

HOW TO EDUCATE SENIOR LEADERS ON ECOMMERCE

CLOSING THE ECOMMERCE KNOWLEDGE GAP AT THE TOP OF THE ORGANIZATION

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Closing the eCommerce Knowledge Gap at the Top of the Organization

Digital leaders that see their organization losing conviction on eCommerce must develop an education plan that equips their senior colleagues with the knowledge needed to navigate the rapidly changing omnichannel market.

Effective education starts with a clear vision of what the organization needs to learn followed by a thoughtful delivery approach.

In this paper, we explain:

- Why many digital leaders are faced with this challenge (pages 2-5)
- The difficulties inherent to eCommerce education (pages 5-6)
- The steps needed to create an effective education plan (pages 6-13)

Importantly, this report outlines an education approach specifically designed to help senior colleagues. **We believe digital leaders should focus first and foremost on educating this group given they control the corporate vision, incentives, and resources needed to power omnichannel excellence.**

Future Stratably research will include approaches for organizations looking to educate their eCommerce team and the rest of the organization.

The Long, Cold eCommerce Winter

The beginning of 2022 ushered in several “winters”:

- Investing profits back into growth fell out of favor
- Metaverse ambitions met extreme skepticism
- VC funding for tech startups disappeared
- Bored Apes plummeted in value
- Bitcoin fraudsters were outed

The [eCommerce Winter had also arrived](#), characterized by plummeting share prices of newly IPO'd DTC brands, talk of consumers eagerly rushing back into stores, and the “adults” in the room pointing out the profitability challenges of employing workers to pick, pack, and ship items instead of the consumer doing the work.

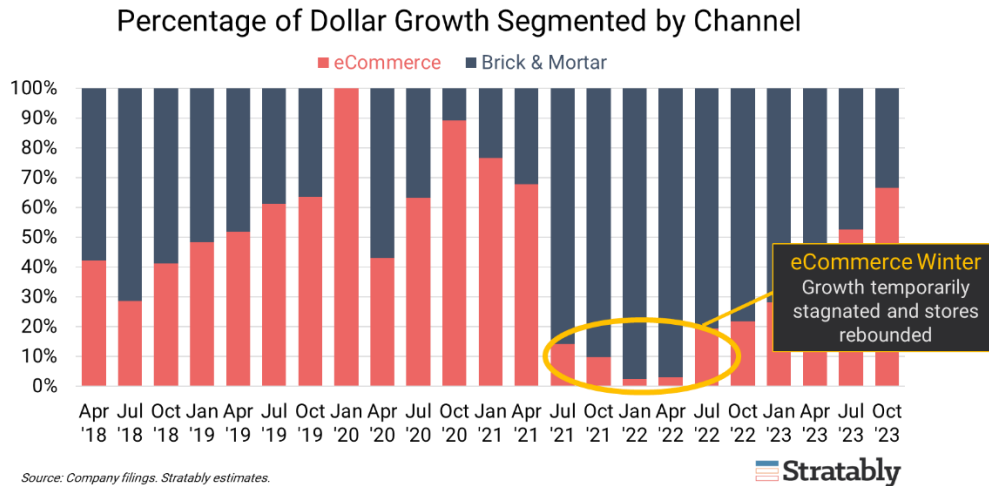
It was a period that lasted a few quarters where eCommerce growth sagged. Our [availability bias](#) led us to predict a permanent counter-reaction to the forced online buying we all “endured” during the pandemic.

Fueling Skeptics and Critics

“See, see, consumers like shopping inside of stores”, shouted consultants, agencies, and leaders inside and outside retailers and consumer brands that otherwise felt threatened by the possibility that consumers were moving more online, including their purchases.

It was difficult to argue against it.

After all, even omnichannel retailers like Walmart were seeing their digital penetration gains decline as eCommerce accounted for just a small minority of the large growth the company was seeing.



Uncertainty was also at all-time highs for consumer brands.

We had just seen a tremendous spike in online demand, then we were seeing a spike in B&M demand. The pandemic stress was still everywhere. Supply chains were struggling and soon after the market was flooded with goods. We had a zero-interest policy environment and then suddenly inflation rips open driving the Fed to raise rates and the consumer to rethink whether they should trade down into private labels.

In other words, there was a lot going on!

Brands were battenning down the hatches as they navigated a consumer market resulting in one of the most short-term focused periods of the last half century.

Digital capabilities like unique assortment, marketplace control, and retail media all fell to the wayside. Investors weren't asking about it. The CEO, who just 18 months earlier was very interested in eCommerce, was hyper-focused on managing inflation.

And because investment markets had turned sour on technology company investments, SaaS companies supporting brands were starved or didn't even start, leaving us scratching our heads on digital questions like retail media allocation.

Since Then...

In hindsight, this left many brands ill prepared for the last two years with the potential for ripple effects, if not waves, over the next five years.

Rather than decline, eCommerce actually grew over this period by 17% in the U.S. market according to the U.S. Census. Its share of total retail sales grew 100 basis points, and it's back to contributing more than half of incremental dollar growth.

The fastest growing retailers over this time weren't traditional B&M retailers, but [pureplay eTailers like Amazon and DTC channels](#). Amazon's global GMV, in fact, grew \$116 billion over the last two years!

Even Walmart – which was pointed to as seeing shoppers return to store – had 36% of its dollar growth over the last two years come from digital and is trending north of 50% in 2023. In fact, [18 out of 25 initiatives](#) it highlighted during its 2023 investment day were digitally focused.

Put simply, consumers did ramp up their spend in stores, but they also maintained and grew their spend in online channels. While both channels were doing well, only one of the channels had the full-throated support of C-suites, benefiting from the powerful inertia present in so many organizations.

Disappointing 2024 Planning

In the last two weeks, we have had a half dozen conversations with digital teams all expressing the same sentiment:

“After several years of volatility, our organization is under-investing in digital capabilities, despite our online sales growing and the consumer spending more time online.”

The timing is not random.

Many brands are completing or nearly done with their annual planning:

- Hard decisions have been made
- Bets have been placed
- Resources moved

And, for *some* eCommerce leaders, the season has brought disappointment.

They've seen reductions to digital headcount, advertising plans have treated retail media like a stray dog, and the role for digital can't be found anywhere in the strategic vision.

Digital leaders are screaming, “Help!”

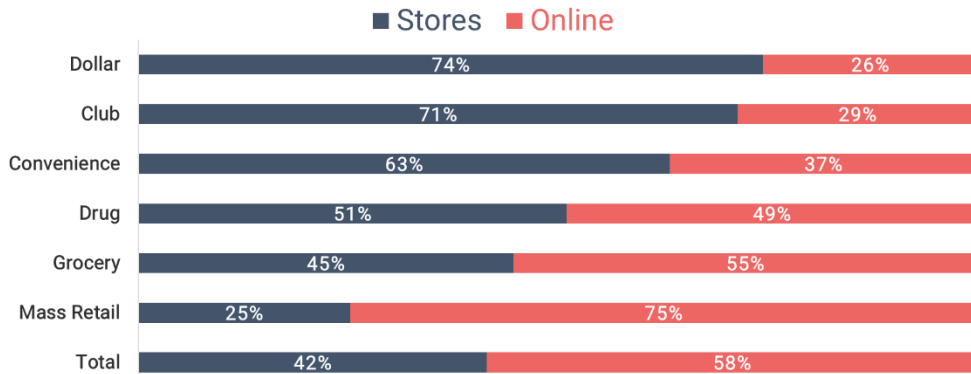
- My C-suite doesn't understand the level of investment needed to win online
- Our regional leaders took some classes but are still not getting it
- Our brand managers are under-investing in retail media

Whatever the variant, it all comes back to: How can we educate our colleagues on eCommerce so that our brand can capture whatever growth is available this year?

After all, growth is, on a market level, projected to decelerate across mass, club, dollar, drug, convenience, and grocery channels in 2024.

And what's troubling digital leaders inside consumer brands is that at least half of the growth available this year (and over the next five years) will arrive through digital means. Sure, some channels like Dollar will be less exposed to online growth, but for the market as a whole, digital will present more incremental growth opportunity than physical store channels whether incumbent consumer brands are prepared for it or not.

Percentage of Incremental Dollar Growth '23-'27



Source: Company filings, Stratably estimates.

10 Core Challenges

In some respects, it's easy to understand why we've ended up at this point.

Winning in eCommerce requires digital transformation, which presents a host of challenges to organizations:

1. **Traditional Mindset:** Many established consumer brands have a legacy of success in physical retail channels. This history can lead to a traditional mindset that prioritizes physical stores over digital channels. Digital leaders often need to challenge this status quo and advocate for change.
2. **Fear of Change:** Resistance to change is a common human trait, and this applies to organizations as well. Shifting resources and strategies towards digital can be seen as disruptive and may face resistance from those comfortable with the existing processes.
3. **Cultural Shifts:** Transforming an organization's culture to embrace digital as a core strategy is a complex process. It requires buy-in at all levels, and many companies struggle with cultural inertia.
4. **Lack of Digital Literacy:** Decision makers at the executive level may not have a deep understanding of digital behaviors from consumers or how online retailers operate and the requirements on their business. This lack of digital literacy can hinder informed decision-making and resource allocation.
5. **Short-Term Focus:** Quarterly financial targets and short-term performance often take precedence over long-term investments into digital capabilities. It's easier to put a promotion into the market to hit a sales number than it is to invest time and money into clean rooms that can illuminate shopper behavior and drive more efficient marketing spend over time.
6. **Risk Aversion:** Senior leaders inside mature consumer brands have often spent their whole career gaining experience inside the firm in order to arrive at their position. Further, growth is often measured in single digits, rewarding investments with a narrower range of outcomes. Thus, there is a general risk aversion built into the management of these organizations, and investing in uncertain areas is not always encouraged or rewarded.

7. **Overestimation of Current Investments:** Some leaders may believe that they are already investing significantly in digital without a clear understanding of industry benchmarks or what's required to win. This overestimation can lead to underinvestment in digital capabilities.
8. **Silos and Fragmented Data:** Large organizations often have fragmented data and siloed departments. It can be challenging for digital leaders to access and make sense of this data in a comprehensive way, resulting in an inability to provide a unified view of the digital landscape and make a strong case for more resources.
9. **Reactionary Stance:** In rapidly evolving markets, competitive pressures can force companies to invest in digital, but this investment may be reactionary rather than strategically planned, resulting in suboptimal resource allocation.
10. **Measurement Challenges:** Measuring the impact of digital investments can be challenging, especially when it comes to attributing digital efforts to overall business growth. This measurement difficulty can lead to skepticism among decision makers, particularly if existing measurement models don't incorporate digital business models well.

With enough time, digital leaders could likely name another ten challenges making transformation difficult.

But suffice it to say, the challenges are many, and varied.

What compounds this is the lack of capacity found throughout organizations. Put simply, people, including senior leaders, are stretched thin and there are not an endless number of hours they can devote to learning. Because of this, education needs to be pointed and efficient.

Overcoming Challenges

Solving this isn't easy.

But it's also not impossible – primarily because, despite the challenges, senior leaders want to make the right decisions. They need to properly allocate resources. They must hit their goals.

To help them do these things, digital leaders must develop a comprehensive plan to educate their senior colleagues on eCommerce regardless of whether they feel they've already done that in the past.

Fortunately, the path forward is not overly complicated.

Rather, it takes a thoughtful approach to identifying the key areas where information gaps are most present and then working backwards to close that gap through a combination of specific and general insights that provide senior leaders with the right information and educational foundation.

Start with a Compelling Digital Vision

Articulating a powerful digital vision for the organization can go a long way towards simplifying eCommerce education because it provides clarity on the path forward. A solid vision focuses on how digital can drive incremental sales growth and improve profitability.

[As we written previously, this can look like the following:](#)

- Our digital business grew 14% Y/Y in 2023 and our vision is to accelerate this to compound annual growth of 17% for the next five years. We estimate this is three to five points ahead of the category we compete in.
- At this pace, digital will account for 53% of the total growth in our business over that time. Dollars coming from digital commerce will more than double.
- Growth will be a function of accelerating our sales through pureplay eCommerce channels, doubling our digital sales with omnichannel customers, and expanding into new retail accounts including evaluating the opportunities with social commerce. This growth is driven by expanding sales and marketing support and injecting digital expertise into omnichannel accounts.
- We forecast contribution margin from digital sales will increase by five points through supply chain innovation to support ship-to-home, implementing digital-first packaging, refining our digital assortment, and customer acquisition efficiencies through a changing media environment.
- Recognizing retail media and social commerce are fundamentally transforming digital advertising and omnichannel store programs, we have created a new, multi-disciplinary team inside the organization to develop a three-year roadmap that brings together our brand building and customer acquisition activations across digital advertising, store-level activity, and retail media.

While this specific example might not work for every organization, some version of it can go a long way towards helping senior leaders understand where they should be headed.

It serves as a foundational component to guide digital leaders towards the topics most important for an education plan.

Clear Recommendations

A clear, compelling digital vision can then lead to an understanding of the specific knowledge gaps that need to be filled.

Too often, we hear digital leaders talk about their colleagues “not getting it” or “focusing too much on stores”. But these types of comments are too general.

We can't get senior leaders to change what they're doing if we leave out company-specific insights from remarks like “in-store sales are influenced by online” or “our customers are investing in digital”.

Rather, we have to get a lot more specific.

A great exercise to determine whether recommendations have been specific enough is to attempt to complete the following table.

- Write down the digital recommendations – the more specific the better. For instance, instead of “invest more into retail media”, write something like “increase the percentage of our Amazon sales that we spend on Amazon paid search by 50 basis points to keep up with our competition”.
- Write down the supporting evidence for the recommendation such as benchmarking data, [Stratably's research](#), Amazon's supporting documentation, or even informal notes from sharegroups.

- Write down the projected ROI from the recommendation. This is often a missing component of digitally focused recommendations that keep even the most obvious suggestions from progressing. For the Amazon advertising example, it could include sharing the historical return generated from similar ad investments over the past year. Don't let perfection be the enemy of the good when it comes to estimating payback.
- For each recommendation, fill out as many cells as possible. The incomplete rows illustrate areas where more work is needed.

STRATABLY OMNICHANNEL RECOMMENDATION EXERCISE

	Specific Recommendation: <i>What should senior leaders do differently?</i>	Support: <i>What evidence do we have to back up our recommendation?</i>	Business Outcome: <i>How does this ladder up to the corporate vision and goals?</i> <i>What payback can we expect?</i>
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			

After attempting the exercise, digital teams should ask:

- How difficult was this?
- What parts were particularly difficult?
- Why was this difficult?

If it was difficult to complete certain rows, then it's likely senior leaders will struggle to clearly understand the opportunity behind the recommendations.

But ultimately this helps drive progress. The blank cells highlight the areas that need further investigation.

For instance, if you lack compelling supporting evidence for a recommendation, that's a clear signal to go out and research the recommendation further. What information is available in the public domain? What firms can help complete this box?

Similarly, if estimating the business outcome is challenging, can you enlist the support of a finance colleague to help develop a payback estimate? Are there outside studies that illustrate the payback from the recommendation at other companies that can be applied?

Put simply, the exercise helps point digital teams in the right direction towards the information and education needed to make the recommendations stick.

Further, the exercise helps communicate to outside parties what specifically they can focus on in their research or presentations to the senior team.

Company-Specific Insights Can Help

In addition to a digital vision and clear recommendations, we see a powerful impact from company-specific insights on:

- The role digital plays in the path to purchase for their products and the category
- Category growth forecasts for their retailers segmented by online and stores
- How their capabilities and investments compare to rivals

For instance, if senior leaders need to understand the impact digital has on in-store sales, it can be impactful to share the results of a custom consumer study focused on the company's particular category.

When it comes to retail customers, digital leaders can make a more compelling case with custom forecasts for their top retailers segmented between in-store and online channels.

As it pertains to rivals, digital leaders can be more persuasive if they leverage benchmarking information.

Combined, these studies could take shape as:

- Based on our custom consumer work, we know that 45% of in-store sales are influenced by shoppers researching our category and products on Amazon, but we're only investing in Amazon based on the percentage of items bought on it.
- Based on our custom forecasts for our top customers, we estimate that 55% of our future dollar growth across the club, mass, grocery, and drug channels we sell into will come from online, but 90% of the new hires we've made this year are to support in-store activities.

- Based on our custom benchmarking exercise, we estimate that we're losing share on Amazon, Walmart, and Target digital sites to our top competitor, and we're lagging in headcount and capabilities.

Undertaking this work is time intensive and requires financial investment, especially considering most digital leaders know (or have a high degree of confidence in) the direction of the market. It seems unnecessary to spend money on more precision, but some organizations require that precision to change the status quo.

Brands might not even classify these studies as education, but more so consumer and strategy research. If we want to meet our consumers where they are, let's study where they are. If we want to be a great partner to our retail customers, let's study where their growth is coming from and what we need to support that growth.

These custom reports help digital teams home in on specific recommendations they can offer to their senior leaders and complete more of those blank cells. **The specific findings for the business also make it more difficult for senior leaders to ignore because it takes away the "what about our (business, product, category)" objection commonly surfaced in more general education sessions.**

The results from these custom studies can then form the basis for a year-long education program. For instance: "Jane Doe from XYZ Firm" will be sharing the findings from our consumer study work during our January Learning and Development meeting, where we'll also be discussing product detail page content best practices and capability needs.

Importantly, before brands undertake new custom research, they should determine if their organization has existing research and insights. For instance, most large brands have undertaken extensive consumer research, and it is just a matter of the digital team working with the right internal team or external partner to uncover what's most relevant.

Digital leaders shouldn't be too discouraged though if they don't have existing research nor the budget to undertake new research, as this is not a pre-requisite to a successful education program. Rather, it's meant to bolster the overall program and overcome some of the skepticism that naturally exists inside organizations.

What Do Senior Leaders Want to Learn?

In addition to identifying gaps in the organization, gathering feedback from senior leaders is a great way to surface what they want or need to learn about. Digital professionals can go to senior leaders with a set of topics and ask direct questions to determine if the topics are of interest and how they align with the group's knowledge level.

We prefer coming to senior leaders with a pre-set of topics because an open-ended "what do you want to learn about?" can lead the program astray, particularly for senior leaders that don't know what they don't know.

For example, if a digital leader knows retail media is an area their firm is behind in, they can ask their senior colleagues what they believe the biggest gaps are on the topic. For example, is it understanding the opportunity, how the organization should be working together, or measuring performance?

Guiding the conversation in that manner is an efficient approach that helps get buy-in from senior leaders, while surfacing additional ideas.

12-Month Education Plan

At this point, the digital leader is prepared with the following components:

- Compelling digital vision
- Clear recommendations
- Specific company insights
- Feedback from senior leadership

A strong senior leader education plan can then unfold over the course of several meetings. Some organizations prefer to deliver the program over three-to-four months, while others spread it over the course of a year. Regardless, it primarily focuses on a few live sessions lasting 2-3 hours supported by ongoing content.

Digital leaders should work backwards in developing this plan, focusing on a content calendar that closes the key knowledge gaps they've identified for their organization.

Each session should have a defined topic that is relevant to the organization.

- For instance, if retail media is the glaring need, they could develop quarterly sessions such as retail media 101, retail media measurement, retail media organizational dynamics, and retail media planning for the following year. This focus will provide senior leaders with a more relevant experience and progressively educate them throughout the year.
- If the knowledge gaps are more varied, digital leaders must prioritize three or four of them and then focus each quarterly session on one topic. Prioritization can be challenging as there is a natural tendency to try to cover everything. But resist that urge and instead focus on making progress in the critical areas first.

The live sessions should be thoughtfully planned in advance and include both internal and external presenters.

- These sessions should mix company-specific and market-level insights that support the clear recommendations under consideration.
- Further, they should have the right mix of attendees that have high trust with each other. This enables free dialogue and comfort asking questions that might reveal their ignorance on certain topics. This means it's not ideal to mix senior leadership and broader parts of the organization in these sessions.
- Senior leaders should be briefed on the agenda topics in advance of the meeting via a summary write-up by the digital leader that outlines the topics to be discussed and the key learning outcome(s) expected. Sample questions can be shared to help facilitate senior leader engagement.

Most digital leaders will only be able to get their senior leaders to a quarterly meeting frequency. In between these sessions, it is important to support senior leaders with ongoing content. That can come in multiple forms:

- Outside research
- Internal newsletter that focuses on the digital teams' initiatives, opportunities, wins, and/or a summary of relevant outside work with commentary on how it applies to the organization
- Monthly status updates from the Head of eCommerce on progress
- Monthly 1-on-1 connects with the Head of eCommerce
- Informal lunch and learns with key digital personnel

12-MONTH OMNICHANNEL EDUCATION CALENDAR TEMPLATE

Q1 TOPIC:

Logistics:	Context:	Additional Support to be Shared:
Date and time:	Why is this topic important to the business?	E.g. summary write-ups, relevant pre-reads, sample questions, etc.
Location:		
Internal speaker(s) / host:	What are the learning outcomes?	
External speaker(s):		

Q2 TOPIC:

Logistics:	Context:	Additional Support to be Shared:
Date and time:	Why is the topic important to the business?	E.g. summary write-ups, relevant pre-reads, sample questions, etc.
Location:		
Internal speaker(s) / host:	What are the learning outcomes?	
External speaker(s):		

Q3 TOPIC:

Logistics:	Context:	Additional Support to be Shared:
Date and time:	Why is the topic important to the business?	E.g. summary write-ups, relevant pre-reads, sample questions, etc.
Location:		
Internal speaker(s) / host:	What are the learning outcomes?	
External speaker(s):		

Q4 TOPIC:

Logistics:	Context:	Additional Support to be Shared:
Date and time:	Why is the topic important to the business?	E.g. summary write-ups, relevant pre-reads, sample questions, etc.
Location:		
Internal speaker(s) / host:	What are the learning outcomes?	
External speaker(s):		

Balancing Feedback

Change is hard and we know from earlier in the report all of the challenges associated with eCommerce education.

This means digital leaders will have to balance feedback on the program. They should solicit feedback from their colleagues on how any given session went, looking for clues as to what topics they need to address further and what formats are resonating the most.

Digital leaders must also determine how to respond to particular feedback:

- Is this feedback helpful to us in terms of what topics we need to cover or what formats are resonating the most?
- Or is this feedback symptomatic of the challenges associated with eCommerce education, such as skepticism and feeling threatened?

If the latter, then that can be an opportunity to remind the team of the importance of the topic and how it dovetails into the digital vision and strategic gaps for the organization.

In other words, digital leaders need to exercise sound judgment in evaluating how to respond to feedback as the program progresses.

The End Result

Like everyone else, digital leaders want to make a meaningful difference in their organization.

But they face unique challenges given the disruptive nature of the channels and responsibilities inherent to their role.

Thus, they have to help their organization navigate this disruption, starting with equipping their senior team with the knowledge necessary to efficiently allocate resources.

A multi-step education plan is a straightforward way to accomplish this, and it requires:

- A clear digital vision
- An ability to articulate where the organization is falling short
- Company-specific research and insights where possible
- Executive buy-in through information gathering

Through the formulation of the education program, the digital team is left with a clearer understanding of their company's knowledge gaps, along with specific recommendations their senior leaders can evaluate.

The senior leadership team, after multiple sessions complemented with ongoing insights over the course of the year, will be better prepared to engage with the eCommerce team. Trust will also have been built given the sessions were thoughtfully developed with a clear goal in mind and they were highly relevant given the upfront work completed.

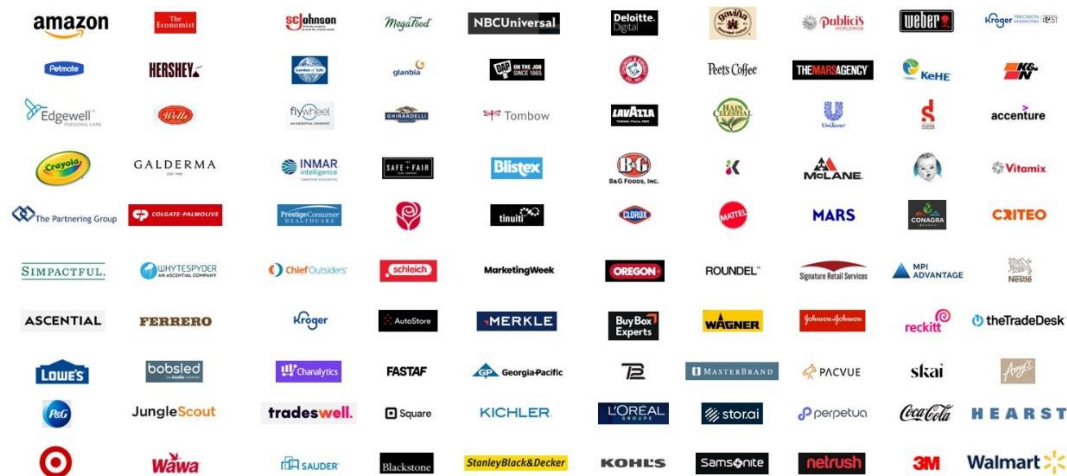
This doesn't guarantee senior leaders wholeheartedly agree with the digital team.

But it's the best, and perhaps only, shot at getting the organization to transform in the right ways to win online as well as in store.

Appendix

Who reads Stratably?

Executives at more than 1,000 of the most prominent brands, retailers, consultancies, agencies and technology firms read Stratably every week. Here is a sample of 100 of those firms where Stratably subscribers work in leadership roles:



What do they say about Stratably?

"Stratably helps me be a more informed leader and gives our team the best tools to influence our organization internally." - Julie Liu, Demand Generation Lead at Ghirardelli

"With the growth in e-Commerce and the rapid changes, Stratably keeps me informed on a broad spectrum of topics that I need to better manage the business." - Pam Olsen, V.P. eCommerce at F. Gaviña & Sons, Inc.

"Russ consistently brings the most thought out and well researched insights in the industry. He tells you what you need to know and how it will affect your various verticals." - Choia Mattix, V.P. eCommerce at K&N Engineering

"I love Stratably! Russ is a trusted expert who breaks down topics into digestible and actionable ways to drive strategy and focus." - Emily Keane, National Account Manager, eCommerce at Schleich

"Stratably is a must read for anyone in the consumer brands digital commerce space. It has a unique POV that combines the best of financial research with practical observations and insights on industry innovation." - Patrick Miller, President, Digital Commerce at Ascential

"My essential source for ecommerce & retail media trends. Stratably cuts through the deluge of news in this space, actually connecting the dots for brands and advertisers." - Kiri Masters, Founder, Bobsled Marketing, an Acadia Company