



GUIDE: MASTERING B2B ECOMMERCE SEARCH

HOW TO HELP BUYERS FIND THE RIGHT PRODUCTS FASTER, BOOST
CONVERSIONS, AND REDUCE FRICTION



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INTRODUCTION & WHY B2B SEARCH MATTERS!



In B2B ecommerce, search is not a convenience; it is a major driver of revenue. Unlike consumers, B2B buyers usually know exactly what they need, including SKUs, part numbers, and specific technical specifications. A poor search experience causes frustration, lost sales, and abandoned carts.

Unlike B2C shoppers, B2B buyers often work within strict time and process constraints. They may be field technicians ordering parts on-site, procurement specialists managing bulk purchases, or engineers verifying compatibility with existing equipment. Each role has its own search intent, and their experience depends on the speed, precision, and understanding of your search.

QUICK STAT

Over 43% of B2B buyers will abandon a website if the search function is poor or if results are irrelevant.

A high-performing search function reduces friction throughout that process. It allows users to locate the right item in seconds, confirm its technical accuracy, and complete a purchase with confidence. That precision not only accelerates order flow but also strengthens trust in your digital channel. Buyers who experience an intuitive search experience are significantly more likely to return and reorder through self-service.

The lesson is clear. In B2B ecommerce, great search is not optional. It is the foundation of a scalable, profitable, and customer-friendly digital business.

MINI-CASE STUDY

A mid-sized industrial parts distributor upgraded its search engine to include SKU autocomplete and synonym matching. Within three months, search-driven orders grew by 22% and customer support requests fell by 18%.

ABOUT LAYER ONE

Layer One is a consultative solutions partner for distributors, manufacturers, and related verticals, operating wholly in the US. Over the last two decades, we've evolved from a traditional agency to experts in the digital ecosystem, solving the unique obstacles companies face with their eCommerce and PIM optimization. We truly partner with our clients, leveraging our innovative approach and versatile team of thought leaders to drive results.

Layer One pushes our clients to think outside of the box. We are always challenging ourselves to be just a little better every day. We bring expertise in marketing, technology, digital strategy, and commerce. We have the skills and experience to help you understand what makes your buyers tick.

Our 100% US team assimilates with yours as a strategic partner, fostering a relationship of trust and collaboration. Our monthly reviews with high NPS ratings, weekly touchpoints, and daily availability means our clients are heard, understood, and confident with the strategic business decisions and processes we build together.

Our focus is on your short and long-term success. So rather than projects that have set finish lines, we integrate with your team in ongoing engagements that evolve as new needs arise and the demands change.

We attack the engagement with an iterative process that demands outcomes from well-defined success criteria. Simply, we start building and creating with you from "GO."

PLATFORM PARTNERS

With a select set of technology partners that are leaders in their own right, Layer One creates best-in-class, platform-agnostic solutions for our clients. From Optimizely and Unilog to inriver and Sitecore, Layer One has chosen to work with the best of the best.



UNDERSTANDING THE UNIQUE NEEDS OF B2B BUYERS



B2B buyers approach ecommerce with an entirely different mindset than consumers. Their goals, constraints, and expectations are shaped by business processes rather than personal preference. Where a consumer might be influenced by aesthetics or emotion, a B2B buyer is driven by efficiency, accuracy, and accountability. Understanding these differences is essential for designing a search experience that actually serves them.

Technical knowledge influences how buyers search because they often use SKUs, part numbers, or product specifications. Complex orders require support for multiple items, approvals, and custom pricing. Repeat purchases are common, as buyers often reorder identical SKUs regularly.

ACTION TIP

First, audit the types of searches buyers perform, including SKUs, technical terms, and descriptions. Second, ensure your search engine can handle all these formats and variations. Third, map top-performing queries to product attributes to improve result relevance.

Use testing tools like those found in Layer One's **Search Fitness Program** to automate this process.

At a more granular level, B2B buyers are different from consumers in these ways:

1. **Precision-Focused Searches.** Buyers often search by SKU, model number, or technical specification. Search must handle exact, partial, and fuzzy matches, along with abbreviations and synonyms.
2. **Task-Oriented and Time-Sensitive.** Most B2B buyers are on the clock. They need fast, relevant results, especially on mobile. Autocomplete, quick filters, and typeahead improve efficiency.
3. **Data-Driven Decisions.** Purchases depend on technical accuracy and compatibility, not aesthetics. Structured product data, maintained in a PIM, is essential for meaningful search results.
4. **Account-Specific Context.** Buyers represent companies, not individuals. Search should display correct pricing, inventory, and product availability based on the user's account or contract terms.

5. **Frequent Reordering.** Many buyers repeatedly purchase the same products. Search should enable quick reordering, saved searches, and “previously purchased” shortcuts.
6. **Trust and Verification.** Errors are costly in B2B. Search results should include datasheets, certifications, and documentation to reinforce confidence and reduce mistakes.
7. **System Integration and Collaboration.** B2B buyers often work within larger systems like ERP or procurement tools. Search should support integration, shared carts, and team workflows.

MINI-CASE STUDY

A commercial HVAC supplier implemented search that supported both SKU and natural language queries. Buyers could enter "VRF 12HP" or "Variable Refrigerant Flow, 12 Horsepower" and receive the same accurate results. This improvement resulted in 15% higher order completion.

SUMMARY

B2B buyers use search as a productivity tool. The best ecommerce experiences anticipate their exact needs, returning precise, contextual, and trustworthy results that fit into their daily operations.

OPTIMIZING PRODUCT DATA FOR SEARCH



Search quality depends entirely on the data behind it. Common problems in B2B ecommerce include inconsistent product naming, missing technical attributes, and data stored in multiple systems, such as ERP, PIM, spreadsheets, eCommerce platforms, and supplier catalogs.

BEST PRACTICES

The first step is centralization. Many distributors and manufacturers store product data across multiple systems, including ERP, supplier databases, spreadsheets, and ecommerce platforms. When data lives in silos, it becomes difficult to manage and impossible to search effectively. A Product Information Management (PIM) system solves this by creating a single, reliable source of truth for every product record. It consolidates details such as SKUs, attributes, pricing, and technical documentation in one place, ensuring consistency across every channel.

Once data is centralized, it needs to be standardized. B2B catalogs often include tens of thousands of products from multiple suppliers, each with its own naming conventions and units of measure. For example, one supplier may list “1 in.” while another lists “1 inch” or “1.0.” Standardizing terminology, formatting, and units ensures that search can interpret queries correctly and group like products together. Clean, consistent fields allow buyers to use filters confidently and help the search engine return precise, relevant results.

Beyond structure, product data must be complete and attribute-rich. B2B buyers search by technical criteria like voltage, size, pressure rating, material type, or certification, so these details need to be captured and indexed. Missing attributes mean missed matches. Every searchable field adds to the likelihood that a buyer will find exactly what they need. Companies that invest in filling out product attributes typically see measurable gains in search accuracy and conversion rates.

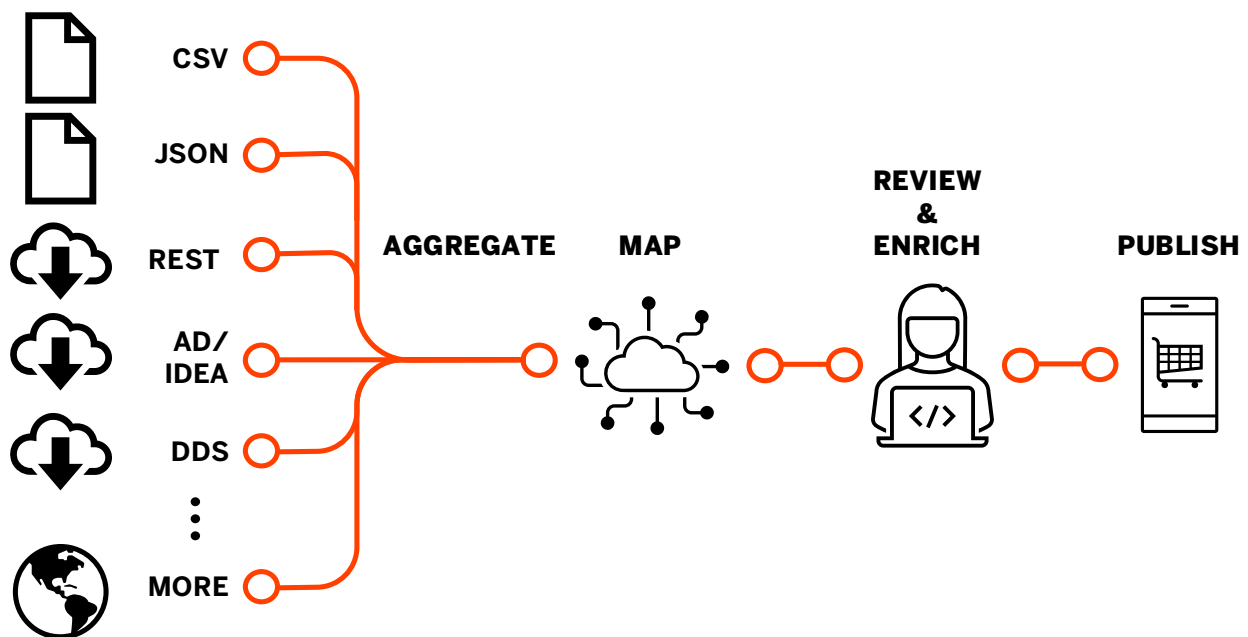
Rich, supporting content also matters. B2B buyers depend on technical validation before purchasing, which means product listings should include

ACTION TIP

Audit your product data regularly to identify missing SKUs or attributes. Missing data directly translates into search results returning no matches. Use testing and auditing tools like the **Search Fitness Program's** search test harness and **Commergenix Product Commander**.

specification sheets, manuals, CAD drawings, installation guides, and safety data sheets. These assets provide reassurance that the product is correct and compatible. Making them searchable and visible in results further enhances trust and reduces returns or order errors.

Finally, data optimization is not a one-time project. Product lines change, new suppliers are added, and specifications evolve. Successful organizations treat product data as a living asset, continuously audited and refined. Regular data quality reviews and search analytics can reveal missing attributes, inconsistent naming, or fields that buyers frequently search for but cannot find. Over time, these improvements build a stronger foundation for every search interaction.



Well-structured product data transforms search from a simple lookup tool into a business enabler. It connects the technical language of B2B buyers with the digital systems that fulfill their needs, ensuring that every search query leads to an accurate, confident purchase.

UNDERSTAND SEARCH INTENT



Not every buyer comes to your site with the same goal, and not every search means the same thing. Understanding why someone searches is just as important as knowing what they search for. In B2B ecommerce, we define search intent around three distinct modes of buyer behavior. Browse Intent, Implicit Product Intent, and Explicit Product Intent. Recognizing these helps shape how your site delivers results, filters, and product context.

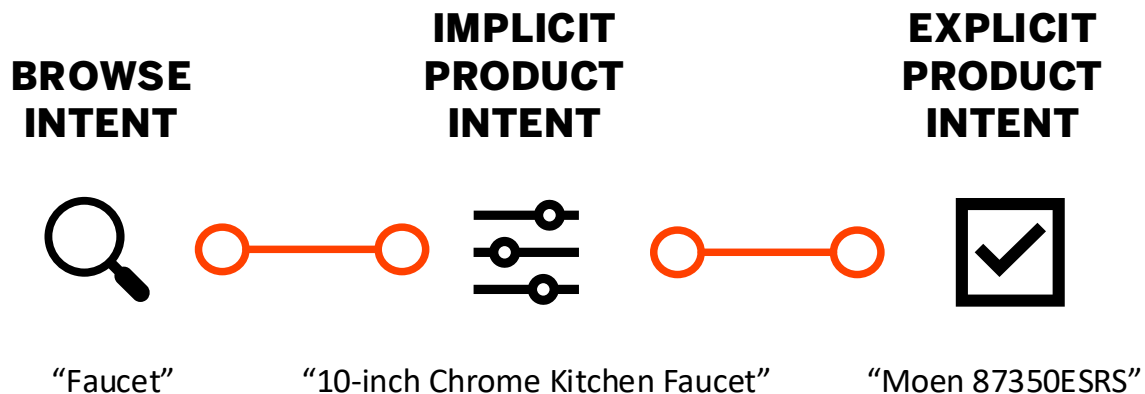
Browse Intent occurs when the buyer is exploring broadly. They may know the general category but not the exact product. A contractor might search for “faucets” or “ball valves” without specifying brand, material, or size. These searches call for visually rich category pages, helpful filters, and strong product taxonomy. The goal is to guide discovery, not precision. Successful browse experiences feel intuitive and show the breadth of the catalog without overwhelming the user.

Implicit Product Intent sits in the middle. The buyer has a clearer idea of what they need, perhaps a “chrome kitchen faucet” or “half-inch ball valve,” but not the specific model or SKU. Here, the quality of your product attributes and synonyms becomes critical. Search needs to interpret the buyer’s phrasing and map it to structured product data. It’s where data normalization, attribute tagging, and robust filters shine. A well-tuned engine can infer intent and surface highly relevant options, often converting searchers into confident buyers within a few clicks.

Explicit Product Intent is the most direct form. The buyer knows exactly what they want, often down to a part number or model. “Moen 87350ESRS” or “Zurn QCA4GX” are classic examples. The search experience here must be lightning fast, exact, and reliable. These users expect instant confirmation that they’ve found the right product, including pricing, availability, and technical documentation. Even slight mismatches or delays at this stage can cause frustration and erode trust.

ACTION TIP

Review your top search keyterms for Browse Intent searches. Design simple landing pages for these that help the buyer find, make decisions and ultimately buy the correct product. These pages should include articles, training videos, brand comparisons and filtering tools to assist the buyer in their understanding.



B2B sites that recognize and design for all three levels of intent outperform those that treat every search the same. By analyzing queries and tuning your data and UI for each intent type, you move beyond keyword matching and into intent-based discovery. The result is a smarter, more empathetic search experience. One that aligns with how real buyers think, not how your catalog is structured.

HOW TO DETECT SEARCH INTENT

Detecting search intent in B2B ecommerce starts with understanding the signals embedded in the query and user behavior. There are several approaches you can use to identify whether a buyer is browsing, refining, or looking for an exact product. While Implicit and Explicit Product Intent will yield search results pages, Browse Intent will typically take a different path. Here are some of the simplest ways of determining Browse Intent.

1. **Use Search Keyterm Redirects.** Arguably, the simplest way of determining search intent is building a set of keyterm redirects. This is accomplished by analyzing your historical searches and determining which terms are likely Browse Intent. From here, you can instruct your eCommerce system to take the appropriate action when the keyterm is entered.
2. **Analyze Query Structure.** Short, broad terms like "faucet" or "ball valve" usually indicate Browse Intent. Queries that include descriptive attributes, such as "chrome kitchen faucet" or "half-inch brass ball valve," suggest Implicit Product Intent. Exact part numbers or model names indicate Explicit Product Intent. Tracking these patterns allows the search engine to tailor results automatically.
3. **Use Attribute Mentions.** If a query contains product-specific attributes like size, material, certification, or voltage, it signals that the buyer has more defined needs. Implicit Product Intent can often be inferred from these attribute mentions even without a specific SKU.

ADVANCED SEARCH & UX



ADVANCED SEARCH

In B2B ecommerce, advanced search is more than a convenience; it's a necessity. B2B buyers often have highly specific requirements such as part numbers, technical specifications, certifications, or compatibility constraints. Advanced search features like faceted navigation allow users to drill down quickly by attributes like brand, size, material, or industry-specific compliance standards. Filters should be logically grouped, intuitive, and dynamically responsive to search results, showing only relevant options to reduce cognitive load and speed decision-making.

Autocomplete and predictive search further enhance efficiency. Unlike basic keyword suggestions, advanced B2B search anticipates SKUs, synonyms, abbreviations, and even common misentries. By predicting intent, these features help users locate products faster

and with fewer errors. Semantic and contextual search takes this a step further by interpreting the meaning behind queries. For example, a search for "240V motor" should return all compatible motors, not just exact phrase matches. Contextual search can also leverage user history, account-specific pricing, and regional availability to deliver more relevant results.

Result ranking and relevance are also critical in B2B search. Users expect products to appear in order of utility or suitability rather than generic popularity. Advanced systems incorporate personalized sorting, priority SKU promotion for key accounts, and feedback loops that learn from user interactions. Error tolerance is equally important: handling typos, partial entries, and ambiguous queries with suggestions or near-match highlighting ensures that users can recover from mistakes without frustration. Finally, integration with product data like datasheets, installation guides, or compatibility charts allows users to act directly on search results, accelerating their path to purchase.

MINI-CASE STUDY

A plumbing supply company added autocomplete, synonym mapping, and faceted filters. Buyers were able to locate the correct fittings more quickly, resulting in a 30% reduction in abandoned carts.

USER EXPERIENCE ENHANCEMENTS

Search experience in B2B is inseparable from overall UX. A well-designed search interface is intuitive, responsive, and aligned with the complex needs of buyers. UX considerations go beyond aesthetics: they focus on reducing friction, guiding users efficiently, and helping them complete tasks quickly. Features such as hover previews, comparison tools, and inline product recommendations allow users to evaluate options without leaving the search context, streamlining the decision-making process.

Mobile and multi-device access are also increasingly critical. B2B buyers often research on tablets or smartphones, so search interfaces must be touch-friendly, responsive, and maintain clarity on smaller screens. Facets, filters, and suggestion lists should adapt seamlessly to different devices without sacrificing usability. The best UX anticipates intent and provides contextual cues, helping users find exactly what they need even in large, complex catalogs. When search and UX work together effectively, they reduce friction, shorten buyer journeys, and increase the likelihood of conversion, making the search experience a competitive differentiator for B2B businesses.

QUICK STAT

~80% of B2B purchases are said to be driven by UX rather than price or product alone.

MEASURING PERFORMANCE & CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT



KEY METRICS TO TRACK

Measuring search performance is critical to ensuring your B2B ecommerce site meets the complex needs of buyers. Key metrics allow teams to identify friction points, optimize the user experience, and drive more efficient conversions. Among the most important metrics are **search adoption** and **search usage rate**, which track how often users engage with the search function versus navigating categories manually. High usage indicates that buyers rely on search to find products quickly, while low usage may signal that the search interface or results relevance needs improvement.

Another crucial metric is search result relevance, often measured by **Click-Through Rate (CTR)** on search results and zero-result searches. Thought of as “conversion,” a high CTR indicates that users find the results meaningful, whereas frequent zero-result queries highlight gaps in product data, synonyms, or semantic understanding. Metrics like time to find product, product view depth, and add-to-cart or quote conversion from search give insight into how efficiently users move from search to action, revealing areas where UX improvements or product data enrichment may be needed.

CONTINUOUS OPTIMIZATION TIPS

B2B search environments are dynamic: new products, updated specifications, and changing buyer behaviors require ongoing tuning. Using a structured approach, such as analyzing search logs, refining autocomplete suggestions, adding synonyms, and testing relevance adjustments, ensures the system adapts to evolving needs. Personalization also plays a key role in continuous improvement, enabling the system to surface the most relevant products for individual users, accounts, or regions. By combining quantitative metrics with qualitative feedback from buyers, organizations can iteratively refine search performance, delivering faster, more accurate results and creating a measurable impact on conversion, loyalty, and overall user satisfaction.

SO WHAT NOW?



Implementing effective B2B search doesn't have to be overwhelming. The key is to start simple and focus on high-impact areas first. Begin by assessing how your users currently interact with search: which queries are most common, where they struggle, and which filters or facets are used most frequently. From there, prioritize improvements that will have the biggest impact on efficiency and accuracy, such as refining autocomplete suggestions, adding missing product attributes, or optimizing category navigation. Small, incremental changes often yield immediate gains while laying the foundation for more advanced capabilities.

It's also valuable to think about search as a continuous journey rather than a one-time project. As your catalog evolves and buyer needs change, so too should your search strategy. By regularly tracking key metrics, like search usage, zero-result queries, and conversion from search, you can identify pain points, iterate on improvements, and ensure your search experience stays relevant and effective.

While starting simple is effective, B2B search can become highly sophisticated, incorporating personalization, semantic understanding, and advanced analytics. That's where guidance from experienced partners like Layer One can accelerate your journey. We help B2B organizations bridge the gap from basic search to an optimized, high-performing solution tailored to their catalog, users, and business goals. If you're ready to take the next step, reach out to our team. Together, we can design a search experience that not only meets your buyers' needs but also drives measurable growth for your business.

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