

How Do Your Business Systems Shape Your Future Choices?

The way a business keeps records, divides work and makes decisions affects what it can credibly offer next. How to find the gaps before a customer is promised a date.

by Samet Kasik

KEY POINTS

- Business systems make some forms of growth easier to pursue than others. Records, working routines, and decision responsibilities affect what a business can credibly offer next.
- A new service or customer group may require several connected changes. Improving one tool will achieve little if the information, capacity, or authority needed elsewhere is missing.
- Preserve options that have a plausible commercial purpose. Test a representative future order or customer promise against today's arrangements, then decide which foundations are worth building now.

A business that sells directly to consumers may eventually want to supply retailers. It can know its products well and still be poorly equipped to make that move.

An online order might mean taking payment, picking available stock, and dispatching a parcel. A retailer may need an agreed quantity on a future date, trade pricing, and payment terms. The product has barely changed. The commitments around it have.

Now consider how the business works today. Available stock is visible, but nobody records what has been promised for next month. Prices can be changed, but discounts are agreed in email. The owner settles delivery exceptions because the team has no clear authority to make them.

These arrangements may have served the consumer business perfectly well. They also determine how much work lies between an attractive wholesale enquiry and an offer the business can reliably fulfil.

That is the part of a systems decision I want to examine: what becomes possible, difficult, or expensive after the choice has been made? By business systems, I mean the combination of processes, information, tools, and responsibilities through which the work gets done.

A new promise changes what the system must know

For the prospective wholesale customer, the important promise could be delivery before a store opening. Accepting that order requires more than knowing what is on the shelf today.

Someone needs to know which stock is already committed, whether replenishment will arrive in time, and what happens if a consumer order uses the same inventory. The team needs an agreed way to reserve stock and communicate changes. Finance needs to understand when payment will arrive and what must be paid before then.

The strategic choice to serve retailers therefore reaches into purchasing, inventory, sales, and cash flow. A wholesale price list addresses only a small part of it.

Some of the information can be added later. Other gaps become harder to repair with time. If discounts, replacements, and extra handling have never been linked to individual orders, the business may struggle to reconstruct which kinds of work were profitable. It can calculate a margin from the invoice and miss much of the effort required to earn it.

I would pay particular attention to information that cannot be recovered reliably later. A record of what happened, why an exception was approved, and what it cost can support future pricing and service decisions. A collection of disconnected emails leaves much more to someone's memory.

Capturing that history requires a choice about what matters. Staff need clear definitions and time to maintain the records. Collecting every possible detail would create another burden. For a business seriously considering wholesale, keeping commitments and order costs understandable has a clear purpose.

The constraint can sit between the tools

An order platform might handle trade pricing well while purchasing still works from a spreadsheet that nobody else can interpret. The new feature is present; the delivery promise remains difficult to manage.

Richard Rumelt's analysis of chain-link systems explains why improving one activity can yield little when other activities it depends on remain weak.¹ Applied here, the question is whether the business can carry the promise all the way through, including the points where responsibility changes hands.

Who can approve a substitute product? Who tells the customer that a delivery date has moved? Can the warehouse see the terms sales agreed? If each answer leads back to the owner, adding another sales channel will add another stream of decisions to the same desk.

Iansiti and Lakhani describe how organizational structures, processes, and technology reinforce one another, eventually making different ways of working difficult to introduce.² This is a reason to examine the whole arrangement when a business changes its offer. Moving information into a shared application will not, by itself, settle who is responsible for acting on it.

There is also a distinction between having records and being able to use them elsewhere. An export may contain the orders but omit the adjustments, customer agreements, or links needed to interpret them. Reconstructing those relationships could become part of the cost of changing systems.

Those costs affect strategy. They can delay a new channel, make a partner arrangement difficult, or cause the business to keep offering only what its current setup handles easily. Over time, an operating convenience can become a reason for avoiding a commercially sensible move.

Keep the options you have a reason to value

Greater flexibility is not always worth its price. Rumelt also describes a cost of tightly coordinated designs: they can achieve strong performance while being harder to adapt.¹ A business can rationally accept that trade-off when a focused offering has a strong competitive case.

For the consumer seller, a simple arrangement might be exactly right. If wholesale is merely a passing idea, building a complex trade operation now would consume money and attention that could improve the existing business.

The judgement changes when retailers are making credible enquiries, the margins could support the work, and the owner intends to explore that route. Then it becomes reasonable to invest in foundations that a wholesale test would need: understandable stock commitments, consistent order records, and clear responsibility for delivery decisions.

The flexibility I would pay for has a specific use. It lets the business try a plausible change without rebuilding everything around it. That could mean keeping customer and order history usable across tools, or defining a delivery handoff clearly enough that another employee or partner can take it on.

The commercial case still depends on pricing, demand, working capital, and the effect on existing customers. The value of the preparation is that management can assess a feasible route, with a clearer view of what it would cost to take it.

Follow one future order through today's business

A practical test is to take a representative order the business wants to accept in the future and work through it using today's people, information, and rules.

For the wholesale opportunity, use an order with a future delivery date, an agreed price, and payment after delivery. Trace how it would be quoted, approved, reserved, fulfilled, invoiced, and reviewed. At every handoff, identify what someone would need to know and what they would be authorized to decide.

Write down the gaps in concrete terms. "We need a better system" is difficult to act on. "Sales cannot see stock reserved for future orders" describes a problem that can be investigated. "Only the owner can approve a delivery change" points to a different kind of work.

Some gaps may need a software change. Others may need a definition, a working routine, or someone learning to make a decision. Taken together, they make [the commitments behind a growth strategy](#) visible.

An option remains credible when the business can explain how it would exercise it, what preparation it requires, and whether that preparation is worth funding. It is useful to discover those requirements while there is still time to choose, rather than after a customer has been promised a delivery date.

REFERENCES

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