



intershop[®]

(R)evolution in B2B commerce

Setting new standards with a digital customer portal

Whitepaper

The only constant is change.

This can be seen in the many business models that are currently being transformed by digitization and the rise of disruptive technologies. As products become increasingly indistinguishable, competition is getting fiercer. Online marketplaces and platforms may extend a vendor's reach, but the same rule still applies: the best price always wins. So what can vendors do? One option is to offer high-quality services—the better you cater to the specific needs of customers, the more you stand out from your competitors.

When developing new services and business models, you should also factor in the changing relationship between you and your customers. B2B buyers now have B2C expectations when it comes to service, efficiency, and the customer experience—including post-sale. Deciding how, where, and when to get the information they need, either digitally or person-to-person, is an ongoing process. The role of sales staff is changing as a result; they are now customer consultants whose job is to deliver tailored solutions.

The digital customer portal is a central hub for efficient and productive interaction. As a result, it is becoming a pivotal element in the increasingly digital customer relationship. Combining digital selling and service processes, the typical portal provides a harmonized view of individual customers across all locations and systems. It also merges customer, transaction, and product data with service offerings to create a unified information and service platform for customers and sales and service employees.

What B2B customers want

The relationship between customer and vendor doesn't end with the sale. The more complex the product, e.g., industrial machinery, the more support the customer may need:

- How do I install and commission the machine?
- Are there any tutorials?
- Who should I call if there's a problem?
- Where do I get spare parts?

In addition, the relationship between customer and vendor changes over time. The customer interacts with the vendor when placing orders, talking with sales staff, learning about new products, searching for documentation, or submitting queries.

All of these processes can be standardized to streamline the interaction between vendor and customer. Frequently asked questions from customers include:

- How can I make the purchase process more efficient and replicate my procurement structures?
- Where are my documents?
- How do I request an appointment or open a ticket?
- Who is my account manager and how do I get in touch?

To ensure seamless communication, the digital customer portal should provide straightforward answers to all these questions. If customers have difficulty placing an order, locating a document, or finding contact details, they are unlikely to remain customers for long.

Finally, the customer interacts with the product, creating a personal product history. For example, the customer can:

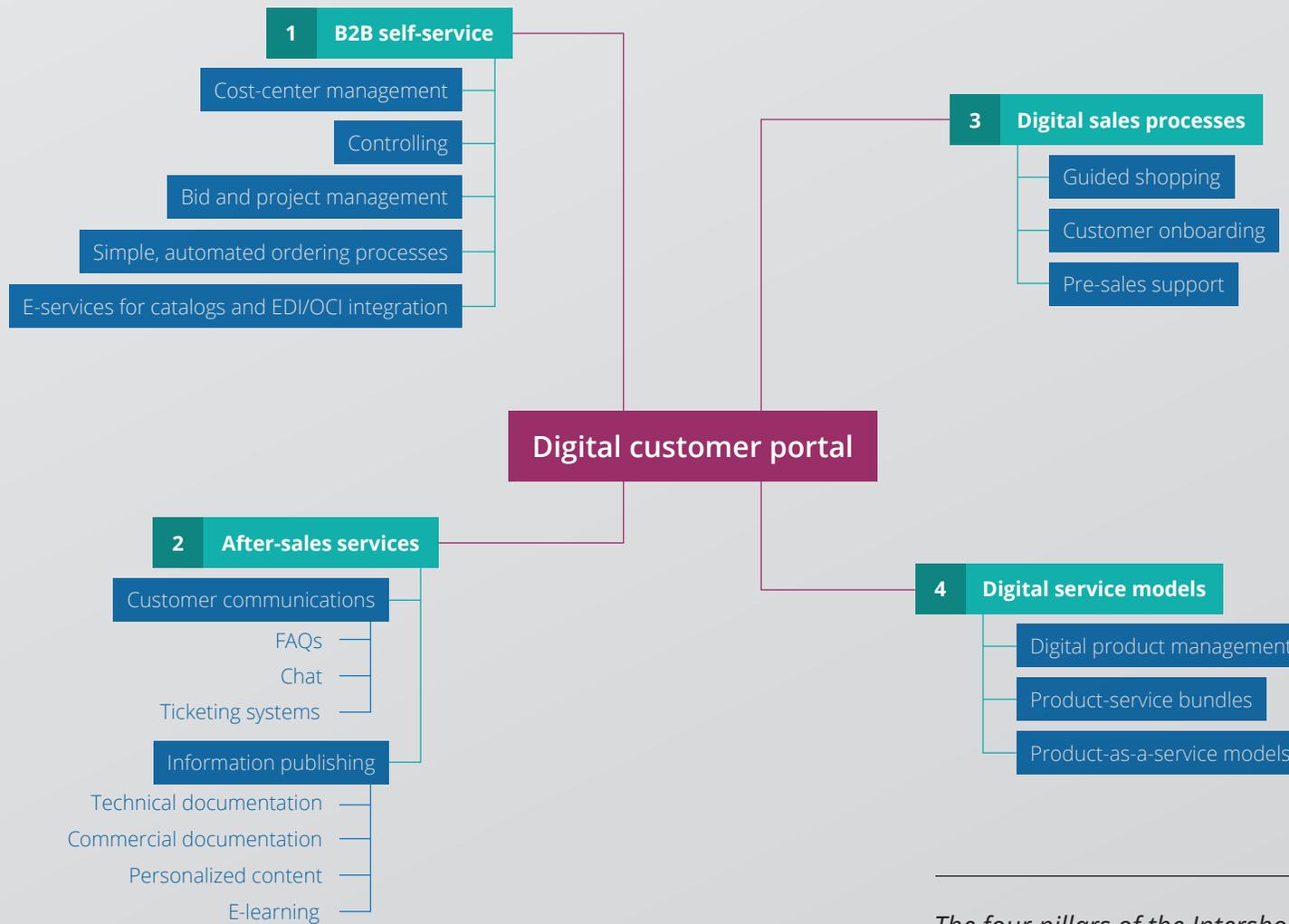
- Generate a range of data when using the product,
- Configure service agreements that can be amended later,
- Modify equipment through upgrade or repair.

The product can be replicated digitally in the customer portal, giving the customer access to a detailed product history (date of purchase, specification, repairs, service agreements, etc.). In addition, the vendor can use the platform to offer additional services, e.g., product maintenance. All of this interaction between customer, vendor, and product is merged within the portal.



The four pillars of the digital customer portal

The digital customer portal is the next evolution of the B2B online shop. It can replicate the buyer's procurement process, digitize the vendor's sales processes, and support after-sales activities and the development of digital services. Covering a large part of the customer lifecycle, it provides a full spectrum of services during the various phases of the relationship. It also enables targeted communications based on the various roles and requirements at the customer's end. Conceptually, the portal is built on four pillars that represent different usage scenarios and the associated benefits for vendor and customer.



The four pillars of the Intershop customer portal



B2B self-service:

Empower the customer

Today's B2B buyers want to manage their own data, products, and service agreements. They also want anytime access to the vendor's information, processes, and e-learning content. Firstly, this reduces their administrative workload. Secondly, they can retain their existing internal processes. In addition, B2B buyers expect the same self-service features they are accustomed to as private consumers.

A digital customer portal enables:

1. Self-service management of:
 - Company profiles, procurement structures, and user roles,
 - Offers, delivery notes, invoices, etc..

2. Custom order processes, e.g.,:
 - Configuration of customized catalogs,
 - Bid and project management,
 - Integration of e-procurement solutions.

EXAMPLE

Replicating internal procurement structures

Most companies have a dedicated purchasing department with its own internal hierarchy. At the top of that hierarchy is the departmental head, responsible for approving purchases above a certain amount. Additionally, there are operational buyers with their own line managers and monthly budget limits.

A digital customer portal can replicate this hierarchy to perfection. The departmental head sets the budget limits and catalog access for each operational buyer.

EXAMPLE

E-learning for fault diagnostics

Imagine a customer has purchased a piece of equipment from you. They are pleased with the product, but it now displays a persistent error message. Despite having experienced staff, the customer has not been able to establish the cause and thus requires your support.

Thankfully, you already have video tutorials on all common fault scenarios in the e-learning section of your digital customer portal. If the customer is unable to resolve the issue, or if you do not yet have a tutorial for the specific error code, they can contact your support team via the ticketing system.



After-sales services:

Post-sale is pre-sale

Vendors can use product-related services to boost customer satisfaction and take advantage of upselling and cross-selling opportunities. The keys to success are personalization as well as fast and flexible communication across all touch-points. For seamless interaction between vendor and customer, all information needs to be accessible in a central location.

A digital customer portal enables:

1. Efficient communication with customers, e.g.,:
 - FAQs
 - Chat/chatbots
 - Ticketing systems
2. Fast customer access to information, e.g.,:
 - User guides and data sheets
 - Product information
 - Personalized offers and information
 - E-learning content

EXAMPLE

Using co-browsing to present products

Imagine you're a field sales agent for a leading manufacturer of machine tools. Prior to a meeting with a major customer, you use the digital portal to co-browse your product catalog with your customer's lead buyer. Together, you identify the products you should present during your visit. The meeting goes well, so you wrap up the negotiations and immediately place an order via a mobile app.

Alternatively, a customer might call your sales team after searching unsuccessfully for a specific type of milling machine in the online catalog on the portal. A sales representative advises the customer on the phone while co-browsing the catalog. After finding the right product, the representative adds it to the customer's cart. Now that is customer service.

3

Digital sales processes:

More time for customer support

As sales processes become increasingly digital, the role of sales staff is changing. We are now in the era of the "empowered buyer," who has greater independence when it comes to purchasing decisions. As a result, many pre-sales activities are already complete before the buyer contacts a sales representative. Nevertheless, that human interaction is more important than ever. In fact, sales representatives play a crucial part in building and maintaining customer relationships. Now assuming more of a consultancy function, they provide ideas and support on potentially complex issues while guiding the client through the buying process.

Supported by a digital customer portal, sales representatives can add value during the customer's purchase decision-making journey, with exciting potential for reconfiguring sales processes and touchpoints.

Possibilities include:

- Integration of mobile apps
- Customer onboarding in portal
- Guided shopping
- Co-browsing

4

Digital service models:

Huge scope for additional business

Services are a key differentiator in the marketplace. Vendors can use them to create tailored offerings and thus real added value for specific target groups. In doing so, they strengthen customer loyalty and generate new opportunities for sales and value creation. As products become increasingly digitized within the Internet of Things, they can be replicated in digital form and used to gather data. This provides insights into product usage and other customer behavior. Vendors can then identify specific customer needs and create tailored services to meet them. The digitized products (“digital twins”) can be registered in the portal and linked to digital services.

User benefits:

- Products linked to maintenance contracts
- Overview of digital products with usage information
- Metered billing for product use (product-as-a-service)
- Automated reordering via kanban systems

EXAMPLE

Maintenance for a digital forklift

Imagine a customer has registered a forklift truck in your digital customer portal. By syncing the forklift’s tracking system, the customer can view the vehicle’s monthly mileage in the portal. After it reaches a certain mileage, the customer is notified that the brakes need servicing.

Since the forklift is already linked to a custom parts catalog, the replacement brake discs are automatically presented in the portal. A video tutorial shows the service technician how to replace the discs. If necessary, the customer can use the chat function in the portal to contact the manufacturer.

“Our customer portal with integrated web shop incorporates our B2B customers directly into our processes. It is taking our relationships to a whole new level, as we focus our marketing, sales, and service on the digital customers of today. The quality of our services has improved significantly, for example, we now provide personalized recommendations and other information. Our marketing department can quickly identify what prospects need and communicate with them more effectively. In sales, we can now make personalized offers and negotiate online at any time. And our service staff can offer products and services in a very proactive way.”

HEAD OF DIGITAL AT A COMPANY IN THE OPTICAL AND OPTOELECTRONIC INDUSTRY



SUMMARY

The digital customer portal as a platform for new business models

In our global and increasingly digital world, products are becoming more and more commoditized. So what should companies do to stand out from the crowd?

Simple: provide excellent services. The digital customer portal is the next evolution of the B2B online shop. It's the platform vendors need to meet demanding customer requirements while also gathering data to create new digital services and personalized business models. Using this technology, vendors can strengthen brand loyalty and differentiate themselves from their competitors.

100% digital DNA

Intershop has been setting standards in the development and deployment of digital commerce software for over 25 years. We provide advice and support as companies digitally transform their business relationships together with their marketing, sales, and service processes. Independent analysts regularly rank our B2B solutions and service portfolio as market-leading. This assessment is confirmed by successful deployment across more than 350 clients worldwide. If you choose Intershop, we can help you boost your productivity and achieve maximum customer value.

To learn more about the Intershop digital customer portal or to meet with our digital commerce experts, email us at insidesales@intershop.de or call us at 03641 50 2062. Under the appropriate circumstances, we can hold an on-site workshop to show you how an Intershop solution can help you fully realize the potential of digital transformation.

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