

The background of the entire page is a complex, symmetrical pattern of overlapping, translucent lines in shades of teal and blue. These lines radiate from a central dark circular void, creating a starburst or sunburst effect. The lines vary in length and thickness, giving the pattern a dynamic, almost crystalline appearance. The overall color palette is cool and futuristic.

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Together makes progress

**Reimagining Industrial
Commerce:** Competing for
Relevance in the Attention
Economy

Executive Summary

The next frontier for industrial manufacturers isn't producing more goods — it's capturing more of the customer relationship. Manufacturers must rethink their approach to product assortment, customer engagement, and platform strategy in an era dominated by digital self-service and saturated online environments. One of the most strategic levers in this shift is the integration of unowned inventory — products sold by third-party suppliers but marketed and fulfilled through a manufacturer's platform.

Rather than framing this strategy under the baggage-laden term "marketplace," leading industrial firms are positioning themselves as orchestrators of supplier networks and distributed fulfillment models. These models provide the scale, agility, and customer convenience required in the attention economy, without compromising the operational integrity or brand control that industrial

players value. For instance, companies like Conrad Electronic have developed industrial marketplaces emphasizing partner integration over open-market dynamics. Similarly, Toyota Material Handling has expanded its parts and service offering by incorporating third-party supplier networks under its digital platform, without disrupting its core brand identity or traditional dealer relationships. Through its MyToyota Store, TMH offers OEM parts and third-party MRO products like safety gear, batteries, and warehouse accessories.

These SKUs are fulfilled via a marketplace facilitator model from curated suppliers, ensuring inventory agility while maintaining a seamless, brand-controlled customer experience.

The B2B Commerce Inflection Point

Digital transformation has changed the rules of industrial buying. With procurement shifting online and expectations shaped by consumer-grade experiences, B2B buyers now demand broad product availability, personalized interactions, and seamless fulfillment. Cost pressures, labor shortages, and supply chain fragility compound the urgency to do more with less.

Manufacturers that once succeeded solely on product quality now face a new mandate: deliver holistic, digitally native solutions that consolidate spend, reduce procurement complexity, and keep buyers coming back. Platforms must do more than sell — they must *engage*.

Why Unowned Inventory?

Unowned inventory models enable manufacturers to:

- **Retain Customers:** Offer a broader assortment under your brand to consolidate buyer relationships.
- **Expand Revenue with Low Capital Risk:** Monetize third-party SKUs without warehousing or production investment.
- **Accelerate Innovation Cycles:** Pilot new categories via dropship or commission models.
- **Mine Demand Signals:** Gain insight into customer behavior across owned and third-party inventory.

Case in point: Grainger's Zoro.com features over 26 million drop-shipped SKUs, many of which are not stocked by Grainger, driving double-digit eCommerce growth and superior EBITDA margins.

From Manufacturer to Platform Operator

Framing matters. While “marketplace” may be accurate, it can also alienate internal stakeholders concerned with brand dilution or channel conflict. Industrial players are more successful when they position the model in operational terms:

- **Virtual Catalog:** Focused on customer convenience.
- **Supplier Network:** Emphasizes existing partnerships.
- **Extended Assortment:** Aligns with procurement value.
- **Distributed Fulfillment Model:** Prioritizes efficiency over disintermediation.

This language reframes the conversation around service delivery and supply chain agility, not retail mimicry.

Preparing for the next wave – GenAI-enabled Search

To fully unlock the value of unowned inventory, manufacturers must think beyond SKU count and consider how AI-powered experiences reshape customer expectations. GenAI-driven search and personalization engines thrive on data volume and diversity; they require a robust catalog to train their models and deliver meaningful recommendations effectively. When customers type ambiguous queries or seek tailored solutions, AI systems leverage a broad product set to infer intent, surface complementary products, and dynamically adapt to the customer's buying journey. In this context, an expanded assortment of third-party SKUs is not just a revenue opportunity — it becomes foundational infrastructure for enabling intelligent commerce. Without sufficient catalog depth, personalization engines underperform, leading to a generic UX that fails to differentiate in a saturated digital landscape.

Adding third-party (3P) seller products to your catalog is not a “one-and-done” activity. 3P Sellers do not always provide rich product descriptions and metadata. AI-driven personalization hinges on high-quality, normalized data (e.g., product attributes, imagery, usage metadata), which is often lacking in third-party listings. Increasing the SKU count can degrade rather than enhance personalization quality without rigorous PIM and data governance.

Strategic Considerations for Execution



Supplier Curation and Control

Industrial buyers value trust and reliability. Start with known partners and adjacent categories. Set SLAs and quality standards to ensure brand alignment.



Sales Team Enablement

Sales reps must see unowned inventory as a tool, not a threat. Adjust commission structures and equip teams with bundling tools that combine owned and third-party products.



Seamless Platform Integration

In the buying experience, third-party SKUs should be indistinguishable from owned inventory. A robust PIM system is essential to normalize data and support search, filtering, and checkout flows.



Operational Rigor

Create repeatable onboarding, fulfillment, and dispute protocols. A Partner Success function can safeguard brand consistency across sellers.



Data-Driven Scaling

Launch with a focused assortment and iterate based on usage data. Monitor conversion rates, returns, and supplier performance to refine strategy.

Competing in the Attention Economy

Industrial commerce is no longer just about availability—it's about attention. In a world of digital saturation, platforms that offer relevant, personalized, and expansive assortments win.

Manufacturers who embrace unowned inventory increase SKU count, capture mindshare, and build stronger digital engagement. This enables:

- **Faster Category Expansion:** Like Macy's Marketplace, which onboarded 400 new brands and 20 categories in months, manufacturers can expand without inventory risk.
- **Higher Fill Rates:** Reducing stock-outs enhances customer loyalty.
- **Omnichannel Leverage:** Distributed fulfillment supports hybrid selling and service models
- **Brand Reinforcement:** A well-managed platform elevates your role from product provider to procurement partner.

Final Thoughts

This isn't about giving up control. It's about evolving from a manufacturer to a procurement platform that commands attention and loyalty in a crowded digital world. By embracing unowned inventory, you gain agility, insight, and revenue without sacrificing operational discipline.

The future of industrial commerce isn't more warehouses. It's a more innovative platform that can support the next wave of digital commerce.

The Role of AI and Analytics

To manage third-party complexity at scale, manufacturers must embrace digital tools:

- **AI-Powered Merchandising:** Tailor product recommendations based on buyer behavior
- **Dynamic Pricing:** Optimize for competitiveness and margin.
- **Seller Performance Analytics:** Drive better decisions and enforce standards.

Smaller industrial players can now access these tools via modern platform providers, leveling the playing field.



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