



Why Manufacturers Think Their Products Are Too Complex for Ecommerce (And Why They're Wrong)

A practical guide to selling
configurable, engineered and
complex products online

B2B companies have complexity due to complicated and custom products, multiple pricing rules, complex business processes and extensive product information.

The answer is not removing all this complexity. The answer is a platform built for complexity. Read on to find out more.

Your Products are not too complex for ecommerce



For many manufacturers, wholesalers and distributors, ecommerce sounds attractive - but also unrealistic. The conversation often starts with:

"Ecommerce works for simple products, but our products are too complex."

It's an understandable concern. A business selling standard and commonly understood products with a fixed price has a relatively simple online process. Their customers search for the product they want and add it to cart. Many B2B businesses operate very differently. Their customers need to:

- Configure a product based on technical requirements
- Select from hundreds of options
- Have customer-specific pricing
- Request approval before ordering
- Purchase replacement parts
- Buy products that don't exist in the ERP until they're made

For these businesses, ecommerce is not just about putting products online. It is about translating complex business processes into a simple customer experience. The good news is your products are not too complex for ecommerce. You just need an ecommerce approach designed for complex B2B selling.

The complexity misconception

One of the biggest misconceptions in B2B ecommerce is that complexity prevents online selling. This does not need to be the case. Your customers don't want to:

- Wait three days for a quote?
- Email a salesperson for product information?
- Call someone every time they need to reorder?
- Manually compare product options?

Today's B2B buyers increasingly expect the same convenience they experience as consumers:

- Easy access to information
- Self-service ordering
- Fast responses
- Personalised experiences
- Visibility of pricing and availability

The challenge is not removing complexity. The challenge is managing complexity better. There are at least four types of complexity businesses struggle with:

1. Product complexity

Many manufacturers sell products with variations, options and configurations. Examples include:

- Industrial equipment
- Machinery
- Electrical components
- Building products
- Medical equipment
- Custom manufactured products

A single product may have:

- Different sizes
- Materials
- Finishes
- Accessories
- Technical specifications
- Installation requirements

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A traditional ecommerce approach will struggle because the product isn't simply one item with one price. It is a combination of decisions. This is where product configuration becomes important. A modern Configure, Price, Quote (CPQ) capability allows customers to select the correct options, automatically calculate pricing and create an accurate order. The customer gets a faster buying experience. Your sales team receives better-quality orders. In fact, the CPQ will streamline the front end sales process as well as the backend manufacturing process but that's a topic for another guide.

A CPQ solution embedded in your ecommerce solution means you can sell almost anything online, even custom made items that don't exist in your ERP yet. The CPQ will guide your customer through the configuration and then when they place the order, the CPQ will create the item in your ERP for you. Complexity turned into sales.

2. Pricing complexity

B2B pricing is rarely simple. Many businesses have:

- Customer-specific agreements
- Volume discounts
- Contract pricing
- Regional pricing
- Distributor pricing
- Promotional pricing

A common concern is:

"We can't put our prices online because every customer has a different price."

This is not a reason to avoid ecommerce. It is a requirement for the right ecommerce architecture. A properly integrated B2B ecommerce platform can use ERP data to display the correct pricing for each customer. The result is the customer sees their price and the business maintains control. The Sales teams no longer need to manually prepare every quote.

To meet the need of complex pricing, you need an ecommerce solution which is connected to your ERP in real time. This enables logged in customers to see their pricing "live" when they look at their products. Further, with a CPQ solution embedded in your ecommerce solution, when your customer configures a custom made product, the sell price for the item can be built up from the customer's specific pricing for the BOM components. Again, turning complexity into sales.

3. Process complexity

Many B2B companies have years of established processes. These might include:

- Approval workflows
- Sales representative involvement
- Purchase orders
- Account management
- Repeat ordering
- Multiple delivery locations

A successful ecommerce project does not ignore these processes. It improves them. The goal is not: "Replace everything with online ordering." The goal is: "Make the buying process easier while maintaining the business rules that make your company successful."

Some companies will augment their offline and online customer experience so that lead times are reduced and operational costs eliminated. Customers become more self-sufficient and only involve product specialists for the edge cases. Further, the sales team can make use of the online tools when dealing with customers face to face.

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4. Product Information complexity

Complex products require complete and accurate information to be easily available to customers. This is where many ecommerce projects fail. Product information may be spread across:

- ERP systems
- Spreadsheets
- Sales documents
- Engineering systems
- Marketing files
- Product catalogues

Customers experience this complexity as:

- Missing information
- Incorrect specifications
- Obsolete information
- Confusing options
- Slow responses

A Product Information Management (PIM) system helps businesses centralise and manage product data so customers receive consistent and accurate information. A PIM embedded in the ecommerce solution means complete and accurate product information will be available for customers 24/7. This will help customers know they're getting the product they need for their requirements.

Further, the CPQ can take the PIM data and create product specific proposals as part of the quoting process whether that by the sales person creating the proposal or the customer from within the ecommerce platform.

Why traditional ecommerce approaches fail

Many businesses start their ecommerce journey with platforms designed primarily for consumer retail. These platforms can work well for:

- Simple products
- Fixed pricing
- Individual consumers
- Low product complexity

But B2B businesses need more:

- ERP integration
The ecommerce platform needs to communicate with the system that already runs the business.
- Product configuration
Customers need guidance to select complex products or build the custom products.
- Sales team integration
Salespeople should be supported, not replaced.

What successful complex-product ecommerce looks like

A successful B2B ecommerce experience might look like this:

Step 1:

The customer logs in and sees:

- Their account
- Their pricing
- Their available products

Step 2:

Customer configures a product. They select:

- Options

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- Components
- Specifications

The system ensures the configuration is valid.

Step 3:

Customer receives pricing. The correct pricing rules are automatically applied.

Step 4:

Customer places the order. The order flows directly into business processes. No manual re-entry. No delays. No mistakes.

Customers benefit from:

- Faster ordering
- Better information
- Self-service capability
- Easier repeat purchases
- Greater confidence

Sales teams benefit from:

- Less administration
- Fewer repetitive quotes
- Better customer conversations
- More time selling

The business benefits from:

- Reduced errors
- Faster order processing
- Better customer experiences
- Increased online revenue

Five questions to ask before starting your ecommerce project.

Before choosing a platform, ask:

- 1) Can customers configure our products online?
If your products have options, variations or rules, configuration capability is essential.
- 2) Can the platform handle customer-specific pricing?
If every customer has different pricing, your ecommerce system must support that.
- 3) Can it integrate with our ERP?
Your ERP should remain the source of truth.
- 4) Can we manage complex product information?
Customers need accurate information before they buy.
- 5) Does it support our sales process?
Ecommerce should enhance your sales operation, not compete with it.

Complexity is not your disadvantage

Many businesses see complexity as something that prevents digital growth. The opposite can be true. Your complex products, technical expertise and customer relationships are competitive advantages. The businesses that succeed online are not necessarily those with the simplest products. They are the businesses that make complexity easier for customers to understand, configure and purchase.

The question is not:

"Are our products too complex for ecommerce?"

The better question is:

"Does our ecommerce platform understand our complexity?"

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About Carrot Solutions

For more than 10 years, Carrot Solutions has helped manufacturers, wholesalers and distributors across Australia and New Zealand successfully implement integrated B2B commerce solutions.

By combining ERP integration, Product Information Management (PIM), Configure, Price, Quote (CPQ) and B2B ecommerce, Carrot Solutions helps businesses turn complexity into sales.

Carrot Solutions - turning complexity into sales.

<https://carrotsolutions.com.au/turning-complexity-into-sales>

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