

B2B Personalization Buyers Guide:

Finding The Right Solution And The Right Partner




TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 3 Kicking Off The Right Personalization Strategy**
- 8 What To Look For In A Personalization Partner**
- 10 What To Look For In A Personalization Platform**
- 13 Things To Question**
- 15 8 Steps To Selecting The Right B2B Personalization Partner**
- 17 Vendor Checklist**



KICKING OFF THE RIGHT PERSONALIZATION STRATEGY



Organizations that fully invest in online personalization will outsell others that haven't by more than 30%.

[Source: Gartner](#)

Personalization has become table stakes in many industries, but B2B brings additional challenges. This makes selecting the right vendor – not just the right solution – difficult. The sector has attracted attention from a wide variety of platform providers, some of which don't have the experience, expertise and ability to support the unique needs of B2B companies.

Moving your organization's personalization plans forward means first creating a strategy to find the right partner by getting past the buzzwords and marketing-speak that might be steering you in the wrong direction.

The process begins with a look inward at what you want to accomplish. It's time to assess:

- Levels and types of personalization
- Personalization channels
- How to connect personalization to the brand
- Vendor landscape
- How to define industry terms



Levels and types of personalization: Consider the customization your brand seeks to achieve, along with the segmentation that makes the most sense for your niche. Do you want to focus on search, browse and discover, recommendations or content? Or all of those? To what degree do you want to personalize the customer's journey? Even if a basic level of personalization makes sense today, consider what sort of scalability you need and where your platform can help you future-proof. It's crucial that you replicate relationships in the way your customers want and expect. The right technology provider will have the knowledge to deliver the levels of personalization that best fit your organization's needs. A seasoned partner will have the expertise to examine your goals and determine the best way to reach them. It will also be able to identify the resources your company will need to reach those goals and highlight any gaps that may need to be addressed before, during or after implementation.

Your personalization channels: In an ever-changing market, B2B personalization doesn't stand still. Forward-looking organizations are increasingly leveraging unified commerce strategies. They may add new channels at any time while also shifting how customer engagement happens across existing channels. From web sites to mobile applications, e-mail, social media, call centers, warehouses and brick-and-mortar stores, companies may choose to use a selection of these channels (or all of them at once) depending on their needs. Because your personalization strategy isn't static when it comes to the channels you use and how you use them, your provider's capabilities shouldn't be, either. It's important that these channels are tied together to deliver the most relevant and impactful content during every interaction. Every customer touch point matters, and the right relationship will enable your brand to deploy the most effective tools wherever your buyers are engaging with you.

The brand connection to personalization: Your organization's end goals and the resources you have available to meet them are perhaps among the most important factors your personalization partner should understand. Providing your customers with consistent messaging in an omnichannel environment is a primary element in building value and nurturing long-term relationships. Your technology provider will be a key player in supporting your brand and scaling your personalization efforts as your business grows, drawing on its expertise and internal capabilities to strategize with you to take you to the next level.



Below are just some of the most common B2B personalization goals:

- Product findability
- Pricing transparency
- Customer lifetime value
- Customize messaging/imagery per account
- Increase revenue and conversion
- Increase click-through rates
- Increase content engagement
- Reduce bounce rates
- Increase average order value (AOV), items per order (IPO) and/or average order quantity (AOQ)
- Increase in recovery rates related to cart abandonment
- Lift in revenue per email
- Improve net promoter score (NPS)

Vendor landscape: When it comes to B2B personalization, the vendor landscape is wide and varied. Some providers work with only a portion of the personalization picture, while others offer solutions that are all-encompassing. Some partners have a hyper-focus on personalization, while others are essentially doing it as a “side job”. Experience levels range considerably and the claims made by providers — for example, around the role AI plays in each system and its ability to process, analyze and act on data in real time — also are all across the board.

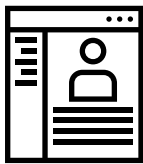
Navigating this landscape requires an understanding of how each vendor’s expertise fits your organization’s particular needs and where its available technology tools are best suited to help you reach your personalization goals. You need to know what you’re getting into, and that your software partner is ready and able to support you most effectively.

Preferred vendors should have the experience and capabilities to do the following:

- **Enable a unified view of the customer, combining first- and third-party data (behavioral, POS, etc.) to build unique profiles;**
- **Test and optimize at scale, building goal-oriented tests or automatically enhancing the experience based on KPIs;**
- **Balance automation with user control, analyzing and applying insights from explicit and inferred customer data, while continuously optimizing by channel and objective; and**
- **Focus on decisioning and executing, delivering personalized content, offers and recommendations across all customer touch points, as well as segmenting, testing and optimizing most effectively.**



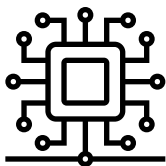
How to define industry terms: Some personalization vendors working in the B2B space have developed their own language, either to focus the discussion on their strengths or to downplay areas where their capabilities are behind the curve. By understanding some common industry terms (and what they don't mean), you will be better prepared to identify which providers have the internal expertise and the functionality within their technology stack to make your company's personalization strategy a success.



Personalization

True personalization centers on individual user profiles for known and first-time visitors. It integrates first-, second- and third-party data about user behavior, context, geolocation and affinity to deliver actionable data-driven insight into customers and prospective buyers. Data, analytics, decisioning and execution come together to create brand experiences that are matched to unique user needs and preferences.

Common misconception: Segmentation is what some vendors mean when they say personalization. Segmentation is the division of customer profiles based on attributes. It's a small piece of the much larger personalization picture.



Artificial Intelligence (AI) or Machine Learning

Artificial intelligence is the suite of processes by which a technology learns, reasons, predicts, self-corrects and even recognizes speech. It gives a system the automatic ability to make human-like decisions, adapting and learning new data to improve those decisions over time. An AI-powered platform can learn without manual programming, changing its algorithms as more information comes in. Machine learning and deep learning are subsets of AI.

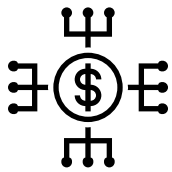
Common misconception: When providers say AI, they sometimes are referring to automation. Automation is simply technology that has been programmed to take previously manual tasks and do them automatically. Incoming data is reprocessed but, without additional programming, the system doesn't gain true intelligence or become better at making decisions.



Real Time

A platform that performs in real time is capable of working in the moment, with in-session data and profiling. The information isn't simply cached. Instead, each interaction "recalculates" and rescores the customer's individual affinity. The technology is able to both collect data and take action on it in real time.

Common misconception: Though vendors often refer to their systems as *real time*, some are actually based on *next session* technology, which takes data, caches it and simply applies it to future interactions rather than using it immediately to deliver a better experience.



Omnichannel

As the name implies, an omnichannel platform collects and integrates data from each customer touch point. This encompasses everything from web site – responsive or desktop/mobile – to mobile apps, in-store, call center, email and ads. Omnichannel stitches together a unified profile of the customer, enabling personalized digital commerce experiences such as custom offers, product recommendations, site search and navigation, landing pages, and product detail pages on web, mobile sites and applications.

Common misconception: Unlike *omnichannel*, many solutions instead utilize *siloed channels*. Even when data is harvested from multiple channels, this approach still can't effectively bring together all of a customer's information, leaving the organization without the comprehensive insight needed to chart the most effective journey for each buyer.





WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN A PERSONALIZATION PARTNER

B2B consumers choose to engage with sellers much later in their buying journeys – and when they do, they expect the seller to know who they are, where they are in that process, and what business goals their companies want to achieve.

[Source: Forrester](#)

With your organization's mission, capabilities, needs and expectations in mind, it's time to find the right personalization provider. Even if you have experienced staff in-house, you'll be relying on your vendor for insight and advice. When selecting a provider, consider its current customer base and proven successes. Its history of proven performance will be key in achieving the best outcomes and maximizing the value of your personalization strategy.

Which qualities should your preferred B2B technology partner possess? Look for the right match for these four characteristics:

- 1 Experience**
Knowing the still-untapped potential within the B2B marketplace, you want a vendor that has spent years mastering the kind of personalization that matters to you and your customers. A leader in the space has use cases available that demonstrate its past successes. Its client profiles reflect a deep background in B2B. The executive management team represents years of experience working in and understanding the industry. The bigger picture reveals a company with a commitment to innovation and excellence.



- 2 Prescriptive and Proactive**


A successful personalization vendor displays a number of important traits. Its team is hands-on, with a collaborative, high-touch approach to every partnership. It's relentlessly focused on results. It's ready to help clients identify potential challenges ahead of time and push through issues that may arise later, whether that means assistance navigating personnel needs during implementation or ways to increase the system's performance after installation is complete. The vendor also tackles problems head-on and has a deep use-case library to draw from when developing solutions.
- 3 Market Credibility**

Looking at a top-tier B2B personalization provider, you'll see that it has a strong reputation within the industry. Its activities are the focus of research analyst reports. It receives awards for its successes. It's likely the provider has developed proprietary assets or processes that enable it to achieve results its competitors often can't.
- 4 Innovation**

A personalization partner delivering strong results for its clients knows that consistent innovation is key to long-term success. It brings new products to market and routinely solicits input and feedback from industry sources. In addition, it contributes expertise to maintain a healthy marketplace. This ensures that its technology is capable of helping clients meet emerging challenges and take advantage of opportunities. The best providers are always evolving to meet the needs of a growing, maturing B2B marketplace. They have dedicated staff overseeing their R&D efforts, and they may be publicly recognized for scientific or technological advancements.



WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN A PERSONALIZATION PLATFORM



Digital-first behaviors mean online experiences are more important than ever.

[Source: Forrester](#)

Along with expertise, the right partner also will bring technology designed to fit within your organizational environment, with the features and capabilities needed to support your personalization strategy. Customers will have ongoing interaction with your chosen system, so their experience needs to be considered alongside your organization's internal requirements. Look ahead — not just to the functionality you'll need now, but also into the future — as you evaluate potential platforms.

Identify the features your personalization platform should offer, including:

- Accuracy
- Solution stack
- Omnichannel capabilities
- Complex use-case capabilities
- Comprehensive data analysis
- Personalization at scale
- Third-party integration



Accuracy and real-time results: A successful personalization solution has several important strengths. It features accurate algorithms targeted at the B2B space that drive actionable intelligence and relevant interactions with your buyers. The right technology also delivers real-time engagements and results, a cornerstone of the nimblest personalization strategies and fruitful customer relationships.

Extensive solution stack: A strong B2B personalization platform encompasses all the necessary functions, rather than focusing on only a few. From empowering your buyers to search and discover items or content within your large catalog to guiding them with tailored recommendations and messaging, it has next-generation capabilities to help your buyers convert. A high-performing solution doesn't sacrifice these fundamental competencies.

Orchestrated omnichannel capabilities: The right personalization solution covers all channels, even if an organization doesn't presently plan to leverage the entire suite. This means that not only are web and email handled, but also mobile applications, in-store, call center and everything else the brand may require.

Complex use-case capabilities: A top-tier technology isn't flummoxed by challenging requirements. It's able to support enterprises with unique needs that go beyond basic functionality. It can efficiently manage everything from inventory to fulfillment to replenishment, all without getting bogged down or falling back on inaccurate, incomplete or low-quality insight.



Comprehensive data collection and analytics: An effective personalization solution is powerful enough to harvest many data types from many different systems and sources. It uses this functionality to deliver value-added, real-time intelligence that translates into actionable insights. If a platform can't integrate information from a broad range of sources, key customer data will remain out of reach. These data sources include:

- Current session behavior
- Weather and geography
- Current content
- Content metadata
- Offline and POS (point of sale) transactions
- Digital transactions
- Past behavior
- Current and past product searches
- Device and technographics
- Preferences, segments, CRM, third-party data
- Time of day
- Lifetime value/RFM
- Product metadata
- Product and gift finder answers
- Inventory

Personalization at scale: A high-performing B2B system features advanced enterprise-level capabilities. It's robust and built to support multiple brands and multiple web-based assets. The design focuses heavily on meeting the critical need for reliable uptime, rapid data processing (even at high volumes), and the ability to expand quickly and seamlessly to support evolving business needs and new services.

Third-party integration: Forward-looking companies leverage a varied technology architecture, and a leading B2B personalization provider recognizes that. The right platform can integrate with third-party systems as well as in-house, custom-brewed solutions. It's compatible with a wide range of technologies and data sources, offering the best in flexibility, scalability and future-proofing.



THINGS TO QUESTION



38% of people complete at least half of their work purchases online. That number is expected to rise to 55% by the end of 2020.

[Source: Forrester](#)

In the search for a technology provider, companies sometimes worry they'll have to kiss a lot of frogs before they find the right personalization partner. Some vendors fall short when it comes to experience; others overstate their capabilities. Organizations risk that what they've been told and what they've been sold aren't the same thing. But it is possible to zero in on a good relationship by keeping an eye out for these warning signs that a vendor — or its platform — isn't up to the task.

The vendor doesn't understand B2B: Some technology providers don't have a good handle on the unique challenges of B2B selling. Their systems may lack the ability to support large product catalogs and complex purchasing and approval workflows involving multiple stakeholders — each of whom may have different permissions and/or a need to see different items within that catalog. A vendor without sufficient experience in B2B may not be able to tailor the experience to the buyer, focusing instead on what the business is selling, and it often can't (or doesn't) incorporate important data feeds such as custom purchasing and approval workflows, CRM and behavioral information. The outcome is an inability to gain a full view of the customer, resulting not only in incomplete insight, but also the potential for a diminished user experience. Though the B2B purchasing process often has unique nuances, most buyers have developed a “consumerized” B2C mindset and high expectations through their personal online shopping. Successfully addressing the complexities of B2B personalization without losing sight of the customer experience demands a strong B2B background.



68% of B2B buyers prefer to conduct their research online rather than with a sales rep.

Source: Forrester

Overstated capabilities: Can the vendor actually deliver what it says it can? You don't want to be stuck with a system that underperforms, so keep your ears open for too many "yes" responses when asking about capabilities. You want honest answers about the platform's ability to scale, its accuracy, its performance when it comes to real-time data and the depth of its feature set. Consider carefully any vendor who claims to do all these things but doesn't have any use cases to show you a proven track record of success.

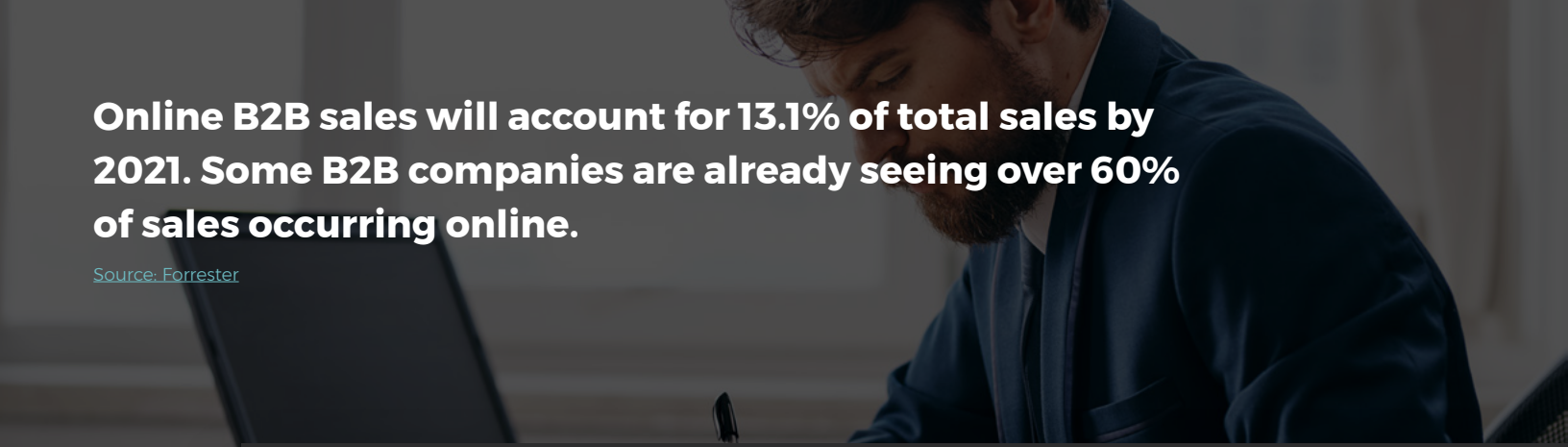
Exaggerated experience and success: Another common pitfall is a provider that makes its background look better than it really is. Some tout experience in specific industries or with certain client types that is, in reality, much thinner than claimed. Others use buzzwords to avoid providing more concrete details about their capabilities.

Attractive tools but no substance: A problem organizations don't want to encounter — one that is too often identified after the system has been launched — is a platform that looks slick but lacks key functionalities. Don't be dazzled by a fancy interface if the engine underneath is weak. Ask to see the platform in action and try the features your organization plans to use. Is the system easy to navigate? Does the UI make sense? Pay close attention to the key components and note potential gaps in long-term usability.

Overly optimistic implementation timelines: Further along the relationship path, vendors may overpromise on how quickly they can deploy the system. They may not have taken the time to develop a full understanding of your organization's requirements and expectations, or it's possible they don't have the internal expertise to accurately estimate how much time is truly needed. No matter the reason, you should strongly question any implementation schedule that appears bullish or omits key steps.

Unrealistic cost estimates: Cost estimates that seem too low to be believable are likely to end up being padded by a laundry list of change orders and upcharges. Beware add-ons such as unexpected system upgrades or expansions, the need to do custom development prior to or shortly after installation, and support for user training. These additional expenses can quickly add up and completely change your company's personalization project costs and long-term ROI.

Silos and non-orchestrated channels: A provider that doesn't have an integrated approach to data will likely not be able to deliver a quality customer experience. If data is isolated across channels, it won't be properly correlated throughout the customer journey. The result is a customer experience that is disjointed and cumbersome, with missed engagement opportunities, a lack of actionable insight and ineffective execution.



Online B2B sales will account for 13.1% of total sales by 2021. Some B2B companies are already seeing over 60% of sales occurring online.

Source: Forrester

8 STEPS TO SELECTING THE RIGHT B2B PERSONALIZATION PARTNER

The time to solidify your personalization strategy and choose a partner is now. Some careful planning and targeted research will get you on the right path.

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- 1 Do your homework.**

You should already know some of the answers to the questions you pose to each prospective vendor. Understand its position in the marketplace and where its experience ends. Have an idea of what its system can offer you, and which features are missing or underdeveloped. Be an educated buyer.
- 2 Outline your use cases in depth.**

It's important that you share enough detail with a potential partner to ferret out which ones can and can't support your needs. Provide background on your expectations, your challenges, and your future plans, and ask vendors how they plan to provide you a solution that meets your needs. You want a true partner, and that relationship begins during the search phase.
- 3 Define the ultimate customer experience.**

The type of engagement you want to drive with your clients is unique to your company. You don't want to simply mimic your competitors' customer encounters or accept a vanilla experience. Once you know how you want your customer journey to look and feel, you can then choose the right vendor to help you personalize the experience to perfectly suit your brand.



- 4 Don't take the salesperson's word.**

Easy answers shouldn't be the end of the conversation. Dig deeper. Ask for details about features. Inquire about the vendor's future development plans as well as how often it releases updates. Ask to speak with the vendor's data scientists or technology experts. How has its market share grown? How many clients has it added in recent years? Can you talk with a few current customers to find out what the relationship looks like day to day?
- 5 Align short- and long-term needs with the vendor.**

An experienced provider will have the knowledge to strategize with your organization to solve for your needs today as well as on a longer time horizon. Ask the provider how it plans to tackle your short-term goals. Vendors with a deep background in the B2B space will be able to help you develop a realistic time frame for achieving the results you desire. You can then work through the same questions on your long-term goals to make sure your expectations and timelines match up with the vendor's at every step along the way.
- 6 Set goals and define the criteria for measuring them.**

You won't know if your personalization strategy is a success if you can't put some firm numbers around how well it's really performing. Sit down with potential vendors and outline what you want to achieve and when you expect to meet those goals. You and the vendor both need to be confident in your partnership.
- 7 Emphasize B2B capabilities and understanding of the sector.**

With the proliferation of personalization vendors working in the B2C market, you need to be careful not to assume their experience will transfer well into B2B. It often doesn't. The right partner will be able to demonstrate repeated success in the B2B space and will welcome your questions about its background and expertise.
- 8 Think in terms of a long-term partner.**

A provider or platform may be sufficient today, but what about tomorrow? With your company's personalization road map for the future in hand, you need to know that your partnership will be a success not just in the weeks after implementation, but also years down the road. As your personalization strategy progresses and matures, your vendor's commitment to innovation and deep experience will be essential in moving your plans forward and supporting your long-term efforts.



VENDOR CHECKLIST

Experience & Market Credibility

- ❑ How long have you been in business?
- ❑ How many B2B clients/sites do you support?
- ❑ What levels of client support do you offer post-implementation?
- ❑ What business metrics can you share? (ex. retention rates, client-generated revenue, total number of personalized experiences powered each month)
- ❑ Do you have patented technology?
- ❑ How do you ensure your personalization solutions stay on pace with the market?
- ❑ How do you manage new features/functionality outside of your product roadmap?

Extensive Solution Stack

- ❑ What is your definition of real-time?
- ❑ How do you use AI/machine learning/predictive analytics?
- ❑ What can be personalized within each buyer touch point?
- ❑ What channels does your solution support?
- ❑ How do you handle complex use cases such as approval processes for account-based buying?
- ❑ Do you have the ability to do A/B and multivariate testing on personalization strategies?
- ❑ How much control do we have to customize personalization strategies based on our business objectives?
- ❑ Which metrics do you use to measure the success of personalization?
- ❑ How will you be able to scale as your business grows?

Comprehensive Data Collection, Actionable Insights

- ❑ How do you collect data?
- ❑ How do you process data in real time and trigger the personalized experience?
- ❑ How do you specifically personalize for unknown visitors?
- ❑ How does your solution personalize your buyers' entire shopping journey?
- ❑ How does your solution integrate data across all touch points?
- ❑ How will you manage a consistent buyer experience among all of our touch points?
- ❑ What types of third-party data can your solution integrate to enhance the buyer profile?



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