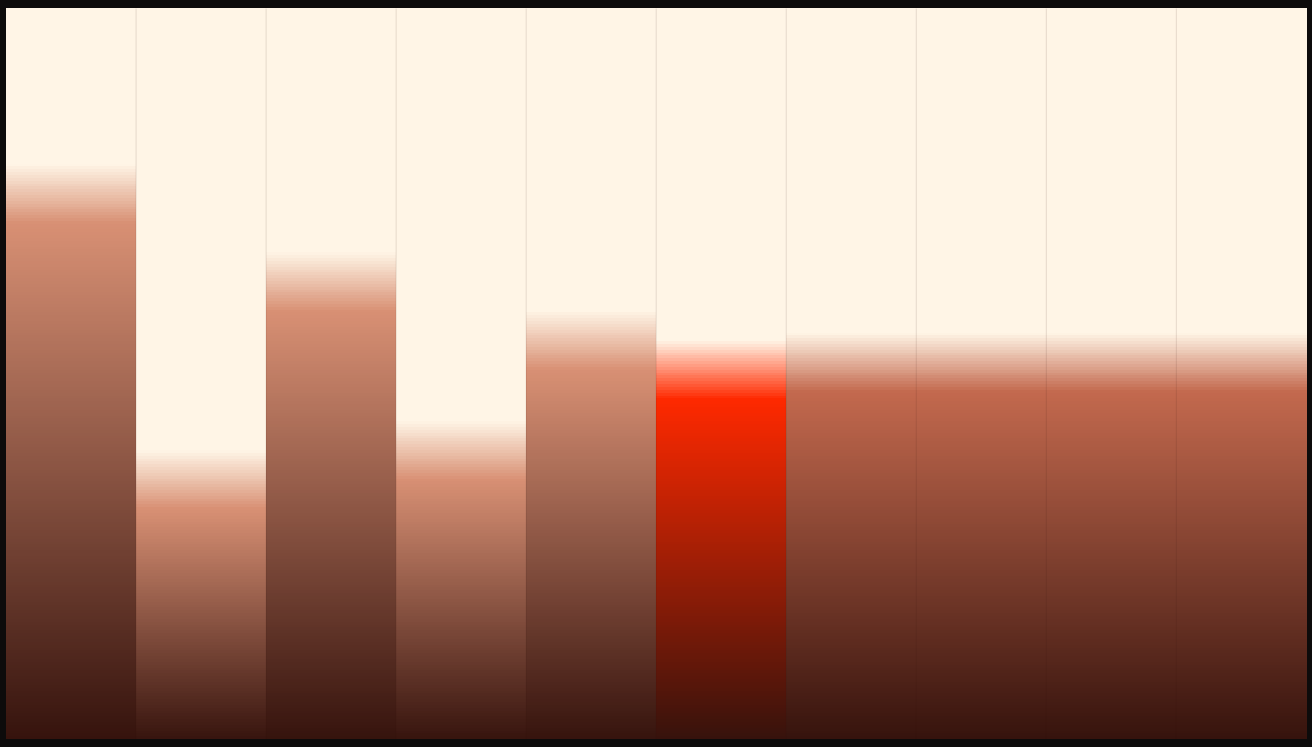
Intelligent commerce is an operating system, not a smarter storefront.

An established retailer should be able to introduce a better way to buy without rebuilding the machinery that takes payment, fulfils orders and serves customers. AI makes new buying experiences easier to imagine. The strategic work is making those experiences useful across markets and keeping the business trading while the systems behind them change.



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Executive summary

1. Choose a buying journey with a commercial reason to improve. Use it to identify the capabilities the business can reuse, the rules markets need to control and the platform dependencies that slow change.
2. Move responsibility for a commerce decision only when the new service can be trusted to take it. Keep existing order and service paths working through the transition.
3. Test whether the next market can launch with less engineering work while protecting customer outcomes, contribution and the stability of the live operation.

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The second market exposes the real work

Imagine a health and wellness brand selling across several countries. Returning customers know which products they buy. New customers need help comparing formats, ingredients, flavours and pack sizes. The brand wants to improve both journeys. A shopper could find an unflavoured powder, see exactly what it contains and choose a one-off purchase or recurring delivery. The brand wants its website and service team to use the same product information and offer terms.

A team can build that journey in one market using the local range, product copy and replenishment terms. The second market exposes the real work. A product sold under the same name may have a different formulation or pack size. The local team owns the range and approved product information and may offer a different delivery cadence or no recurring option for that pack. An order can pass through a shared checkout while the service team lacks the terms it needs to explain the next shipment or process a cancellation. The interface may be ready to translate while the decisions behind it are still embedded in the first market's storefront.

This is where a commerce director and a technology director need a common investment decision. They can fund a local experience and accept that the next team will rebuild much of it. They can wait for a replatforming programme. Or they can use this launch to separate the commerce decisions that need to work across several experiences, while retaining the systems that already trade dependably. The choice depends on where the constraint sits and how often the business expects to encounter it.

Intelligent commerce is the ability to change how customers buy and how the operation serves them as a coordinated piece of work. The storefront matters. So do the product knowledge it draws on, the decisions a market can make, the systems that take the order and the people who resolve the exception. The operating system is visible in how those elements change together when the business wants to try something new.

Design around the decision a customer is trying to make

Start with the decision the customer is trying to make. A new shopper may want to compare formats, ingredients and prices. A returning customer may want the product they previously bought, with a clear view of anything that has changed in the pack or offer. A service colleague may need the same facts while answering a question about a recurring order. These experiences can share product knowledge and still serve different purposes.

Baymard's ecommerce search research documents how shoppers describe products by use case or by attributes that may be absent from product titles. Look at the questions customers ask, the evidence they need and where they leave or ask for help. In the wellness example, a filter may handle an unflavoured preference. A model could interpret how a shopper describes a format and compare it using approved information for that market. Questions about suitability for a health condition need an appropriate route outside the buying guide.

Design the experience so it can hand off what it has learned. If a shopper has compared two pack sizes and chosen an unflavoured product as a one-off purchase, the basket should preserve those choices. If a customer wants help with a recurring order, service needs the product variant, the terms the customer accepted and the requested change. Keeping those details available can spare the customer from repeating the decision or being offered a substitute that differs from what they chose.

The guided journey also gives merchandising something to learn from. If shoppers repeatedly ask how two similarly named products differ, investigate the labels, product model and comparison design. If shoppers comfortably choose a product and then abandon when the recurring terms are shown, examine the offer and how early those terms are visible. Both can appear as weak conversion. They call for different interventions and owners.

References 1

Share the capability and give markets room to trade

Decide which concepts should mean the same thing across the business and which terms a market needs to control. The system can use a common definition of a product variant and a recurring order. The formulation actually sold, product copy, pack sizes, price and fulfilment options resolve for that market. A shared name can link a family of products. The market's variant record establishes the actual ingredients and pack. Shopify Markets illustrates one way to manage market-specific pricing and availability. The brand still has to decide who can change those terms and which experiences need to see them.

A market team might use a headless CMS such as Contentstack to publish its approved comparison copy while keeping the same guided-buying experience. Each entry needs to identify the variant sold in that market. If two markets sell different formulations under the same name, each customer needs to see the information for the product they can actually buy. The commerce service supplies the current price and recurring-order terms.

In this example, the website and service team can use one way to ask whether a given pack can be bought on a recurring basis and on what terms. The market can own the configuration within agreed limits. Both channels can rely on the same meaning for the charge, delivery cadence and permitted changes. The benefit becomes visible when a market can change a replenishment offer without each storefront and service team interpreting and releasing the change separately.

Some differences will justify separate implementations. One market might fulfil recurring orders from its own warehouse, another through a local partner. Share the meaning of the commitment and the information that needs to travel with it, including how a change or cancellation is confirmed. Give the market room to deliver it differently where the operation requires it. A common platform that imposes one operating model on every country can be as limiting as a collection of disconnected storefronts.

This is also a question of accountability. Someone needs to own the shared capability and resolve conflicts across the channels that use it. Local teams need authority to change terms they are accountable for fulfilling. When a market asks for an exception, find out whether it reveals a real difference in the operation or a rule that happened to be coded into one storefront years ago. Moving either into a new service without that distinction can preserve the constraint the investment was meant to remove.

References 2 3

Modernise the decision that limits the journey

Suppose replenishment eligibility and pricing are calculated inside the existing checkout. Each storefront has its own workaround, and service colleagues see the terms only after an order is placed. Guided buying cannot explain the difference between a one-off and recurring purchase at the point the customer is choosing. Replacing the whole checkout brings payment, tax, promotions, orders and service into the same change. First determine whether the decision about which packs qualify and what the recurring terms are can be exposed through a shared service, while the existing checkout continues to transact.

That service can initially call the existing operation for answers. The guided experience and the service team can use the same decision before the business moves the underlying rules. If the replenishment platform or a fulfilment partner changes, a team can change how the answer is produced behind that boundary. Martin Fowler's account of gradual modernisation describes how behaviour can be separated and moved while the older and newer systems coexist. For this brand, the boundary is useful if it makes the new buying decision possible and can be verified against real orders.

Before the service makes a commitment to a customer, compare its answers against real purchase scenarios. Include a promotion that applies only to the first order, a pack withdrawn from the local range and a change requested before the next shipment. Decide which differences are intended and investigate the others. Release to a defined group, confirm the terms are reaching fulfilment and service, and agree when to route new orders back to the previous path. Customers already on recurring orders need a clear way to manage the terms they accepted even if the guided experience is withdrawn. Restoring the storefront alone leaves the operation with those commitments to honour.

Keep a decision owner and a retirement condition for any temporary connection. If a new service can answer the same question as the old checkout, decide when each path should stop making that decision and who will check that nothing still depends on it. Some existing services will earn their place through reliability and reasonable cost of change. Others can be retired after the new path handles their remaining work. The test is operational. A second copy of the rule, with a new interface in front of it, creates another place for two customers to receive different answers.

References 4

Give AI a role that matches the authority it needs

The wellness journey combines decisions that benefit from interpretation with decisions that commit the business. A model can clarify which format the customer means, compare verified product attributes in plain language or help a colleague retrieve the terms of an offer. Commerce services should determine the available variant, price and recurring terms. If the system can start, change or cancel a recurring order, define what the customer confirms, what the operation checks and who can resolve a discrepancy.

Design the limits into the experience. If the requested product is unavailable locally, say so and make material differences visible before the customer chooses an alternative. An order amendment can pass to a colleague with the terms in force and the requested change. NIST's AI Risk Management Framework places trustworthiness considerations across design, development, use and evaluation. In this journey, test ordinary purchases and cases where the customer changes their mind or the system lacks verified information to proceed.

An independent shopping assistant is one useful test of this operating design. Google's Universal Commerce Protocol integration guide describes both a transfer to the merchant's site and a checkout integration. A retailer that already understands which capabilities to expose can decide how much of its offer a partner can represent and where the customer should return to the retailer. There is no need to make that partner the reason for the platform investment. An adviser in a store, a new market site or a service colleague can reveal the same gaps in product meaning, authority or hand-off.

References 5 6

Let production evidence decide the pace

Sometimes the next investment belongs entirely in the buying experience. If the existing services already support reliable product selection, offers, fulfilment and order changes, a better interface may make a measurable difference on its own. Improved filters or assisted selling may be enough. At the other end, a platform approaching a hard support deadline or showing persistent instability may justify a larger migration. A release around one journey can reveal what needs to move and how safely it can move.

Choose measures on both sides of that decision. For the customer, check whether they receive the variant they selected, understand the recurring terms and can amend or cancel without repeat contact. For the business, measure contribution after promotions, shipping, returns and service. For the operation, track manual corrections, missed cancellations and whether the new path can fail without disrupting unaffected orders. Compare equivalent journeys. A market with more established recurring demand, a narrower range or easier fulfilment can produce different results for reasons unrelated to guided buying.

The second market adds another test. Measure how much engineering and operating work it takes to launch, and what still needs bespoke implementation. If deployment is easy only because local teams are maintaining parallel spreadsheets or service staff are interpreting new promises by hand, the cost has moved. If local teams can configure their terms, customers get the intended service and engineering can retire a duplication, the business has gained a capability it can build on. The measures should reveal whether the operating system has become easier to change as well as whether the pilot traded successfully.

Decide what the next market should inherit

Start with one journey the business expects to improve in more than one market. Walk an ordinary purchase and an exception with commerce, technology, merchandising, fulfilment and service. Use the two markets to make five decisions.

The first launch should solve a problem for customers. The next launch tells you what the business has learned to do again. That is where intelligent commerce becomes an operating advantage. The retailer can introduce a better way to buy, carry it into a different market and keep the live business working through the change.

- Choose the outcome. Specify what changes for the customer and why it matters commercially. In the wellness example, follow the purchase through delivery and, where the customer chooses recurring orders, the first renewal or change.
- Name the capability to share. Identify the decision every experience needs to ask in a consistent way. Set the information it uses and the answer each channel needs.
- Give variation an owner. Name which service terms or policies each market can change, and how those changes reach the experiences and teams that will honour them.
- Plan for live trade throughout the change. Identify the order and service paths that must keep working. Decide what needs to be compared before switching traffic and how existing commitments will be honoured if the switch is reversed.
- Set the evidence for further investment. Agree what would justify another market, a broader release or retirement of the old path. Consider both customer and commercial outcomes and the effort needed to make the next change.

Sources and further reading

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What does this change for your organisation?

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Intelligent commerce is an operating system, not a smarter storefront.

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