PLAYBOOK

Platform Selection

The decision is made above the feature list

Five layers, top down. Kill the misaligned options early, and know which layer actually decided it.

CommerceStudio.ai

2026 Edition

A furniture manufacturer I worked with had a row of physical storefronts and wanted the website to behave like part of the same business rather than a separate channel. Someone walks a showroom floor, sits on the sofa, goes home, and finishes the decision online. Or does it in the other order.

That meant the site had to carry far more than a product grid. Detailed specifications, because furniture is a considered purchase and the questions are specific ones about dimensions and materials. Rich media, because nobody commits to a piece they can't see the weave of. And financing wired into the buying flow, because for a purchase at that price the friction is the number, and the answer to it is a smaller number per month.

None of that shows up on a feature checklist. Every platform on that shortlist would have ticked product detail page, image gallery, and third-party payment integrations. The checklist couldn't tell you which one would let that business sell the way it actually sells.

That gap is what this playbook is about.

The checklist is the wrong instrument

Commerce platform features have converged. Any serious platform does roughly eighty percent of what's on your requirements list, and the vendor will demo all of it convincingly.

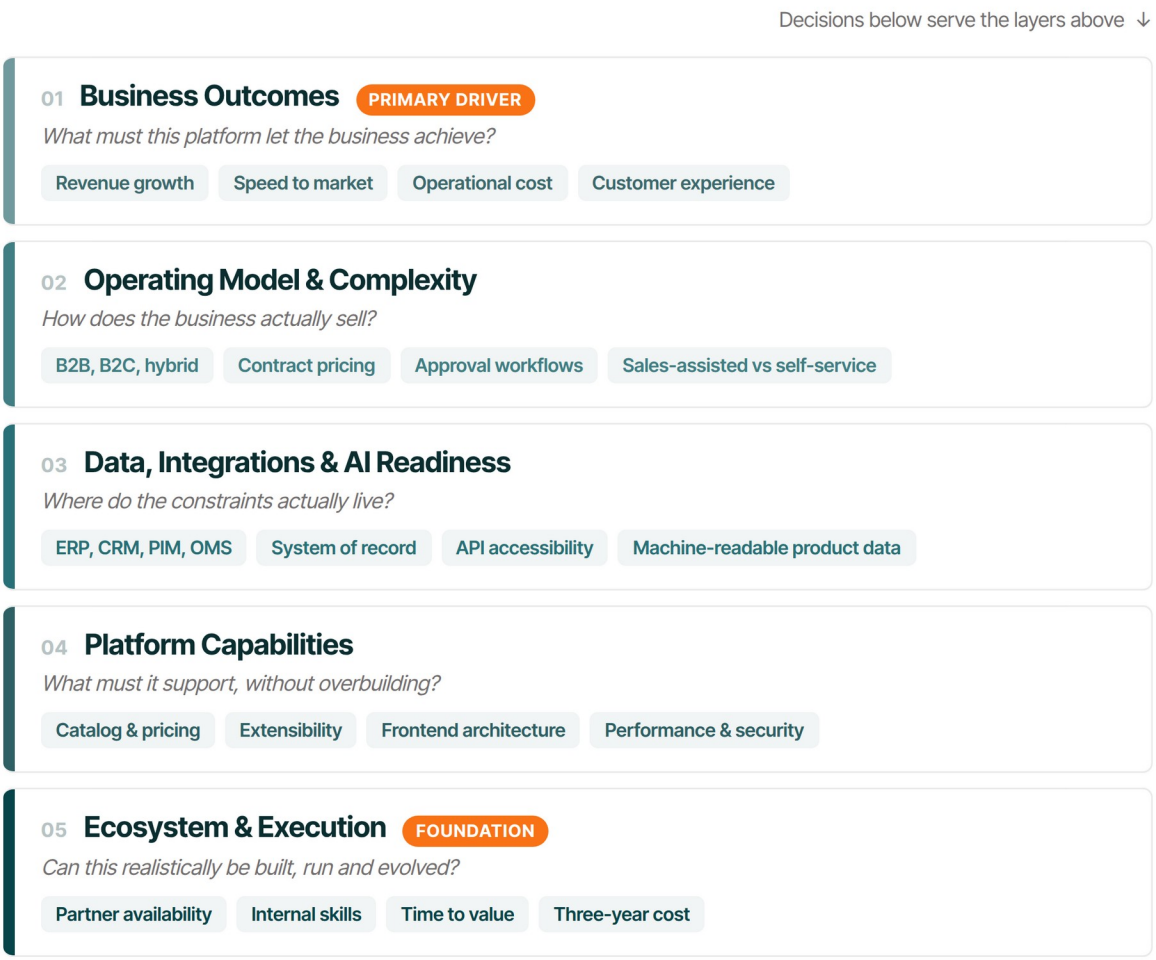
What separates them is how each one behaves under your specific operating model. Whether contract pricing is native or a workaround. Whether your catalog structure fits the data model or fights it. Whether the thing your business does that nobody else does is a configuration or a six-month build.

I've watched the same sequence play out repeatedly. The selection gets decided at the operating model, then rationalized with a capability matrix afterwards. The scoring spreadsheet exists to make a decision defensible, not to make it.

That's fine, as long as you know it. The failure mode is believing the spreadsheet.

Five layers, top down

The framework is a sequence, not a scorecard. Each layer constrains the one below it, and you don't get to evaluate platform capabilities until the three above are settled.



Business outcomes define what success means. Revenue, speed to market, operational cost, customer experience. If the justification is "the current platform is old," you don't have an outcome yet.

Operating model and complexity is how you actually sell. B2B, B2C, hybrid, sales-assisted, self-service. Contract pricing, approval workflows, account hierarchies, the exceptions that aren't exceptions because they're half your revenue. Most platform failures originate here, and they get blamed on the platform.

Data, integrations and AI readiness is where the constraints live. Which system owns what, how clean the product data is, what your APIs can actually expose. This is the layer teams defer, and it's the most expensive one to correct after contracts are signed.

Platform capabilities comes fourth, deliberately. Catalog and pricing flexibility, extensibility, frontend architecture, performance. Evaluated against the three layers above rather than against a competitor's feature grid.

Ecosystem and execution is the floor everything stands on. Partner availability, internal skills, who owns it after launch, real cost over three years. The best-fitting platform still fails if nobody can run it.

> *Misalignment at any layer compounds. A platform that's wrong at layer two cannot be rescued by strength at layer four.*

The furniture problem, layer by layer

Running that business through the sequence shows why the checklist would have misled.

Outcome: reduce friction on a considered purchase and make the showroom and the site feel like one business. Measurable, and it rules things out immediately.

Operating model: a long consideration cycle, a sales floor involved in most decisions, and financing sitting inside the buying path rather than bolted to the end of it. That last detail does more to narrow the field than any feature requirement, because it dictates how extensible checkout has to be.

Data and integrations: deep product attributes, a rich media library that has to stay organized as the catalog turns over, and a financing provider that needs to be reachable at the right moment in the flow with the right data.

Capabilities: only now. How the platform models complex product data, how it handles media at volume, and how far checkout can be extended without going headless.

Execution: who keeps the media library current. A platform that makes merchandising rich products easy is worth more than one with a longer feature list, because somebody does that job every week forever.

Five layers, and four of them were decided before anyone opened a comparison matrix.

Platform profiles

Modern SaaS. Fast to launch, lower operational overhead, strong APIs, continuous updates with no upgrade projects. The trade is less tolerance for extreme customization and an expectation that you'll adapt some processes. Right for most mid-market businesses. Wrong if you have workflows you genuinely cannot change.

Enterprise suites. Broad native functionality, serious governance, tight fit with a wider enterprise stack. Longer implementations, higher total cost, slower innovation, and a dependency on specialized skills. Right for large organizations with mature internal teams. Usually wrong for mid-market, whatever the demo suggests.

Composable and headless. Maximum flexibility, the strongest available component in each slot, real experience differentiation. Higher architectural complexity and more integration to own, and the operational responsibility moves permanently to you. Right for experience-led brands with genuine engineering capacity. Wrong for lean teams, undefined requirements, or tight timelines, and it is chosen for those situations more often than it should be.

Legacy monoliths. Familiar, heavily invested in, extensively customized. High debt, slow change, expensive maintenance, poor AI readiness. Rarely the right answer for anything new, though it may persist during a transition.

Eliminating a misaligned profile early saves more time than comparing two aligned ones in detail.

Scoring, and when to override it

Score the five layers, weighted to your situation, and treat the numbers as a way to structure the argument rather than settle it.

Layer	Weight
Business outcomes	25%
Operating model and complexity	20%
Data, integrations and AI readiness	20%
Platform capabilities	20%
Ecosystem and execution	15%

When two platforms score close, stop scoring. Close scores mean the capability difference doesn't matter, and the decision belongs to execution: partner availability, team readiness, time to value, and appetite for complexity. In those cases the simpler platform usually wins over three years, even when it scored slightly lower on paper.

Override the score outright when a platform brings execution risk you can't staff for, when data or integration constraints were underestimated, or when total cost exceeds what the business will tolerate in year two. Write the override down along with the reason, because somebody will ask in six months.

Stop and re-plan if

- The justification is competitive parity rather than a business outcome
- Heavy customization is required to meet core needs
- Critical workflows are being deferred to phase two
- Data cleanup is assumed rather than scoped and staffed
- The timeline was set by optimism rather than capacity
- Your own teams disagree about what success looks like after launch

Where we come in

We run the selection top down, kill misaligned options early, make the tradeoffs explicit, and give you a recommendation you can defend six months after launch rather than only on decision day. Then we help turn it into a delivery plan with a scoped MVP and a phasing approach.

Platform-agnostic, and opinionated. We have no reseller margin riding on your answer.

If you're choosing a platform, or quietly wondering whether the one you have can support what's next, that's a conversation worth having.

Ready to start?

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No pitch. Just a conversation about where you are and where you're trying to get to.