

RETAIL

Millennials more apt to seek excitement, experience in physical stores

May 4, 2018



Shoes are one of the most purchased fashion categories online. Image credit: Roger Vivier

By SARAH JONES

Despite the rise of ecommerce, the bricks-and-mortar retail experience remains a key factor in consumers' purchase decisions.

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According to a report from Astound Commerce, 59 percent of consumers consider a brand's in-store experience before shopping with that retailer, while 78 percent agree that a positive interaction with a sales associate can convince them to buy. Finding ways to fuse the physical and the digital will be key for retailers going forward, as millennials are more likely than the average consumer to take advantage of cross-channel services.

"Contrary to public opinion, brick-and-mortar stores remain valuable assets for fashion brands," said Sebastian Klare, vice president of global marketing at Astound Commerce, San Bruno, CA. "The physical space of the store establishes a strong connection between product and brand messaging, and the majority of millennials evaluate a store's quality before making a purchase.

"Consumers turn to Internet and mobile shopping for speed and convenience, but many shoppers aren't prompted to visit a site until after they have stepped into the brick-and-mortar store," he said. "Physical stores are still worthwhile investments that provide a space of discovery for new customers."

Astound Commerce's "[A Window into the Fashion Shopper's World](#)" is based on a survey of 1,000 U.S. consumers. The respondents are equally male and female, with a balanced representation of ages.

Online to offline

Astound Commerce found that four in 10 consumers buy more than half of their fashion via ecommerce. Additionally, three-quarters of shoppers make one in five fashion purchases through digital channels.

On average, 35 percent of consumers shop weekly for fashion, with 47 percent of millennials shopping on a weekly basis.

The most popular categories bought online are apparel and footwear.

When it comes to shopping online for fashion, consumers show varying preferences for product presentation. Millennials are more apt to want to see a wide assortment of goods than those in other age groups.

Men also show more of a preference for an edited assortment, with 68 percent of male shoppers wanting curated selections compared to just 56 percent of women.



Female consumers want more product options. Image credit: Saks Fifth Avenue

Almost two-thirds of shoppers say they are prone to making fashion impulse purchases when shopping online.

Shoppers most often arrive at fashion ecommerce sites from search engine advertisements, with about half being directed from these placements. Coming in a close second is social media ads.

Third in prompting online fashion traffic is physical retail, with four in 10 shoppers navigating to a retailer's Web site after a visit to their store.

With the physical store experience also playing a role in whether consumers decide to shop with a particular brand, retailers need to consider their in-store environments.

Frustrations such as not being able to find the right color or size, inconsistent pricing and long lines are common factors that drive consumers to leave a store.



Consumers want to be able to find their size in-store. Image credit: Neiman Marcus

Consumers' expectations for customer service are set at such heights today that retailers lost about \$37.7 billion in sales over the last 12 months due to long lines, according to a new report.

According to a study from mobile payments solution Ayden and 451 Research, digital tools have conditioned consumers to expect faster and more convenient solutions. Over the past year, more than 86 percent of survey takers in the United States claim to have abandoned their purchases in stores due to long lines ([see story](#)).

Today's shopper is highly connected, and millennials reflect this growing need for more seamless experiences across channels.

"Shoppers go to storefronts for excitement and an experience," Mr. Klare said. "They are also more connected than ever and want to be able to access information from multiple channels while they are in store.

"Associates must understand consumer buying behaviors on all available channels and should be prepared to provide assistance from this knowledge," he said. "Shoppers are more likely to stay in a store and engage with products if they are able to check product information on a smart device, place online orders for warehouse inventory or use Web site promotions at checkout.

"Luxury retailers that integrate technology will typically see better store efficiency and increased traffic on all platforms."

Per Astound Commerce's research, millennials over-index in shopping behaviors such as buying via mobile, shopping directly with brand manufacturers, taking advantage of click-and-collect and purchasing from social media.

Also, while the majority of consumers weigh aspects of brands such as sustainability and labor practices before making a purchase, millennials are more likely to consider these values important.

Amazon advantage

Even though half of consumers make at least a quarter of their fashion purchases on Amazon, the ecommerce giant still has a ways to go at proving itself in the apparel space.

Only one in four consumers consider Amazon "highly fashionable."

Where Amazon does win with fashion shoppers is in convenience, pricing and assortment.

The e-tailer is also becoming a prime place for consumers to start their search, with 46 percent preferring the marketplace over department stores for their initial browsing.

While Amazon has struggled to get high-end labels to retail through its marketplace, it has sought out the fashion shopper in other ways.

The retailer might be changing the manner in which consumers interact with fashion now that its new artificial intelligence device Echo has been outfitted with a camera for style advice.

Consumers who purchase the new Amazon Echo will have the ability to receive fashion advice in regard to their outfits through the device's camera and its artificial intelligence solution. Fashion designers will likely have an avenue in the future to further connect with consumers through this feature ([see story](#)).

"Amazon improves its business everyday, so it would not be surprising if its retail selection eventually threatens apparel brands," Mr. Klare said. "Amazon wins consumers with speed of delivery and competitive pricing, but its apparel category has yet to take off."

"In order for luxury retailers to maintain their edge they need to focus on perfecting their business where Amazon can't," he said. "This means focus on providing a highly personalized customer service, a differentiated brick-or-mortar presence and a comprehensive understanding of the individual buyer's preference, such as style or silhouette choice."

"Retailers that are able to listen to buyers' needs and develop positive relationships will see better brand loyalty and customer conversion."