

Digital Solutions to Navigate Healthcare Commerce in 2021



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A pandemic like COVID-19 affects everyone in the healthcare chain. Manufacturers cannot keep up with the demand that distribution companies are asking for, distributors are being asked to manage inventory and set product ordering restrictions for facilities that need products, and healthcare workers on the front line are being asked to do more with less. And of course, all this affects patient health.

This guide gives perspective on key areas that B2B healthcare organizations should be looking at today, including what's new that may be relevant and what the future holds for healthcare ecommerce. Focusing in on these specific areas will aid in driving innovation and growth not only during this pandemic, but beyond.



Addressing these problems is why we created the latest version of our Now/New/Next (N3) – which focuses exclusively on healthcare distribution and manufacturing organizations. This guide will help B2B healthcare organizations understand industry trends, such as the:

- Now: The elements considered table stakes for most organizations and how you may look to integrate them within your business
- New: Components that a few companies are executing on today, and why they will likely be able to differentiate themselves from the competition
- Next: What’s around the corner that no organization is working towards today, but would be at the forefront of innovation if they were

We’ll offer perspective and solutions to help B2B healthcare distribution and manufacturing organizations like yours navigate the current environment and jumpstart your roadmap to “think differently” about your business, products, and solutions.

The Now

These are areas of functionality that you should have implemented on your site, and if you haven't, you're likely behind your competition

User Experience

What It Is:

User experience (UX) leads us off, and with good reason. Each site has different users, and each user has different expectations of what a “good experience” looks like. Much of this is dependent upon what your business does, who your customers are, and how they access your site. If most of your users navigate to your site from a mobile device, but your site isn’t accessible through a mobile app, built on a progressive web application (PWA), or have responsive elements, then the experience will be underwhelming, or even useless.

Why It’s Important

User experience is critical to meet and exceed your customers’ expectations. Specifically, within this segment, customers who are ordering for their healthcare facility need to be able to find actionable content quickly. Think of a well-crafted website like a well-designed home. It wouldn’t make sense to put a refrigerator in the bathroom. The same holds true for your site experience. Areas need to flow to the expected and desired experience of your customer base.

Where to Start

The best way to start looking at your site experience is to ask for insights from your team, your customers, and any other key stakeholders who would have valuable input. Your team is vital, especially customer-facing employees like customer sales representatives (CSR) or salespeople who will be able to give you information on what customers express to them regarding the site.

But in the end, the opinions of your customers will be the most important, as they will have first-hand feedback on what’s working and what isn’t. Keep in mind that customers will ask for the world. Some input is valuable, but you’ll have to mitigate some requests as they likely don’t make sense for the given project. For example, SDS (safety data sheets) are vital within the distribution and manufacturing space, not only for employees, but for the facilities placing orders. Look at creative ways to insert SDS sheets on product landing pages, within ordering lists, or virtual libraries as a great way to improve a user’s experience when navigating on your site.

Voice of the Customer

What It Is

Voice of the customer (VOC) and UX go hand in hand. While most of the initial UX work should have been done during the project buildout, VOC requires the continuous collection of information. It should be noted that VOC can have various avenues depending on your business processes. One organization may utilize its own delivery drivers as a backchannel for customer feedback, while another company that uses a third-party like UPS/FedEx doesn't have that option.

Why It's Important

Ongoing VOC collection is a must have. The COVID-19 crisis made it evident that things can change so quickly that having channels for healthcare facilities or distributors to submit feedback is essential. For example, COVID has caused many healthcare facilities to do more with less, meaning they can't

purchase as much of a certain type of product that is in high demand. A healthcare distributor or manufacturer that is offering up VOC avenues would likely collect requests from customers to build in more inventory visibility site features. If the company chooses to build these new features, it provides customers with a way to help shape the roadmap of the platform that they use, keeping their needs met.

By providing quick and accessible ways for feedback to flow upwards, customer voices are heard loud and clear. There is no better trust builder than getting feedback from a customer, incorporating their feedback into the platform, and then sharing it back with the customer. It helps to improve the site, but most importantly, it helps build customer loyalty.

Where to Start

Where you start depends on where you are in the process. If you're just starting your ecommerce journey, it likely makes sense to bring in certain focus groups of customers and ask them what they like, dislike, and what could be better. Take a look at different customer types as well. If you're a distributor, you may have customers that are hospitals, long-term care facilities, and post-acute care doctors' offices. How do these customers differ? How are they the same? You may want to incorporate different VOC avenues for each group depending on their shopping habits and behaviors.

Look at your customer personas. Do they have clinical backgrounds? Business backgrounds? Are end-user patients using your platform? These questions shouldn't be overlooked. Once you've determined the user groups, you'll be able to focus on what mediums and channels make sense to collect feedback. Consider feedback surveys after various touch points such as after a user places an order. Remember, it's important to always ask your customers what's working well, what isn't, and what they would like to see. From there, you can start to navigate which workflows work best to collect this information from the customer so you can continuously improve the user experience on your site.



COVID-19 is a perfect example of why it's critical for healthcare distributors and manufacturers to have VOC feedback channels to ensure the commerce platform is meeting customer expectations

Key Performance Indicator Development

What It Is

Key performance indicators (KPIs) are metrics that allow you to evaluate your progress towards the various business goals your company has set. When you were in school, you took tests and exams. The grade you received on those exams was a KPI, as it essentially rated how well you did. How does that apply to the world of B2B healthcare distribution and manufacturing? Let's say you're a medical supply distributor and you want to get more clinical users to sign up for a new educational content portal on your site. You'll get a specific set of users who navigate to this educational page, and a subset of those users will ultimately end up signing up for the content. The conversion rate of those who sign up can be used as a KPI for this new educational content.

Why It's Important

KPIs are vital because they provide benchmarking metrics for not only you as the owner of the commerce project, but for the entire organization. Think of your website as a course that you're taking, and KPIs are the grades you receive in various sections towards your goal. If a business goal is to grow website revenue through user personas with clinical backgrounds, you'll want to look at what KPI metrics can be tied to that initiative so you can measure the success of the experiences, workflows, and features you are building to reach that goal.

Where to Start

When you first start looking at KPIs, you should have a set of business goals that you want the ecommerce platform to succeed upon in a given timeframe. Some common KPIs are things like unique products purchased and clinical educational content that users need to consume to keep up with mandated accreditations. Let's say you're a medical device manufacturer of dental supplies and you want to grow a newly launched category by 5% through ecommerce to your distributor customers. You'll need to identify areas within your site that will help achieve this goal and make sure they are maximized for success. In this situation, factors to evaluate could be the cart abandonment percentage for products within that category, site traffic for those products, and the conversion rate for those items. Once you've developed baselines, you'll be able to leverage new site features to help grow that business deliverable further and most importantly, track your progress.



The New

Initiatives that fall into the “new” category are areas that most companies aren’t doing today, but the few that are stand out from the competition. These are the functionalities that are the future of the B2B ecommerce experience, and early adoption will serve healthcare organizations well now and moving forward.



Content and Product Personalization

What It Is

Say you're searching online to buy a pair of shoes. Somehow that pair of shoes follows you around wherever you go on the internet, and you even get an email with a discount to purchase them. That's personalization. These experiences in our private life are starting to bleed over into the B2B space. Personalization in the B2B healthcare distribution and manufacturing space allows experiences to be tailored specifically for the user that is experiencing them.

Roche Diagnostics asks users to select their profile before they are even permitted to enter the site. This allows the medical device manufacturer to build content and experiences that are tailored to the specific user persona. Because of this, Roche is likely able to drive more time on site and more return visitors because the experience directly meets the user's needs.

Why It's Important

A recent Google survey¹ found that people are 40% more likely to spend more than they planned when they identify the shopping experience to be highly personalized. That's quite the statistic, and a perfect example of why personalization is so essential.

Imagine you're a whole medical supply distributor into doctor's offices. Each persona that visits your site likely has a different understanding of the products and services that they're viewing. For instance, a user with a business background thinks to search "Advil," where someone with a clinical background thinks to search "Ibuprofen." Your goal is to build an experience that's tailored to both backgrounds. Each person will likely find the product differently, search differently, and may even order differently.

Taking this a step further, the ideal situation would be that the site can analyze the product selections a user makes to tie them back to possible conditions the patient could have, and then suggest additional related products. If the user is adding Advil and a knee brace to their cart, it's possible that their patient is suffering a knee injury. What other items would make sense in this situation? Your site may suggest other helpful products such as bio freeze, ice packs, crutches, etc. This is personalization in its best form; helping your customers with a better buying experience, and increasing sales.

¹Google



Where to Start

Start by finding a creative way to break the personas you identified into various segments that you can later call out through experiences on your site. For example, if you're a manufacturer of surgical equipment used within the operating room, a great way to start the process of personalization would be to capture a user's email address during their visit to your site. You can then prepare your "lead in" email, which serves up different pieces of content. Based upon what content the user clicks on within the email, you can begin to assign a persona and better serve up content moving forward.

From there, depending on the ecommerce platform or content management system (CMS) you use, you'll likely have some base out-of-the-box features that might help create some high-level personalized workflows and give you further understanding around if that user is a doctor or perhaps just a procurement manager from the hospital. Use a CMS that has personalized workflows or other third-party partners to build more elevated functionality that could be invaluable in setting yourself apart from your competition.

¹[Google](#)



People are **40% more likely** to spend more than they planned when they identify the shopping experience to be highly personalized.¹

Site Search

What It Is

Site search is self-explanatory, but for whatever reason, it hasn't received the love that other areas like artificial intelligence and personalization have over the last few years. That being said, search should be a key focus area for B2B healthcare distributors and manufacturers.

Thanks to Google, we as a society have high expectations whenever we search online. In fact, B2B buyers have come to expect procurement sites to provide the same elevated search experience they've had on Google. And yet, onsite search is an area that is still sorely lacking on many organizations' websites. By elevating the search experience, not only are you able to drive more revenue through your commerce platform, you're also becoming a source of truth for your customers, which is an extremely powerful thing.

Why It's Important

The B2B healthcare distribution landscape has become more cluttered thanks to Amazon. Now more than ever, buyers from hospitals, facilities, doctors' offices, etc. have multiple purchase options. Add other elements like long buying cycles for acute care facilities looking to purchase capital equipment, and you could have quite a mess on your hands.

Because users have so many options when deciding where to buy, search needs to be top of mind. As mentioned, many products in the B2B healthcare vertical have multiple and interchangeable names. Being able to leverage onsite search engines that provide users with the right product based upon their persona-specific search terms is crucial to creating the seamless search experience buyers are used to in their personal lives.

But the psychology of it goes way beyond this. Helping people find what they are searching for is one thing, but being able to impact buyer behavior is something else entirely. If users are finding what they need with ease, and it's in their preferred terminology and lingo, then their buyer behavior could shift to start all their searching on your site. You will become the source of truth for information because, again, it's personalized to the experience that the customer expects.

Where to Start

The best way to start improving site search is to get an understanding of where you are today. Look at the data and analytics on bounce rates, empty search results, and conversion rates to start. You'll likely need to dive further into a search audit from there. The audit will yield results around any gaps and holes that need fixing and help you prioritize which areas to fix first based on your business goals, specific user roles, and other unique business factors.

From there, try to build out some user profiles. If you're a manufacturer of wound dressings, your products are likely used in both acute and post-acute care settings, in addition to being used by end user consumers. Being able to identify each of these users will help as you look to tweak and maneuver your onsite search results to best fit each of the users who may be searching on your site.



Mobile

What It Is

While mobile isn't really "new," it is new to the B2B healthcare distribution and manufacturing space from the standpoint of effectiveness. One could argue that mobile has more of a place within this vertical than anywhere else today. For instance, a nurse may need to research a specific product for a patient at their bedside. Or a procurement manager at a hospital wants the ability to leverage barcode scanning in the stockroom. The list goes on and on. With PWAs coming into the mix over the last few years, having a mobile strategy is no longer an option, it's a necessity.



Why It's Important

Having mobile as component of your commerce platform is so vital because the way society consumes information has shifted. The tides have changed, and mobile has replaced desktops as the primary form of consuming information.

In a post-COVID-19 world, there will be much more emphasis on “touchless.” And though you have to touch your phone, this application in the healthcare B2B space will be key. Many products in hospitals or nursing homes are kept in a storage or stock room. Re-ordering usually occurs through inventory management systems or through specific processes that each facility sets up. This all could be leveraged through mobile experiences where nurses could take pictures of products to see application and use instructions, and procurement managers could scan items in the stock room and get insight into inventory allotments.

Where to Start

Most modern ecommerce platforms have some out-of-the-box mobile capabilities that can render your site in a mobile responsive template, but that only goes so far. If you're a wholesale medical supply distributor, a responsive website doesn't work for your users from a feasibility standpoint when they must order 60 lines of product. To start, you'll want to refer back to the VOC discussion. It's important to speak with the various personas that you are serving to understand what they might want from a native mobile app or a PWA. From there, you'll likely have to determine what type of software or solution can help you achieve your business goals.

The Next

If you made it this far, get ready for some next-level ideas that serve as a lens into what may be possible in the future.

Here are some far-out ideas that will hopefully get the creative juices flowing.

Augmented Reality Product Possibilities

What It Is

Augmented reality (AR) is an interactive experience where the real world and the art of the possible collide. If you're of the millennial generation, think of Snapchat filters; it's about taking a picture or video of a real-world experience, but having it enhanced by graphics or technology.



Why It's Important

One view of the future sees healthcare buyers ordering through AR experiences. For example, if you own a hospital or nursing home, you must fill that facility with patient and resident furniture. Leveraging AR experiences, you as the buyer would use a device to build an order for a resident's room and see how the furniture would match in the existing space. If you're a healthcare furniture manufacturer or distributor, having this type of technology would change the game.

Taking it a step further, a user could use voice command to change colors, themes, specifications, and more, and as a result, help customers visualize products in their space. Then on the back end, this would be connected to a commerce platform that would seamlessly build the order and finish off the rest of the experience.

This application within the B2B healthcare space gives buyers, doctors, and users the ability to “right size” products before purchasing.

Where to Start

If you're future-minded, begin to research AR companies that may be interested in this approach. If it can be done, a partner like Perficient can leverage the technology and build a way to accept orders through AR.

Virtual Expert Assistants

What It Is

In traditional commerce, a customer service representative (CSR) assists customers who call in with questions on specific product categories and services. Today, if a user is shopping on an ecommerce site for a specific brand of allergy medication, they may expect the ability to instantly live chat with a CSR rather than calling in. COVID-19 has taught us a lot, but one thing it will leave us with is a higher level of comfort with video chat services. I see a future where ecommerce sites will have real-time video CSR services and product training.

Why It's Important

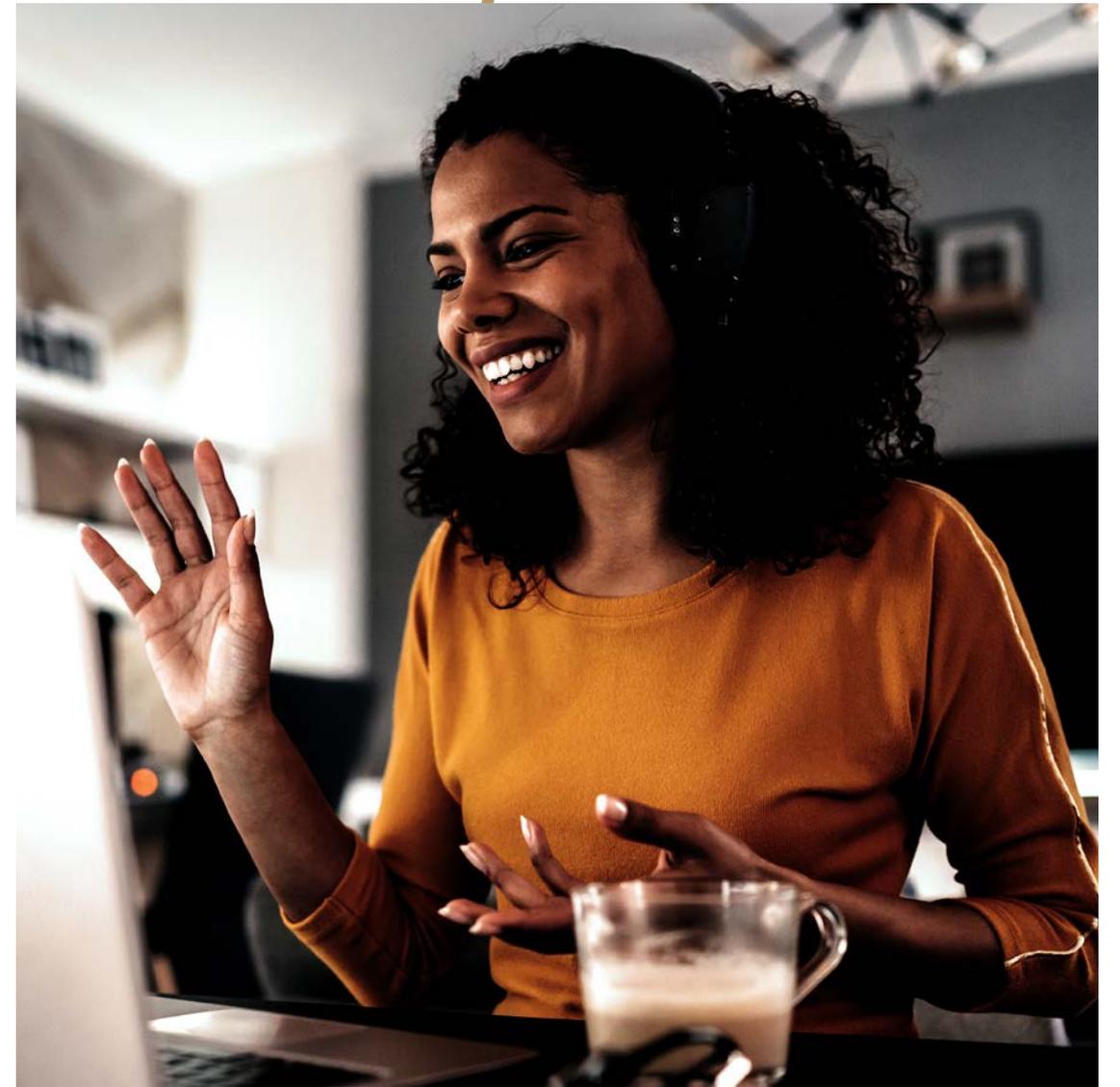
Sometimes, users don't procure products because they may not be comfortable with using them. Depending on their persona, a user may want to ask specific usage questions, such as how to

apply a certain type of wound dressing for various conditions. Being able to speak directly to a clinical employee from the company that manufactures the product through video chat would be a spectacular way to establish comfort and trust with customers.

We're already seeing the shift to virtual doctor appointments and it's likely this will remain in the post-COVID-19 world. The same could apply to a medical device manufacturer. These organizations field calls from not only the businesses that distribute their products, but the end users who need them. Having someone on staff to answer clinically specific questions virtually would be a game changer.

Where to Start

It would be great to see companies like Zoom and Skype snatch up an onsite chatbot software and build it into their existing video conference products to create a complete, holistic video chat experience. For now, the best course of action would be to leverage existing chat services in correlation with other video conferencing services separately to provide a similar experience.





Hopefully this guide instilled some helpful insights that inspire you to think differently about your business going forward. Now more than ever the industry must focus on leveraging technology to not only serve customers better, but to serve patients.

Regardless of where you are in the process, **Perficient is here to help.**

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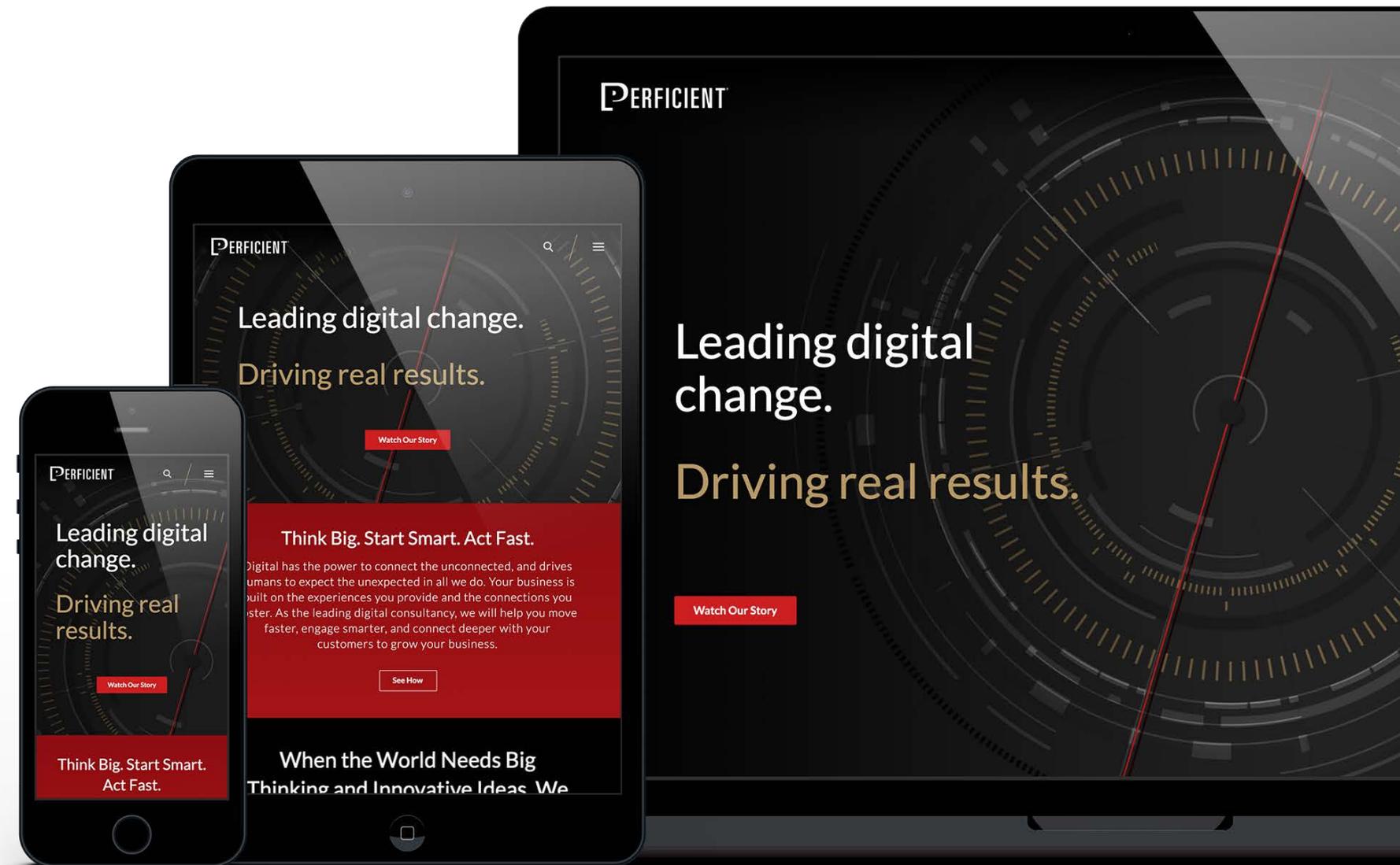
Justin Racine serves as a Senior Commerce Consultant at Perficient where he helps clients achieve their business goals through commerce enabled technologies. Justin has spoken at more over 15 global conferences within recent years on ecommerce strategy and implementation, and was published for his theories in Henry Stewart Publications, Journal of Brand Strategy. Justin has 10+ years of experience in ecommerce, specifically focused within the medical device and healthcare product space.

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