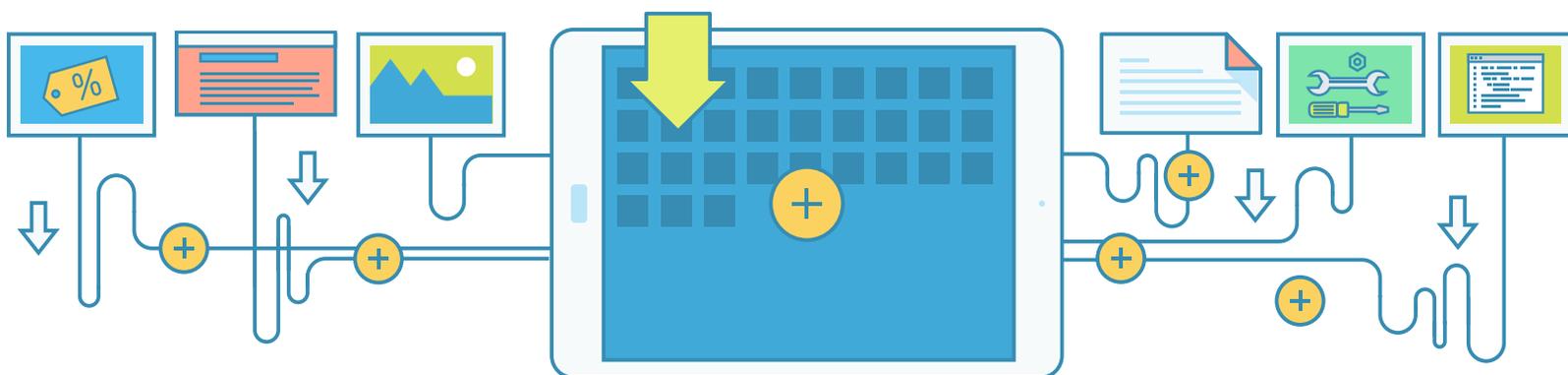


GUIDE: How to Create a B2B Digital Catalog

A comprehensive guide to creating a digital product catalog that will improve your customer experience, increase sales productivity, and drive revenue for your business.



CONTENTS

The Case for Digital Catalogs in B2B Sales _____	2
Determining Your Catalog Structure _____	4
Understanding Content Needs _____	7
Branding Your Catalog _____	11
Creating a Personalized Customer Experience _____	13
Beyond Digital Catalogs _____	15

THE DIGITAL CATALOG IN B2B SALES

The cousin to the likes of the telephone book and the 22-volume encyclopedia, the paper product catalog has managed to stick around over the years--but not for long.

According to a recent survey, 60% of wholesale distributors and manufacturers have already digitized their catalogs, allowing sales reps to present products to customers on mobile devices like the iPad. In fact, when asked what information they'd most like their sales reps to carry into customer meetings, digital catalogs came out on top, with 74% of respondents indicating that reps should have access to a digital catalog.¹

74%

of wholesale distributors & manufacturers believe sales reps should have digital catalogs in customer meetings.

60%

of wholesale distributors & manufacturers have already digitized their catalogs.

Digital catalogs are living, breathing documents. Products can be added or removed, prices changed, and descriptions and images updated. These updates can then be instantaneously updated on your B2B website and disseminated to your entire rep force from one central location--synced from your head offices to their mobile devices in the field. No longer limited by outdated versions and an endless shuffle of paper, manufacturers and wholesale distributors who digitize their catalogs have the ability to make on-the-fly changes whenever they're needed.

¹ Handshake, "2015 Wholesale Technology & Sales Survey Report," <http://www2.handshake.com/1/25242/2015-09-01/2vgbqc>.

But a digital catalog is only as good as your customer or rep's ability to use it. Once you've decided to digitize your product catalog, the challenge lies in ensuring that it is well-organized, easily searchable, and highly visual. It should contain all the information that both sales reps and customers need to make strategic decisions, while representing your brand in its best light. It should also provide a highly personalized experience to each of your customers.

The aim of this guide is to help manufacturers and distributors looking to create a digital catalog by providing key insights on organization, content, branding, and personalization. You'll also learn how modern digital catalog and mobile order writing solutions can improve your overall field sales experience.

We're long overdue to rid the world of paper product catalogs. Ultimately, the environment will be better for it, sales reps will be glad to have up-to-date, detailed information at their fingertips, and customers will enjoy a more modern ordering experience.



“Digital catalogs are living, breathing documents. Products can be added or removed, prices changed, and descriptions and images updated. These updates can then be instantaneously disseminated to your entire rep force.”

DETERMINING YOUR CATALOG STRUCTURE

Let's start with catalog organization. Before moving forward with your catalog project, it's important to think about the best way to organize your products so your customers or sales reps can navigate the catalog and pull up individual SKUs quickly and easily.

OPTIMIZE FOR HOW YOUR CUSTOMERS BUY

The organization of any B2B digital catalog should be driven primarily by your customers' buying patterns. If you're selling products seasonally, for instance, and you've categorized your catalog by product type, you will face problems showcasing seasonal collections to customers.

With that example in mind, here are a few ways your catalog can be organized:



1. Seasonally:

Whether you are selling seasonal collections or other products that are only available at certain times of the year, organizing products by season will ensure that you can conduct any pre-season selling necessary.



2. By brand or line:

If you sell multiple owned and licensed brands or distinct product lines, organizing your catalog this way can help you highlight whatever brands or products a customer is interested in.



3. By product category or type:

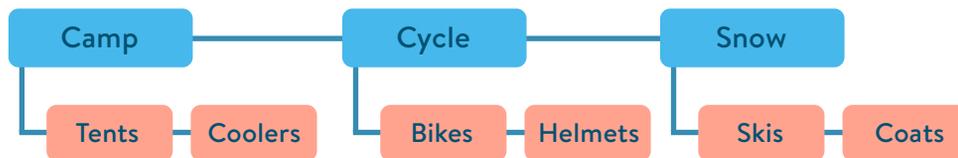
If you are selling many of the same products all year round, and you don't have distinct brands or lines to distinguish them, organizing the catalog by category or product type will be your best option.

These are three of the most common ways to organize a digital catalog, but your business may even find that a hybrid of these methods works best. It's important to note, however, that **over-categorization** can very quickly become a problem, which can be avoided with thoughtful planning.

If, for instance, you have 15 top-level categories and 4 levels of nested categories, it can take customers or reps a long time to figure out which initial category they're looking for and then drill down through that structure to isolate a single SKU. This wastes not only the sales rep's time and energy, but it's also a frustrating user experience for your customers.

It may also simply be the case that you are selling a relatively small number of SKUs, making a more granular categorization approach more hindrance than help.

Draw out a proposed category tree, which allows you to visualize how your products will be organized. Once you have that, go through the process of actually categorizing your products.



Are you noticing a large portion of your products clustered under one of your top-level categories? Perhaps it could be broken down more. In a similar vein, are you noticing certain top-level categories with very few products under them? They may need to be consolidated.

PROVIDE SEARCH FUNCTIONALITY

Another key consideration for the organization of your catalog is search. Remember, your customers and reps are going to want several different ways to navigate the catalog. While they may use categories to browse, they will also want to quickly search for particular products.

Think about the ways your customers might want to search for an item. Should you give them the ability to search by product name, certain keywords, or by a particular SKU number? Do your reps need the ability to scan products? Consider giving them the ability to scan a barcode with their mobile device's camera or a bluetooth scanner to pull up the full product description and images.

EFFICIENTLY DISPLAY PRODUCT VARIANTS

If your catalog consists of a variety of items that come in variants, referring to different colors, sizes, styles, or materials, your reps are probably familiar with the tedium of having to memorize those variants or flip through a paper catalog to check the fine print.

A digital catalog can afford you with new ways to display variants, whether it's in a list view, or a "grid view" display, in which all possible variant combinations are displayed in a matrix format. If, for instance, all possible sizes are listed horizontally, and all possible colors are listed vertically, you simply have to find the box that corresponds to a certain combination of color and size.

If you are using B2B eCommerce and/or mobile order writing software, (which includes an order writing interface as well as a digital catalog), both can make adding variants to an order much easier. See the "Digital Catalog Solutions" section of this guide for more details.

	XS	S	M	L
Blue	6 \$19.00	5 \$15.80	5 \$15.80	6 \$19.00
Red	6 \$19.00	5 \$15.80	6 \$19.00	5 \$15.80
Green	6 \$19.00	3 \$9.48	4 \$12.64	7 \$22.12

UNDERSTANDING CONTENT NEEDS

After determining how your catalog will be structured, it's time to turn to the content--the product descriptions, specs, and images that will help reps sell and customers make purchase decisions. A common goal for all your catalog's content (whether it's text or images) is consistency.

Reps and customers should have a uniform experience when looking at the breadth of your catalog. It will not only create a more professional experience, it will also help customers focus on your products, rather than any image inconsistencies or missing information. Let's take a look at each of these elements in more detail.

PRODUCT IMAGES

Product photography can be the difference between a closed or failed sale. A low quality image will scare customers away and has damaging brand implications. On the flip side, a strong, appealing image with the right lighting, composition, and focus will keep customers engaged and interested.

Depending upon the size of your catalog and the current stage of your business, you may decide either to invest in a freelance product photographer to help you with creating these images, or you may choose to do it yourself. Whatever you decide, there will be some key things to look out for. **Here are 6 best practices for your product imagery:**

1. Ensure photos are high resolution & always in focus:

Sharpness and clarity in your photos is absolutely necessary. If you're photographing products yourself, use a tripod to minimize any camera shake, and make sure products are properly in focus before shooting. Also ensure that your photos are in high resolution, so that your reps can zoom in on images to get more detailed views of materials, patterns, etc.

2. Show several product views:

Make it a priority to include several different views of your product, but be consistent. If you provide a front, back, and side view of a particular product, be sure the include those views (in the same order) for your other items. The user needs to know what to expect when scrolling through the image carousel.

3. Avoid inconsistent cropping:

When showing multiple product views, avoid multiple crops and sizes, so that users can seamlessly scroll through without any changes in the orientation of your images (e.g. from vertical to horizontal, or from square to vertical). Choose one crop style that works for all of your product shots, and keep it consistent throughout your catalog.



4. Choose a neutral background:

Keep the background of your images simple and clean, so that your products are the star. Any additional background patterns, colors, or light sources can be distracting. A simple white background is common industry practice.

5. Demonstrate scale if necessary:

In some cases, you'll need to give customers a point of reference to estimate the size of a product. If, for example, one of the products you're selling is a pocket-sized notebook, but the image looks like a full-sized 8x10 inch version, your sales reps may need to take more time explaining the product, or risk the customer receiving an item they didn't expect.

6. Include contextual images at the end:

If you have any contextual or lifestyle images of your products, include them at the end of your image carousel. However, the most important images--those where your product is front and center on a neutral background--should be highlighted first.

HOW TO DEMONSTRATE SCALE IN YOUR PRODUCT PHOTOGRAPHY

It can be a challenge to demonstrate size and scale in your product imagery, but here are several methods to help you achieve it:



Have a model hold the product. This is one of the most familiar points of reference you can use.



Include a small, low-key object in the image that customers might associate with that product. For instance, if you're selling handbags, you might want to photograph them with a mobile phone or set of keys (remember, this particular "detail" image should be included towards the end of your image carousel).



If you prefer to keep extraneous objects out of your images, you can **use margins and white space** to reflect scale, a simple technique to show size differences among products relative to others.

PRODUCT DESCRIPTIONS

Although an image can be worth a thousand words, well-written product descriptions are also needed to help customers quickly understand a product's key features and advantages. Here are 4 best practices for your product copy:

1. Be concise, yet thorough:

The description should be detailed enough to answer any questions your customer might have about your products, but not so complex that they can't be understood through a quick scan.

2. Avoid large blocks of text:

Similarly, while you want to include enough detail about a product to help sales reps feel confident about their knowledge on that particular product and customers feel confident about making a purchase, avoid large, overwhelming blocks of text.

3. Maintain a consistent structure:

Divide up your product descriptions into key sections and keep them consistent. For instance, you may want to include a brief overview of the product, a boilerplate message about the brand (especially if you're a manufacturer or distributor selling multiple brands), and then a list of specifications.

4. Consider including inventory information:

If you're working with a just-in-time inventory strategy, and you frequently have products that need to be backordered, it's a good idea to include real-time visibility into inventory levels in your catalog.

This allows reps to sell more strategically, steering customers toward alternate products if certain items are out of stock. On the other hand, if it is very easy for you to replenish inventory, you might choose not to include this information in your catalog.



Not surprisingly, product information can vary widely across industries. Whatever specific information you need to include, whether it's materials, ingredients, country of origin, etc. remember that consistency is key. Make sure that each piece of information is complete, and located in the same place for every product.

BRANDING YOUR CATALOG

Traditional product catalogs were meant to be important pieces of brand or marketing collateral, showcasing not just products, but also your brand. The same goes for a digital catalog.

While it is meant to be an important information resource, it should also give retailers a sense of what makes your brand unique, provoking an emotional reaction that will:

1. Make them more invested in your brand. If a retailer is indifferent to your brand, they may become indifferent to your products over time as well.
2. Allow them to understand your brand DNA and pass it on to the end consumer. Ideally, your retailers will become powerful brand ambassadors.

So how can you achieve this with your catalog?

- **Custom look & feel:**

This is especially important if you're a design-oriented company, or if your brand has a unique look and feel that you want to replicate in your digital catalog. Ensure that you can customize your catalog with your logo, custom colors, and any background images that you want to use.

- **Lifestyle imagery:**

If you're in fashion, gift, or other lifestyle-oriented industries, you can still include lifestyle imagery in your product catalog. Just make sure that those images are consistently placed at the end of your product carousels.



- **Product education & merchandising information:**

One of the great things about having your catalog on your B2B eCommerce portal or through a mobile order writing app is that you can include other forms of digital media in the selling process. If, for instance, you have product demo videos, merchandising guidelines, or slideshow presentations, you can use these materials to support the products in your catalog. If you're a distributor, you may want to include materials from the manufacturers/brands that you work with.

CUSTOM BRANDING FOR A B2B ECOMMERCE PORTAL



Custom branding comes even more into play when you're building a B2B eCommerce portal, where B2B customers can log in independently and place orders online 24/7. In fact, many of the best practices concerning catalog content and organization can apply to B2B eCommerce as well.

For more information on implementing B2B eCommerce for your business, check out our guide, **"5 Steps to a Successful B2B eCommerce Rollout."**

CREATING A PERSONALIZED CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

The last step to creating a top-notch digital catalog is making sure that it can be easily tailored to your individual customers. This personalization element is a huge part of what makes B2B digital catalogs so powerful.

B2B selling all about personalized service. It may be the case that your customers only purchase certain brands or lines from your catalog. You may also have different pricing tiers or discounting systems for each customer. Your reps may also want to see the items that each customer tends to purchase most.

A digital catalog can help your reps create that ultimate personalized experience. Here's how:



Customer-specific product assortments:

Your digital catalog solution should allow you to filter and customize your catalog for each of your customers, so that you can ensure that those customers only see the products they are eligible to purchase. This will prevent customers from becoming overwhelmed with too much choice, while also keeping them focused on relevant products.



Customer-specific pricing:

If you have several pricing tiers for your customers or any customer-specific discounts, your digital catalog should be able to display the pricing relevant to that particular customer. This way, your reps won't have to memorize complex pricing rules or waste time calling the back office for pricing information. Accurate, customer-specific pricing also significantly speeds up fulfillment times, as orders are less prone to errors.



Access to order history & top products:

If you have layered ordering functionality on top of your catalog, it's useful to provide a customer's order history and most frequently ordered items to your reps and customers. This allows for quick duplication of past orders and upsell or cross-sell opportunities according to buyer preferences.

Catalog personalization can also occur on the rep level. If sales reps in certain territories only sell certain manufacturers, brands, or lines, you can control their version of the catalog so that they have access to only the products they are authorized to sell. This will:

- Ensure only trained sales reps are delivering a brand's message to customers.
- Make it simple for sales managers to track and report sales rep performance by brand.
- Eliminate confusion for both sales reps and customers.



Catalog Visibility Controls ultimately ensure that each customer can see and order only the products in your catalog that apply to them. As a result, your sales reps and customers can easily search and quickly find the right products, saving time and increasing sales.

BEYOND DIGITAL CATALOGS

It's time to rethink your catalog strategy. The catalogs sitting in your warehouse represent money that could have been spent elsewhere, and after they're more than a season or two old, there is literally nothing you can do but dump them in the trash. With a wide array of digital selling solutions available today, it's time to not only digitize your catalog, but also realize its potential as a tool to drive revenue.

While there are tools available that simply help you create digital versions of a paper catalog, these are often limited when it comes to features and functionality. Ultimately, what makes a digital catalog truly powerful is the ability to use that catalog to actually create and submit orders. More comprehensive solutions like mobile order writing and B2B eCommerce software can allow brands to digitize their catalogs, while also eliminating manual order writing and submission methods.

First, the modern day digital catalog is synonymous with your B2B website. A place for your customers to have anytime access to product information and ordering functionality. Second, the digital catalog is also the key part of a mobile selling tool for your reps, so they can get rid of cumbersome printed catalogs and order forms and no longer need to memorize pricing rules for each customer. In both scenarios, because everything is done digitally, orders can be immediately synced with back office systems, eliminating the need for data entry in the order submission and fulfillment process.

If you'd like to talk about optimizing your digital catalog, or have questions about your digital sales and ordering strategy, contact us today.

ABOUT HANDSHAKE

Handshake provides the B2B Commerce platform for manufacturers and distributors that powers standout ordering experiences both in-person and online. Companies using Handshake transform their sales effectiveness and drive operational efficiency, delighting customers and growing lasting relationships.

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