The Honest Truth

Unmasking the Software
Selection Charade

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The Illusion of Choice

The eCommerce platform selection process is so rife with hidden relationships, unspoken biases, and complicated agendas that it makes political campaigns look transparent.

In this research, we'll lift the veil on how merchants and agencies really navigate this labyrinth of half-truths and hopeful promises. Merchants and agencies alike make buying decisions and recommendations based on established opinions, existing relationships, and factors of friction.

The result is an **illusion of choice** in the eCommerce software landscape, resulting in the same recommendations repeatedly, **regardless of complexity, budget, and timeframe.**

A word of caution: don't get too comfortable with the status quo. As AI enters the scene, promising to revolutionize decision-making, we ask: Is this the end of the RFP charade or the beginning of a new one? Will algorithmic decision engines cut through the noise or add another algorithmic obfuscation layer?

We conducted qualitative research this summer, with nearly 100 Merchants and 10 Agency leaders to find out what matters in the RFP creation and selection process right now.

Welcome to 'The Honest Truth.'

01. THE EVOLUTION OF ECOMMERCE PLATFORM SELECTION
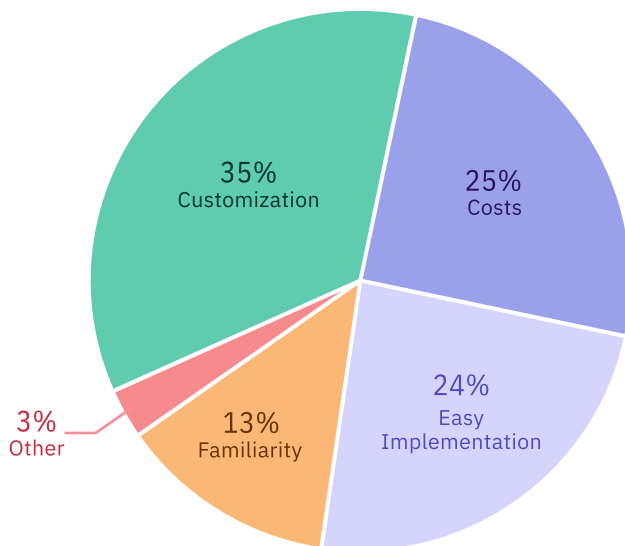
From Custom Builds to Off-the-Shelf Solutions

The journey of choosing eCommerce platforms has been a wild ride, from the early days of bespoke solutions coded from scratch to today's array of off-the-shelf options. This evolution has brought both convenience and complexity as businesses grapple with the trade-offs between customization and speed-to-market.

The Speed vs. Customization Tug-of-War.

Speed and customization are often at odds in this high-stakes digital transformation game. Our study shows that 4 out of 5 Merchants believe **"Speed to market is the most important factor in realizing revenue growth."** Yet, simultaneously, the "ability to customize" is a crucial consideration in the decision-making process.

Tug of War:

81% Prioritize Speed to Market

86% Prioritize Customization

#1 Consideration When Selecting New Platforms, Software and Solutions

35% Customization

25% Costs

24% Easy Implementation

13% Familiarity

3% Other

This cognitive dissonance sets the stage for future disappointments and scope creep.

The Rise of RFP: How We Got Here and Why It's Failing Us

The Request for Proposal (RFP) emerged as a seemingly objective way to evaluate platforms, but nearly **2 out of 3 Merchants admit the decision to RFP is made on a case-by-case basis.**

What's more: **82% expect delivery against a proposal to "vary drastically from the promises made in the sales process."** The RFP, once a tool for clarity, has become a smokescreen of false promises and misaligned expectations.

We're witnessing a masterclass in corporate charades. While Agencies perform elaborate mating dances to be perceived as a '**trusted advisor,'** Merchants see RFPs as a ritual rather than a requirement.

MERCHANT POV

"Evaluating proposals is an exercise in not mistaking charm and personality with the ability to execute."

Five themes emerged in our exploration of the state of solution selection:

1
The 'Trusted Advisor' Paradox

Agencies mention being a 'trusted advisor' with the frequency of a skipping record, but Merchants are tuning out this particular track. **Only 18% of Merchants** consider 'Platform Account Team is Personable' as essential to their solution assessment.

2
RFP: A Puppet Master?

The invisible strings of lead sources change the nature of an "objective" recommendation, yet few Agency respondents in our study openly acknowledge its impact on their final recommendations despite its outsized influence on the outcome.

3
The Integration Illusion

89% of Merchants rate 'Ease of Integration with Existing Tech Stack/ Ecosystem' as important. However, the promise of seamless integration often glosses over the complexities of legacy systems and industry-specific needs.

4
The Customization Conundrum

While **86% of Merchants place importance on customizability**, there's a growing trend of businesses adapting to platforms rather than vice versa. It's the digital equivalent of forcing a square peg into a round hole—and calling it innovation.

5
The AI Wildcard

As AI and LLMs enter the chat, they promise to cut through the noise. But will they truly unmask the charade, or just add another player to this game of digital dress-up?

Read on, and we'll unpack these findings, expose the hidden biases that shape them, and explore how the impending AI revolution might reshuffle the deck.

02. A PSYCHOLOGY OF PROMISE AND PURCHASE

Cognitive Biases in the Buying Process

Why do we believe what we want to hear? Our data shows that **34% of merchants admit to using gut feeling when evaluating proposals**. This human element adds an unpredictable variable to the selection process that savvy vendors can exploit.

1 in 3

Merchants Trust
Their Gut

The Vendor's Dilemma: Honesty vs. Competition

Vendors are caught in a Catch-22: be completely honest and risk losing deals, or overpromise and face the consequences later. As a result, a sense of grandiosity permeates the whole process, and the pressure to decide often means these warning signs are overlooked by Merchants eager to maximize speed to market.

Biggests "Red Flags" When Evaluating a Proposal

63% Claiming Out of the Box Functionality Will Meet All Needs

59% Offering Unrealistic or Inflated Turnaround Times

51% Not Being Forthcoming with Client References

This sense of grandiosity permeates the whole of the selection process, and the pressure to decide often means these warning signs are overlooked.

While Agency leaders tout their objectivity in a search for the best fit, the data tells a different story: **58% of Merchants say solution selection is greatly influenced when their preferred Agency is a certified partner.**

This seemingly innocuous credential is the trojan horse of bias, sneaking commercial interests into the decision-making process under the guise of expertise.

"Everything we've worked for in our lives to earn the only real commodity we can offer—trust—is being placed in hands that are not attached to our bodies."

- Noah Oken-Berg, CEO at Above the Fray

ABOVE THE FRAY

The Culture Shift: Adapting Businesses to Platforms

Our data reveals a seismic shift in how businesses approach software adoption. A whopping 76% of Merchants identify "out-of-the-box" features as important, **signaling a willingness to mold business processes around pre-built solutions.**

This trend towards standardization may streamline implementation, but at what cost to business uniqueness? Agencies with integrity caution against trying to fit a square peg in a round hole.

"Rarely does the platform win an RFP or vendor selection process. It's the demonstration that your firm understands the needs of the organization looking for a software solution and that, as an implementation partner, you understand the capabilities of the software you're implementing well enough to know what gaps will need to be filled throughout the project."

— *Jeremy Noonan, Managing Partner at Torq*

torq=

"Flexibility:" An Elastic Concept of Platform Capabilities

The term 'flexible' has become so overused in vendor pitches that it has lost all meaning. More often than not, merchants discover that what vendors call flexibility is a veneer of themeable components over rigid core functionality, with a lack of relating and exposing customized data.

Still, **4 in 5 expect comprehensive options for third-party integrations** that support business needs. Good partners are sensitive to bridging that gap.

"[Our proposals aim to provide] comprehensive solutions, combining advanced data validation tools with regular audit schedules to ensure ongoing data accuracy... robust data cleanup strategies... our ability to integrate the proposed solution seamlessly with the client's existing ERP and e-commerce platforms..."

- *Sandeep Agrawal, Credencys Solutions*

CREDENCYS
Data Management Company

Integration Illusions: Promises vs. Reality

While **89% of Merchants say integration with their existing tech stack/ecosystem is crucial**, the reality often falls short— the promise of seamless integration glosses over the complexities of legacy systems and industry-specific needs; recommendations are clouded further by shifting approaches based on lead source.

"The lead source significantly impacts how we respond to an RFP....when an RFP comes directly from a brand or retailer, we focus on understanding their specific business objectives, market challenges, and customer needs. Our response is tailored to showcase how our expertise... [can] drive their business forward...When an RFP comes through a technology partner, our approach shifts to highlight our compatibility with their technology... we're aiming to show how we can work effectively within their ecosystem."

- *Slava Kravchuk, CEO Atwix*

ATWIX

The Customization Conundrum: When "Can Do" Meets "Should Do"

86% of Merchants crave customizable platforms. However, extensive development often leads to maintenance nightmares and upgrade impossibilities. The question isn't "Can it be customized?" but "Should it be customized?"

> *"We take time to analyze all possible workflows. You need to understand all areas to ensure a successful project. The [partners] that don't do this are the ones at risk."*
>
> *- Yitzchak Lieblich, CEO, WebSolutionsNYC*

Support and Maintenance: The Hidden Cost of "Comprehensive Care"

The promise of comprehensive support often needs to include additional costs and complexities: **1 in 4 Merchants cite monthly/recurring costs as the #1 most important factor in moving forward with a solution.** While guaranteed support may seem like a safety net during sales can turn into a tangled web of tiered support levels and hidden fees.

> *"Our proposals are driven by our values to provide the best to our customers and create a long-term partnership with them... We make sure we are transparent when it comes to costing, we outline risks and assumptions upfront and define high-level timelines."*
>
> *- Vandana Singal, General Manager, Happiest Minds*

MERCHANT POV

> *"[Don't fall into the trap of] focusing solely on the initial purchase price and not considering the full range of resources and costs associated with implementation, including maintenance, upgrades, training, and potential downtime."*

"Just Say Yes": Deciphering Differentiation and the Dark Arts of Selective Presentation

The selection process behind blind RFPs creates a challenging dynamic for agencies and software vendors alike, especially in scenarios where third parties are proctoring the RFP selection process.

MERCHANT POV

> *"It's the biggest turn-off when it's clear they don't understand the difference between the solution they're offering and the others we're evaluating. Buzzwords don't cut it."*

The pressure to stand out (and not to opt out) incentivizes optimistic projections over nuanced realities, especially when **89% of Merchants believe agencies overpromise and underdeliver**. The result is a dangerous game of expectations versus outcomes:

4 out of 5 Merchants expect the implementation process to deviate from the promises made in the sales process, highlighting the inherent tension of Merchant-Agency relationships.

The checkbox/dropdown nature of many RFP instruments (the software component itself) may obscure crucial nuances in implementation methods. Whether a feature is native, requires third-party integration, or demands extensive customization, it often gets lost in the rush to tick all the boxes.

While **3 out of 5 Merchants** value agency-vendor partnerships, these relationships can lead to biased presentations, disincentivizing critical evaluation of limitations, or repressing suggestions of more suitable third-party solutions

This selective presentation could delay the selection process and set the stage for post-implementation disappointments and costly adjustments.

Mind you, they're not lying. The blind RFP process and maintaining relationships with software vendors require a type of truth-telling that paints an overly rosy picture.

"Don't believe the 'yes-men'...engage with those interested in your project and your business model by asking questions. This active involvement can lead to valuable insights and a deeper understanding of your project's dynamics; it might not be the cheapest project but it will deliver more successful outcomes."

— *Cindy Wilfort, Director of Customer Success, NETFORMIC*

NETFORMIC.

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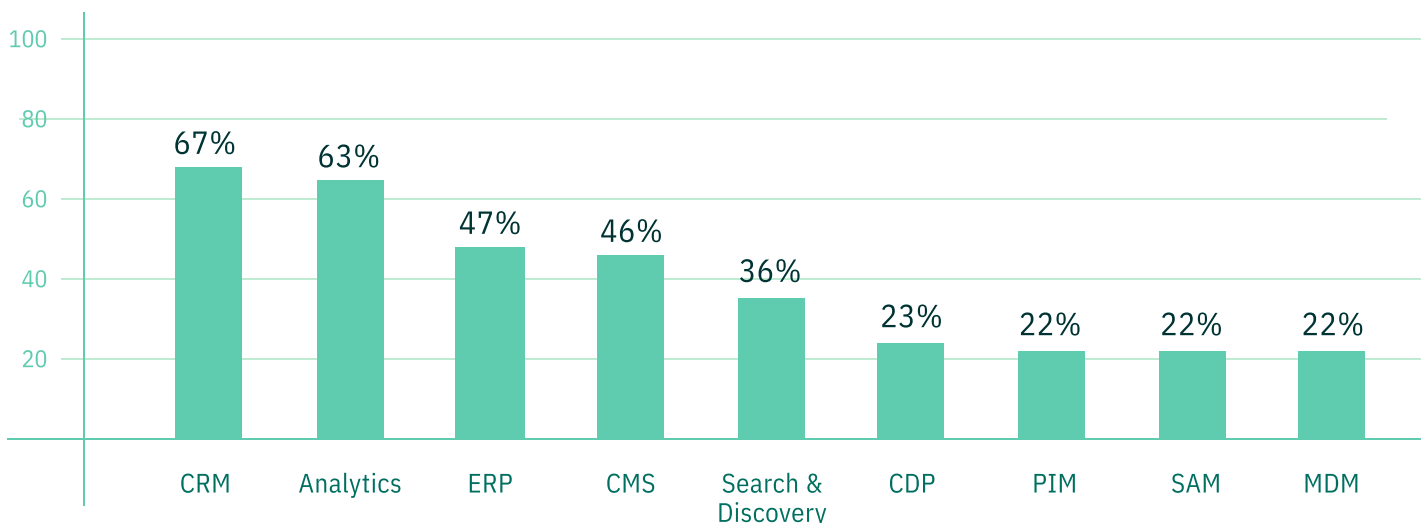
- *Sarah Lang, CEO Hob by Horse*

hob by horse

THE RIPPLE EFFECT: CONSEQUENCES OF MISALIGNED PLATFORMS

03.

Systems, Software and Solutions Required Beyond eCommerce Platform

Merchants know platform is not a silver bullet; virtually all participants in our study indicated their decisions are crowded and connected to the myriad systems required for success:

Category	Percentage
CRM	67%
Analytics	63%
ERP	47%
CMS	46%
Search & Discovery	36%
CDP	23%
PIM	22%
SAM	22%
MDM	22%

The repercussions of a poorly chosen software platform extend far beyond mere inconvenience. The RFP is supposed to avoid this, but even in the case of a positive RFP experience, our study found that projects rarely launched on time and on budget.

With **3 out of 5 merchants wary of unrealistic turnaround times**, it's clear that the 'go-live' date is often more aspirational than actual.

In sales, we can say 'we are the best' or 'we are the right partner' all we want, but we need to demonstrate to the customer as to why... So even if our conversations with the client are about project scope and services, we continue to outline how the platform can support their needs and continuously reiterate the platform's value.

- Carsten Krohn, VP Sales at Basecom, Inc.

✳ basecom

The Outcome

Financial fallout: Budget overruns and lost revenue
The financial consequences can be severe when platforms fail to deliver on their promises. Implementation budget overruns are just the tip of the iceberg—lost revenue from missed opportunities and operational inefficiencies can dwarf initial overspending.

System dysfunction: Increased friction on all sides
Misaligned platforms can create operational nightmares, turning simple tasks into Herculean efforts. What was supposed to streamline operations instead becomes a bottleneck, frustrating staff and customers.

Diminished brand reputation: The customer-facing cost of internal struggles
In the age of social media, internal struggles quickly become public spectacles. A clunky eCommerce platform doesn't just frustrate your team – it erodes customer trust and loyalty with every glitch and delay.

Lost opportunities: Innovate or integrate?
The most insidious cost of a misaligned platform is the opportunity cost. While your team puts out fires and jerry-rigs solutions, your competitors are innovating and moving forward.

04. THE AGENCY ADVANTAGE: A NEW PARADIGM

From Custom Builds to Off-the-Shelf Solutions

With their broad experience across multiple platforms and industries, agencies are uniquely positioned to cut through vendor hype and identify true best-fit solutions, with 77% of Merchants revealing that they trust their agency partners to have their best interests in mind. However, our research reveals a paradox: despite high levels of trust, only

1 in 5

leverage their agency account person when evaluating proposals and solutions.

MERCHANT POV

"We have three different business models and a good level of personalization. If a proposal cannot adapt technology for us, it won't work."

Platform-agnostic agencies can offer unbiased advice, free from the strings of vendor partnerships. This objectivity is crucial in a landscape where

43%

of merchants agree that "there is no differentiation between eCommerce platforms."

While not a literal truth, developer implementation details have strong analogous relationships across PIM and eCom platforms. As AI use becomes more prevalent in discovery and development, it has also improved developers' productivity, ultimately **driving down implementation time (and therefore costs) and allowing for quality control** within budgets.

This allows platform specialist teams to become more agnostic over time, which should help agencies to better align with the merchant's desire for "objectivity."

05. REWRITING THE RULES: STRATEGIES FOR AUTHENTIC ASSESSMENT

For Merchants looking to qualify that vendors have their best interests in mind, you don't need to wait for technology to catch up. There are simple, practical steps you can take today.

Shift to Scenario-based RFPs

Move beyond feature checklists. It's time to retire the traditional RFP. Instead, create scenario-based assessments that challenge vendors to demonstrate how their solutions solve real-world business problems rather than just tick feature boxes. **60% of Merchants admit they're not providing prospective partners with details on points of integration, despite it being a critical expectation.**

User stories aren't copy-paste. Don't recycle RFP content from a 3rd party vendor, or one that was provided to you. Recycled content bloats the evaluation process, wastes time in review, and muddies the reality of future goals versus current functionality.

"Must-have, at launch." Be realistic with your vendors about current UI and UX functionality, and ask them to be honest with you. Not everything you've historically built in your eCommerce experience is useful or practical. Never mind that it works well, or customers even know that it exists. Be ruthless in prioritization, and ask your vendors to ruthlessly prioritize for you.

The proof is in the prototype. Nothing beats hands-on experience. Short-term trials or proof-of-concept projects reveal more about a platform's fit than any sales pitch or demo.

Peer power. How can you leverage industry networks and benchmarks? Tap into peer networks and industry benchmarks to gain real-world insights into platform performance and challenges. **51% of Merchants say it's a red flag when Agency partners don't display adequate and comprehensive curiosity about their business** – peers can help you ask the right questions.

Rely on References and Reality Checks

Do you ask the right questions of current clients? Don't just ask for references – dig deep. Ask about challenges, unexpected costs, and the realities of day-to-day operations post-implementation.

Use Cross-Disciplinary Assessment Methods

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06. FUTURE-PROOFING YOUR PLATFORM OF CHOICE

Look beyond feature lists to evaluate the entire ecosystem around a platform. How easily can it integrate with current and future technologies? How robust is its developer and partner network?

Platform selection should be driven by long-term business objectives, not just current needs. **90% of merchants agree that "More time in product discovery should be spent on understanding the existing ecosystem, not vetting new platforms."**

Create a decision-making team that represents all stakeholders, from IT to marketing to operations. However, be careful not to elect a clear and decisive leader who has the authority to make the hard decisions. A lack of leadership and an egalitarian approach can lead to indecision.

Platform choices are full of trade-offs, and there will always be a compromise.

07. THE CRYSTAL BALL: THE FUTURE OF ECOMMERCE PLATFORMS

As we hurtle towards an AI-powered future, let's pump the brakes and remember that behind every line of code, every data point, and every decision, there's a human story. In the rush to digitize, automate, and optimize, let's not risk losing the very thing that makes commerce part of human culture.

While AI promises to crunch numbers faster than a squirrel on espresso, it can't replicate decades of industry experience—at least not yet.
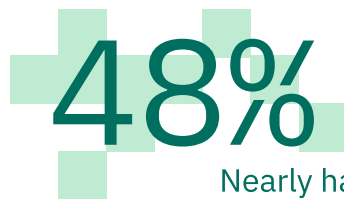
48%
Nearly half of Merchants

say organizational experience with a solution is important in their decision-making process, a stark reminder that the value of human experience isn't binary in the world of ones and zeros.

AI might excel at pattern recognition, but it needs help with the nuances of human context.

This insight underscores the irreplaceable value of industry-specific knowledge and the ability to read between the lines of a client's needs.

MERCHANT POV

"We need to feel they understand what business challenge they are helping me solve—if the sales team has no visible background in retail, it's a deal breaker."

Championing Change in Commerce Technology

The cost of maintaining the status quo in platform selection needs to be lowered. From financial losses to missed opportunities, the price of complacency is paid in both dollars and market position.

Agencies have a crucial role to play as guides through the complex landscape of eCommerce platforms. Their platform-agnostic expertise and broad experience position them as invaluable partners in the selection process.

A CALL TO ACTION

Pioneering a New Era of Transparency in eCommerce

It's time for a new era in eCommerce platform selection characterized by transparency, alignment, and a focus on long-term business success. The future of software selection isn't about choosing between options—it's about creating them.

It's a world where technology adapts to business needs in real-time, where transparency is the norm rather than the exception, and where the software selection process is as adaptive and dynamic as the digital commerce landscape itself.

Welcome to the future of software selection. It's honest, it's intelligent, and above all, it's human.

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