

A special report from the editors of *Internet Retailer*

E-COMMERCE PLATFORMS A WORLD OF CHOICE



A SPONSORED SPECIAL REPORT ON E-COMMERCE PLATFORM TECHNOLOGY AND WHAT MERCHANTS SHOULD CONSIDER IN SELECTING ONE THAT MEETS THEIR NEEDS.

How to choose the right e-commerce platform

RETAILERS HAVE A DIZZYING ARRAY OF OPTIONS when it comes to e-commerce platforms, which can make choosing the right one for their business needs now, and in the future, difficult.

Selecting a platform to deliver a delightful shopping experience consumers expect is just the tip of the iceberg. Other considerations for retailers include: how much customization a new platform will require; whether they have the resources to write new code for the website; how many developers and integrators will be needed to support it; whether they have the resources to host the platform or if they are better off with a software-as-a-service-based platform or one hosted in the cloud; and if the platform is tightly integrated with their back-office systems, such as inventory and order management and customer relationship management applications.

Sorting through those issues requires internal analysis and discussions across multiple departments, even before the names of prospective vendors are considered. By taking the time to define current and future business needs, retailers can select an e-commerce platform that meets those criteria and won't create unforeseen problems down the road.

"An e-commerce platform is no longer just some technology that supports the web store: It ought to be part of a retailer's overall business strategy," says Manish Chowdhary, CEO of GoECart, a provider of a cloud-based software-as-a-service, unified commerce platform. "Retailers need to make platform purchasing decisions objectively so that they can prioritize how the platform will help them achieve their business goals and invest in technology accordingly."

That requires retailers to bring together their marketing, information technology and executive management divisions to determine which platform to buy. As e-commerce has become a major revenue generator for retailers, CEOs and chief financial officers are

getting more involved in e-commerce technology decisions because they know success online hinges on selecting the right platform. Subsequently, top executives want to see measurable near- and long-term returns on their investment, as opposed to promises of benefits that may or may not materialize, or show up

over time. Top management also wants to know the total upfront cost of ownership, including additional licensing fees and all installation and support fees, not just the advertised price of the platform.

"CEOs and CFOs are making more results-oriented choices before investing capital in an e-commerce



MARK LAVELLE
Senior vice president, head of global product and strategy and general manager of Magento for eBay Enterprise

platform because they know the platform is a key part of their company's long-term digital strategy," says Mark Lavelle, senior vice president, head of global product and strategy and general manager of Magento for eBay Enterprise. "The retailers that understand the fit between their e-commerce platform and digital strategy have a competitive advantage."

While the C-suite is exercising more control over the purchasing decision, input from the marketing and IT departments remains critical as they have the most day-to-day interactions with the e-commerce platform. Marketing understands the capabilities the retailer needs to attract customers and support promotions that can increase sales, while IT knows the company's performance needs, such as scalability, page download times and data security.

Michael Collins, senior director of product, strategy and engineering for Rackspace Inc.'s digital services practice also recommends soliciting input from other

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departments that may interact with the e-commerce platform, such as logistics and supply chain. As a managed hosting provider, Rackspace Digital specializes in support for web content management systems, e-commerce solutions and mobile services.

“A great marketing campaign can drive a lot of traffic, which impacts performance. That’s why retailers want to make sure that all the stakeholders are involved in the purchasing process,” Collins says. “The e-commerce platform makes a grand promise to the entire company, not just the e-commerce department, which is why it should meet the needs of all stakeholders. If one group is missing from the discussion, it can lead to problems.”

Weighing input from multiple departments is a delicate balancing act, as having multiple stakeholders can delay decision making. To avoid getting bogged down in departmental preferences, final decision makers must stay focused on how the company as a whole can benefit from a new platform, not just one or two departments. Understanding how departmental preferences can influence the thinking of stakeholders can help final decision makers properly weigh the variety of opinions expressed and determine the platform that is most closely aligned with the company’s business strategy and that best serves customers’ needs.

For example, the chief financial officer may push for a hosted platform, which tend to require fewer upfront capital expenditures. But if the retailer needs to create a more customized shopping experience, a hosted system may not be the best choice because hosted platforms typically retain control over the programming code, which limits how much customization a retailer can make.

“The people who are the most hands-on with the platform should be involved early on to evaluate the ease of use and the ability of platform features to improve their day-to-day productivity,” says Darren

Hill, CEO and co-founder of e-commerce platform provider WebLinc Corp. “But as the evaluation process progresses, those with veto power at any point need to be open-minded and weigh departmental viewpoints carefully against the needs of the business. If you have to go back to the drawing board at any time, that’s a lot of time and resources to waste.”

Evaluating an e-commerce platform starts with whether it can support the features an e-retailer wants to use to attract shoppers and get them to click the Buy button.

“Flexibility allows retailers to build out custom elements that can be extremely valuable to their businesses,” says Andrew Pearson, vice president of marketing for Windsor Circle, a customer retention and predictive marketing platform. “If that flexibility does not exist, it is a reason for concern because it can limit what a retailer can do.”

Being able to customize a site’s customer-facing features, such as incorporating customer reviews or product videos, and behind-the-scenes features like meta descriptions, can give an e-retailer more ways to boost its marketing effectiveness. If a platform doesn’t make it easy to include such features, an e-retailer may want to keep shopping, experts say.

Meta descriptions, for example, help determine the text and images consumers see in search results to increase click-through rates. As snippets of advertising content, meta descriptions influence what links consumers click by letting them know whether the previewed page contains the information they’re looking for. Being able to change meta descriptions, which do not influence Google search rankings, allows retailers to quickly replace ineffective content.

“The ability to alter meta descriptions as needed gives retailers more control over their SEO strategy,” says Brett Lindstrom, director of sales and marketing for Znode, a .NET e-commerce platform.

Znode’s Multifront e-commerce platform enables companies to customize their websites by providing full access to the platform’s source code.

Since consumers often use multiple devices to browse the web and read email, retailers need an e-commerce platform that can deliver consistently satisfying browsing experiences regardless of the device the customer is using.



ANDREW PEARSON
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Supporting responsive design—a design technique that optimizes the layout of each web page and page elements to fit the screen of the device the consumer is using—is a must-have functionality for many retailers. When a retailer uses responsive design techniques, a shopper visiting a retailer’s website on her mobile device sees a page designed for that device’s screen, eliminating the need to pinch or scroll excessively to find the desired information. When the same shopper resumes her shopping journey on her PC she may see more items and larger images filling up the computer’s bigger screen.

Not only does using responsive design allow for a more consistent browsing experience as customers move across devices, it also enhances organic search rankings. “Google’s new algorithm gives higher rankings to websites that use responsive design,” Lindstrom says.

One aspect of responsive design that retailers need to keep in mind is that all site elements, not just their home page or product pages, need to adapt to the shopper’s device screen size.

“The e-commerce platform must allow a retailer to deliver a branded shopping experience to meet customer expectations regardless of the device used. The platform must also quickly adapt to changing customer behaviors and trends,” says eBay Enterprise’s Lavelle. “Customer experience is one of three pillars in an e-commerce platform. The others are omnichannel support and global sales.”

The eBay Enterprise Magento Enterprise commerce platform includes responsive design tools for all core website features including gift registries, downloadable products, multiple wish lists, add-to-cart by SKU and private sales. Retailers can also create responsive default email templates that format emails for mobile devices.

With social media users sharing product information and reviews that influence online purchasing decisions, social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook and Pinterest have become important marketing and advertising channels. “Integrating commerce with social networks represents a huge opportunity for retailers looking for cost effective ways to promote their products and attract new customers,” says Melanie Kalemba, senior vice president of global

sales for e-commerce platform provider Bigcommerce, which provides cloud-based e-commerce solutions.

The Bigcommerce Product Ads platform, developed jointly with Bigcommerce partner Boostable Inc., allows retailers to create dynamic advertising and retargeting campaigns by directly importing product images and data from their online product catalogs. Retailers can then create ads and automatically target specific consumer segments on Facebook and Twitter while optimizing campaigns and managing multiple marketing campaigns with the Bigcommerce dashboard. Product ads can be employed to increase brand awareness, drive traffic to high-converting products, target new customers, and promote sales and exclusive offers.



MELANIE KALEMBA
Senior vice president of global sales for Bigcommerce, a provider of hosted e-commerce solutions

Advertising purchased through the platform carries a nominal service fee. “Retailers want platforms with built-in features that allow them to attract new customers and boost conversions,” Kalemba says. “Our platform helps level the playing field for small and midsize

retailers by giving them sophisticated tools needed to compete with larger retailers, but at an affordable price.”

As retailers adopt personalization strategies,

shoppers expect retailers to know their preferences and purchasing history across all customer touch points, not just when they browse the website or receive email. Connecting customer profiles to the customer service department can give retailers a leg up on addressing customer inquiries and service issues.

For example, when a customer contacts the retailer about why only part of her order shipped, the service agent can see from the customer’s order information that the order was filled at two locations and the remaining portion of the order shipped later and is expected to arrive in a few days.

“Integrating full customer profiles across all customer touch points can give retailers information that

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eliminates a lot of pain points when interacting with a customer because they can see what the customer has purchased, her order status and preferences,” says Rackspace’s Collins. “The more a retailer knows about a customer, the better equipped it is to resolve problems and provide a satisfying customer experience at any point of contact.”

Consumers no longer follow a straight path to purchase. Allowing consumers greater visibility into store-based inventory helps them understand their choices when it comes to buying in store versus delivery. Additionally, having an order management system that can utilize inventory anywhere in the world, whether it is on a store shelf or in a warehouse, ensures retailers will be able to fulfill customer expectations more consistently, faster and more cost effectively.

The multichannel retailer should look for a system that integrates e-commerce and in-store systems. This is a way to ensure shoppers will have a seamless journey where a complete customer history is visible at all times. This allows retailers to create a greater level of convenience for the customer, such as allowing for in-store returns of items purchased online, and ensures that employees are able to offer a consistently high level of service by understanding a customer’s history with the brand at every point of interaction.

“Omnichannel is possibly the single greatest challenge facing retailers today. However, when an e-commerce platform operates independently of its core business systems, it is impossible to get a 360-degree view of the customer. Without this 360-degree view, the brand experience invariably suffers,” says Andy Lloyd, general manager of commerce products for e-commerce platform provider NetSuite Inc. “Ensuring all commerce systems run on a single system of truth is a consideration that often gets overlooked when departments make buying decisions in a silo. Ultimately the relationship with the customer ends up suffering.”



MICHAEL COLLINS
Senior director of product,
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for Rackspace Inc.'s digital
services practice

Enabling customer service representatives or in-store sales associates to access a shopper’s order history can provide insights into the shopper’s brand and product preferences. Service agents and sales associates can use that information to identify cross-selling and upselling opportunities. “Connecting the e-commerce platform and back-office systems creates a holistic view of the customer than can lead to a more satisfying shopping experience, higher customer satisfaction and greater brand loyalty,” Lloyd says.

NetSuite’s SuiteCommerce platform is a cloud-based commerce platform that natively integrates e-commerce and point-of-sale systems with back-end business systems, including customer relationship management, order and inventory management and financials. By unifying all these systems, Lloyd says shoppers are afforded a much more continuous buying experience. Because it is built in the cloud, customers are always running on the most modern commerce software available. As more retailers adopt omnichannel and multichannel strategies, they expect seamless and real-time integration with their order and inventory management, customer relationship management, enterprise resource planning and other back-office systems. “The market is starting to expect this level of back-office capabilities native within the next generation of e-commerce platforms,” GoECart’s Chowdhary says.

GoECart’s platform combines e-commerce storefront technology with back-office functionality such as distributed order management, fulfillment, warehouse, inventory and CRM, all powered using a single system pulling from one data source.

Many retailers are expanding into international markets to spur growth. Having an e-commerce platform that is designed to simplify adding and managing international sites can make it easier for e-retailers to customize sites for international markets and manage those sites through a single administrative interface. “No matter a retailer’s size, picking a platform that supports global sales is important because of the growth opportunities available in international markets,” Lavelle says.

The Magento Enterprise Edition can support multiple stores, including international sites, through its administrative dashboard. Beyond those international elements, the platform also allows shoppers to search

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for products by such attributes as price, color and category. Retailers can also track customer behavior traits to develop targeted offers and marketing campaigns.

Retailers might also consider whether an e-commerce platform supports the latest payment options, such as Apple Pay, which can be used by mobile shoppers. To support Apple Pay, retailers can either write code to support Apple Pay within their mobile shopping applications or hire an integrator to do it for them. A third option is to integrate their checkout application to a payment processor that supports Apple Pay, such as First Data Systems Inc.

Mobile apps set up to accept Apple Pay let iPhone and iPad users connect to the Apple Pay app on their device when clicking the Apple Pay option at checkout.

The feature helps mobile shoppers avoid data entry errors since they don't have to enter their billing and shipping information. Instead, shoppers only have to enter a personal identification number to initiate a transaction. Next, a shopper's credit card information, which is stored in the app by the consumer, is automatically transmitted as a one-time cryptogram to the payment processor, which holds the key to unlock the token and see the customer's actual card account number.

When the transaction is authorized, the payment processor returns a cryptogram to the merchant, which holds the key to unlock that token. The process makes a mobile transaction secure since actual credit card data is not transmitted between the retailer and the payment processor. "There is a large market of savvy consumers that are going to want to use something like an Apple Pay with mobile commerce," Collins says. "Siloed strategies forget that there are billions of mobile transactions yearly and it's simply a matter of time before this next step becomes mainstream. Many apps already have Apple Pay integrations. Retailers also can't take data security for granted because consumers want to feel confident their sensitive personal and account data is safe."

Rackspace Digital shortens the time it takes to build e-commerce infrastructure by preconfiguring architectures and automating deployment for Magento, hybris, and Oracle e-commerce platforms. The technology, which can be tweaked to meet a retailer's needs, can be up and running in about a day, Collins says.

"Building and maintaining an e-commerce infrastructure is not a core competency for retailers," he says. "We remove the guesswork by deploying the right infrastructure and proactively monitoring the infrastructure to ensure peak performance for a retailer's store, which removes unnecessary back and forth between retailers and hosting providers."

With so many available features on today's e-commerce platforms, merchants risk settling for a kitchen sink approach rather than making a critical assessment of their needs by looking at the features their customers want most, Lavelle says. Instead, they need to look at the features e-commerce platform providers have in the works as well as how quickly they

can bring those online to keep pace with changing customer needs.

"While retailers can't anticipate everything their customers will want, they need to be aware that some features they include now will become antiquated sooner than expected. They need to look at where the development of the



MANISH CHOWDHARY
CEO of GoECart, a provider of
software-as-a-service-based
e-commerce platforms

platform is going and understand a vendor's time to market with key features so they can future-proof their business," Lavelle says.

One of the biggest decisions a retailer faces

when replatforming is whether to operate its platform in-house or go with a SaaS-based or hosted solution. Since that decision depends on the retailer's needs, sorting out the pros and cons of each, and seeing how they align with its business goals, is important to making the right choice.

SaaS-based systems can be more affordable as retailers do not have to invest upfront by paying for software licensing fees and servers to run the software. Instead, SaaS providers often charge monthly fees.

"A lot of small and mid-sized retailers have modest IT budgets and don't want to break the bank to launch and maintain an e-commerce platform," GoECart's Chowdhary says. "They want a scalable platform with

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the tools to compete with larger retailers to provide unique customer experiences and can be managed through intuitive administrative panels rather than by the IT department.” GoECart’s monthly fees include 24/7 post-installation customer support, as well as maintenance costs and free lifetime upgrades.

GoECart’s administrative panel allows retailers to customize back-office work flow, leverage built-in customer relationship management tools to generate targeted transactional emails, such as abandoned cart recovery messages or notices when an order has shipped and when it has been delivered at the customer’s doorstep or when a back-ordered item is in stock.

Some cloud-based platforms are also faster to put in place than in-house hosted platforms. “Speed to market is important to retailers, most of which don’t want to lose time when replatforming,” says Bigcommerce’s Kalemba.

Bigcommerce Enterprise, which began rolling out earlier this year, features nine analytics reports that retailers can use to parse data at a granular level in real time. The reports encompass data about store performance and customer insights, providing actionable data such as a list of shoppers who have not visited the website for a number of months or a list of customers who buy at full price and can be excluded from promotions. Additional built-in capabilities include integrated search engine-optimization tools to enhance retailers’ search engine rankings, as well as page load response times to improve storefront performance. Bigcommerce has also invested in security and fraud prevention, Kalemba says.

Delivered in a SaaS model, the platform is designed for mid-market retailers with up to \$50 million in sales. An advantage of the pre-built applications within the Bigcommerce Enterprise system is they free up IT technicians’ time—time that can be devoted to growth initiatives and high-value tasks instead of system upkeep and monitoring, Kalemba says.



DARREN HILL
CEO and co-founder of
e-commerce platform provider
WebLinc Corp.

While some SaaS-based e-commerce platforms allow retailers to create their websites using pre-configured templates, those templates may be too generic to differentiate a retailer’s business from the competition and they may not be customizable. “The more competitive a retailer’s business, the more customization capabilities it wants,” says Windsor Circle’s Pearson. “Preconfigured templates may not be specific to a retailer’s business. They can also be highly generic so that retailers using the same platform end up looking a lot like each other, even if they don’t compete directly with them.”

Cloud, or web-based platforms, which like SaaS-based platforms have lower upfront costs than most in-house solutions, may include the ability to scale server capacity on demand as part of the monthly service fee. Cloud-based hosting spreads a platform across multiple servers known as a cluster. As traffic increases, more servers are added, enabling rapid scalability with no noticeable drop in performance. The ability to scale quickly can be a big boost to retailers that run a promotion likely to cause a tidal wave of traffic, such as a Super Bowl ad.

“Cloud-based hosting is a commoditized cost retailers should seriously think about taking advantage of,” Lavelle says. “We’re seeing merchants tapping the economics of the public cloud to get the best of both worlds—the on-demand scale of the cloud with the full control and ownership of traditional licensed solutions at a fraction of the total cost of ownership and complexity.” In-house platforms give retailers more control to customize their platforms because the merchant isn’t sharing the software with other retailers, as is the case with SaaS-based solutions. In a SaaS-based environment, e-retailers are restricted to the capabilities the vendor writes for the platform.

The range of features and functions that SaaS-based platforms offer varies widely. A merchant selecting a platform should be careful to select a platform that meets both its current and future needs. “While SaaS-based platforms can take the heavy infrastructure burden off retailers’ shoulders, they should be wary of choosing a limiting, entry-level solution just for its simplicity,” WebLinc’s Hill says. “Replatforming is time consuming and costly. Going with a platform that’s not ready to grow with your business can amplify that cost significantly.”

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In-house platforms can make sense for retailers that expect their websites to require a lot of ongoing customization, because they provide retailers with control over the source code. As a result, a retailer can make modifications as needed, rather than paying the vendor to do it.

As attractive as having access to the source code can be, retailers need to make sure they have the resources to not only customize their site, but run it and maintain it. “Retailers need to be careful about overestimating their own capabilities when it comes to operating and maintaining a site on premise,” Hill says. “Scaling to make sure you’re covered with development resources, uptime monitoring and hardware with enough power to handle traffic for holiday shopping is a costly proposition. We’ve seen self-hosting retailers that thought they were ready for a holiday spike run out of bandwidth and watch thousands of dollars in sales go out the window.”

An option for retailers that want to host their platform is to have a flexible deployment model. For instance, a retailer can contract with a vendor that offers the scalability and on-site support staff to initially host the platform, but that allows the retailer to maintain direct control over the platform. The merchant can later move the platform to an on-premise installation when it has the infrastructure to justify it, Hill says. This model gives the retailer the option to keep the platform if it grows to the size where taking the support and hosting responsibilities in house make sense. “We’ve seen clients want this option when their business grows significantly in a few years,” Hill says. “It’s the ultimate flexibility with hosting and support.”

Over-customization can also be a problem for retailers modifying software and services built by vendors. A vendor may update software and roll the update out to users, but the update may not be compatible with custom programming. In these instances, the retailer may have to choose between implementing the update and having IT rewrite the custom code so it is compatible with the new version or forgo the update to retain the original customization.

“If the update is not compatible with the customized features of the platform, retailers need to weigh the cost of reworking everything against the cost to their business of not implementing the update,” Pearson says. “If a retailer does not have the resources to

rewrite custom code when updates are released, then a SaaS-based platform may be a better way to go.”

Should a retailer opt to forgo minor updates to spare it from rewriting custom code, Znode’s Lindstrom recommends the retailer find a platform vendor that will keep track of which updates it implements. This service enables vendors to tell their retail clients when the version of the platform they are running is becoming outdated.

“We always let the customer know in advance when upgrades are planned and what the upgrades will be,” Lindstrom says. “We don’t force our customers to implement updates, but we do want to be able to communicate to our customers when they have passed on enough updates that we may no longer be able to support the version they use.”

Making the right choice among a SaaS-based, hosted and in-house platforms ultimately comes down to how well retailers understand the capabilities,

differences and cost of each platform type.

“While there are similarities between the three platforms models, the differences in the cost of ownership and capabilities can make a huge difference in whether or not the platform is the right fit for the vendor’s business,” Chowdhary says. “Retailers



BRETT LINDSTROM
Director of sales and marketing
for Znode, a .NET e-commerce
platform

need to closely examine those differences before making a decision.”

Once a retailer reaches the point where it has determined the features it wants in its platform and whether to go with a SaaS-based, hosted or in-house solution, it must select a vendor. Some of the key criteria for evaluating vendors include the size of their customer base, customer success stories and the size of the developer community writing applications for the platform. All of the above can provide clues as to the strength and staying power of the vendor.

If a high percentage of retailers that replatform opt for a specific vendor, that can be viewed as a good

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sign the vendor has the technology retailers need to compete now and in the future. How many systems integrators install the platform and the number of web designers that build sites on the platform can also provide clues about the strength of the vendor's offering, says Windsor Circle's Pearson.

"If there are not a lot of systems integrators or applications developers supporting a vendor's platform, that can limit the potential of the platform," Pearson says. "Retailers should take the time to find out this information before considering a vendor."

Another key question to ask is what new features the vendor has in development and how those features can foster future growth. "Retailers should ask a vendor if their business grows to a certain level what capabilities will be provided to get them to the next level of sales," Lindstrom says. "Without these types of assurances, a retailer may find itself replatforming in a few years."

Update frequency is another measuring stick for vendors, as retailers want to be running the latest version of the platform. "Updates assure retailers their platform is keeping pace with changes in e-commerce technology and in customer behavior," says Bigcommerce's Kalembe. "There is no right or wrong answer when it comes to frequency, just so long as the update enhances the platform and doesn't disrupt a retailer's business with unscheduled downtime."

Bigcommerce typically allows its customers to install updates at their convenience, instead of immediately after the update is released so their reporting cycles and workflows aren't disrupted. "Vendors that understand a retailer's business needs are business partners, not just technology providers," Kalembe says.

Retailers should look to update their site experience on a regular basis. Anything less and retailers risk failing behind the technology curve, NetSuite's Lloyd says. "Moreover, brands should be building on a platform that is automatically pushing new functionality to them at least twice in annual releases," Lloyd says.



ANDY LLOYD
General manager of commerce products for e-commerce platform provider NetSuite Inc.

Experts also recommend vetting a vendor's client base by identifying competitors that use the platform and how they are using it, whether the vendor has any blue-chip clients, and how many customers have left for another platform in recent years. One way to gather this information is by looking at a vendor's website to see if it showcases any blue-chip clients, and if it breaks down its services provided by industry. "If a prospective client sees several like businesses using a vendor's platform, that's an indication the vendor understands the retailer's business," Pearson says. "Retailers should also perform due diligence on what the constraints of the vendor's platform are."

Lastly, checking the financial health of a vendor can tell retailers a lot about its long-term viability. "If the vendor is weak financially, it may not be around in a few years, which means going through another replatforming sooner than expected," Lloyd says. "Further, larger vendors with stronger bottom lines are able to spend on research and development and ensure the platform stays at the forefront of the industry."

Retailers also should understand how the vendor will support the retailer after the retailer implements the platform. Questions to be asked include: What's the level of support provided? Who will be executing the support? Is the development team that handled the implementation available for support?

"Post-implementation is where operational costs can really skyrocket, which is why retailers want to remove any ambiguity around the level of service they can expect," says WebLinc's Hill.

Negotiating at least a 90-day post-installation warranty is considered prudent, as that will give retailers time to identify any bugs within the system or problems their IT staff may have customizing their site using the source code. Retailers should also get vendors to spell out how responsive the vendor will be on weekends and holidays.

"Pinning down vendors on the level of support they provide is critical because a retailer's business can't afford any surprises when it comes to technical support," Lindstrom says.

As the lines between online and offline customer channels blur, e-commerce platforms are becoming the technology backbone for retailers. Selecting the right format and vendor can greatly contribute to a merchant's success. ■



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