

THE COMPLETE GUIDE TO CHOOSING THE RIGHT ECOMMERCE PLATFORM

Author: Tom Robertshaw, Ecommerce Evangelist, Space 48



Supporting global brands.

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Executive summary

The best ecommerce platform for your business is one that complements and facilitates the team members to meet the business objectives. Space 48's team of technical and strategic ecommerce experts have built up years of experience to help merchants make the right decision: not only in terms of technical efficiency and robustness, but crucially in terms of realising tangible return on investment.

The first step when planning a replatforming project is to evaluate the business objectives and identify the strengths and weaknesses of the current team. Gather stakeholders to help break down the desired functionality that is needed to meet these objectives. Go to the heart of your business needs.

Then evaluate platforms' functionality in the context of business needs, not just what is trending or a "nice-to-have". It's never a cut-and-dried decision, but rather an elaborate balancing of priorities.

Open or closed-source, cloud or self-hosted, PHP or Java, all of these contribute to the culture of a platform but the priority is that your business fits well inside the target market for a platform, their vision matches the direction of your own business, and they have a clear ability to execute this vision.

Finally, the overarching aim of the evaluation process is to maximise the return on investment. Estimating the total cost of ownership is not easy and requires factoring in up-front, yearly and transactional product license fees for the platform and any add-ons, as well as the implementation, maintenance and support costs for an accredited agency. The cheapest solution will not always provide the greatest return on investment, as each provides different value to the business through usability, features and integrations, amongst other facets.

We have found Magento, Shopware and Shopify all to be good fits, depending on the business size and requirements. If there's one thing we've learnt from developing complex and business critical platforms for the likes of Charlotte Tilbury, Better Bathrooms and Silentnight, it's that the decision to choose the right platform is not simply a technical one. It spans the entire spectrum of business intelligence, very real notions of tangible value and, crucially, the culture and practices of your particular business.

With all of the above in mind, our aim at Space 48 is to present you with a wholly objective and technology-agnostic document that adds real and obvious value to your decision-making process. We'd love to take the conversation forward and answer any questions you may have once you've had the opportunity to read through the following pages.

Introduction

An ecommerce platform is the foundation for a business to grow on. It is the investment in a technology and a community that provides momentum for the business to implement, test and iterate its way to its objectives.

When an ecommerce platform or implementation no longer serves the business but instead becomes a hindrance, it is time to evaluate the benefits of a clean slate against continuing the battle. However, there should be no pretences that doing so will solve all problems. A re-implementation is more often than not an opportunity to make the same mistakes again. Only by going about the process with more insights, more support and by transferring learnings to the new product can you hope to progress to making new mistakes!

While we have experience in Magento, Shopware and Shopify, we aim to stay agnostic as an ecommerce consultancy. Therefore, the purpose of this guide is to arm you with the tools to evaluate platforms against each other and against your business objectives, not a pitch for each platform.

Building a business case for replatforming

Every website reaches a point where the business will be better off from it being decommissioned in favour of a re-envisioning of the brand and customer journey. There are usually a number of contributing factors to this decision. Motivators may include an ageing design or technology, a breakdown in vendor relationship and confidence, or outgrowing the platform feature set.

The most common manifestation of all of these is decreased velocity in creating value for the business through website improvements and features. This is commonly exaggerated by an increase in time spent fighting fires and maintaining the site due to a build-up of “technical debt” from years’ worth of business requirement changes. This causes the codebase to grow in complexity, resulting in feature development taking longer, with more surprises along the way too.

For each potential route forward the costs, benefits and risks will need to weighed up such as:

- Predicted Benefits
 - Value of new features
 - Value of improved customer experience
- Predicted Costs
 - Build
 - License
 - Maintenance
- Time to see a return on investment
- Cost of not re-platforming yet
 - Time and financial cost of firefighting
 - Time and financial cost of bloated development times.
 - Lost opportunities due to some features or designs not being achievable
 - Damage risk of security breach
- Risks
 - Failed project
 - Sub-optimal platform
 - Sub-optimal agency relationship

Importance of choosing the right platform for your business

When it's time to re-implement, it's time to review ecommerce platforms and evaluate them against your business objectives. Ideally, you'll want to judge which is going to be the best fit for your business for the next 3-5 years. However, doing this requires a certain level of clairvoyance. Balancing the requirements of the business now with future potential requirements is almost impossible. Significant weight should be given to designing a solution that is a good fit for the current business requirements with a *reasonable* amount of flexibility to modify or replace components.

Choosing the most feature-rich and flexible platform is not always the best choice for a business that will not see the benefit of these attributes. It will likely increase the build, maintenance and licensing costs without providing the return on investment.

There are further, invisible costs of being on a more feature-rich and customisable platform when the possibilities are endless and the answer to whether something is achievable is always "Yes". In this situation, it's easy to spend time discussing, planning and implementing features that should never have been the priority. In this situation, features are seen as the solution to a problem that hasn't been fully diagnosed. The limitations of some platforms can help provide focus on the business and more importantly focus on the customer's needs, using technology as a tool rather than features as an end goal.

Choosing the wrong platform or development partner could have a knock-on effect to the company for years, as further unbudgeted expense is needed to get to a resolution before any form of return on investment can be actualised. On the other hand, a platform with a good fit that is implemented well the first-time around will enable you to move quicker than your competitors and maximise the return on investment. This has a cyclical benefit of maximising the budget available when the new website comes to the end of its life.

Ultimately, there's no single platform that fits all companies. That's one reason why, as an ecommerce consultancy, we work with Magento, Shopify and Shopware. Acting as an ecommerce consultancy enables us to focus during discovery on the business objectives and requirements. Once these have been identified, we can then provide recommendations based on platform experience for those that best fit.

Evaluating the business

The first step, before reaching out to platforms and partners, is to evaluate the current business requirements and objectives for a new ecommerce platform. While it's good to be inspired by new technologies and product features, considering objectives and cultivating a product vision beforehand helps ensure that platform choice moulds to the business and not the other way around.

Objectives

There are always pain points in the current platform and these are often the motivators for a platform update or migration. While it's promising to finally be able to tackle these long-standing problems, it's important to stay objective so that the solution designed achieves commercial success. This is the time to involve other stakeholders in the project to understand what they value and how they will perceive success in the project.

Example objectives may be:

- 60% of traffic is on mobile but the conversion rate is 50% that of desktop. Customer experience on mobile must be prioritised in order to improve conversion rate. (Set targets & expectations, if feasible).
- In order to better understand and support our customers, we must have a single customer view across all channels.
- We must provide customers with the ability to personalise their products as it's a key business growth area.
- The site has struggled to support peak periods during marketing campaigns. The new website must be able to scale to support 5000 concurrent users and 100 orders/minute.

Quick Question

- What are our top 3 business objectives for a new website that the project success is going to be judged by?

Evaluate features & their value

List out the functionality that the new website will need. When doing this, try to evaluate features based on customer value rather than because of pre-existing functionality or their tendiness. A feature that doesn't provide value is instead adding unnecessary complexity to the customer experience.

That being said, a business that plans for growth should have a plan for what areas of the business are going to be the largest contributors to this growth. This could be through new product lines or offerings, e.g. product personalisation, which would in turn inform the technology choices.

The first features that you think of are likely customer-experience focused. Don't forget to list out functionality that is required to integrate with business workflows and ensure efficient operation. There are likely more opportunities for automation than when the systems were last assessed.

Some of this functionality will be achieved through partnerships with third-party products and services. This is a good time to list out all those that you currently work with or are looking to bring on board so that when evaluating platforms, the availability of integrations can be identified.

Quick Questions

- What features do you have now?
- What value does each one provide to the customer and business?
- What areas are you looking to add to or improve on in order to unlock further growth?
- What technology partners are you considering?

Wider commerce systems and processes

What a re-platforming project can achieve is, to a certain degree, limited by the other business IT systems and whether they can support the new initiatives. You may find that it's time to evaluate the other systems that are in place. For example, are there order-management workflows or administrative tasks that are consuming significant time due to inefficient, manual workflows? Or is the inventory management system struggling to cope?

This is an opportunity to reassess daily activities to see if there are other systems that will better facilitate the project requirements and more automation. By offloading these tasks to technology, the ecommerce team can recover more of their most valuable asset, their time. However, be wary of replacing multiple business-critical systems simultaneously, as this will substantially increase project risks.

Quick Questions

- What systems will the website need to be integrated with?
- Are any of these systems also being re-evaluated? How would this affect the project?
- What time-consuming tasks are prime targets for automation?



The team

There is a wealth of knowledge within your ecommerce team that the project can benefit from. Whether it's those that have been at the company for years and understand the ins and outs of how everything works and why, or newer team members that have worked with other ecommerce platforms and are able to offer a fresh perspective informed by outside experiences. Having deep and diverse experiences on the team will facilitate pragmatic decision-making that focuses on limitations that, once removed, will unlock growth in the business.

Of course, it's important for all stakeholders to be involved in this planning and discovery process. This will enable business objectives from management to be informed by staff members that carry out the day-to-day tasks to maximise the chance of project success. You may find that how processes should work in theory are not always how they end up working in practice!

Plot a breakdown of the different skill sets that you have in-house, from development to merchandising to order management and the workloads of these team members. There may be potential for further investment in staff training and team growth as part of the replatform project. On the flip side, if team growth is not an option, are there services that could be adopted to do more with less?

As difficult as it may be, discuss what has historically gone well and poorly with the team to help learn from experiences objectively. Taking a "no shame, no blame" approach can create a safe place for discussion without judgement. This can help team members to be more reflective and acknowledge the positive and negative sides of previous decisions, reducing defensiveness and competing camps forming.

When considering a previous project, was the experience indicative of the platform as a whole? How did the agency contribute to the problems? How could the merchant team have better managed objectives and risk?

Some companies value having an internal development team that works either independently or alongside an agency for initial implementation, maintenance and support. This can be an effective way of working to your own timeline and having full control of the resource and new releases. On the other hand, depending on the size of the business and the need for technical skill sets, it can be a drain on resources to recruit, retain and keep a development team engaged. If handling development in-house, consider choosing a platform with lower complexity and less technical overhead.

Does the team have experience in a range of ecommerce platforms, both from an implementation and growth perspective? This is invaluable to the platform evaluation process. In either case, it's still wise to bring in consultants to assist during the discovery phase. Having an external team organise the evaluation can help to formalise the process and ensure that it doesn't get de-prioritised in place of the daily firefighting.

In the same vein, depending on the experience of your team, would they benefit from external performance analysis and ecommerce strategy support? There are many ecommerce teams where people are wearing multiple hats. In this case, often the only way to leapfrog the competition is the effective use of external experts. During the platform and agency selection process, it's best to look for partnerships that complement the in-house experience. Those that can provide strategy on top of the design and development process can provide a greater return on investment than that of purely implementation-focused agency.

Quick Questions

- What skill sets do you have in-house?
- What skill sets are missing? Particularly in target growth areas of the business.
- Collate platform and business experience & acknowledge biases.
- Where is the team most stretched?
- Do you have the ecommerce strategy experience in-house to achieve planned growth?

Budget

The notoriously difficult topic of project budgets. The recent commercial performance of the website together with the risk and reward of the business case put forward for a replatform is ultimately what is going to dictate the funds and the enthusiasm for such a project.

There is no magic formula for calculating the budget that should be spent on a replatforming process. For established businesses, it would not be unusual to find that the budget is anywhere up to 20% of annual online revenue. Often the budget is more a reflection of whether the business is aiming to be in a couple of years' time.

There are many factors that will affect the amount that is desired to be invested. From previous success, the business values and culture, the brand image and vertical. For a trendy fashion brand it's a competitive market, there will be higher expectations on the final product and more enthusiasm for investing in research and development to create more novel and engaging experiences.

Working with a platform that is feature-rich and flexible is great for companies where having the power to make the platform their own through customisation is core to retaining a competitive advantage and can be part of their brand ethos. Even if the platform has a significant licensing costs, the spend can still be warranted if it will generate additional value.

For other companies, this complexity and flexibility can be an expensive distraction in the long term. The challenge is to find the right place on the scale for your business. Where do you sit?

At the beginning of the life of a project, depending on the platform choice, two largest contributors to costs are going to be the implementation phase and license fee.

Post-launch, a comprehensive financial plan will include the costs of maintenance, further development, software licensing costs (core platform and products). The type of platform, e.g. self-hosted or SaaS, are going to drastically affect budget required for support and maintenance.

Merchants are moving away from the traditional model of large, feature-rich initial implementation and then stagnant development for the following years until the next build. Those that adopt the [lean startup principles](#) are building only what they can prove they need and then continually experiment and validate new features and processes. Ecommerce is the perfect environment for this methodology as so much data is available to inform the build-measure-learn cycle.

Quick Questions

- What budget do you have for a build?
- How much of this budget is going to be consumed by platform and technology license fees?
- How important to your brand is being able to provide unique experiences?
- How important is R&D and technology for your business?
- What post-launch budget is available for works?





Evaluating platforms and partners

It is not unusual for merchants to evaluate potential ecommerce platforms before approaching potential partners. In fact, it's sensible to do some initial research independently to make the best use of time with partners. Either way, we recommend undertaking a platform discovery process with the support of an experienced ecommerce consultant (or at the very least, this document!).

Even if you choose to go through the entire platform discovery process internally, it's sensible to meet with agencies that have experience in at least the top two ecommerce platforms, not just your top pick. Their niche experience of working with the platform will add insight that research alone will not provide.

You may already have a trusted agency partner that has experience on a range of ecommerce platforms. This can be advantageous because you can be more confident that you're receiving a tailored recommendation rather than everyone receiving the same advice.

As this guide hopefully shows, there is no ecommerce platform to rule them all. Each has its strengths and weakness, and its feature and product choices that make it more or less suitable for your use case.

One thing that should be ruled out early on for all but the most unique companies is creating your own ecommerce platform. This path is reserved only for those that are revolutionising ecommerce and where technology is the core intellectual property that sets the company apart. Otherwise significant time and money are spent reinventing the core ecommerce functionality without achieving a competitive advantage.

Armed with a good understanding of the business objectives and needs and a shortlist of ecommerce platforms, the next step is the fun part of researching their capabilities.

Do platform features line up with requirements?

Creating a list of functionality for each platform is a research-intensive phase. The first stop will be the vendor marketing sites but these often provide a rather limited amount of information, so it will take some initiative to find out what can be done.

If possible, take the time to observe demos of the platforms to get a better feel for them, particularly in terms of how well they support day-to-day administrative use. Take the opportunity to ask questions. Experience with multiple platforms can provide inspiration for questions which will help to identify the differences.

As a prompt for research, consider the following features which are common platform differentiators. This list is by no means comprehensive, and not all are going to be relevant to the business.

- Wishlists
- Promotions
 - Does it support promotions, discount codes and gift cards?
- Internationalisation
 - Multi-currency
 - Does it just support automatic price conversion using exchange rates, or can you manually manage product prices for each currency?
 - Multi-lingual
 - How may you provide and manage language-variant stores?
 - Does it support localised payment methods, tax, and legal requirements?
- Inventory Management
 - Does it support multiple stock locations?
- Content Preview
 - As an admin, can you preview content changes?
- Permission management & Audit History
 - Can you create users to match business roles so that content managers cannot access customer and sales data?
 - Can you identify which admin users performed which actions for auditing purposes?
- Regulation compliance support
- Complex product types

- What structure is your product catalogue?
 - Do you need to group products together on a single product page?
- Digital products
- Bulk pricing discounts
 - Can you advertise and offer reduced unit prices when customers order in bulk?
- Product information management
 - Can you add custom product attributes and attach all the information that you need to a product?
- Merchandising
 - What automation and machine learning is available for category, cross-sell, upsell, and related item management?
- Content Management
 - How much HTML/CSS knowledge and/or developer support will the ecommerce team need in order to update site content?
- Personalisation
 - Machine-learning powered product and content recommendations tailored to the customer.
- Digital asset management
 - Can you manage images, videos, PDFs and assign them to products and categories?
- Customer Management
 - What level of functionality does it provide the customer service team to manage customer accounts and support sales process?
- Customer Reviews
- Product Filters
 - Can customers narrow products in categories and search results based on product attributes?
 - If products have colours/designs, can customers filter by swatches rather than text labels?
- Reserve or Collect in store
 - Related to advanced inventory management, can customers reserve or collect in store?
- Admin Usability
 - What level of staff training will be needed to realise benefits of the platform?
- Search
 - Is the search powerful and intelligent enough out of the box or do third-party providers need to be considered?
- SEO
 - How well is the platform regarded for supporting Search Engine Optimisation?

- APIs
 - What level of coverage of the feature-set is available by way of APIs?
- B2B
 - There's a wealth of functionality that may be relevant to B2B businesses, for example:
 - Customer account request and moderation
 - Request for quote
 - Requisition lists
 - Customer-specific pricing
 - Pay by account & credit limits

Many vendors offer complementary products to their core ecommerce offering that merchants can choose from in order to accelerate their growth without needing to find third-party compatible technology vendors. These could be:

- Analytics & business reporting
- Point of sale
- Order management
- Marketing tools

Armed with research on the product offering of each platform, review the original business requirements to see which platforms are suitable for the business. Identify where any business critical or customer journey critical features cannot be achieved and remove these from the shortlist if no alternative solution can be found.

While considering more "professional" or "enterprise" platforms can feel like a safe bet for a growing business and comforting to be part of the "right" crowd, avoid taking on more complexity and cost than is critical for the success of the project. A smaller platform can reduce costs and help to provide business focus because the restrictions in what is achievable saves time deliberating over whether something should be done. As developers will be able to tell you, the features that are the quickest to implement and maintain are those that were never added! For that reason, consider removing platforms that offer features far beyond what the business needs.

Quick Questions

- What are the notable missing features or restrictions of a platform?
- Does the platform have complimentary products that are relevant to the business?
- Which is the smallest platform that will still not restrict the growth of the business?



Design & experience

What is the quality of the user experience and design of the platform's demo theme? These are not just examples of the experiences that can be achieved with the platform "out of the box", they are also commonly the starting point for many agencies' designs and implementations. This is a cost-effective way of creating sites without needing to design and build everything from scratch and only the deviations from core need to be implemented. The flip side of this inheritance is that the good comes with the bad. If there are weaknesses in the user experience or official implementation, these are likely to be part of the final product.

This is a good discussion point when talking to agencies, as the best ones will create their own suite of modifications that improve on the core design based on their experience. This can be a great value way of getting the most out of the platform, and importantly more than competitors using the same platform.

Particular attention should naturally be given to platforms that optimise for mobile devices. The challenge is in differentiating them, as all will advertise mobile optimisation. But, in practice, the level of optimisation varies greatly. In addition, reading the marketing material available, the demo sites can be tested on different device types to judge the reality of mobile-support. All platforms should now have a mobile-first responsive design but the most up-to-date platforms are now incorporating progressive web app features, such as offline support and push notifications.

Quick Questions

- How user-friendly, modern, performant and mobile-optimised is the demo design?
- Do agencies have a standard set of customisations that they make to the platform?
- How well do the core designs and agency customisation align with user research findings?

What features are available from add-ons?

A platform's limitations are prime opportunities for the market to fill the gap. In many cases, it's a good product decision for a platform not to venture into certain areas. This is true of functionality that can be better offered by a product that is focused squarely on doing just one area, e.g. newsletter systems or personalised product recommendations.

At a high-level, there are two ways to supplement core platform functionality: with features that are purchased (by installing code), or with features that are rented (software-as-a-service). Depending on the platform, there may still need to be code installed in order to make use of software-as-a-service features.

For any feature that requires code to be installed, the business then takes on the responsibility to maintain and ensure the quality and security of the code. This is true, even if there's a support agreement in place for this code.

When installing "connector" add-ons to integrate with the SaaS features, look for the official connectors as these are likely to be of better quality and better supported.

In general, any additional third-party features adds risk because the vendor may stop supporting their product. A well-populated marketplace that has competing products is a healthy marketplace and reduces the inconvenience, should this happen.

Evaluating the credentials of the add-on vendor can help indicate the confidence that the business should have when investing in an add-on. Look at reviews and at the age of the product and the vendor to ensure that you're in good company and not the guinea pig for the product. And if you are, you should be able to get a healthy discount for finding the bugs. Another factor is whether selling add-ons is a core part of the vendor's business. An add-on provided by an agency may have less frequent updates and less responsive support.

Do not be afraid to spend more money on a higher quality extension. Surprisingly, the worst case scenario is not finding an add-on is no longer available or supported but when the sunk cost fallacy results in continual, expensive bug-fixing rather than moving away from it for an alternative solution.

For any required features that are not available from the marketplace, they will need to be custom developed and this will draw down from the project budget. In order to maximise how far the budget goes, consider whether the features are really required to the degree defined or whether a part-solution when add-ons that are acceptable in the short-term.

Quick Questions

- Are there well-reviewed add-ons from established, reputable vendors available in the marketplace that fulfil your business requirements when the core platform does not?
- What business risk is assumed by depending on them?
- How is this risk minimised?

Support & training

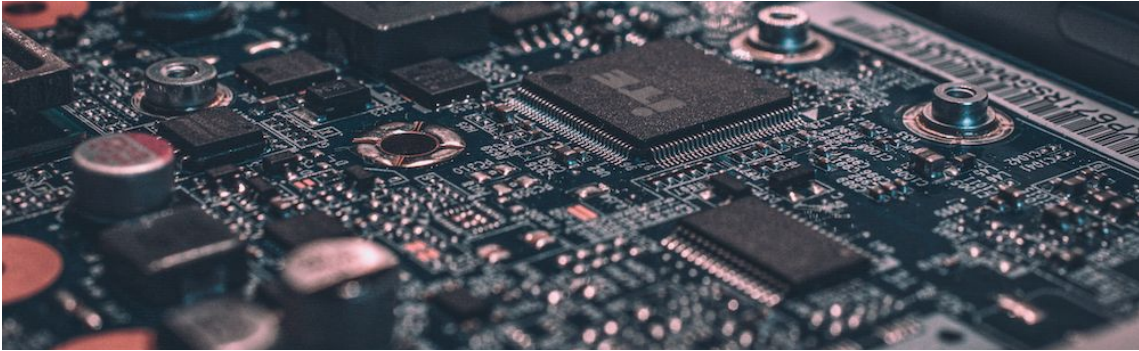
Support and training from the platform helps to maximise the value realised from it. Platform vendors that provide support and oversight of the implementation partner can help ensure that the website is built to best practices. The aim of best practices are to maximise the life of the website through minimising technical debt and ensuring another development team can pick up the project if needs be.

Merchant training not only helps to get staff members up to speed quickly, it also helps to avoid platform features being underutilised due to lack of familiarity or knowledge of them.

From a legal perspective, using an open-source platform without choosing a product with a license fee will mean that your business does not have a commercial relationship with the platform company. This means that your business takes responsibility for all code being used. If there is a security flaw or a lawsuit (e.g. patent troll), then there's no protection guarantee provided to you by the platform.

Quick Questions

- What support is available from the platform for you and your implementation partner during development?
- What training support is available?
- What protections are available to you as a customer?



Hosted versus self-hosted

Platforms that are hosted, i.e. software-as-a-service, typically provide little-to-no access to the underlying codebase. With fewer moving parts this means they can often provide more reliable, performant and scalable hosting for merchants. Another advantage is that when core product updates with features or security patches are released, sites are updated automatically. This ensures timely updates as well as reducing maintenance costs.

Self-hosted platforms are those where the platform codebase is provided (though this does not guarantee freedom to modify), and the business can host themselves or go to a third-party host. This gives the business complete control over the architecture and investment in the underlying hardware. The downside is the additional cost of hosting, as even if hardware is cheap the team to manage it is not. It will typically take greater effort to achieve the same level of reliability, performance and scalability. As the business has full control of which version of the software is deployed, any updates that become available must be manually applied and deployed, which consumes time and money. For security patches, they can also cause development schedules to be thrown out of the window!

There are newer hosting models, such as platform-as-a-service which Magento's Cloud is an example of. This sees the ecommerce platform vendor provide an official hosting service to their customers that is tailored to the platform. This approach arguably has the best of both worlds of being able to have access to the underlying codebase to be able to make changes, whilst also having the confidence to host in an environment that's optimised solely for the platform.

Quick Questions

- What hosting options are available for the platform?
- Are there internal team members available to support the infrastructure?



Performance & scalability

Performance and scalability can be difficult factors to evaluate and compare across platforms. In terms of simple definitions, we consider performance to be how fast the site is and scalability being how many customers the platform can handle simultaneously.

The first port of call will be any benchmarks and case studies that the platform publishes. For self-hosted software, the quality and size of the hosting setup is going to dramatically affect performance and scalability. Whereas hosted “cloud” platforms that support automated scaling can have an advantage here of providing high scalability out of the box.

Platforms that are built to scale are also likely to have advanced caching methods and will deploy technologies such as Varnish. Somewhat at odds with the motivation to cache as much as possible is the ability to automatically purge content when product content is updated by the merchandising team. How does the platform handle this? What sort of delay will there be before changes are reflected? Is it safe to make changes around peak periods?

Quick Questions

- What benchmarks and case studies are available that demonstrate potential performance?
- Is a cloud hosting platform available?
- Is there support for caching technologies such as Varnish?

Flexibility & extensibility

There is a natural desire to choose a platform that is flexible and that is not going to limit the directions that a business can pivot in during the lifecycle of this implementation. Unfortunately, there's no scientific measure for the flexibility of a platform!

There are, however, properties of a platform that can indicate that it is more flexible:

- Open-source
 - Can modify the code until your heart's content and the budget is consumed. There is a decision whether to maintain upgradeability (i.e. benefit from upstream platform improvements).
- Comprehensive APIs
 - Can create custom interfaces and workflows outside of the platform but still integrate with it.
- Modular architecture
 - Can remove, replace or add components.
- Ecosystem solutions
 - Extent to which third-parties can add and customise functionality, e.g. a new checkout process can indicate a flexible platform.

Another dimension to evaluate flexibility can be understood by talking to developers to get a feel for where it sits on the "configuration versus convention" scale. A platform that is highly configurable is great for flexibility that maintains the ability to upgrade. The downside is that it adds complexity, resulting in developers requiring more training and development tasks take longer. Whereas a platform that is less configurable and instead opts for convention is quicker to implement bespoke designs and features. But getting multiple third-party components to work well together requires more effort. Similarly, when it's time to upgrade the underlying platform, the customisations make this more difficult or mean that new functionality needs to be manually integrated into the customisations.

Neither convention nor configuration is wrong or right, but being aware of the decisions and philosophy that are being adopted by choosing a particular platform is important. Typically though, the simpler ecommerce platforms choose convention over configuration and so this suits smaller or more straight-forward ecommerce businesses.

As alluded to when discussing the drawbacks for highly configurable platforms, there is a hidden cost for flexibility. The abstractions that support flexibility need to be maintained in all further customisations, which adds to all development time. Prematurely preparing for business pivots by choosing a flexible platform and then not making use of the flexibility means that the website has cost more and taken more time to develop and maintain than necessary.

Quick Questions

- Can developers modify the underlying platform code?
- Is there a comprehensive API?
- Does the architecture follow convention over configuration or vice versa?



```

1  module.exports = (scope) => `article`
2  <header>
3  <h1><a href="${scope.link}">${scope.title}</a></h1>
4  </header>
5  ${require('./tags.html.js')(scope)}
6  <div>
7  ${scope.body}
8  </div>

```

Technologies

The underlying technology that powers the platform, from infrastructure to backend to frontend, can give an indication where in the market a platform is targeting. Truth be told, developers can create masterpieces or disasters in any language, but here is some guidance on backend programming languages [Warning: Religious content]:

- Java
 - Historically regarded as a more professional language. Formal software engineering principles and practices have long been present, leading this to be popular amongst Enterprise platforms where lower fault tolerance is more valuable. Java powers ecommerce platforms such as SAP Hybris and Salesforce Commerce Cloud (Previously Demandware).
- .NET
 - A Microsoft platform, it started life as a Windows-specific programming language but has since moved cross-platform and open source and supports multiple programming languages, though C# is the most popular. Being Microsoft based, it is favoured by many business and powers ecommerce platforms such as Episerver.

- PHP
 - In Wordpress and Magento it powers a significant portion of the internet but the ease with which developers can build a website in PHP has meant there is a wide-range in implementation quality. In recent years, a number of software-engineering principles that have been long recognised in the Java ecosystem are now being deployed leading to greater adoption in the Enterprise space.
- Ruby on Rails
 - A niche technology choice that has seen a growth in popularity over the last decade. Famous for its simplicity and consistency, its largest deployment is arguably Shopify. Like PHP, it doesn't require developers to adopt the complexities of advanced software engineering techniques.

In terms of frontend technologies, there is a rise in JavaScript-based implementations with technologies, such as React and Vue. These can provide dynamic, fast and mobile-optimised websites that are more decoupled from the underlying platform through the use of APIs and running in “headless mode”. Without going into too much detail here, this is an attractive modern approach as it enables the decoupling of the frontend and backend, meaning that it can be cost-effective to perform website redesigns without having to touch the underlying ecommerce components, admin area and back-office systems.

This is still a relatively new approach but even large platforms, such as IBM Websphere, are supporting this new paradigm with the likes of [Argos](#). With this approach, comprehensive and performant APIs are critical.

Ultimately, to make a judgement on the quality of the codebase and how steep the learning curve is, this can only be done by talking to developers and agencies. One thing that can be done if there is an public issue reporting system is to review the open and closed issues. Browsing recent issues will give an indication of what problems merchants have experienced on recent releases. What's more, if the platform is open source, you may be able to review the code repository, e.g. on [GitHub](#), to see the number of community contributions.

Quick Questions

- What technologies are used?
- Do the technologies and software designs used reflect modern practices?
- What are the availability and cost of experienced developers in the chosen technologies?

Country presence

Whether a platform is localised to your primary sales country or region can make a drastic difference to the amount of custom development work that needs to be done during the build phase.

If the vendor has offices in your country or region, then there's a greater chance of the platform providing compatibility with local customs, regulations, tax and payment gateways.

The length of time that the company has had a sales office in your country will also give an idea of how much experience they have had with supporting merchants from the region.

Quick Questions

- Does the platform have office locations in your region?
- Do they have demonstrable experience delivering ecommerce support to merchants in your region?

Vision and execution

Once the current feature list is analysed and the limitations identified, it's important to review the roadmap of the platform and the vision of the business. All (good) businesses are forging forward towards their own mission and goals. Understanding whether this is in a direction that's congruent to your own business will help to predict whether the platform is going to continue to be a good fit for the business.

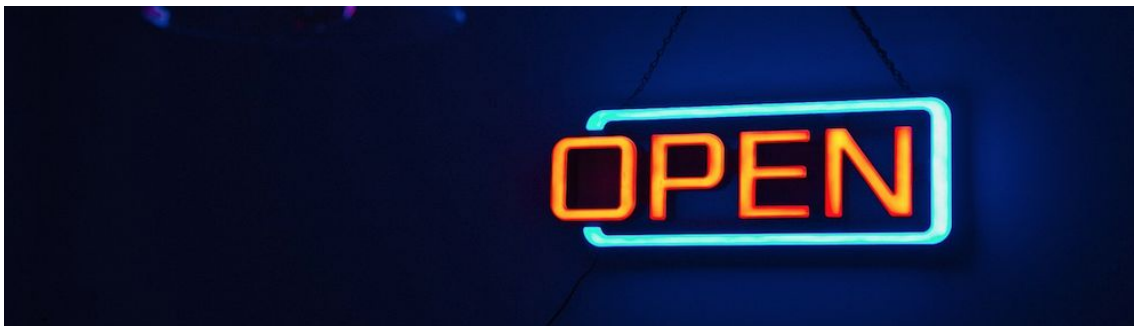
This is no mean feat and will take some research and reading between the lines of the marketing and presentation of the product. Looking to the past and where the platform has come from can help to plot its forward direction.

On a more practical note, the product roadmap may list missing features that are important but not critical for the business, so some confidence can be gained that these will come in time.

Finally, even if the vision is aligned with your own, a judgement can also be made on how well the platform has executed on its vision to date to make a prediction on if they will be successful. Does the feature-list that a platform boasts provide value in reality? Or is functionality restrictive and unreliable?

Quick Questions

- Are there items on the vendor roadmap that are attractive the business?
- What size businesses is the platform targeting?
- How has the platform executed its vision to date?



Open-source versus closed-source

Open-source is eating the software world. The collaboration of software creators, consumers and contributors can lead to a product of higher quality, and one that provides more value to users. As software gets more advanced, the only way to achieve this without increasing development team size, delivery times or costs, is to build on top of what is already available. Open-source is the answer to this. As more and more functionality is released open-source, it allows companies to focus their efforts on crafting their unique selling propositions.

A platform's choice of open-source or closed-source can dramatically affect the range of integrations and functionality available from third parties as well as the ability to customise it yourself. The extension points on closed platforms are often fewer in number and provide limited ability to customise. This can result in the closed-platform having fewer add-ons available. On the flip-side, fewer moving parts can create a more stable system for what it does provide.

A platform's decision to be open-source or closed-source is felt through the culture of the company and the market that it supports. Open-source versus closed-source can be seen as a spectrum. Some platforms provide code open-source but if there's too much friction or poor community management then contribution and community size will dip, meaning that fewer benefits of the approach are achieved.

Quick Questions

- Where does the platform sit on the open-to-closed source spectrum?
- Has this affected the quantity and quality of add-ons available?
- If add-ons aren't available for functionality or required integrations, is there potential for them to be created by a vendor or agency? (Note this will come out of the budget).
- How important is it having the flexibility to create a custom experience?
- Which suits the company culture more?



Ecosystem size and health

The power of the network effect is well published. Platforms that have been able to create an ecosystem or community around themselves, whether it's open or closed source, are more valuable to merchants in many regards.

A larger ecosystem will attract more technology partners (i.e. SaaS companies) to invest in providing integrations and compatibility with the platform, thereby increasing the number of and quality of solutions available to merchants.

Similarly, it will increase the likelihood of finding a pre-existing, productised solutions in the platform marketplace at a reasonable cost. A lot can be gleaned from the marketplace. What are the most popular extensions? These will provide insight into the platform's limitations. Additionally, in a mature marketplace, you should see feature-rich and professional products.

A larger ecosystem, by definition, will mean that there is a greater choice of agency partnerships. This is both advantageous for the initial implementation but also if the agency becomes a poor fit there are a range of high quality alternatives that can take over effectively.

One of the best ways to get a picture of the vibe of the ecosystem is to attend a platform-focused conference. While the messaging from the stage will be overwhelmingly positive, getting a chance to speak to those in the trenches between sessions will paint a more realistic picture. It's not a foolproof approach but gauging the sorts of merchants in attendance and how well your business fits alongside them can give confidence.

Failing attending a conference, on a smaller scale look out for meetup groups, e.g. [meetup.com](https://www.meetup.com). Even just gauging how many there are, how often they meet and the sort of attendance they receive is insightful.

Quick Questions

- How large and established is the ecosystem?
- Are the best-of-breed technology partners integrated?
- Is the marketplace full of feature-rich, professional products?
- Is it a growing ecosystem?

Industry analysis

The most prominent ecommerce platforms will have been reviewed by expert analysts at research and consultancy companies, such as [Gartner](https://www.gartner.com) and [Forrester](https://www.forrester.com).

Technology tracking websites, such as [Builtwith](https://builtwith.com), can provide an indication of platform adoption and migration rates. As platforms age, release new features and realise their product visions, their adoption rates will rise and decline. Remember position in the market, i.e. SMB or Enterprise will drastically affect the number of installs and popularity alone gives little indication of its value to your business.

There is also some value from researching reviews from users of the platform on websites such as [Capterra](https://www.capterra.com) and [g2crowd](https://www.g2crowd.com). Acknowledging that these reviews will likely be biased in one direction or the other, there is still value to be had reading between the lines and collating information in here with all other research done.

Moving down the value chain, a small amount of research could be done by searching Google, LinkedIn and Twitter for discussions on the shortlisted platforms for opinion pieces and experiences to see what challenges each community has been battling with recently.

Quick Questions

- What independent analysis is available on the platform?
- What can you learn from merchant and user reviews of the platform?



Competitor analysis

It's hard not to look over the fence at the competitors to get an idea of what platforms and services they are using. At the least, it helps to validate that the platform has experience supporting a business within your vertical and/or with similar online revenues. Use a tool like [Wappalyzer](#) or [Builtwith](#) to find out what technologies a site is running and for how long.

It's hard to draw too many conclusions if a merchant is running a particular technology. If it's a recent move, they themselves are still finding out whether it was a good move for the business. You may be able to make a surface-level judgement of how well they have been able to execute on the platform. Comparing with the demo theme for the platform will help to identify where they chose to spend their development budget, albeit without considering the admin and integration piece.

It may be possible to identify the agencies responsible for an implementation by using the merchant name and the technology as a search term. This can sometimes bring to light a portfolio piece or a case study.

This can help to build a picture of the wisdom of the crowd but don't be afraid to stand apart if ultimately the evidence points to the popular platform not being the best suited. While you may have heard of the phrase "no-one gets fired for buying IBM", I'd say that was a pretty low bar. Do the research and draw up a plan that is going to see the business excel because a platform is going to facilitate your own growth plan, not because they are a safe bet or they've worked for other companies.

Quick Questions

- What platforms are competitors using?
- How well have they been able to execute?

What's the estimated total cost of ownership?

A judgement on whether a platform will provide a return on investment cannot be made without calculating the total cost of ownership.

Comparing the costs of platforms is more complicated than just comparing the license fees. For one thing, some platforms having pricing models based on the level of plan and features that are subscribed to, others will have a license fee based on the size of the business or volume of transactions through the platform.

Some platforms will, on top of a subscription, charge a commission based on the revenue that the site generates. For smaller ecommerce sites, this can be a cost-effective method of working, but as the company grows and profit margins are squeezed, a commission-based approach can become expensive.

Some platforms will be hosted and so hosting costs are covered by the cost of the license or subscription, while self-hosted platforms not only have the hosting costs to estimate but these will typically require more in the way of operational maintenance.

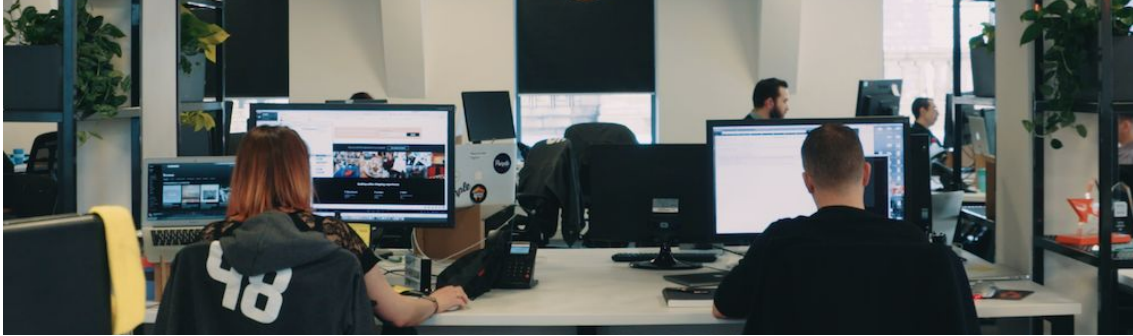
Add-ons with a one-off cost are easy to factor into the budget, but add-ons that require a monthly subscription are more affordable day-to-day but can add significantly to the total cost of ownership. There is also a liability of price increases adding to this figure.

Get an estimate of build costs by talking to a selection of agencies with experience of each platform. As discussed in a later on, there will always be a more expensive or cheaper agency, so find an affordable agency that is going to provide strategic value to increase your chances of meeting your objectives and use that project cost/range for the estimate.

Finally, what is the business expectation of the lifespan of this project before it will need to be rebuilt again? Only with this information can you split the one-off costs across each year of ownership to provide an estimated yearly cost.

Quick Questions

- What are the platform licensing costs?
- Are there transactional/commission-based costs?
- What's the contract length?
- What are the hosting costs?
- What are the one-off and subscription costs for add-ons?
- What is the estimated implementation cost?
- What are the maintenance costs?
- What is the estimated lifespan?
- What is the estimated annual cost of the platform?



Choosing an agency

Choose Space 48. Job done.

In all seriousness, finding an agency to fit the business and the team is almost as important as the platform decision. It's certainly one of the biggest risks in a replatforming project, so it deserves careful consideration.

It goes without saying that an agency must have demonstrable experience with the platform. If it's new to them, then it will be important to see that it's part of the business vision and direction rather than just taking on the work to fill a gap.

We all know that business is won and lost on relationships. Meeting a range of people within the business from the solution specialists to the technical architects, this can help give confidence on the capabilities in-house and to get a better feel for their approach and culture.

Ask the agency to talk through their processes and systems, both from a project management point of view but also a development point of view, to better understand what their quality assurance process is like. Depending on the in-house team, it's likely that you will benefit from an agency that will provide strategic planning and consultancy to maximise value generated through implementation and beyond.

Identifying where your business fits in terms of size when compared to an agency's other clients helps to understand how they will be able to provide support. A benefit of being a smaller client will be the value that they can provide by way of their experience working with larger merchants but you may struggle being prioritised. Being one of the largest clients can mean that you get a lot of attention but if you need to move faster than the agency can expand the team this can be limiting. Being somewhere in the middle means that their processes are already optimised for working with a business of your size, which can help keep things running smoothly. At the same time, they have a track record working with larger businesses and your business can benefit from their experience.

Quick Questions

- What size merchants do they work with?
- How many clients do they have?
- What are their project management workflows and development cycles?
- Do their developers have official certifications?
- How is employee retention?
- What proportion of revenues would your project represent?
- What value does the agency offer on top of implementation?

Notable platforms

It's not possible to compare platforms without the context of a business looking to apply it. Many platform aspects that are a benefit to some companies will be drawbacks for other businesses.

Here is some top-level information on platforms that we are most familiar with, to begin to guide your research and discussions with potential partners.



There are over 250,000 retailers using Magento for their ecommerce stores, whilst the Magento community boasts 300,000 developers, 800 technology partners and 350 system integration partners. This gives you an idea of the reach of the platform, the community vision and the level of support available to merchants for improving and innovating with Magento.

Since the news of Adobe's acquisition of Magento, the future of the platform looks strong, with the combination suggesting even further focus on open-source, omnichannel commerce, enhanced customer experience and also B2B. Magento already powers the ecommerce stores of some of most popular online retail brands, and Adobe brings even further enterprise kudos to the platform.

[Magento 2](#) is seen globally as a powerful and highly-scalable platform. Magento 2 has been created with innovation and open-source at its core, helping ambitious retailers with a large online presence continue to grow over the next decade.

Magento notable traits

- Comprehensive featureset for B2C and B2B
- Proven track record
- Large market share
- Open-source and commercial versions available

- Optimised Cloud hosting platform available
- Large network of developers, agencies and technology partners around the globe
- Surge in feature and product development in recent years
- Modern PHP, sophisticated development architecture
- Highly-extendable
- Limited availability for merchant support and training
- Extension marketplace of add-ons



[Shopware](#) is a German platform that boasts 80,000 merchants and is seeing a surge in popularity despite it having 18 years worth of experience. Like Magento, it benefits from providing an open-source product with more complex functionality provided in Professional, and Enterprise editions for a license fee. There are also “accelerators” for meeting specific needs, such as B2B or marketplaces.

Shopware offers retailers great features and functionality, one notable one is Shopping Worlds. It’s an immersive, cutting-edge feature that facilitates drag-and-drop content management so that merchants can manage website content in the same way that they’re used to managing newsletter content.

Shopware notable traits

- German company with an increasing commitment to the UK & Irish market
- Open-source platform
- Additional functionality available commercially through affordable one-time license fee
- Growing marketplace for add-ons
- Growing B2B functionality
- Modern PHP architecture with lower complexity & sophistication when compared to Magento
- Four different [support levels available](#)
- [Public Roadmap](#)



Shopify is a fast-growing hosted platform for retailers and ecommerce businesses, powering over 600,000 online stores. Its ease of use is one of its greatest appeals. The platform enables merchants to get up and running quickly and without large costs or large-scale upheaval. Shopify hosts your ecommerce store, which offers unlimited bandwidth for products inventory and customer data, whilst giving retailers piece of mind in terms the stability of their website.

It's an attractive platform for new businesses or SMEs with limited development resources or expertise in coding or technical product management. With [Shopify Plus](#) and recent product developments the platform is becoming a viable option option for larger, more experienced ecommerce businesses. Those with traditional, simple customer journeys are best served.

Shopify notable traits

- Canada-based hosted, closed-source platform
- User-friendly design (admin and frontend)
- Invisibly scales to support your traffic peaks
- Additional functionality available through App Store
- Apps are hosted by their developer, including data
- Supports billions of dollars in merchant revenue
- Trusted by 600,000 businesses, with over a million active users
- Provides a range of solutions to meet needs of small businesses, including point-of-sale

Summary

We hope you found this *Complete Guide to Choosing the Right Ecommerce Platform* useful. The purpose of the guide is make retailers aware of the vast range of considerations involved in building a business case for replatforming, scoping out your requirements and assessing the suitability of different platforms.

This extensive guide is your go-to resource for helping you to plan, research, assess and evaluate which ecommerce platform is right for your business. We've armed you with the insights and recommendations, now it's time for you to apply everything to your own business and your project.

You can find lots more useful guides and resources via the [Space 48 website](#).

Alternatively schedule a call with Tom Robertshaw, our Ecommerce Evangelist. See details on the next page!

How Space 48 can help

Space 48 is an [award-winning ecommerce consultancy](#), based in Manchester & Bath. Our experienced team of ecommerce experts and website developers have taken countless retail brands through the process of platform selection and website replatforming. If you want to discuss your challenges or chat about where your business is at now and where you want to get to, [get in touch with us today](#).

Or schedule a call with the guide's author, Tom Robertshaw. Tom is [Space 48's Ecommerce Evangelist](#) with a wealth of experience working with retailers to improve their performance. Tom is a leading expert in the industry and a regular event speaker, discussing the latest retail innovations.



Schedule a call with Tom

<https://calendly.com/tom-robertshaw/call> or tom@space48.com



Appendix

Checklist

Here's a checklist of many of the points discussed in this guide to help platform evaluation.

It's also available to download in a [Google Sheet](#):

- Build/migration cost
- License/transaction cost
- Cost of add-ons.
- Maintenance cost
- Hosting
- Support and training
- Risks
- Features support (delete as appropriate for your business). Either core or through trusted products/partners
 - Complex products, e.g. downloadable products, personalisation
 - Multi-currency
 - Multi-lingual
 - Local payment gateways
 - Order management/integration
 - Stock management/integration
 - Personalisation/recommendation
 - Product management
 - Email marketing
 - Product merchandising
 - Rule-based category management
 - Digital asset management
 - Reviews
 - Product filtering on category and search
 - Search service
 - Customer management (single customer view)
 - Customer segmentation
 - Customer profiling

- Customer account management/self-service
- Loyalty management
- Store locator
- Social Integrations
- Point of sale
- Coupons
- Promotion management
- Gift cards
- Content preview
- Wishlist/gift list
- Reserve or collect in store
- Marketplace integrations (Amazon/Ebay)
- On-site marketplace (multi-vendor)
- Regulation compliance
- Admin permission management
- Advanced business reporting & analytics
- Subscriptions
- Invoice management
- Customer service agent support
- Shipping carrier & live quotes.
- Multi-channel
- Return management
- Order management/fulfilment
- Admin usability
- A/B testing
- Search Engine Optimisation
- APIs
- B2B
 - Custom catalogs
 - Custom prices
 - Tiered pricing
 - Request for quotes
 - Customer organisation management
 - Pay by account
 - Credit management
 - Requisition lists
 - Order by SKU
 - CSV uploads

- Quality of base/demo theme
- Mobile optimisations
- Modern technology/architecture
- Scales to large product catalogues
- Scales to large concurrent visitors
- AI-enabled
- Open-source
- Platform updates
- Flexibility and extensibility
- Marketplace (likelihood of finding off-the-shelf extensions that provide functionality)
- Roadmap alignment
- Ecosystem size & health
- Industry analysis
- Competitors analysis