WHOLESALE & DISTRIBUTION
INTERNATIONAL

MAKING CONNECTIONS

IEWC believes in providing its customers with the best service possible. **Page 14**

STRENGTH IN NUMBERS
IDI Independent Distributors gives companies buying power.
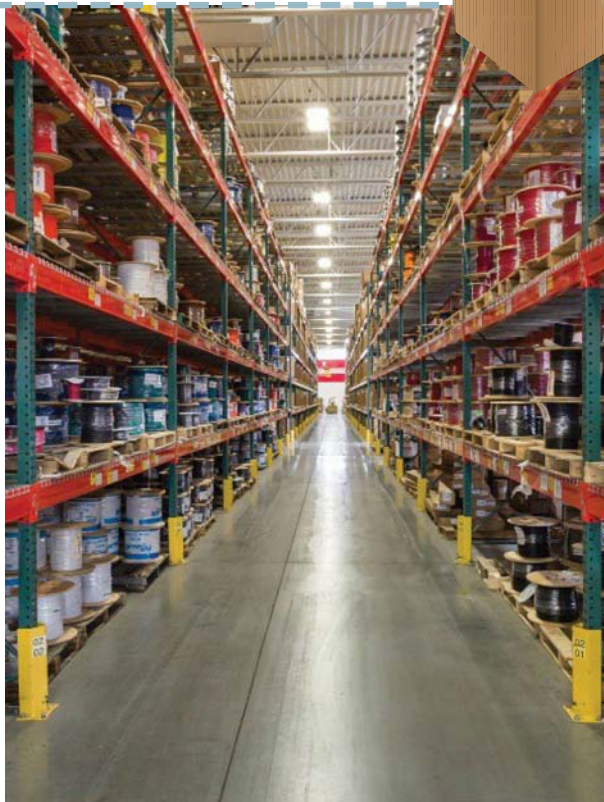**Page 24**

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Safety Marketing Group's members lead the way in safety product distribution.
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IEWC makes its customers feel like they're "a part of the team," it says. *Page 14*

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Choosing the Right E-Commerce Platform

Integration, mobile capabilities and analytics are among the essentials features your company needs. BY SUCHIT BACHALLI

When AmazonSupply went live in April 2012, it was an event that would completely redefine the wholesale distribution industry. It meant the other 35,000 wholesale distributors in the United States had to step up their e-commerce game fast or risk losing out on massive amounts of business.

AmazonSupply sparked a new way of buying and selling industrial products online, a message that was reinforced two years later when Alibaba entered the U.S. market. This $248 billion enterprise and the world's fastest-growing global marketplace for wholesale trade would further infringe on U.S. wholesalers' market share.

Despite this disruption, though, the B2B market has been curiously slow to respond to e-commerce innovation than its B2C counterpart. This is in part because of the lack of marketing resources and expertise that exist in most wholesale business operations as well as the fact that there are very few e-commerce platforms that exist which specifically address their unique integration requirements.

But that's starting to change as the market matures. Forrester Research recently reported in its "U.S. Commerce Platform Technology and Services Forecast" that while U.S. spending on e-commerce software is expected to reach $2.1 billion by 2019, manufacturers and wholesalers will increase their spending at an even faster rate than online retailers.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Having an e-commerce presence is clearly a prerequisite for today's wholesale businesses to stay competitive. But while more and more B2B buyers demand a seamless Amazon-like shopping experience, finding an e-commerce solution that delivers on that promise while still meeting the specific needs of B2B buying and selling environments is difficult.

That's why the most important step is the first one – choosing the right e-commerce platform. Here are the key features to look for when comparing your options:

- ❑ **Deep integration:** Be sure the platform offers seamless integration with your ERP system. This is crucial to providing your customers with instant access to information, like individual product pricing, availability, account information, open order status, payment history, credit limit management and more. The goal is to make it easy for customers to help themselves and find the path of least human interaction.

- ❑ **Strong feature set:** The content management system should allow you to customize the look and feel of your website exactly the way you want to while still integrating with your back-end repositories and processes. It should have its own product information management so you can add and update products, specification sheets and other long tail content for customers to conveniently access on your website. Some of the most advanced platforms even come with their own built-in re-pricers and site scrapers. Since you are playing catch-up, you want the platform to give you a good launch pad.

- ❑ **A knowledgeable and responsive support team:** Beyond the initial implementation, choose a provider that will help your business achieve its marketing and sales goals long after the site has been built and launched. Your best bet is to go with a provider that understands your industry and is committed to serving as your partner.

- ❑ **Insightful analytics:** You want the platform to offer insightful analytics and reporting, so that you can track buying trends and customer behavior in order to drive more traffic and online sales. Ideally, you should be able to customize your reports and data to ensure the most relevant and effective promotion is shown to each buyer at every stage of the shopping experience.

- ❑ **Mobile optimization:** With more buyers using their mobile devices to make online purchases, finding a platform that supports mobile and responsive design is important. This will ensure that you give your customers a consistent and user-friendly browsing and shopping experience, regardless of what device they are using.

- ❑ **Flexible pricing options:** When it comes to pricing, one size doesn't fit all. Look for a provider that will offer a customized pricing model designed to meet your company's specific needs. Also steer away from products that aren't fully integrated. Having to purchase multiple, disparate software products to make your e-commerce site work will only drive up the project costs.

It can be tempting to go for the least expensive or most popular option when selecting an e-commerce platform, but a lack of research is one of the biggest mistakes companies make. By looking for key capabilities and feature sets, you'll be much better equipped to find the best platform to achieve your sales goals. ❑

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