



A NEW ERA OF ECOMMERCE:

Headless Commerce



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Changing buyer habits are proving the link between content and commerce can no longer be ignored. While legacy ecommerce platforms struggle to keep up, SaaS innovations have helped retailers adapt and prosper without having to rip and replace existing ways of doing business.

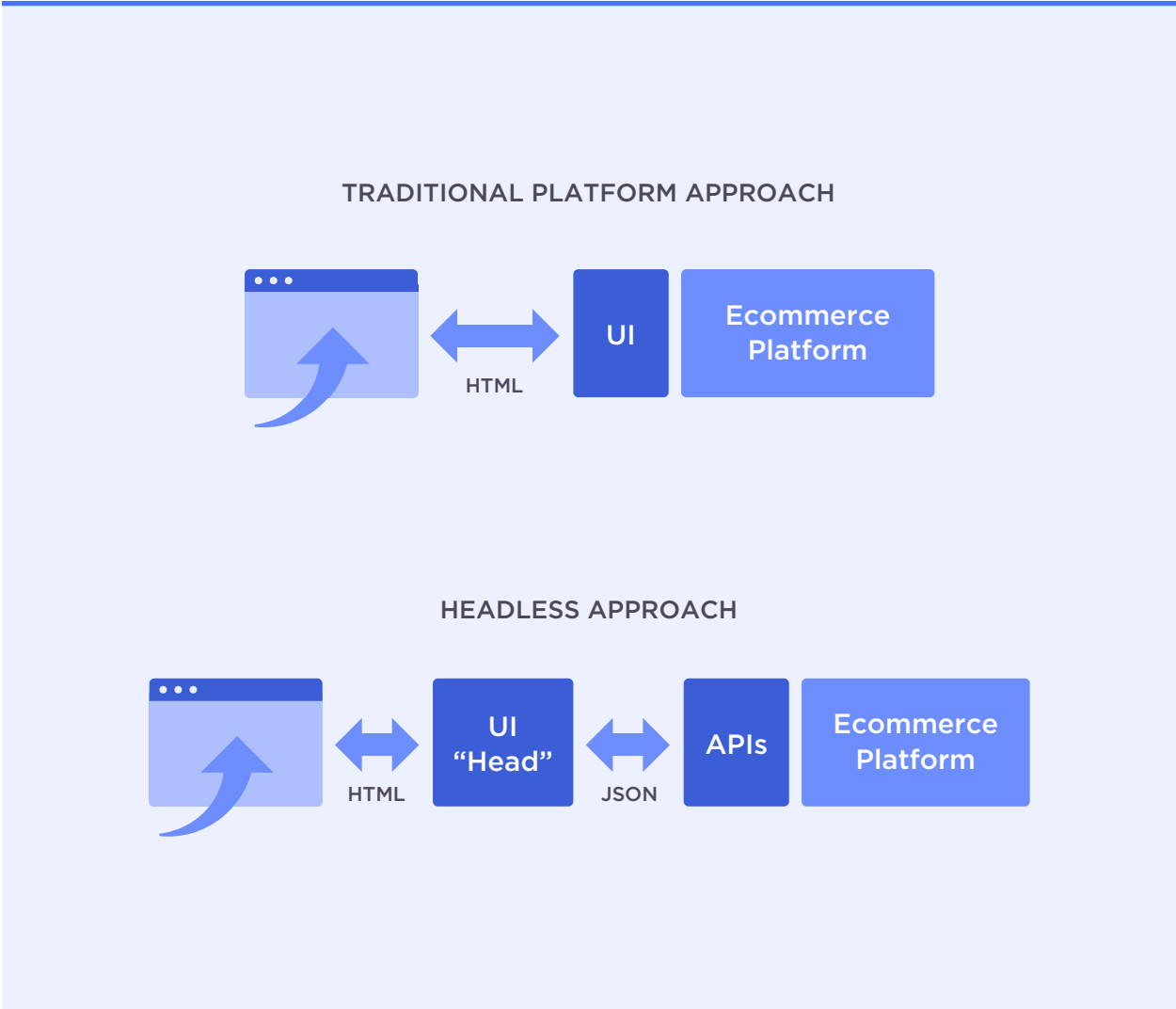
In this white paper, you'll learn how a headless commerce architecture allows high-volume brands to operate with the best-of-breed solutions, flexibility at scale and content-first approach shoppers demand. In addition, we'll explore why merchants, and partners, need a headless commerce solution to take full advantage of CMS options, such as WordPress; digital experience platforms, such as Acquia; and single page app frameworks, such as React, that are already in place.

We'll also cover:

- How content and commerce require a new kind of ecommerce platform
- Pre-packaged offerings and flexible plug-ins
- How developers can seamlessly weave existing content management platforms, such as WordPress, into headless ecommerce solutions
- Why monolithic ecommerce platforms are becoming obsolete and how to explore pre-packaged options and flexible connector approaches

Understanding headless commerce

Headless commerce decouples the presentation layer — in most cases the template or theme — from the ecommerce platform. This allows more flexibility in content management and delivery, UX and SEO; and also why it's sometimes associated with decoupled commerce.



The ecommerce platform can still connect to all the backend needs, from inventory management to ERPs, OMS tools and PIMs via APIs. In this model, the platform serves up PCI compliance, security, fraud management and inventory management while connecting to the key infrastructure points mentioned above.

Benefits of decoupling the presentation layer from your platform:

- Content management systems and digital experience platforms present brands in the best possible light by driving an experience-led look and feel
- Removes the need to compromise content, commerce or experience
- CMS systems (such as WordPress) are better equipped to drive content experiences that increase brand value perception and drive shoppers to buy

HEADLESS COMMERCE VS. DECOUPLED COMMERCE

The short answer: they're not the same.

Headless commerce

Headless commerce gives mid-sized companies the agility to move and grow fast by enabling teams to work within their existing ecosystem instead of being forced into a new platform.

Businesses can develop the front-end in WordPress and simultaneously manage logistics and commerce in the backend, versus relying on a single system to do both flawlessly. When you add support to the mix, it fits under the umbrella of Commerce-as-a-Service (CaaS).

Another major advantage to headless commerce, is that it allows marketers to better couple content with commerce. For merchants with a site built around established, SEO-optimized content, it serves as a much better alternative to moving content to a static ecommerce site, where traffic can be lost. Or worse, awkwardly bolt content to the commerce site.

Decoupled commerce

Decoupled commerce is an option for enterprise customers with vast sections of their online presence needing a commerce microservice delivered via API. An enterprise's online presence is often powered by a content-rich platform that would be difficult to deliver within a monolithic or commerce-led platform.

THE STATE OF ECOMMERCE PLATFORMS

What happened when you wanted to start an online store 20 years ago? You purchased a monolithic system that wasn't easily customizable. Your choices were limited in terms of using any best-of-breed solutions without employing an army of developers to integrate it, or you used a solution separate of your monolithic system.

Over time, commerce-led SaaS platforms emerged. Built with the central purpose of selling in mind, this software-driven solution gave you options for customization — plugin components without huge integration expenses. The platforms were designed to allow you to connect or plug-in other options, such as marketing tools that needed the platform data to function optimally.

Headless commerce: moving from a monolithic model

While monolithic offerings take away choice and lack the ability to iterate fast enough to stay relevant, CaaS is committed to a consultative strategy that helps get the right solution bundled together for your client.

THE END OF THE MONOLITHIC ERA

Slow go-to-market timelines, high development costs, delays in innovation — traditional ecommerce models simply can't keep up with the agility and customization of CaaS. Here's why more brands are moving to a CaaS ecommerce model.

APIs deliver commerce where needed

Headless commerce takes the core functionality and services of a SaaS ecommerce platform, removes the presentation layer, and gives you the ability to specify where commerce takes place and what data needs to be surfaced. All done utilizing a large swatch of APIs.

Flexibility and customization

The commerce-led platform stepped away from the monolith by making it relatively easy to include functionality like shipping logistics, PIMs, ERPs, or to extend, modify, and enhance through apps and custom development alterations to the front end (such as pop-up banners, email or plugins).

Data moves in seconds, not hours

The headless commerce model moves further away, aligning itself more closely with a microservices or decoupled approach without the over complexity and investment costs of those approaches. And it's driven by the need to ensure anything plugged in can run quickly — through robust APIs or other means.

What it means for agencies and retailers

For organizations actually building a commerce store, or redesigning an existing one, it means a modular, streamlined approach that delivers what you need. Brands can reap the inherent benefits that come with a SaaS platform, but with the flexibility of choice when it comes to presentation layer.

Another way to think of headless commerce is that all the components are modular. It's not quite Android (open) vs. Apple (closed, permission-based). It's a hybrid middle approach with a defined structure. It's an approach that welcomes the newest best-in-breed solutions to join the game with a commerce engine designed to let them hop on board.

It's a pattern-based, repeatable system that allows the rapid adoption of new technologies and trends. For example, there's isn't a video hosting platform out there capable of click-to-shop-in-video commerce — but with CaaS, it's possible to enable click-on items in-video with shop technologies.

Monolithic systems have always paid lip service to openness, but when the critical components that used to only come in the monolithic system become truly open, that's a game changer.

Headless commerce: the checklist

Everyone who offers solutions to commerce companies are talking about openness. But there are varying degrees of openness. If headless commerce is the right option for your agency and your clients, there are several important considerations for your business to explore.

It's critical for companies who express they have headless, decoupled or microservices, to understand if the tools provide the best-in-breed solutions you know will work for your client. This openness should exist without forcing compromises in other areas, or a force-fit into a predefined box.

- An agnostic commitment:** Is the platform truly neutral about allowing vendors to create connections and plug-ins? Is the platform designed for multiple connections? How many endpoints are opened and are they bi-directional?
- API-centric:** Look for highly-efficient, or unlimited API call volumes and multiple endpoints. There should be a heavy focus on API development and throughput in the product roadmap and well-vetted developer documentation.
- Solid, scalable and secure:** Solutions should seamlessly weave the various best-in-breed solutions together without risking security.
- PCI compliance:** Look for a platform that can manage PCI compliant checkout and is willing to guarantee security without reducing flexibility, or restricting the number of gateways. For more enterprise use cases, the ability to forgo platform-powered PCI compliance through server-to-server checkout and payment experiences should also be present.
- Simplified & highly-scalable catalog:** Merchants outgrow CMS-based websites when catalogs get larger and more complex. Look for solutions that can handle 600 options/variants per product, without any catalog size restrictions.
- Detailed documentation:** There should be well-documented developer materials to ensure seamless connections and plug-ins.
- Ready to bake-in options:** Options that are easy to connect-in, such as solutions to send customer order status messages, real-time shipping calculations and label printing, are important. These should be designed as modular, optional components.

Roadblocks to avoid

As you look for a truly agnostic solution, avoid the pitfalls

Complex workarounds

Though a benefit to commerce-led workarounds is the ability to build the way you want to, be careful not to compromise SEO benefits and plugin interoperability when integrating your CMS solution.

With the value of a same-domain experience, however, complex workarounds can be avoided, keeping SEO functionality intact.

Completely decoupled options

Choice is good, but monolithic platforms are expensive. Options that are totally self-serve (download a payment app or a catalog app) might work if you have an appetite for development bills. Having pieces designed to work together in a modular system with different options takes some of the work out of headless commerce.

Headless commerce as a growth strategy

When evaluating a platform, always keep in mind:

- Will you be able to choose best-in-breed solutions as you grow?
- There are companies aligned with CMS players — but are they scalable?

For enterprise companies, the headless approach is about offering those decoupled solutions to manage niches of the digital marketplace. It's about not having to rip and replace anything while still getting revenue-driving features and functionality you need.

There are fewer options to be nimble, to quickly adopt a best-in-breed solution to help stave off competition — than a headless commerce architecture.

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