

Whitepaper

Why the shopping experience is leading for a b2b platform

How a great shopping experience is changing B2B commerce



Introduction

B2B buyers shop for a living. Although B2B and B2C differ significantly, what they have in common is that the end user in both business models is a consumer. And all consumers, however 'businesslike', are swayed by emotion. Whether you are ordering a pair of trainers for your daughter or a new collection of garden furniture for your lifestyle store, the process will be an experience – a shopping experience, as we say. Such experiences can be manipulated – sorry, orchestrated – and here, digital B2C is streets ahead of B2B, where all too often, the thinking is: 'We're digital, we have a website'. Or: 'We do e-commerce, our catalogue is online'.

The digital revolution is revolutionizing marketing, and revolutionizing it permanently, to borrow a phrase from Karl Marx. B2C was the first to arrive on the scene. B2C upstarts such as Amazon and eBay became household names overnight as they explored and pioneered the amazing opportunities created by digital. Older, more established and 'stuffer' B2B enterprises were always at a disadvantage as they couldn't start from scratch. But this disadvantage was never purely technological; the culture and mindset of B2B remained analogue. 'A tin of baked beans is a tin of baked beans. We don't need pretty pictures.' Or: 'B2C is all marketing, all tricks. But B2B is hard-nosed business.'

Attitudes are changing fast. In their daily lives, B2B buyers also shop for fun just like everyone else. And they like what they see in B2C: inspirational pages (not just lists of produce), real-time product updates, offers that are relevant to them, intelligent, personalized searches and an attractive design that looks just as good on mobile. Why can't they have the same pleasant and frictionless online experience at work, in B2B? They won't put up with anything less for long.

B2B e-commerce needs to get its act together as the stakes are huge: the market will be worth \$1.2 trillion by 2021 in the US alone, according to estimates from Forrester, and account for 13.1% of all B2B sales. Don't be too distracted by that trillion dollars; it's the 13.1% that is actually the most instructive, because it shows that when it comes to digital, the B2B market is still relatively immature. So there is everything to play for.

To stay in the game, B2B needs to offer shopping experiences that rival the best of B2C. Why should retail have all the fun? B2B websites can – and must – also inspire, personalize, look great and make payment hassle-free. It would be a grave mistake to think of these as frivolous retail 'extras' that have little to do with the serious business of B2B – they are the serious business of B2B, and vital ingredients to the success of your e-commerce strategy.

Introduction

No one is pretending that B2B is the same as B2C. The way B2B has to stage and structure these all-important shopping experiences is markedly different from how it's done in B2C. The B2B customer journey lies outside the scope of this white paper which explores some of the ways in which B2B e-commerce can – and must – offer their customers a B2C shopping experience that rivals the best in B2C.

Like all revolutions, digital is ruthless – and many B2C names that once seemed impregnable did not survive. Creative destruction, absolutely. To escape this fate, you need to curate great shopping experiences for your customers. We shall explore some of the ways you achieve this below. Nobody wants a shopping experience that is bland and generic, so **personalization** is crucial. **Design** isn't just there to look good (although that matters), it should also help the buyer navigate the site in a straightforward and intuitive way. **On-site** searches have to be quick and effective – patience is in short supply online! A lot of B2B e-commerce enterprises don't pay sufficient attention to **SEO**; we'll explain why that's a serious oversight. Other topics that contribute to a great shopping experience are ease of **payment**, the **mobile** variant of your shop and relevant opportunities to **cross- and upsell**.

Inspire and personalize

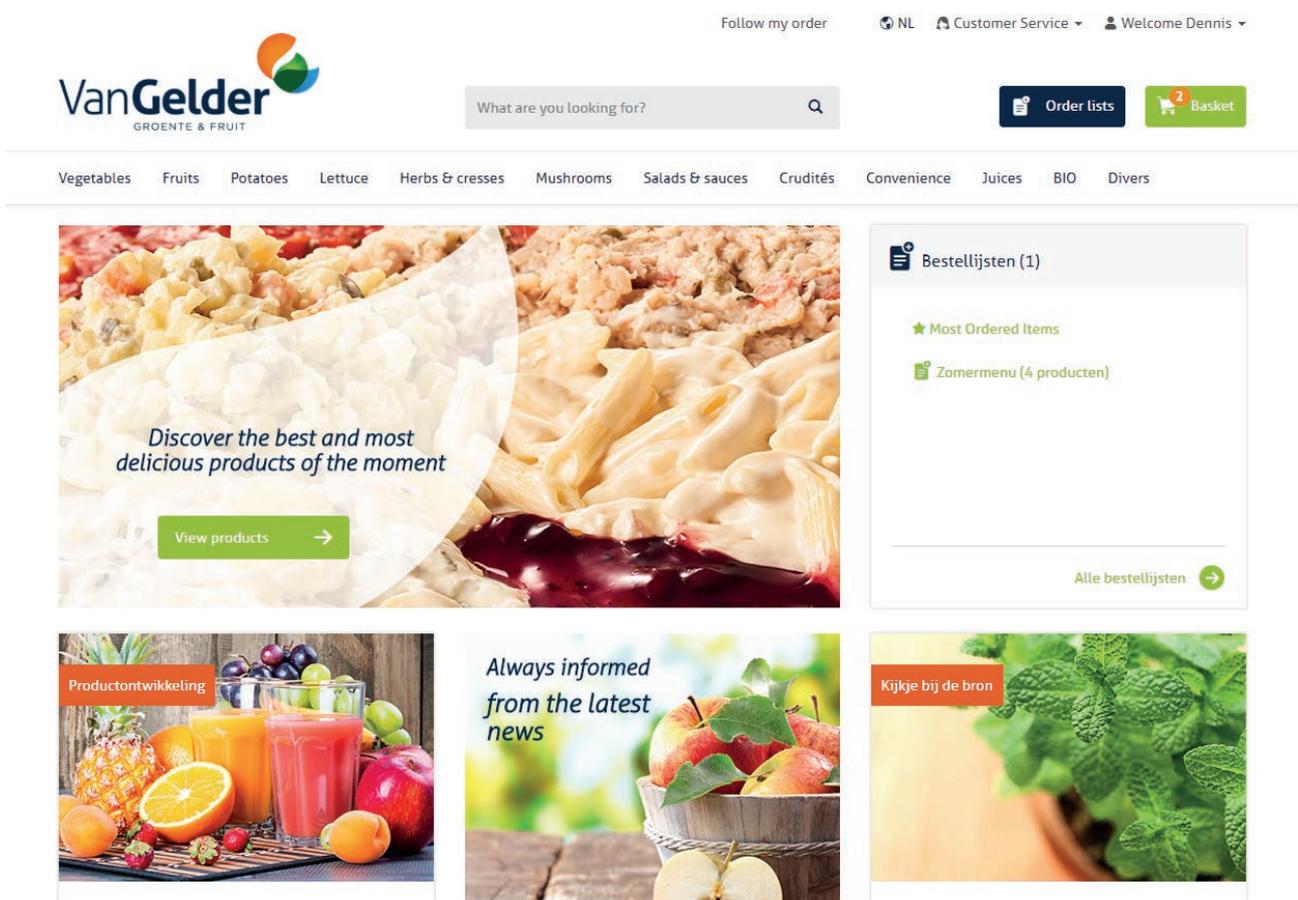
Personalization works: it drives conversion, often significantly. When done well, B2B customers regard personalization as a service, and in a recent survey, 50% of them said they wanted more of it.

When it comes to personalization, B2B has an advantage over B2C: relationships in B2B are longer-term, so you know a lot about your customers.

The two screenshots below are from the e-commerce website of Van Gelder, the Dutch fruit and vegetable wholesaler. The first screenshot shows the standard Van Gelder home page; the second screenshot is a homepage presented to a visitor who has logged on to the site – a customer in other words. The buyer's order history is flagged up clearly.

The recommendation of a new range of salads and fresh juices with a longer shelf life is not plucked out of thin air, but is based on previous purchases and on-site searches. Note that without personalization, the visitor might never get to hear about these products.

But B2B personalization must go much further than that. You want to segment the product offering itself, and only show the customer what is available to him, and at the price based on the terms of his contract. Anything else is a distraction. Customized product catalogues also have a technical benefit. B2B assortments and specifications can run to many thousands of items, so if you cut down that list you cut the loading time, and make the site experience much snappier.



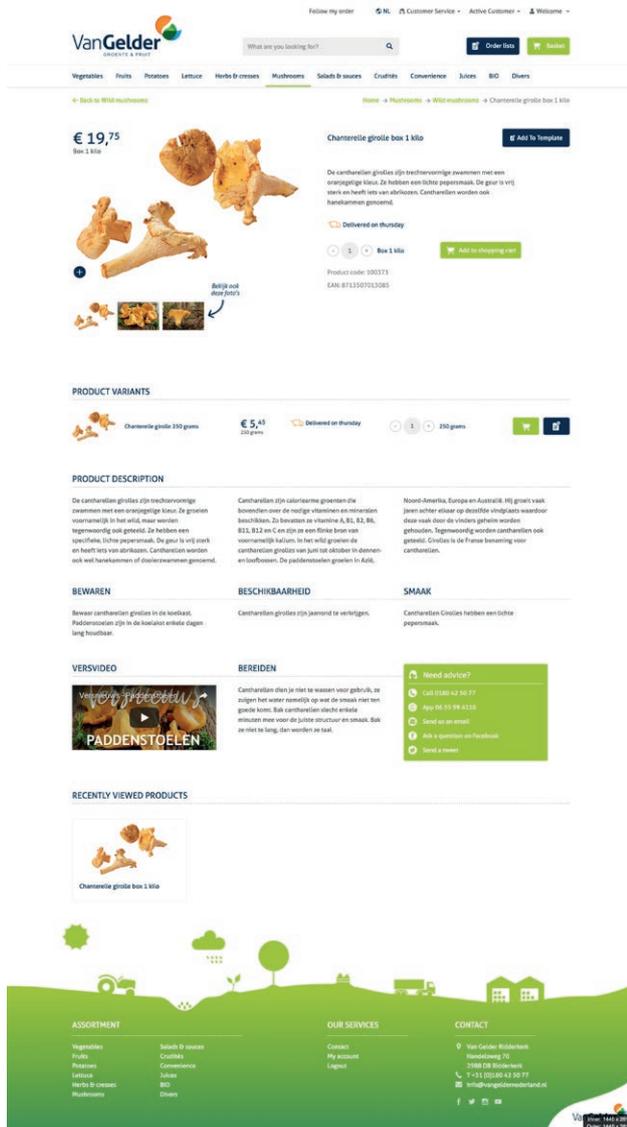
Your design is your identity

A website is a visual medium, and our reactions to a site are visceral. If a product page looks bad, the product must be bad also – especially if your competitors are more thoughtful and creative. Informing the customer is not the same thing as cramming as much information on the product page as possible – again, do not commit the error of thinking: ‘This is B2B. Our customers know what they want. There is no need to dress up what we sell.’

It is extraordinary how many B2B webshops still have this (analogue) mindset. Poor, often tiny photographs are buried in a sea of text. Call to Action buttons – the very place where you want your visitor to go – are lost in a confusion of colourful and shouty design. You can’t zoom in. Fonts are clunky, colors clash. You do not want to read the text but you just know that there are spelling errors.

A product page from the Van Gelder webshop shows us how it’s done. The page’s color scheme is in harmony with the product and ethos of Van Gelder. The photographs are skillful and attractive, the product price and description well-positioned. The purchase influencing message (“Next-day delivery”) is clearly visible, yet discreet. As well as the hard facts, the product information includes instructions on how to prepare and cook chanterelle mushrooms – perhaps not the immediate concern of a B2B buyer, but a nice touch all the same and a great example of the consumerization of B2B. (Another great example of how B2B can inspire its customer is the mothersite of the Makro supermarket wholesalers. Product pages are enriched with information about the provenance of a product, or details about the farmer which play so well on restaurant menus.)

Very few e-commerce pages achieve the level of finish of this Van Gelder – the result of a lot of hard, detailed work. Yet the result looks effortless. This builds the buyer’s confidence in the product.



On-site Searches: make every result count

We spend 70% of our time online looking for information. This has massive implications for search engine optimization (SEO), of which more below, but it also tells you that it is imperative to get your on-site search right.

Like all online shoppers, B2B e-commerce customers are impatient. Even a delay of a few second can be experienced as irritating. Visitors to your e-commerce site should see the search bar instantly and unambiguously; if they have to scan the page for it you may have lost them already.

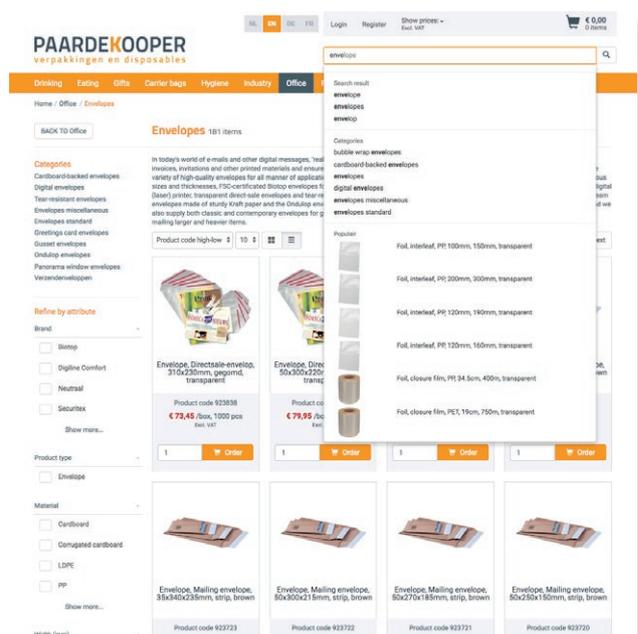
Another cause of frustration are searches that fire blanks and give you 'no result'. Google Tag Manager tracks these 'no result' searches, giving you the data you need to stamp them out.

Irrelevant results also negatively affect the shopping experience. This is where personalization comes into play. You can respond relevantly and intelligently to a search by basing your suggestions on the buyer's order history and wish list, supplemented by real-time contextual information such as the weather where this is relevant. Search recommendations can also be generated by what is called collaborative filtering, which establishes affinity between products. This 'people who bought this also bought this' technique is a B2C staple that can also be highly effective in a B2B context.

More powerful e-commerce platforms also allow the B2B seller to override the personalization functionality and create his own set of predefined relationships between products. This helps cut down on recommendations not experienced as relevant by the customer – and therefore not customer-friendly.

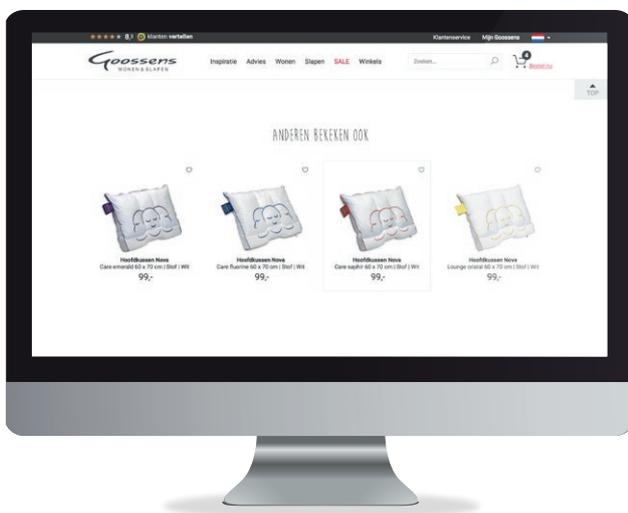
Let's see how the webshop of Dutch packaging wholesalers Paardekooper handles on-site searches. As you can see, the user has typed 'envel' in the search bar – short for 'envelop'. The type-ahead becomes a mega menu listing the types of envelop available (cardboard-backed, digital, tear-resistant, standard) as well as the most popular sizes and amounts. The navigation on the left breaks down the product taxonomy according to brand, material, dimension, type of closure, position of the window and so on. A lot of clear information from just half a word!

An improved shopping experience is reward enough – but there is more: the search data are immensely useful to you. Insight into how your customers search, and what keywords they use, can help you understand why certain searches convert, and others don't.



Cross- and upselling: stay relevant

Every time a Starbucks barista asks you if you would like a brownie with your macchiato she is engaged in cross-selling. The term is often confused with upselling, where the vendor is trying to persuade you to buy a more expensive version of the same product (a double macchiato in this case). Both techniques have the same end goal: to increase spend per visit.



The purchase of the macchiato was a B2C transaction, and cross- and upselling is very prevalent in B2C. However, more and more B2B e-commerce companies are interested in using these techniques to increase spend per basket. You can see why. B2B customers often make large repeat purchases and may be more motivated to focus on quality and value rather than price – ripe for an upsell. Also, because of the long sales cycle and the need to build mutual trust, the parties in B2B know a lot more about each other than the retailer/buyer in the B2C relationship. This means it is potentially easier for B2B to cross- and upsell in a targeted and relevant way.

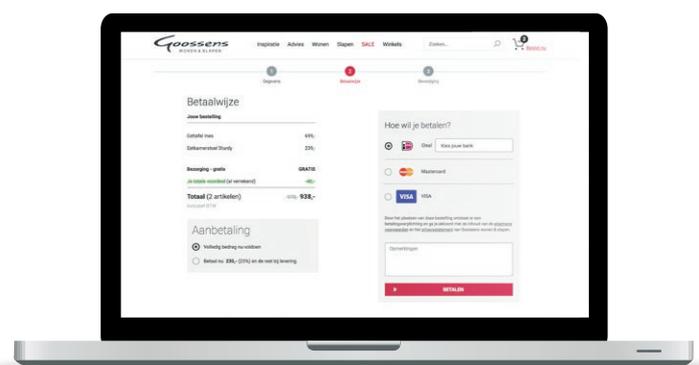
It is crucial not to be heavy-handed. As with personalization, cross- and upselling should be perceived as a **service** to the customer, not (just) as a way of getting him to part with more of his money.

Checkout and payment: make sure you're ready for the future

Payment in B2B is incomparably more complex and slower than the simple credit card transaction used in B2C. One way of putting it would be to say that B2B is often forced to spend a lot of 'analogue time' on approvals, Purchase Orders, arranging lines of credit, invoice consolidation and so on. In the US, 51% of B2B payments is still made by check.

Increasingly, B2B e-commerce companies are offering payment through such solutions as iDEAL and PayPal. Your B2B e-commerce solution needs to be able to respond to this growing trend and offer a stable and secure integration with these payment platforms.

A brief word about the checkout page. As in B2C, a poor checkout experience can make or break a deal. And poor here means unclear. So make your checkout as simple as possible. Headers and footers should be removed or minimized to tune down any visual 'noise'. The example below of a concise checkout page comes from the webshop of Dutch lifestyle and furniture company Goossens. Note the simple use of color and the scarcity of text; the succinct information about checkout options is kept well away from the action on the left-hand side of the page. Silence! The customer is about to pay!



The unstoppable rise of mobile e-commerce

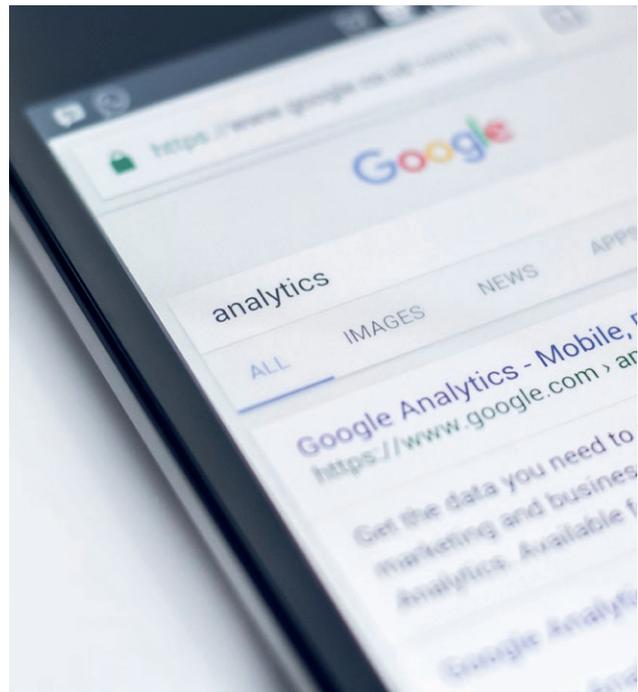
Having a transactional B2B site is not enough. To remain competitive, you must have a mobile-first B2B presence.

Last year, mobile e-commerce sales grew 200% faster than e-commerce overall, with mobile already accounting for 33% of all B2B e-commerce sales. This figure will only go up as a new generation of digitally native B2B decision makers takes up the reins. A few more statistics. A Forrester survey suggests that 59% of B2B buyers prefer to research online instead of interacting with a sales rep, and that the typical B2B decision-making process is 57% complete before a customer even thinks to reach out directly to B2B providers. In other words, the battle for B2B e-commerce sales is for a large part won or lost on mobile.

To build a successful mobile shopping experience, your e-commerce platform has to deliver a high level of technical expertise and creative flair. Mobile is on-the-go – in crowded trains, out walking the dog – so here more than ever the designs need to be simple, yet compelling. Content has to be kept to the bare minimum, yet not feel incomplete. Naturally, your design is responsive, adapting automatically to the device on which it is viewed. Photographs are optimized, with the EXIF data removed, so they load quickly and don't slow down the user as he's scrolling down.

SEO: neglect it at your peril

Of all the e-commerce marketing techniques out there, search engine optimization probably has the highest ROI, yet most online shops are put together with little to no consideration of search engines. It is hard to say why. It is true that SEO requires a fair amount of effort upfront, but only then – once you rank, you practically make sales on autopilot with no recurring expense.



This vast and crucial topic lies outside the scope of this white paper, but if you want to learn more about how SEO can help your e-commerce business, please download our paper Strategize to Optimize: How to Win the B2B Ratings War.

from *How mobile is reshaping the B2B landscape for growth*



50% of B2B search queries today are made on **smartphones**. BCG expects that figure to grow to **70%** by 2020.

Source: Google Internal Data, March 2017 'Mobile Marketing and the New B2B Buyer' The Boston Consulting Group in partnership with Google, Oct. 2017

think with Google

thinkwithgoogle.com

Conclusion

In the past, the role emotion plays in the B2B decision-making process was often underestimated, sometimes ignored. This is bad for business. To stay in the game, both B2B and B2C have to create fulfilling shopping experiences for their customers – potentially many millions for retail, far fewer for B2B. It is not uncommon for a B2B company to realize 80% of its turnover from just 20 customers – so the loss of one unhappy customer could make a serious dent in your earnings. All the more reason to get it right!

You know what you have to do. The first step, as with all digital transformations, is to make sure everyone in your organization has ownership of your new strategy. You need an e-commerce platform that works with this strategy, and can keep pace with your drive to innovate.

Technically, you will want the platform to do the heavy lifting – with an open architecture and a smart integration with your ERP. What you don't want is a purely 'nerdy' platform that limits your creative freedom. One of the reasons you are re-defining your e-commerce strategy is to differentiate yourself from the competition. And one of the ways to do that is to look different, and give your (potential) customers a satisfying shopping experience.

The CloudSuite e-commerce platform was built from the ground up by digital obsessives who had grown frustrated with the uninspiring shopping experiences offered by B2B e-commerce. Making these experiences personal, relevant and engaging should be at heart of your e-commerce strategy.

The cornerstone of your e-commerce strategy

CloudSuite is an e-commerce platform for B2B and B2C. It was built from the ground up by a group of digital obsessives who had set themselves the task of reinventing B2B, and make it fit for the digital era. We did not make a single decision – nor write a snippet of code – that did not get us closer to an e-commerce platform that drove innovation, rivalled B2C for customer experience, and had a smart back-end.

Our work is never done, but the CloudSuite platform is ready to support and implement any e-commerce strategy – ground-breaking for B2B, broad and flexible enough for B2C and B2B2C

CloudSuite has three core competences. It is agile. It creates great shopping experiences. It is smart.



Business agility

CloudSuite changes the way you work – not only with your customers, but also with each other as a team, where everyone has ownership of your e-commerce strategy. CloudSuite drives innovation – whether you want to take your products global, sell through marketplaces or acquire a rival B2B or B2C business. Agility means nothing more or less than to be open to change, and make change happen fast. And if you aren't agile, you will soon be overtaken by the competition.



Shopping experience

B2B has been 'digital' for a long time, but its mindset has been stuck in analogue. For a long time, e-commerce sites were little more than a long, detailed product catalogue that you could access on your PC. The thinking was: 'We are B2B. We don't need these frills'. But design is never merely window dressing, it is a way of communicating your brand identity. With CloudSuite you create shopping experiences that are as elegant and frictionless as the best of B2C. You can personalize your product catalogue, capture complex pricing structures, increase spend per basket and speed up payment. If you don't deliver these, you make yourself irrelevant.



Smart performance

An e-commerce platform is only as smart as the IT behind it. For both back- and front-end, CloudSuite delivers complexity that is transparent and simple to manage. Through our API Connect module, our e-commerce platform integrates seamlessly with your existing ERP system, payment providers, shopping feeds, accounting tools and email marketing software. CloudSuite lets you set up and run multiple webshops from a single server. The platform is stable and secure, but has the virtuosity to put you in control. The CloudSuite e-commerce platform is there for just one reason: to showcase your brand and to make your vision of it come alive in e-commerce.

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