

Putting More Speed in Express

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The Snapshot

Express, a Fortune 1000 retail company, based in Columbus, Ohio, had the usual issues with its on-premise, legacy application. It was expensive, system integrations were troublesome, there were upgrade and compliance hurdles, and seemingly simple UI changes were laborious. The combination of the Aries team's leadership on a commercetools implementation brought a uniquely progressive set of skills and processes to this project. These qualifications led to Express hosting the first ever successful commercetools implementation in North America. As a result, Express gleaned a 19.6% increase in ecommerce revenue, where online sales represented 28.7% of its overall revenue within the first year.



The commercetools microservices, API, and headless approach make us faster. Aries' SAFE® agile framework practices and expertise in GraphQL and cloud architecture enabled us to achieve our end-to-end implementation efficiently.

– Brendan Gualdoni, former VP of Commerce & Enterprise Architecture, Express

Meet the Client

Express LLC is an international Fortune 1000 retail company headquartered in Columbus, Ohio. They describe themselves as a *"...fashion-forward apparel brand and style community whose purpose is to create confidence and inspire self-expression."*

Goals

1. **“Trickle-Up” Simplicity:** Express.com needed a better foundation for its ecommerce system; something that made each piece of that system far less co-dependent and far more composable. Removing tightly coupled dependencies and moving toward a composable model makes it easier to carry out changes down the line, from big scalable holiday traffic management to small everyday UI button functions.
2. **Cost Optimization:** Time is money. Express was spending far too much on service agreements with a platform that also cost their employees time. Having resources dedicated to dealing with complicated compliance issues and wading through complex integrations to make a single change on a web page was a needless money pit.
3. **Primum Non Nocere:** In Latin, this means “First, do no harm.” The Commerce Department executives used this saying to express their reticence about this proposed overhaul of the Express.com ecommerce platform. Of course, businesses want to keep up with the times and engage in digital transformations. But how do we do that while being positive their existing revenue streams are left undisrupted?

Tim Steele, CTO of Aries Solutions, reflects on the project’s magnitude saying, *“Primum Non Nocere was doubly important once Covid shut down the world in March 2020. We were 75% through the project and set to launch in August. All the stores were closed. ECommerce was the only channel for making money. We had to do no harm. Otherwise, we would have broken the only thing making revenue.”*

The Solutions

Express chose commercetools for its MACH principles. The idea of custom-tailoring the digital commerce experience to *their* needs instead of the older, square-peg-in-a-round-hole platform model was highly attractive.

“The team’s knowledge of SAFe[®] agile framework, managing SCRUM teams, and Big Room planning were a huge benefit for us. Their organization and road map for this project was flawless,” says Brendan Gualdoni, former VP of Commerce and Enterprise Architecture at Express.

Gualdoni continues, saying, *“Aries is an expert in GraphQL and implementing SaaS. They have a unique mindset where they can visualize creating this whole system in the cloud and are completely at ease with that.”*

These three keystones accomplished all three of Express’s goals within just twenty months, launching the new commercetools platform in August 2020. The groundbreaking technique of traffic funneling that the Aries leadership team created was one of the many reasons Express still reported profits during COVID shutdowns and restrictions. Other companies are still trying to recreate those innovative but proprietary processes.



Reaping the Benefits

Since their new commercetools implementation, things have become more streamlined in the Engineering Department.

"Before we were headless, some of our pages had 40-60% JavaScript errors. The customer couldn't see it, but it slowed everything down. Once we implemented a single-page application architecture, we are now at 3-4% JavaScript errors on the page, which is to the credit of the engineers that built it," Gualdoni states. "Some of the open source tools we now have in our front end layer alone make it so you can release whatever feature you want so long as the default is off. I call them 'levers.' We release a feature; turn on the lever. If it's wrong for some reason, you don't have to roll back the code anymore. You just turn off the lever. These 'levers' were possible because of the headless architecture provided by commercetools. The product and marketing and business side [at Express] have confidence in the team that it's all going to release correctly."

In November 2020, Express was in a code freeze the week leading up to Black Friday. C-level executives approved and requested a change to the site the Wednesday morning before Thanksgiving. The Aries leadership team was able to complete the request and push code without a single hiccup that same day.

In a presentation at a Modern Commerce Day conference, the former CTO of Express reflects on another situation that happened later that week.



We saw a spike in traffic that was more than three times higher than our busiest hour on Black Friday. To give you a bigger sense of scale for this, the peak hour was nearly 10% of all commercetools transactions in that hour. If this had occurred in our legacy implementation, systems would have crashed, we would have lost sales, and we would have spent hours bringing the system back online. During that time, we saw almost no degradation of performance. Those millisecond response times held in there, and I don't think our customers even noticed a blip.

From a fiscal perspective, the amount of money Express spent on just one year of a service agreement with its old platform now covers three years of commercetools costs. Not to mention all the time and resources saved now that things operate more efficiently and effectively.



75k
SKUs

+400%
Time to Market

\$500M+
Online Sales/Year

From commercetools' customer stories

Express.com Today

In his presentation at Modern Commerce Day, the Express CTO states that since the commercetools implementation, *"We have increased our pace of innovation and continue to roll out a full host of new capabilities on the system."*

Gualdoni expands on this, saying, *"We can proof-of-concept and pilot things faster. We went from releasing updates every two to three months to multiple releases a week. This helps us meet the needs of the business and keep up with the market demands. We couldn't have achieved it without our teams' commitment and Aries leadership's investment in the project. They were key in making the implementation of the commercetools platform run smoothly from start to finish. If you're not taking advantage of this revolution, you're, quite honestly, going to get left behind."*

