

RETAIL

61pc of online shoppers seek live chat options: report

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Shoppers prefer live chat over chatbots. Image credit: Radial

By SARAH RAMIREZ

Quality customer experience is essential to online retail, with consumers more likely to purchase from brands that provide high levels of service and flexibility.

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According to a new report from CFI Group and Radial, 43 percent of consumers are more likely to purchase from a retailer who offers a live chat option. Additionally, a quarter of ecommerce shoppers have used live chat at least three times in the last 12 months.

"We all know that there is a growing appreciation for chat assistance when ordering," said Ricardo Layun, vice president of customer care services at **Radial**. "Making online chat available and visible has become a digital welcome sign to shoppers that makes them feel comfortable purchasing on your site."

The report is based on a survey of 500 retail shoppers.

Consumer expectations

While not all consumers use chat options, the presence of a chat option is reassuring. Twenty-four percent of consumers who did not use chat reported that they are more likely to buy from a retailer that has a chat option available.

More than 60 percent of shoppers actively sought out chat options, while others replied to chat pop-ups.



Four Seasons chat is available on nine platforms. Image credit: Four Seasons

After engaging with customer service via chat, consumers were 15 percent more likely to recommend retailers, as well as 14 percent more loyal and 12 percent more satisfied.

However, retailers are cautioned to use live agents instead of chatbots. Following interactions with chatbots, shoppers are 3 percent less likely to recommend a retailer and 8 percent less satisfied.

"Live chat provides instant answers to questions, in an increasingly mobile and social world where we expect immediate answers to our questions," Mr. Layun said. "Shoppers are also growing more comfortable engaging someone in a text chat than speaking to someone over the phone."

Service and flexibility remain important even after shoppers decide what goods to purchase.

Both buy online, pickup in-store and ship-to-store options are increasing in popularity. This is partially attributed to consumers having a wider selection online than at physical stores.



Nordstrom Local offers services such as curbside pickup and buy online, pickup in-store. Image credit: Nordstrom

About two in five consumers are more likely to make ecommerce purchases from a retailer that offers these options. Thirty-one percent of respondents have used in-store pickup options at least three times in the last year, while 27 percent have used ship to store as frequently.

Consumers are also expecting speed from retailers, with more than three-quarters of shoppers counting on purchases to arrive at stores within two days. Once ready to pick up purchases, shoppers expect agents to have access to their entire order history as well.

Luxury applications

According to an earlier survey from CFI Group and Radial, the majority of consumers attempt to resolve their issues before contacting customer service, with 64 percent preferring to do so.

Customers are first looking for self-serve tools for various tasks such as checking order status, general product support and more. This means by the time they reach out to a service agent, customers' expectations and demands are much higher.

Sixty-nine percent who are interested in resolving their issues themselves first take to the company's Web site ([see story](#)).

Luxury brands are catching onto the importance of online customer experience.

The updated Four Seasons app allows guests to manage their experience from start to finish, including booking spa treatments, requesting room service or making dinner reservations. It also enhances Four Seasons Chat as the hospitality brand looks to make stays more seamless for tech-savvy travelers ([see story](#)).

While WeChat has become such a prolific force in China, Western brands are rethinking how to interact with consumers via text message by leveraging Apple's Business Chat.

Previously, brands were tapping SMS for marketing endeavors similar to email blasts, often letting customers know when deals and events were occurring. This one-sided format of interaction is now outdated ([see story](#)), as consumers seek greater two-way communication with brands, causing luxury brands such as Burberry and Hodinkee to jump onboard early for Apple Business Chat ([see story](#)).

"Retailers should make it clear on the site that there is a live agent ready to answer any questions that the visitor may have," Mr. Layun said. "The key here is providing professional, knowledgeable representatives behind those chat sessions.

"Luxury retailers must resist the temptation to attempt to provide this service using a bot or unskilled contact center staff," he said. "Luxury brand online shoppers expect high-touch service, whether in person or online."

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