data on orders out and stock checked into the warehouse without waiting for manual counts. Instantly accessed data makes planning much easier. An integrated solution improves operational efficiencies throughout the company.

E-Commerce Challenges: Inventory Management

Entrepreneur listed several challenges that often surprise new ecommerce business owners. One major challenge for nearly all ecommerce business is inventory and supply chain management. For a small business, poor inventory management can be a leading cause of business failure. Manually matching the SKUs in the warehouse to inventory updates online can be challenging, especially during busy shopping seasons.

The solution? An integrated ecommerce and ERP system that automatically updates stock counts throughout the system and on the front-end of the website. Many ERP systems can be set with automated notices or alerts so that when stock drops below a preset level, the alert triggers a notice to reorder. This can be a lifesaver for busy ecommerce businesses and another benefit of ecommerce integration.]

Common Integration Challenges

It seems clear that there are many benefits to ERP and ecommerce integration. There are, however, several common integration challenges that should be considered when exploring ERP and ecommerce integration.

Interfaces that Handle Multiple Cart Software

Any integration solution must be flexible enough that it works with multiple shopping carts. Companies often run myriad shopping portals for different division or brands, and some may use different shopping carts. Integration solutions must be able to handle multiple carts and integrate all efficiently into the ERP system.

Custom Website Integration

Another consideration is an integration solution that can support custom website integration. Custom carts pose their own unique challenges to integration, and few ecommerce and ERP integration solutions can support custom carts. An integration solution that can handle custom programming as well as multiple off-the-shelf carts is one that is flexible enough to grow with the business.

Intranets and Secure Ordering Systems

A third challenge to most integration solutions is an intranet, or secure ordering system. Wholesalers and distributors that use intranets often find that most commercial integration solutions cannot handle their unique needs for secure order-taking and password protected information.

Real-Time Synchronization

Several back-end office challenges also face companies seeking an integrated ERP and ecommerce solution. Real-time data synchronization is vital for ecommerce businesses, where the store never closes and accurate stock counts and shipment information is vital. Monitoring individual SKUs is also critical since trends can change on a dime, and retailers need to act quickly to reorder hot-selling items. All of this depends on accurate, real-time synchronization. Some may use different shopping carts. Integration solutions must be able to handle multiple carts and integrate all efficiently into the ERP system.

How to Select the Best Integration Software

There are several tips to keep in mind as you search for the best solution for your business and evaluate the vendor providing the solution.

Gather the Requirements

Understanding your company's needs is the first step to selecting the best solution. Include representatives from all departments on the planning team. Explore what each needs from an integrated ERP-e-commerce solution. Although your initial list may seem long, you can prioritize it later. Schedule a meeting with the vendor and include appropriate parties. The vendor should be able to guide you through a discovery call to determine the integration points and needs. The advanced preparation will make this process go smoothly.

Multi-Platform Flexible Solutions

Software for e-commerce and ERP integration are the most powerful if they can work with multiple carts and platforms. Such a flexible solution can accommodate additional shopping carts as your business grows and expands. Make sure that the solution you are considering can handle most, if not all, of the popular e-commerce platforms and marketplaces.

Custom Platform

If your website includes a custom shopping cart or a lot of customization, be sure that the solution you are considering works with a custom platform. Some integration tools have difficulty handling custom programming. Look for past work that demonstrates the system's ability to handle custom programming.

Vendor Selection

Not all vendors are created equal. When you purchase an integrated solution, you are also purchasing the services of the integration vendor. That vendor's capabilities are critical to the success of your installation. Evaluate vendors based on the following criteria.

- **Experience:** Integration vendors should have ample experience working with your shopping cart and ERP system. They should provide references and testimonials demonstrating successful completion of similar integration projects in the past.
- **Communications:** Be sure the vendor is available to answer questions about the integration and understand for what period they are available post-integration.
- **Training:** Training should be part of your integration solution. Ask the vendor about the type, frequency, and duration of training available.
- **Problem-solving:** Some vendors excel at problem-solving. To assess vendor's problem-solving skills, contact the references they provide. Ask questions about the services provided, any problems, and how they were overcome.
- **Prices:** Ask what the price includes as well as what the annual costs are so that you are not surprised by any hidden costs. The cheapest price may not necessarily be the best. Weigh experience, service, and quality against price for the best value.

Questions to Ask Vendor References

Here are some questions you may wish to ask the companies you call for vendor references for your ERP and ecommerce integration project:

- What is your overall experience with the vendor?
- Did the integration complete by the deadline?
- If not, what happened, and how did the vendor fix the problem?
- Were there any problems with the integration after the project concluded? How did the vendor handle this?
- Is the product performing as expected?
- What do you wish you had done differently, if anything?
- Were there any hidden costs in the project? If so, what were they?
- Did the vendor provide adequate training?
- What would you do differently if you could do this project again?

Calling other companies for references on a vendor can be tricky if the companies are your direct competitors. Given these solutions are not “industry-specific,” you should be able to talk with non-competing references and achieve the results you are looking for.

Conclusion

ERP and ecommerce integration are essential for online retailers with an eye on growth and profitability. The need for integration outweighs any potential drawbacks or challenges ecommerce companies face. Improved customer service, enhanced information, better forecasting and inventory control, and easier communications are all benefits derived from ERP integration.

Choosing the right integration solution and partner relies upon knowing your company's needs and drawing up a comprehensive wish list which can then be whittled down to a requirements list. The best solution works across multiple shopping carts, provides real-time data, and offers mobile support.

Lastly, choosing the right vendor for your system is also important. The vendor that you choose can enhance the overall success of your project and make it an enjoyable experience. Seek integration vendors with experience working with multiple industries and projects. Look for vendors with a demonstrated track record of success. Check references, even if you must call competitors on the vendor's reference list. Make sure that there are no hidden costs and that training and follow up are included in the project.

ROI and IN-SYNCH

ROI Consulting was established in 1997 with the goal of maximizing companies' accounting software investment through integration and customization. Co-founders Bob and Ruth Richter have over 20 years of experience working with a wide range of ecommerce and other business customers to solve their integration challenges. Both founders are committed to excellence in all that they do, and offer exemplary service and support for clients.

ROI Consulting developed IN-SYNCH, integration software for Sage 100 ERP systems and multiple ecommerce platforms. Clients throughout North America use IN-SYNCH to seamlessly integrate Sage 100 with any third-party ecommerce platform. It works very well with nearly all websites, ecommerce platforms, CRM systems, warehouse management and data systems.

IN-SYNCH offers:

- Real-time synchronization
- Bi-directional
- Secure integration
- Lightning-fast speed

It is a proven, mature integration solution that has been successfully used by companies throughout North America. With many testimonials and case studies on the ROI Consulting website, you can be sure that IN-SYNCH offers the reliable performance you need to move your business forward.

For more information on IN-SYNCH and ROI Consulting, please contact ruthrichter@roi-consulting.com or call (402) 934-2223 ext. 1.

SOURCES

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