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Is Headless Right for You?

A guide to determining if headless commerce is the right fit for your organization

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Introduction

Although most consumers have never heard the term omnichannel, they are omnichannel in every way. They expect to shop when, where, and however they want, whether using mobile devices, in-store kiosks, wearable devices, or gaming consoles. They also demand a seamless experience that is consistent across all channels. Keeping pace with these expectations is a big challenge for many brands – especially when they must create new experiences.

In a traditional ecommerce model, new experiences can require changes to both the front- and back-end system, which can turn even small projects into huge headaches with heavy dependency on an already busy IT team. Headless architecture is a technique for building digital channels that allow brands to make customer experience updates more quickly while potentially exceeding customer expectations.

But how do you know if headless is right for you? In this whitepaper, you'll learn about business models and profiles for headless commerce. You'll discover implications and considerations for the headless approach, and how headless can accelerate your growth and optimize operations. You'll also find a decision guide of key questions for determining if headless commerce is right for your business.

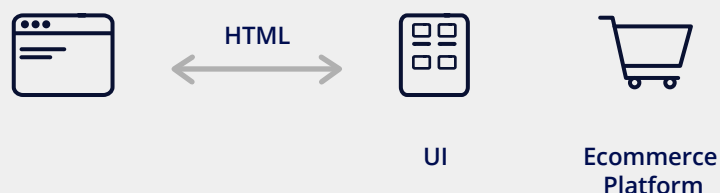


A Quick Primer on Headless Commerce

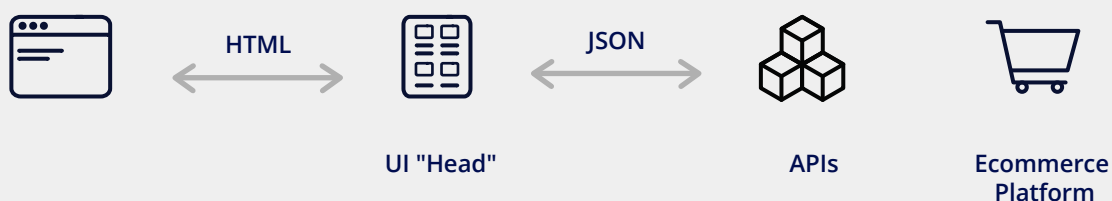
Headless commerce is a separation of the front-end presentation layer and the back-end business functionality layer. In a headless architecture, the two application layers typically communicate with one another using APIs. This allows each layer to operate independently, which offers more flexibility and lessens dependency on IT to make changes to the front-end layer. In essence, even employees who aren't tech savvy can more quickly make user-centric changes that only impact the front-end because they do not also need to make changes to the back-end.

The platforms that enable headless commerce also link up with other critical components of ecommerce infrastructure (e.g., ERPs, CRMs, products information management systems (PIMs), and accounting software). As a result, they enable a seamless flow of data without the cumbersome, disjointed data entry or management across numerous back-end systems.

TRADITIONAL PLATFORM APPROACH

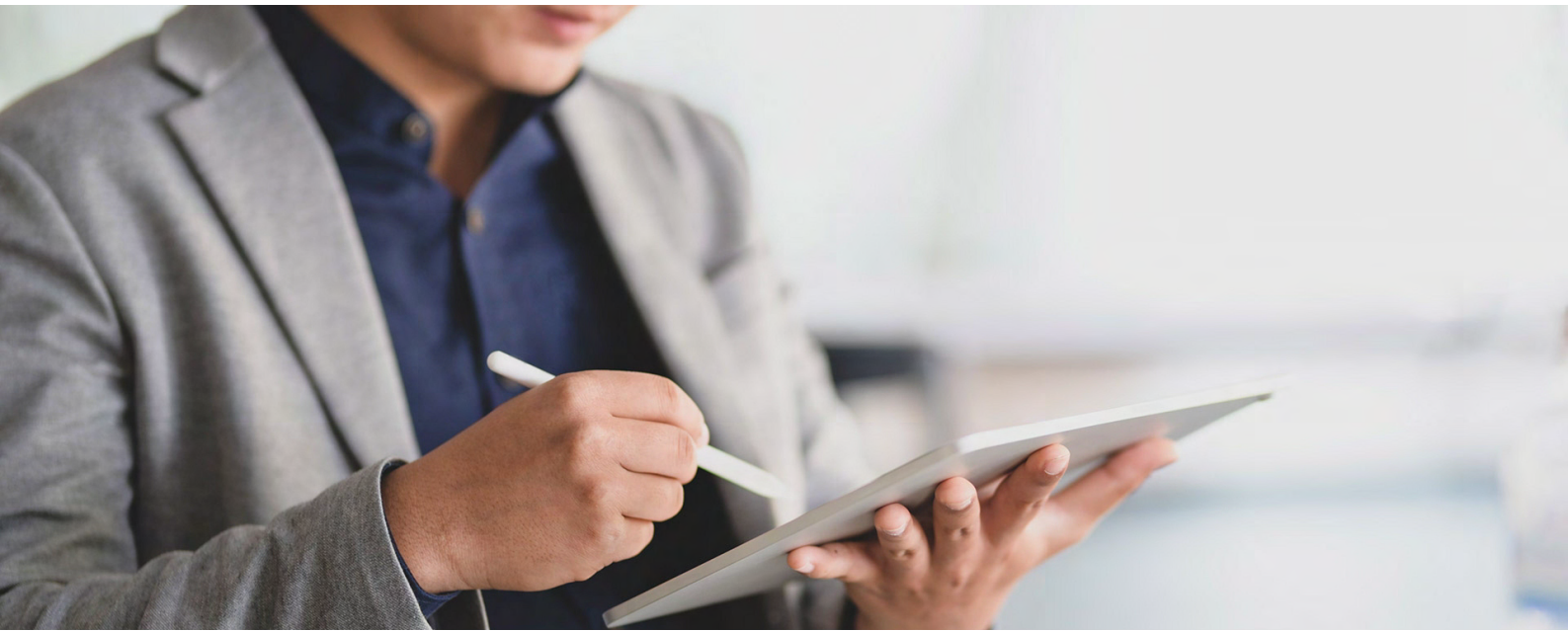


HEADLESS APPROACH



“Headless and microservices are two different evolutions of Service-Oriented Architecture. Microservices is used to build an entire ecommerce platform using a collection of smaller autonomous services whereas headless is a decoupling of the presentation layer from the ecommerce platform.”

Jeff Buttimer, Sr. Consultant, OSF Digital Strategy



Headless architecture is gaining popularity for two main reasons. First, original ecommerce platforms were built as monolithic (i.e., full-stack) systems, with the website front and back-end coupled. This approach worked well to handle single-channel ecommerce, where purchases mainly happened via shoppers' desktops. However, it became difficult to efficiently execute changes on full-stack solutions, which became a major problem with the rise of omnichannel ecommerce. In other words, ecommerce businesses struggled to keep up with each new shopping channel.

Second, content-first non-traditional commerce players (think bloggers, artists, designers) began to dominate the commerce space. For them, it is much easier to build a commerce engine and connect it to the existing content management solution rather than build a completely new website and migrate their old content.

At OSF Digital, we increasingly find ecommerce organizations turning to headless commerce as a more flexible way to keep pace with omnichannel demands.

Benefits of Headless

Now that you have a good understanding of headless commerce, let's discuss the benefits of headless architecture.



Business Autonomy:

Ability to make changes independently without IT intervention or updates/redeployments of back-end systems.



CX Touchpoints:

New customer touchpoints and channels can integrate with a single consistent API to the back-end.



Customization/Flexibility:

Not being confined to a specific system's template or plug-in selection means the retailer has full control to create unique experiences.



Scaling/Performance:

Ability to scale front-end separately from the commerce stack provides more flexibility in maximizing your site performance.



Agility/Speed:

Organizations can make changes to the customer experience quickly, efficiently, and continuously. Front-end changes can occur with faster testing. Plus, since simple changes generally do not impact core functionality, they are less subject to code freezes, reducing time to market while enabling more optimizations.



Future Proof:

Organizations can swap out and enhance user interface and CMS tools without replacing the entire commerce stack.



Front-end



Customization



Flexibility

MONOLITHIC

- Design constraint
- Need resources to edit and manage platform

- Predetermined experience for admin and users

- Front-end and back-end are coupled, so limited customization

HEADLESS

- No design constraint
- Need only build front-end presentation

- Create unique experiences for admin and users

- Endless customization can be made in the front-end



Business Considerations with Headless

Below are some best-fit characteristics to help you determine if headless will suit your business model and current ecommerce priorities.



Content/Design Heavy:

You want to deliver dynamic, content-rich, design-heavy elements without waiting for IT. You might also need more creative and development freedom. Headless removes many of the roadblocks typically associated with specialized content, saving time to market and money.



Experience Complexity:

You need to support distinct and varying customer experiences across the commerce enterprise (e.g., multiple brands, multiple regions, or multiple microsites). Headless architecture gives you the autonomy to create unique experiences without being restricted by templates or a set format.



Channel Complexity:

You support multiple customer touchpoints/channels (in-store kiosk, that requires a unique and non-standard design, virtual assistants, third-party platforms, etc.) experience. Headless is structured so to support endless customization.



Various Business Models:

You run both B2B and B2C models that require different designs and distinct content supported by a single site. Or you might support a B2B2C channel with its own set of rules and interface. Headless offers the flexibility to support various business models.



Non-Traditional Ecommerce/Scaling:

If you need unique UIs (e.g., mobile apps in cars, IoT), need to support ever-changing customer experiences, or want the flexibility to support new technologies, headless architecture would be a good investment.

If any of the above describes your business model, headless architecture could solve some key challenges. However, business model requirements are only part of the evaluation process. It is equally important to evaluate your organization's ability to successfully implement, support, and maintain a headless architecture.

Technical Considerations for Headless

While a headless architecture frees the organization from IT reliance in some regard, it still requires technical expertise and IT involvement. As the name implies, headless commerce does not account for the front-end of your commerce experience. While this enables more flexibility, it means you must separately account for the front-end.

The following are essential technical considerations.

- ✔ **IT capability:** Your IT team is tech savvy and can support a custom, open source, or distinct front-end (UI) system. If not, you can engage a System Integrator (SI) for implementation or ongoing support.
- ✔ **Technical bandwidth:** You will need to integrate third-party applications (e.g., personalization solutions, search solutions) with your front-end and back-end.
- ✔ **Greater oversight and guardrails for brand aesthetics:** With greater flexibility and capability comes a greater need for more branding oversight to ensure your design and standards are consistently applied and maintained.
- ✔ **Front-end solution 'build vs. buy' rationalization:** Headless architecture requires that you build or buy a front-end experience solution since the front-end experience is no longer contained within the ECP/CMS. Your organization will want to rationalize its decision, whether that is to build or buy the frontend, by comparing the pros and cons of each approach.
- ✔ **Understanding and budgeting the hosting costs:** Hosting costs for a headless platform can be unpredictable for peak cloud usage periods. Make sure these costs can be realistically estimated and planned.

If a traditional ecommerce solution is preventing you from what you want to do, and you are considering making the move to a headless architecture, remember the points above. When exploring a headless approach, these considerations should be reviewed and evaluated.

"If an ecommerce platform (ECP) re-platforming is on the horizon in 18-20 months, implementing a headless approach now would preserve the UI when a new ECP is implemented. This means you would not have to start the entire design again; only the API integrations would need to be updated."

Arthur McManus, Chief Technology Officer, OSF Digital Strategy



Is Headless Right for You?

Use these key questions as a guide to help you evaluate whether headless is the right fit for your organization. If you check yes to majority of these, headless could be right for you!

BUSINESS REASONS

- Do you need to deliver a unique customer digital experience or deliver rich content?
- Is there a high and growing emphasis on personalization and A/B testing?
- Do you need autonomy from IT when it comes to managing and updating CX?
- Do you manage multiple marketing channels, content sites, or unique brands, each with its unique look and feel?
- Does your creative team express a compelling need to be unencumbered by template or layout restrictions, such as to improve the brand image or customer experience?
- Do you need to integrate multiple customer experience services without being bound to only those compatible with the entire ecommerce platform?
Remember, when the front-end and back-end are coupled, any new service can impact every part of the existing architecture.
- Is the current front-end shopping experience slow to the customer?

TECHNICAL REASONS

- Is your company looking to re-platform your commerce platform?
- Does your company have the technical resources and skills to build and manage (and potentially host) the front-end UI completely in-house?
- Is your technical team able to manage the API integrations between front-end and CMS and commerce back-end?
- Is your technical team organized to support and specialize in the various front-end technologies, such as View or React, to be used?
- Is the technical team set up to manage the separate contracts needed for the front-end services?

ORGANIZATIONAL ALIGNMENT

- Can your digital commerce team dedicate content management resources to rapidly create and deploy new content and experience working with a separate CMS for A/B testing and personalization?
- Can your organization support a greater emphasis on content and commerce experience?
- Have you built out content to support personalization and multiple campaigns?
- Do you have a digital asset management system or structured repository of content available?



How to Go Headless with Salesforce Commerce Cloud

When you are ready to go headless, you'll want to build a flexible headless commerce solution that unlocks agility and innovation without adding more risk or operational burden. Salesforce offers a flexible headless commerce solution with scalable Commerce APIs that separate the back-end services from the front-end customer experience. Headless commerce will unlock the flexibility you want to inject commerce functionality into any customer touchpoint — such as Instagram, Facebook, video games, and more.

The flexibility of a commerce platform can ensure your developers can build with speed and full autonomy of tools, code, and APIs or any other third-party integration. With Salesforce's headless commerce solution, IT teams get modern infrastructure and developer efficiency tools to boost agility and productivity, while business users get innovation to drive growth.

Conclusion

Headless has become popular because keeping pace with emerging touchpoints and experiences is more complicated than ever. We predict it will get even more complicated as commerce innovation happens faster. Headless architecture alleviates many of the pain points organizations traditionally face when implementing new functionalities. However, like any technology, it comes with its challenges and implications.

Assessing whether headless architecture makes sense for your business model and organizational capabilities is critical. When considering any technology changes, we recommend retailers and brands secure buy-in across all key functional teams. It is important to identify gaps (whether lack of internal technical skillset or guardrails for brand-specific aesthetics) and address them before implementation.

With headless, organizations can achieve a competitive advantage by adopting a more future-proof architecture that will not limit them in satisfying dynamic and evolving customer expectations in an omnichannel world.



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OSF Digital is a global commerce and digital transformation leader with expertise in connecting technology and strategy to drive business goals. With expert status in B2C and B2B commerce and several Salesforce awards for multi-cloud innovation, OSF Digital seamlessly guides enterprises through their entire digital transformation journey. With customers in various industries around the globe, OSF Digital provides personal attention and the highest level of connection with a local presence throughout North America, Latin America, APAC, and EMEA. For more information about OSF Digital, visit: osf.digital.

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