Ready for B2B e-commerce?

- This is how stellar product information lets your webshop soar

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B2B e-commerce is a gold mine waiting to be exploited

1,200,000,000,000. According to Forrester Research, the turnover in B2B e-commerce will total 1.2 billion dollars world-wide by 2020.

Even today, the turnover in B2B e-commerce is around twice as high as within B2C – and that's even though the market can still be considered to be relatively undeveloped. It's only around 10% of the total B2B turnover that is generated by webshops today.

That means that there is no way to get around the potential of B2B e-commerce, and that's why a large number of com-panies are right now ready to open an online sales channel.

Succeeding with B2B e-commerce, however, is far from simple and a lot of attempts get off on the wrong foot.

In this guide, we'll help you steer clear of some of the most common problems and especially take a closer look at what you need to get a handle on in relation to your product information.
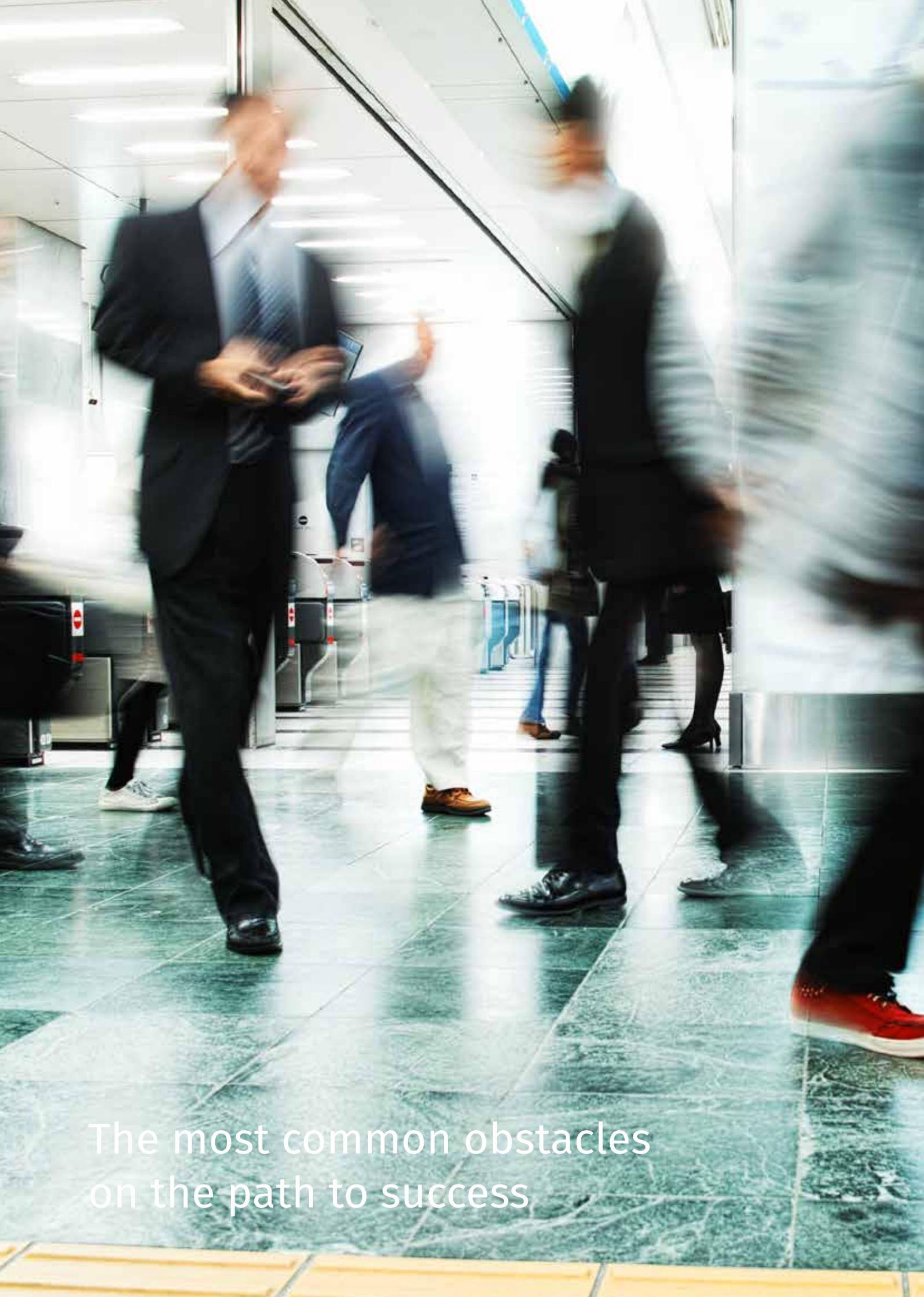
The most common obstacles
on the path to success

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Lack of buy-in from senior management
E-commerce needs to be high on the agenda for both the management and the board. Otherwise, the risk that the project founders is far too great. This is because introducing a new sales channel impacts the very foundations of the company. E-commerce will have a knock-on effect on all aspects of the company and they will have to adapt to a new reality – this applies to everyone, including marketing, sales and logistics. It's a high-impact project, and it will only succeed if the top management leads the way.

Conflict between the channels
The traditional sales process where sales staff, retailers and brick and mortar stores have been central is suddenly challenged by an online sales channel that requires new skills and processes. Therefore, there will often be a natural fear among some employees that the move towards e-commerce will change – or maybe even eliminate – their place in the company.

Developing the strategy and driving the project forwards requires digital skills both in relation to the technical implementation of the project and the entire marketing effort – often it requires more in depth digital skills than most B2B companies have on staff.

The e-commerce platform must be integrated into the business
E-commerce is rarely the only way that B2B companies generate sales, and it is necessary to integrate the e-commerce platform with the rest of the company's systems. In order to achieve an agile ordering process and show inventory and the like, the e-commerce platform must pull data from the ERP and potentially other business systems.

This integration can in some cases be resource intensive and makes it difficult to start at full speed.

Where can you place your product data?

ERP

In the ERP system
Pro: You have everything on one platform
Con: ERP is not designed to handle product information of this type and one will be feeding marketing information into a system where it has no function.

PIM

in a PIM-system
Pro: Is designed to handle product information and therefore it is a lot easier to control and maintain product information from several different sources and on multiple channels.

Con: You have to invest in a new system and the business requires a certain degree of complexity in order for the investment to make good business sense. It might be needed if the product data is spread across many different places and are hard to get an overview of, or if there is a need for data for several outputs such as e-commerce, web, catalogues, price lists, product sheets, POS-material, etc.

Within the e-commerce platform
Pro: You won't need to implement something like a PIM-system.

Con: The e-commerce platforms are not designed for master data and are not well suited for extra data. By placing your product data directly into a marketing channel, it becomes difficult to use them elsewhere, for example in catalogues. Unless the company only relies on e-commerce it is therefore a better idea to place the product information further behind in the value chain.

Perfion

Product information is rarely ready from the start
Last, but not least, there are the products – or rather the information about the products that the customers need to find, evaluate and buy them.

The challenge with product information is often under-estimated. One has the products, after all, and there are so many other things to think about when building an e-commerce platform.

But it's one thing to use product information internally and in a traditional sales process. To display all this information online in a meaningful way to potential customers is something else entirely.

Poor product information is typically the greatest show-stopper, and therefore we will in the following pages take a closer look at how you get your product information ready for e-commerce.

Time for a thorough cleaning

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Incomplete and poor product information is the greatest obstacle on the path to success with e-commerce. The first step past this obstacle is to get an overview. What parts of the necessary product information are accessible, where are the located and how complete are they?

Make a product chart with the products on the y-axis and the necessary product information on the x-axis. Even in a simplified form and with a basic item like a pen, there will quickly be a need for displaying a range of product information in the webshop. If you make a similar matrix for your products, how many empty squares are you left with?

Internal product name	Webshop product name	Material	Farve	Color of ink	Tip width	SEO-friendly product text	Inventory status	Price per pack with 100 pieces
Pen HT12-1	Pen "Office premium"	Plastic	Green	Blue	0,75 mm	The pen "Office premium" is a (...)	In stock	49,95

Manufacturing companies are often in possession of the basic information, but typically they will be spread across several systems. The basic data is in ERP, more product information might be in a database and several excel sheets while pictures are on another drive, etc.

Collecting all of this information in a single system in a way that makes sense is a challenge in itself, but the real problem is that product information is usually created for internal use. Something as basic as the product name might easily be understood internally, but be entirely meaningless in the eyes of the customer.

The customer's search behavior should be the starting point
It is critical that it is the customer's perception and search behavior that are the focal point for what product information is displayed in the webshop, and in how specifically they take shape. If it isn't possible for the customer to find precisely the information he or she needs in order to make a decision, and to find them quickly, then the company loses potential sales.

For wholesalers, the challenge is twice as big as they depend on getting the product information from the manufacturers. Gathering and structuring information from several different external sources that do not deliver product information the same way makes the job of succeeding with e-commerce even more complex.

There are unfortunately no quick and easy solutions to get a good basic grip on your product information. It requires blood, sweat and manual labor, but it will be worth all the effort.

On the following pages, you will be guided through what to focus on in order to turn product information from an obstacle into a competitive advantage.

6 things you need to get a
handle on in order to succeed with
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1. Describe all relevant product properties
There will be differences from product to product as it relates to what information is relevant, but the common denominator is that there needs to be the information that the customer needs in order to make the decision on whether to buy it or not.

Physical characteristics such as dimensions, material, color, etc are obvious. It might also be about production capacity, warranty periods, etc, if the product in question is a machine or something similar.

The key here is to turn the internal product names and descriptions into something that makes sense to the customer. It's about structuring, describing and displaying the product properties so that it becomes possible for the customers to search for or filter the information that is important to them.

2. Ensure uniform descriptions
When you are basing your product information on data from several sources, it is not an uncommon problem that the product information is not described in a uniform manner.

A length might be described as "20mm", "20 mm" or just "20" in different systems and without a uniform method of description for the various product properties it'll be hard to make a good filtering system for the products in the webshop.

3. Create logical groupings – for the customer
The internal grouping of products in a company does not necessarily make sense for a customer. For a wholesaler, products might be grouped by supplier, and that is not always the most relevant for the customers. For them, the focus will instead be on the most important product properties.

In relation to the webshop, the groupings must therefore be made based on which overall categories the customer would divide the products into. What sections would it be logical to look in if you were a customer and you step into the store? One must also take into account that a product can belong to multiple categories.

The grouping can also be so general that one works with several webshops specializing in their own niches, if for example one has a product portfolio that is directed towards several different business areas.
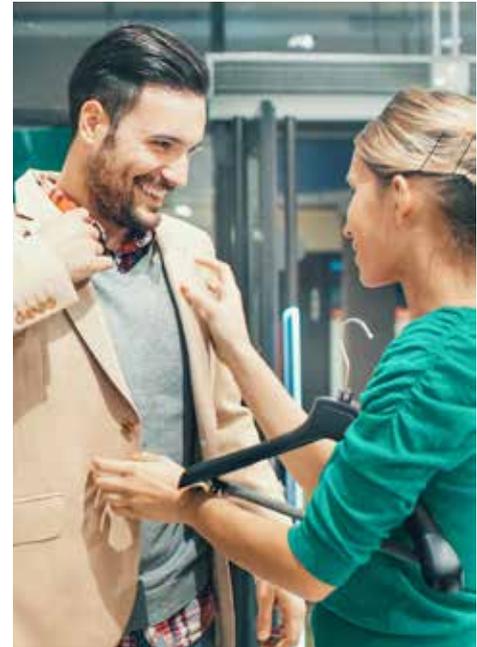
What does your B2B webshop need to be able to do?
Most e-commerce platforms contain the basic functions one can rightfully expect from a modern e-commerce solution. There are also a number of functions that one might consider using if need be:

There are, for example, individual pricing schemes, support for customer accounts with several users, showing of catalogues, the possibility to quickly re-order previously bought items and more.

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4. Languages

Every time you add a new language to your webshop, you add a layer of complexity to your product information. If you take the matrix with the product information for the pen above as an example, language becomes a third dimension. Every extra language is a new row of product information.

Even if every extra language added might not require the same resources as the first, there is a large amount of work involved in developing, and not least maintaining, product information in several languages. Make sure, therefore, always to have a clear process for how product information is maintained for all the languages.

5. Make the product text SEO-friendly

Even the most beautifully designed webshop is worthless if the customers can't find it. One of the decisive differences between generating sales with traditional marketing techniques and sales material and running a webshop is that you do not have control over who receives the information. Instead of delivering the message in the form of, for example, a print catalogue or a mail to a known recipient, you now want the receiver to find it on his/her own. The webshop, in other words, need to be search engine optimized. There are a lot of things to consider in relation to SEO, but one of the most important things to think about is including the relevant search terms in your product description.

For most B2B businesses, the webshop is not on its own, but rather has to work together with a modern website where a significant portion of the SEO is most likely to be found. Nevertheless, an SEO-friendly product description will be an important contribution towards ensuring that the customer can quickly find what is relevant to him/her.

6. Get a handle on pictures and videos

The basic product information is text-based, but one must not forget the visual aspect of the product data. It is critical for the customer's perception of the webshop and one must remember that the customer has gotten used to stylish webshops when they are buying in a B2C capacity.

A lot of companies find that they lack good pictures for all their products, and therefore they might have to start working on either getting or taking the necessary pictures. Existing pictures must be made to appear uniform in format and size, and everything must be named in a meaningful way – both for the purposes of internal categorization and search engine optimization. Existing pictures must be made to appear uniform in format and size, and everything must be named in a meaningful way – both for the purposes of internal categorization and search engine optimization.
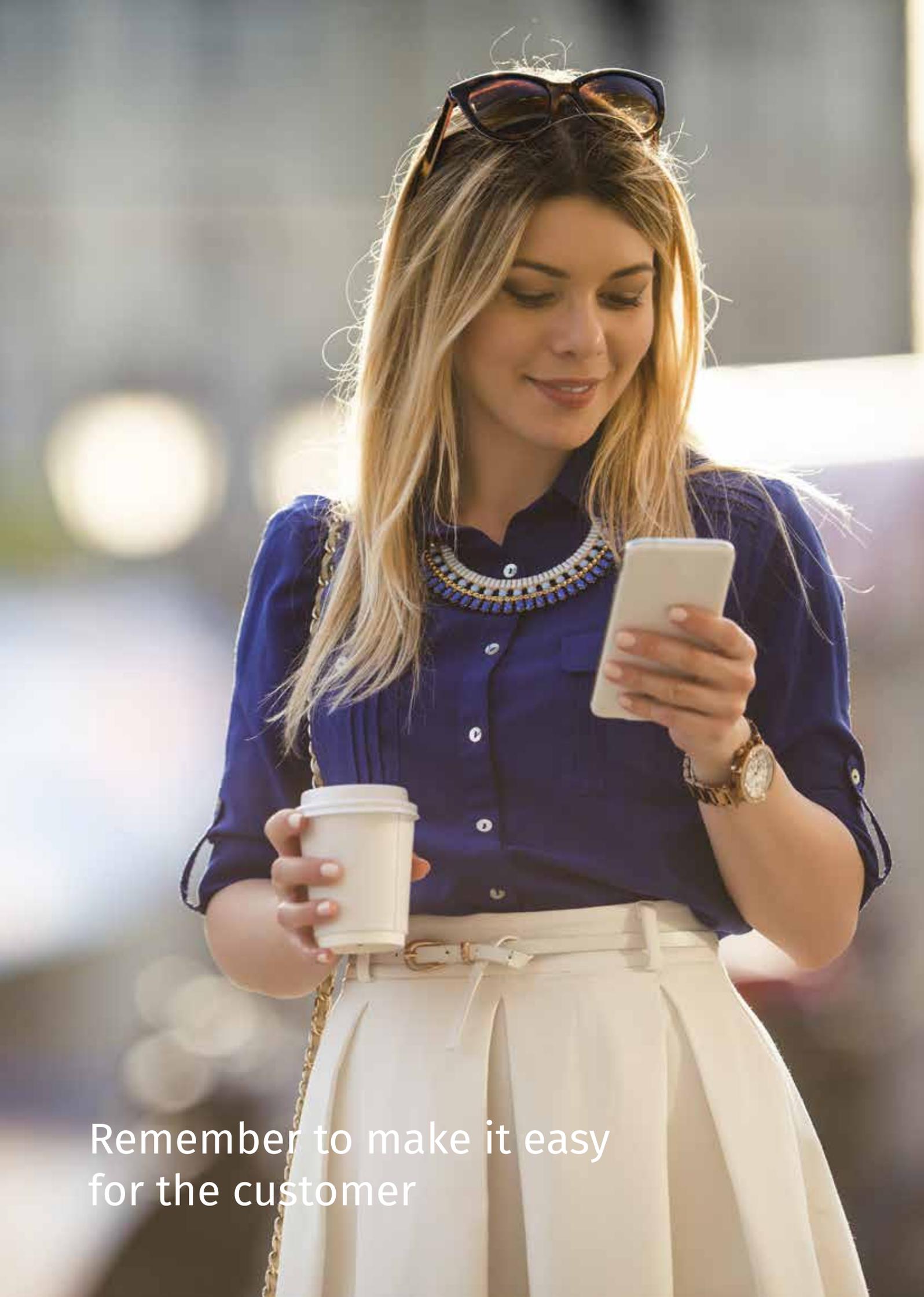
Remember to make it easy
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The path to a successful B2B e-commerce platform is, as mentioned in the introduction, far from simple. Yet if you collect and structure the necessary product information as described in the preceding pages you are well on your way – at least, assuming that you are constantly focused on the customer's experience.

These customers have gotten used to shopping in hyper-optimized B2C webshops in their personal lives, and these B2C webshops are thoroughly designed to be as user friendly as possible. They take these high expectations with them to work when they shop in a B2B capacity.

One thing is different, however. Your customers do not come to you because they want to, but rather because it is a part of their job. And most would like to do their job as easily as possible. Therefore, maintain a clear focus on how to help the customers do their job as quickly and efficiently as possible. Then you increase the likelihood of them returning to your webshop next time.
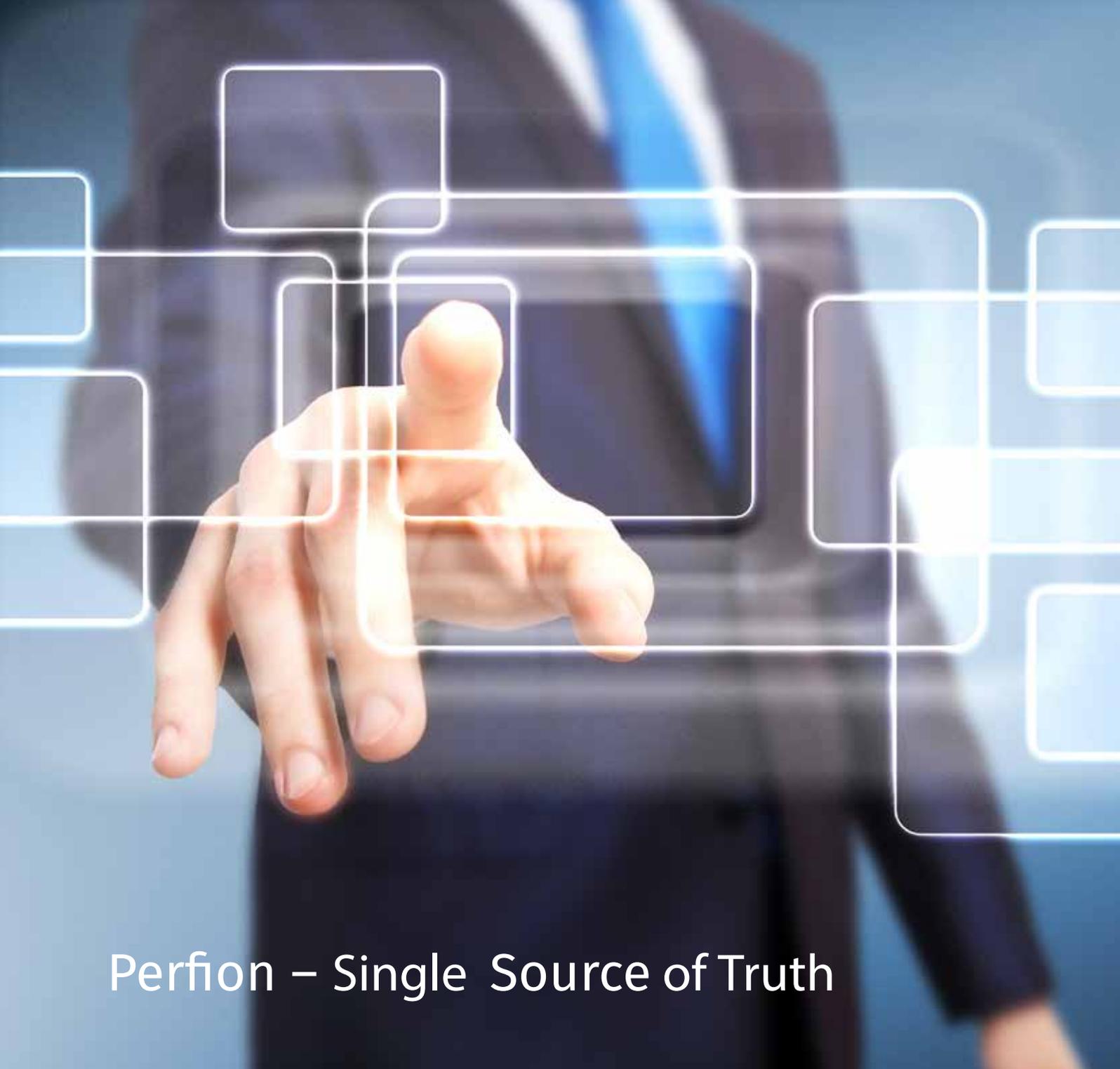
Perfion – Single Source of Truth

Perfion PIM is developed for companies that communicate through many channels and in several languages and which have a complex product structure with a lot of product data.

As the world's only 100% standardized solution for Product Information Management, Perfion PIM provides you with the basis for optimizing your company's processes which allows you to lower the time-to-market, gain new market share and to always deliver the information that your customers need.

With Perfion, you have one simple source for all your texts, technical data, files, pictures, videos, etc. This gives you full control over all product data on all sales and marketing platforms.

Perfion's open API makes it easy to integrate the solution with the IT systems you are currently using – anything from your ERP system, InDesign and your Office package. Similarly, Perfion has a standard integration into several e-commerce platforms which makes it easy to keep your webshop updated directly from Perfion PIM.