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B2B Ecommerce in 2026: A Digital Market That Still Runs on Manual Work

US B2B commerce is increasingly digital. But the numbers tell a more complicated story than most market forecasts suggest, and a more useful one for manufacturers, wholesalers, and distributors deciding what to do next.

A distributor can receive purchase orders by email, exchange transactions with major accounts through EDI, and maintain thousands of products in an ERP system – all without giving most customers a convenient way to order online.

According to the US Census Bureau's 2024 industry data, ecommerce accounted for approximately $4.22 trillion of the $11.03 trillion in US wholesale trade sales, or 38.3%. That's a substantial share of the market.

But there's a catch: the Census Bureau's definition of ecommerce includes transactions conducted through Electronic Data Interchange (EDI), email, extranets, and other electronic systems. A customer emailing a purchase order can contribute to the statistics without ever visiting an online store.

Meanwhile, a 2025 Distribution Strategy Group survey found that only 23% of responding distributors with less than $10 million in annual revenue offered a transactional ecommerce website.

These findings aren't contradictory. They're measuring different things. And understanding that difference is one of the best places to start when evaluating the state of B2B ecommerce in the US.

The market is already digital in many ways. It just isn't consistently easy to buy from.

The numbers are large. The definitions matter more.

US business-to-business commerce is enormous, even before considering the companies and activities that fall outside conventional manufacturing and wholesale categories.

Digital Commerce 360 estimated that US manufacturing and wholesale distribution sales reached $15.12 trillion in 2025, increasing just 0.4% from the previous year. That modest growth matters: businesses have been working in a relatively restrained sales environment, making operational efficiency and customer retention important considerations.

Yet the most frequently quoted B2B ecommerce figures require careful interpretation.

The Census Bureau's 2024 Annual Integrated Economic Survey reports the following for US wholesale trade:

Measure	2024
Total wholesale trade sales	$11.03 trillion
Ecommerce-classified sales	$4.22 trillion
Ecommerce share	**38.3%**

The calculation is straightforward. Interpreting it is not.

These are wholesale-trade figures, not the value of all US B2B ecommerce. They include manufacturers' sales branches and offices within the wholesale sector, and they follow the Census Bureau's broad definition of electronic commerce.

That definition is useful for understanding how extensively electronic systems support commercial transactions. It is much less useful for answering another question: How many buyers can sign in, see their own prices, confirm availability, and place an order without involving a salesperson?

An EDI transaction between large organizations, an emailed purchase order, and a self-service purchase through a customer portal are all electronic in some sense. But their implications for customer experience, administrative labor, and software investment can be very different.

This explains why estimates of the B2B ecommerce market can vary so widely. Some measure electronic transactions. Others count sales placed through websites or marketplaces. Some measure what buyers prefer, while others measure what sellers have implemented.

Before drawing conclusions from a market statistic, it's worth asking what the researcher counted.

Smaller distributors tell a different story

Industry averages conceal considerable variation in the businesses behind them.

In its October 2025 report, Distribution Strategy Group described a market in which ecommerce adoption was spreading, but remained far from universal. Among survey respondents with less than $10 million in annual revenue, 23% said they offered ecommerce.

Crucially, this survey used a narrower definition than the Census Bureau: a website with a shopping cart through which customers could complete purchases.

Across the survey's broader sample, respondents estimated ecommerce accounted for 13.5% of revenue in 2025, up from 11.6% in 2024 and 9.7% in 2023.

Those figures are not directly comparable with the Census numbers. They are based on a survey of distributors and manufacturers using a different definition of ecommerce. They nevertheless show an important reality: smaller companies have been adopting online selling, but many still operate without a transactional digital storefront.

There are understandable reasons.

A small wholesaler may have built its business around long-standing customer relationships, field representatives, phone orders, and emailed purchase orders. Its ERP may handle inventory, invoices, and account records perfectly well for internal purposes. Existing customers may know exactly whom to call when they need something.

From inside the business, that arrangement can appear functional.

The problems become more apparent as order volume grows, employees become harder to replace, or customers expect to manage more of their purchasing independently.

An emailed order may be easy for the customer to send, but someone still needs to interpret it, check the account's terms, confirm product availability, enter or validate the order, and communicate its status. Exceptions can require additional calls and emails. A routine purchase can occupy several people without creating any additional value.

This doesn't mean every distributor needs the same digital solution. It means the absence of a customer-facing buying experience is a separate issue from the presence of electronic transactions elsewhere in the business.

A company can be highly computerized and still depend heavily on manual work.

Buyers want independence, but not the disappearance of salespeople

The changing relationship between buyers and sales representatives may be the clearest illustration of where B2B ecommerce is heading.

In May 2026, Gartner published results from a survey of 645 B2B buyers conducted in August and September 2025. The findings included:

- 67% preferred a sales-representative-free buying experience.
- 70% preferred a completely digital, self-service buying experience.
- 69% preferred validating AI-generated information with a sales representative.

It's tempting to use the first two findings as evidence that B2B salespeople are becoming obsolete. The third makes that interpretation difficult to defend.

Buyers can prefer to work independently and still value human expertise when a decision becomes complicated or consequential.

Consider a purchasing manager at a manufacturing company.

When replenishing familiar supplies, the buyer may know the product codes, quantities, and delivery locations. Requiring a phone call adds little value.

When evaluating an unfamiliar component, negotiating terms for a large purchase, or resolving a supply problem, the same buyer may want an experienced salesperson who understands the account and its operational constraints.

These are different purchasing situations. Treating them as one type of transaction creates unnecessary friction.

Recent distributor-specific evidence points in the same direction. An October 2026 Distribution Strategy Group article examined a WizCommerce benchmark study based on order and customer data from more than 250 wholesalers using its platform.

Among wholesalers with at least $15 million in annual revenue, ecommerce accounted for 63.5% of digitally captured orders, while representatives wrote 36.5%. Yet at three-quarters of the wholesalers studied, the average website order was worth less than half the average representative-written order.

That does not establish a universal market pattern. The study reflects the provider's customer base. It does, however, illustrate a plausible division of labor: routine purchases increasingly move online, while representatives remain important for larger and more involved transactions.

For B2B sellers, the practical question is no longer simply whether to introduce self-service. It is which interactions should become self-service and how the company can preserve human expertise where it genuinely helps the customer.

A website is useful only if it reflects how the business actually sells

A business can introduce ecommerce and discover that relatively little has changed.

Customers still call for their actual prices. They still email to check stock. Representatives still enter orders manually because the online catalog doesn't reflect contract terms or ordering arrangements.

The website exists, but the underlying buying process remains largely untouched.

This is where B2B ecommerce differs from the simpler image of an online catalog with a checkout button.

Many B2B transactions depend on established commercial relationships. A customer may have negotiated prices, quantity-based discounts, credit terms, several delivery locations, designated purchasers, or internal approval requirements.

For an online channel to become genuinely useful, it needs to respect those arrangements.

Take an ordinary example: a wholesale customer with three branches, each ordering from the same supplier. Head office negotiates the commercial terms, but different employees purchase for different locations. One location orders in full cases, another needs scheduled deliveries, and a third has restrictions on who can approve certain purchases.

If the ecommerce platform can't reproduce these conditions, moving orders online may create extra administrative work rather than remove it.

Customers may continue using email because it is more flexible than the website.

The most important question is therefore not how many features an ecommerce platform advertises. It's whether the platform can support the purchasing relationships the company already has and make them easier to manage.

That includes what happens behind the storefront.

Prices, inventory, customer accounts, orders, and fulfillment information often originate in an ERP system. If the online channel cannot exchange that information reliably, employees end up reconciling two versions of the business.

A polished storefront cannot compensate for inconsistent prices or orders that fail to reach the system responsible for fulfillment.

The next gains may come from doing less work per order

The commercial case for B2B ecommerce is often framed around increasing online revenue.

That's reasonable, but it leaves out a significant part of the value.

Moving an existing customer's order from email to a website does not automatically create incremental sales. The order may have happened anyway.

Its benefit may instead come from reducing the effort required to process it.

Imagine a distributor receiving 150 routine orders per working day. Suppose each order requires an average of six minutes of avoidable manual administration: entering details, looking up prices, checking availability, or sending a standard confirmation.

That's 15 hours of work per day, or approximately 3,750 hours across 250 working days.

These are illustrative assumptions, not a claim about typical distributor performance. But they show why the economics are worth examining.

Even modest improvements in a high-frequency process can release substantial staff capacity. That capacity could reduce overtime, support more customers without proportional headcount growth, or allow representatives to focus on complex sales opportunities.

And labor isn't the only consideration. Manual processes can introduce errors, delay confirmations, make account information difficult to retrieve, and leave customers dependent on particular employees.

None of this means digitization will automatically generate savings. A poorly implemented system can merely move the work elsewhere. Someone might still need to correct mismatched prices, handle incomplete catalog data, or reconcile orders between systems.

The right measurement is therefore broader than the percentage of revenue placed online.

A distributor should also ask:

- How much employee time does a routine order require?
- How often do customers contact staff for information they could reasonably access themselves?
- How many orders need correction or re-entry?
- Can existing customers place repeat orders without assistance?
- Are salespeople spending their time helping customers buy or administering transactions?

A company that reduces the work behind every order may improve its economics without generating an impressive ecommerce revenue-growth statistic.

AI investment is accelerating. The basics still determine its value.

No assessment of B2B commerce in 2026 is complete without AI.

Master B2B's 2026 State of B2B eCommerce research, based on a practitioner survey conducted in February, found that 81% of respondents planned to spend on AI over the following 12 months. AI also ranked as the leading technology investment priority, cited by 55%.

Yet the same research found that data quality remained the largest barrier to ecommerce growth. Moving the business from offline-centric to digital-centric operations was still the most frequently cited challenge, identified by 56% of respondents.

This is a useful warning against treating AI investment as a substitute for operational foundations.

An AI shopping assistant needs access to accurate products, prices, customer permissions, and availability. An assistant helping a representative build a quotation needs to understand account-specific commercial terms. An agent placing an order needs reliable transaction processing and clear authority to act.

The intelligence may be new. Much of the underlying information and operational responsibility is not.

That said, AI offers opportunities beyond search and product recommendations.

It can potentially help business administrators configure workflows, assist representatives with account information and repetitive tasks, support buyers through complicated product selections, and reduce the expertise needed to operate sophisticated commerce software.

Some of these capabilities are already present in commercial products, while others remain unevenly implemented. Their value depends on which actions an assistant can perform, what data it can access, and how safely the business can authorize those actions.

A business that is still fixing its product catalog should not ignore AI. But it should evaluate AI as part of its commercial operating model, not as an isolated investment.

What should a US B2B seller do with this information?

For a company without ecommerce, the first step is to look closely at the transactions already flowing through the business.

Find the orders that occur repeatedly, involve predictable products and terms, and require staff to perform the same administrative tasks every time. These are often the strongest candidates for customer self-service.

For a company with an existing storefront, the more useful question is why customers still avoid it.

Are they unable to find products? Are negotiated prices missing? Does the website fail to reflect available stock? Do they need to contact a representative to arrange delivery or obtain a quote?

The answers reveal where further investment may matter more than a redesign or a new marketing campaign.

For companies planning a larger technology change, the priorities are broader: reliable ERP connectivity, flexibility around existing commercial rules, realistic implementation and operating costs, and the ability to adapt the system without excessive dependence on specialist development.

AI should be evaluated alongside those requirements, particularly where it can simplify work that businesses already struggle to perform.

The overall market direction is clear enough. Digital channels are becoming an increasingly established part of B2B selling. Buyers expect greater independence, while sales expertise remains important for complex decisions. Companies are investing heavily in AI, even as many continue struggling with data and everyday digital operations.

What remains far less uniform is how successfully businesses translate those investments into better purchasing experiences and less operational work.

That's where the meaningful opportunity lies.

The next advantage in B2B commerce won't necessarily belong to the company with the most elaborate online store. It may belong to the supplier that makes buying and selling substantially easier.