



Customer trend index

How AI, trust, and social influence
are reshaping the path to purchase

2026/27 REPORT

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Earning customers' trust, one step at a time

In last year's customer research report, we explored loyalty and the experiences that drive repeat business. This year, we're stepping back to examine what happens before loyalty begins, and at each stage along the customer journey — how brands are discovered, communication preferences, and the factors that influence purchase decisions. These lay the foundations for building long-lasting relationships with your audience.

We surveyed 4,000 customers across Australia, Singapore, the United Kingdom, and the United States to test some of the biggest assumptions in marketing today: Are people really shopping less? Are they disengaging from brands? Is AI replacing traditional brand interactions?

We found that while shoppers are still buying, discovering, and engaging with brands, they're doing some things a little differently. They're relying on

social proof and expecting more from every marketing interaction. With more choice, information, and tools at their fingertips, customers have never been more empowered, yet they trust brands less and expect more from them.

Across every trend in this report, one pattern stands out: customers want to feel confident before they commit. They want to be certain that a brand understands them and will deliver on its promises. That confidence shapes every decision they make, from a first click to a long-term relationship.

We'll break down how customer expectations are evolving and what marketers can do to earn attention, build trust, and drive long-term growth.



Methodology

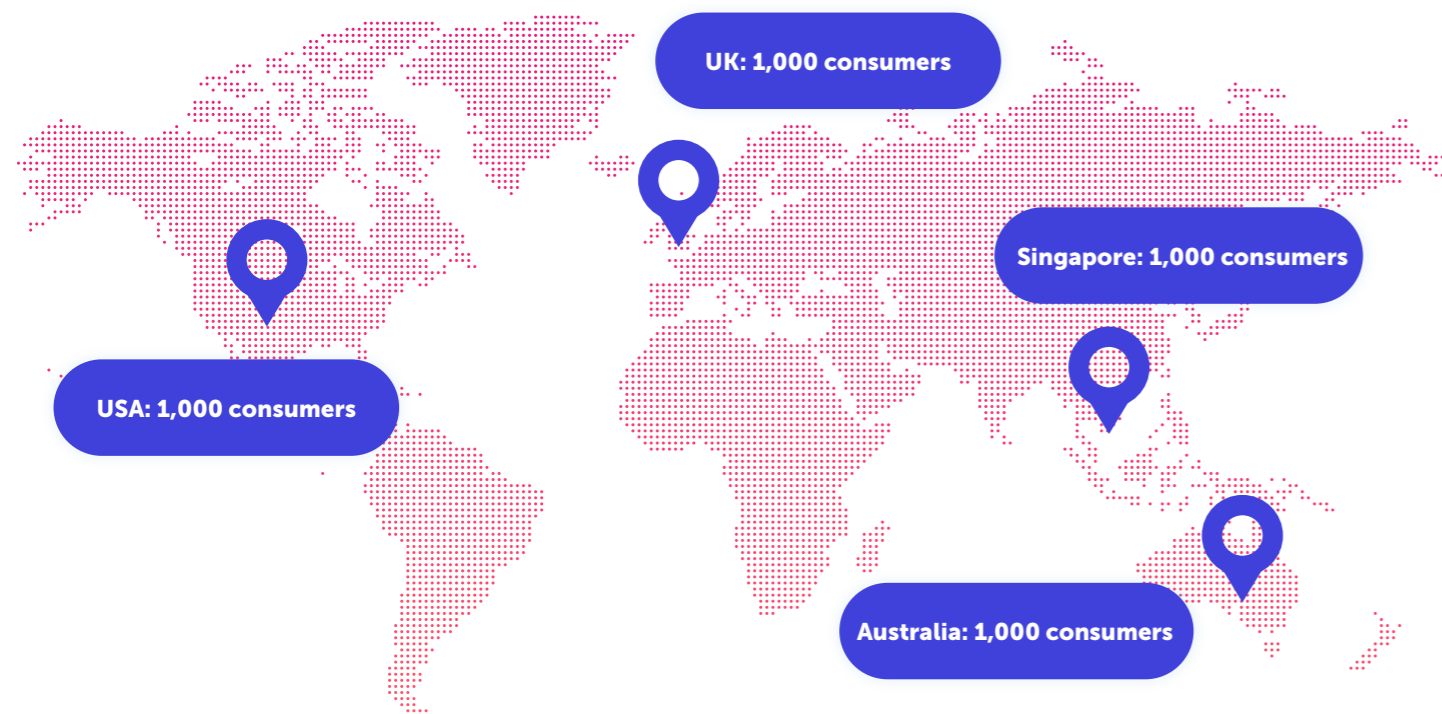
The research in this report was conducted by Censuswide among a sample of 4,000 general consumers, 1,000 in each region across the USA, UK, Australia, and Singapore. The data was collected between 12/15/2025 and 12/19/2025.

Censuswide abides by and employs members of the Market Research Society and follows the MRS code of conduct and ESOMAR principles. Censuswide is also a member of the British Polling Council.

The people behind the data

An international affair

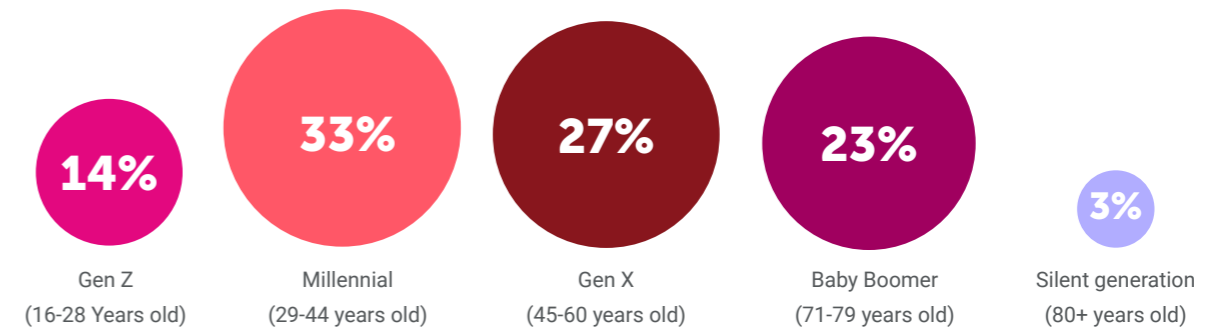
We spoke to 4,000 customers across four continents, with an equal split of 1,000 voices from the USA, UK, Singapore, and Australia.



Who we heard from

Our survey reached a wide range of ages, with Millennials leading the way at 33%.

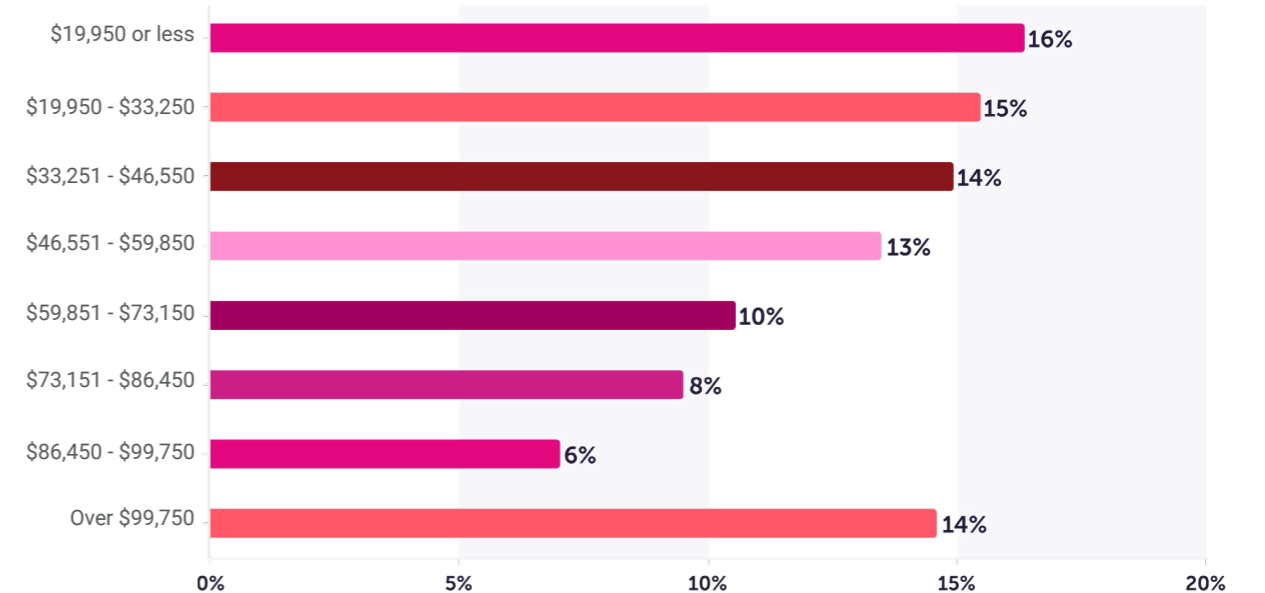
Participant breakdown (by generation)



A peek into their pockets

Our respondents represent a broad range of economic backgrounds, with 16% coming from households earning \$19,950 (USD) or less.

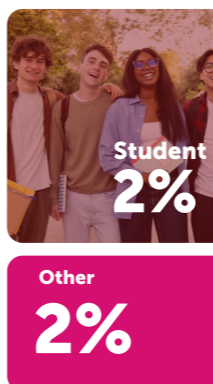
Global average household income (in USD)



How they spend their 9-to-5

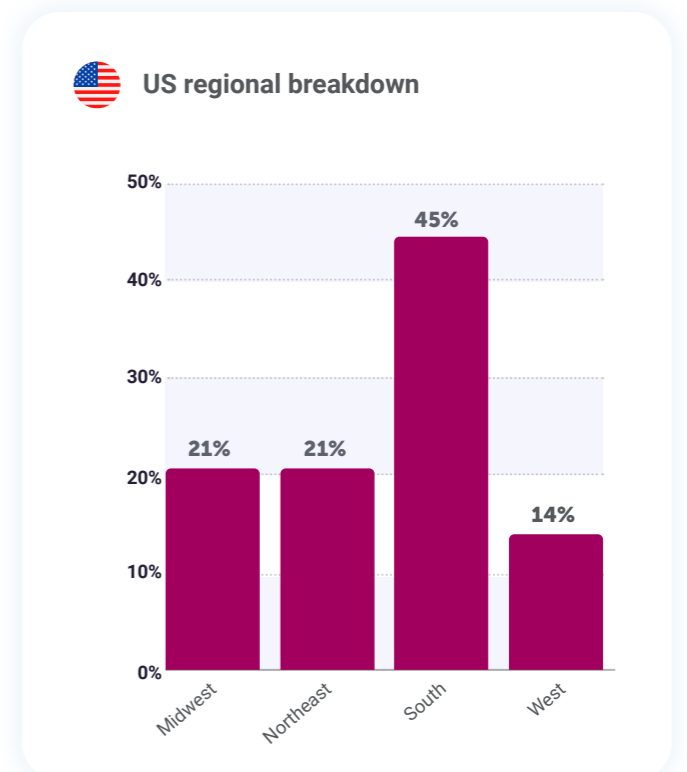
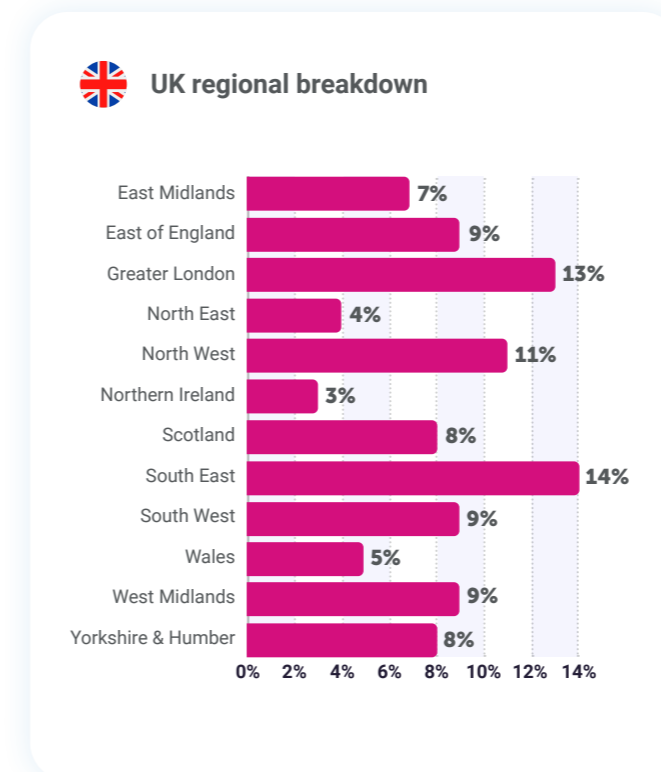
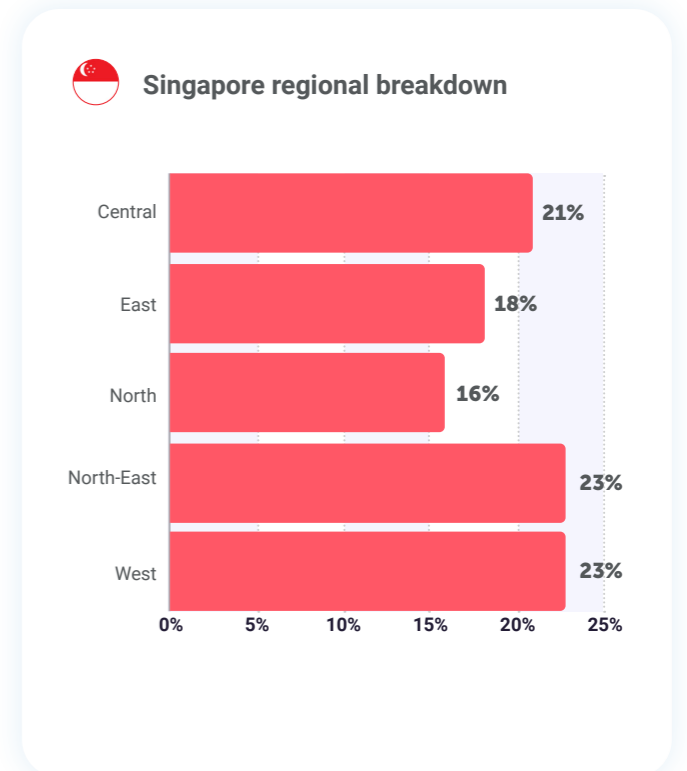
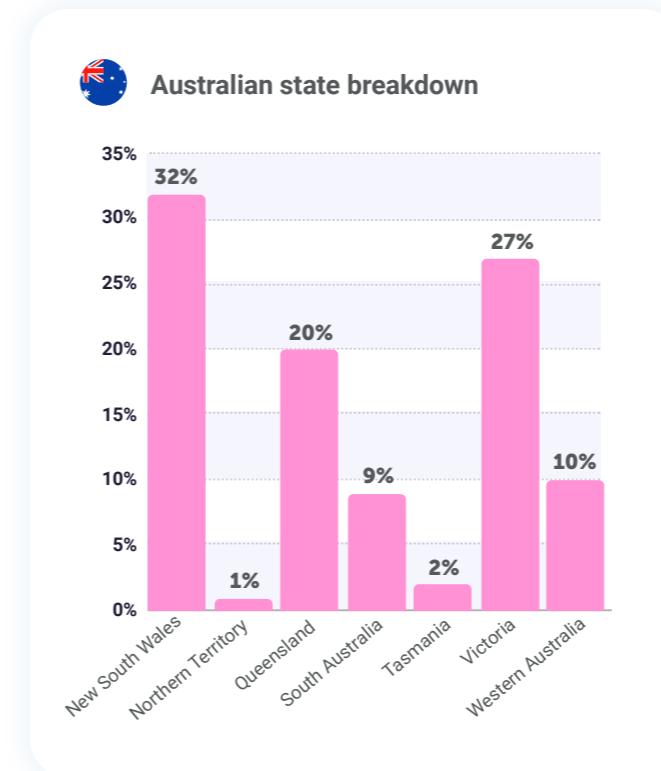
While 50% of those we spoke to are in full-time employment, we also heard from a significant group of retirees and part-time professionals.

Current employment status



The places behind the people

Our respondents span regions across Australia, Singapore, the UK and the USA, giving us a truly global view of how customers think and behave.



Trend 1

AI's growing role in the search journey



AI is reshaping the way people use online search engines. **80% of customers** now rely on AI overviews to answer their questions, rather than visiting specific websites to access information.

However, when it comes to discovering new brands to shop with, AI has not yet become the starting point. In fact, only 16% of customers use AI to discover new brands. Customers continue to prefer more traditional methods, like in-store browsing and using search engines like Google or Bing.

16%
of respondents
say they use AI to
discover new brands

Eyes on the future

Q: How will AI go from guiding to becoming transactional?

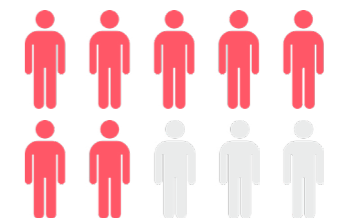


Ecommerce transactions will increasingly happen directly within AI interfaces, turning the AI provider into a direct sales channel, not just a referrer. This will concentrate visibility on fewer brands and reduce user choice at the results stage. For marketers, this means competition for visibility is intensifying, and optimizing for AI-driven recommendations is now essential to remain discoverable.

Russell Brockett, CEO, Rusty Monkey.

This doesn't mean AI is sitting on the sidelines. 70% of customers have experimented with AI search engines, with 1 in 10 (10%) saying they always use them for shopping recommendations, almost 1 in 5 (17%) saying they often use them, and a quarter (25%) saying they sometimes use them. Prompts like "top Nike running shoes" or "Mac vs. Lenovo laptops" provide quick comparisons for customers during the decision-making process, giving AI an active role to play.

7 in 10 consumers
have used AI
search engines



The always-on consumer

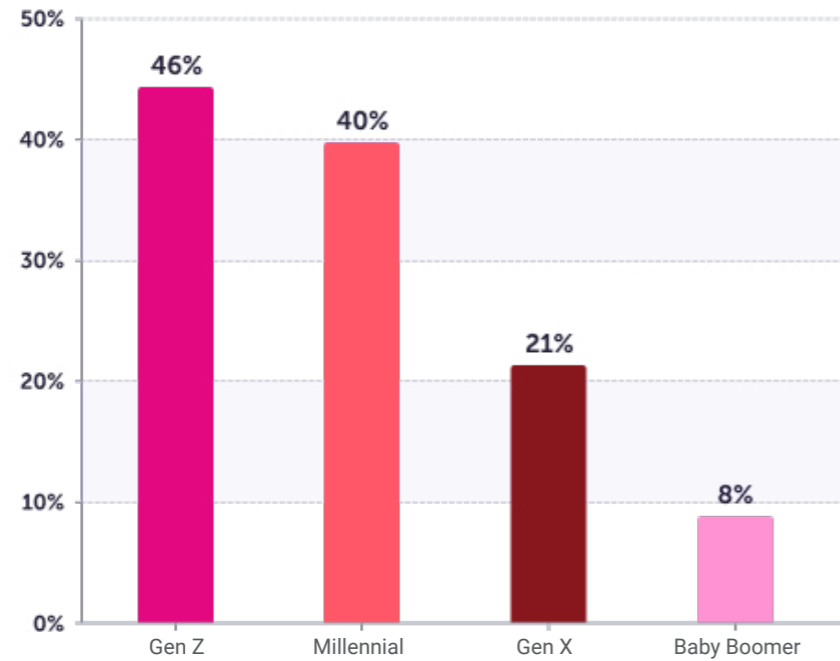
This behavior signals the rise of the 'always-on' consumer. These shoppers are largely Gen Z and millennials who take a continuous research approach to shopping and actively use AI. They're exposed to new and evolving digital tools through work, study, and everyday life and are comfortable using AI to generate product shortlists, product comparisons, and summaries of various social proof points, like reviews and recommendations.

Always-on consumers don't just browse or research casually; they act with purpose but use AI for the heavy lifting. They expect answers in seconds, and your content, product pages, and reviews are used to shape these AI responses. If these pages are difficult for AI to crawl, or just don't include the information that shoppers are looking for, your brand won't benefit from AI recommendations and citations.

Always-on consumers in a snapshot

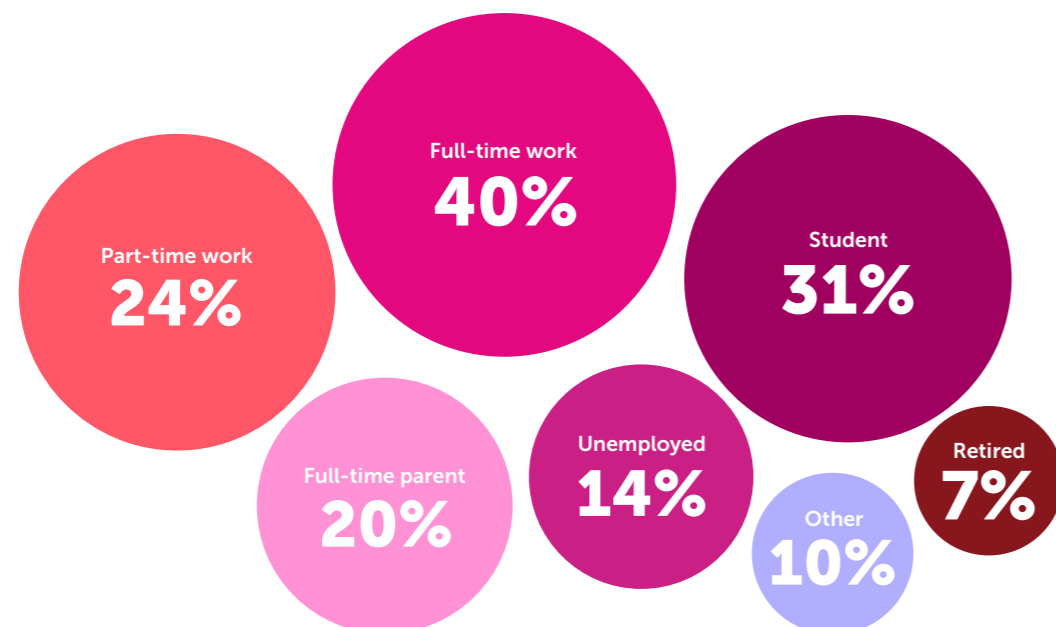
AI shopping habits by generation

% of customers in each group who say they "always" or "often" use AI for product recommendations



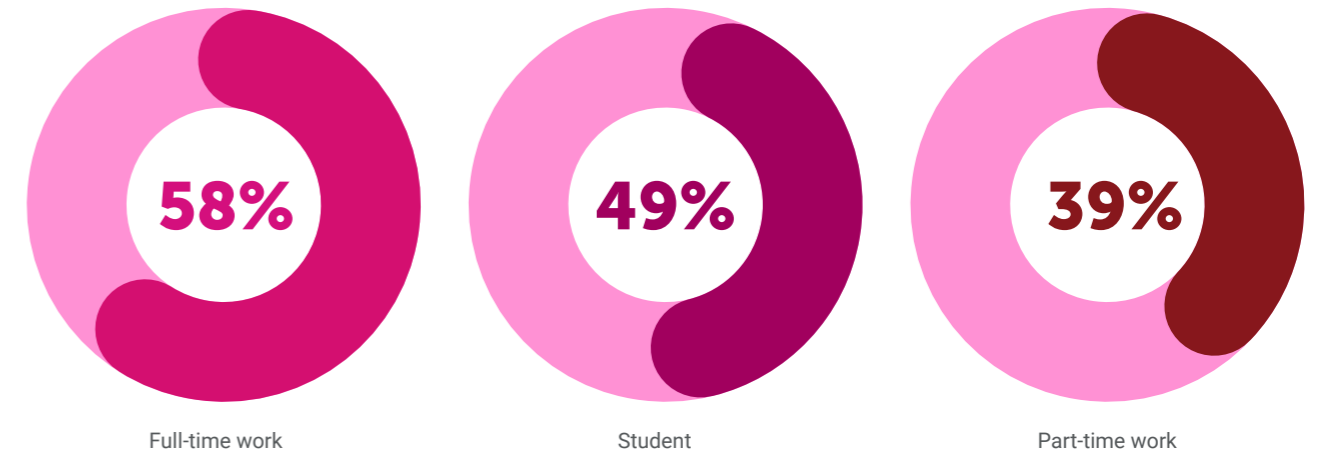
AI shopping habits by employment status

% of customers in each group who "always" or "often" use AI for product recommendations



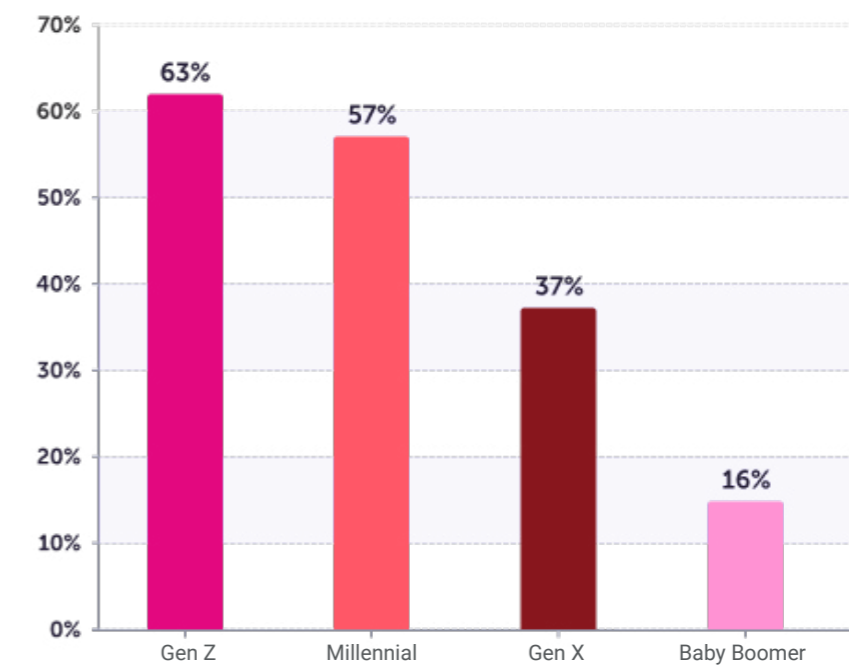
"AI has helped me discover new brands or products in the last six months"

Top 3 customer groups who agree with this statement by employment status



"AI has helped me discover new brands or products in the last six months"

% of customers in each generation who agree with this statement

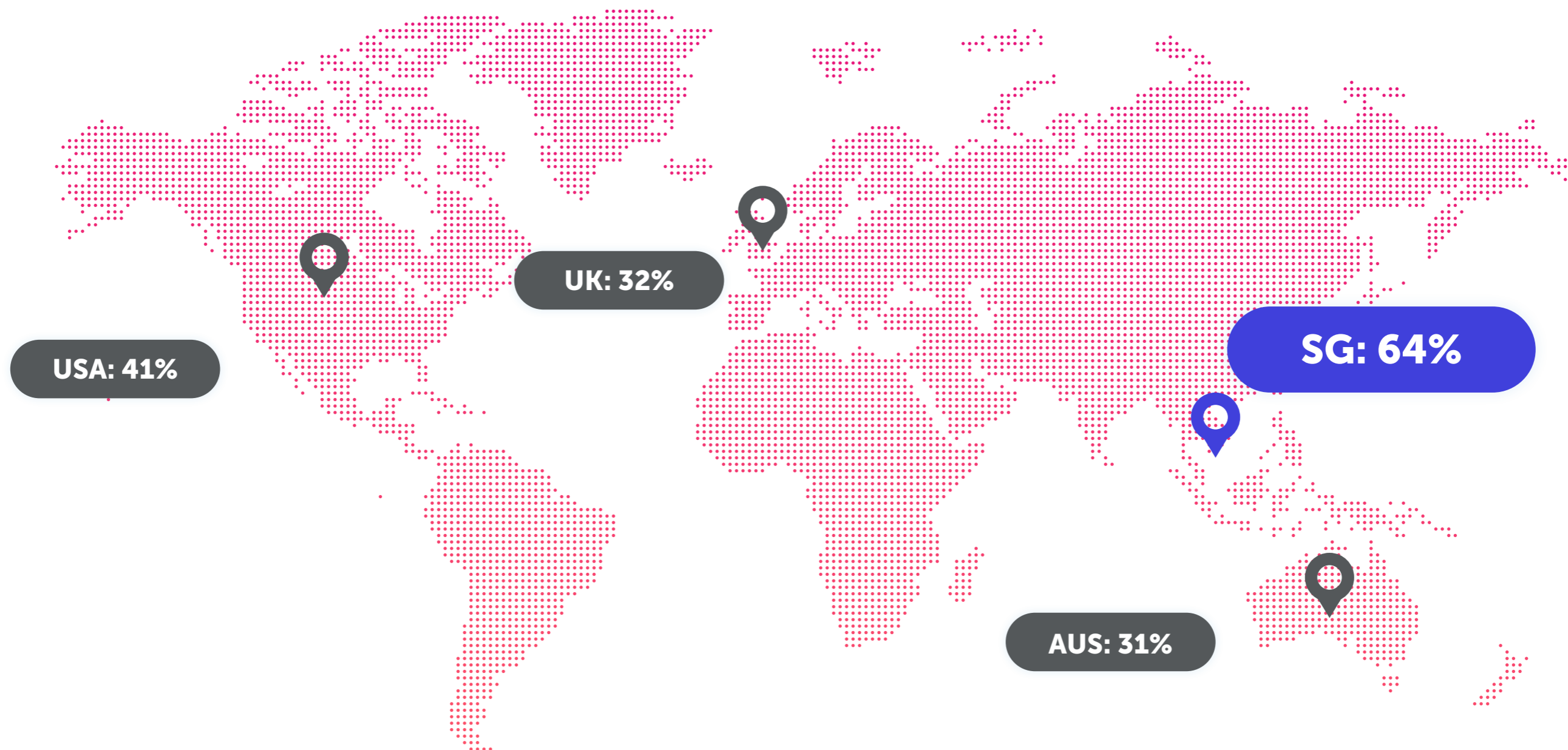


Singapore: A preview, not an outlier

Among the four regional groups surveyed, Singapore stood as the frontrunner among digital and AI-savvy shoppers. 36% of Singaporean customers frequently use AI search, and 64% have discovered new brands or products through AI in the past six months. This is what happens when comfort with digital tools turns into confidence; Singaporean shoppers are embracing new tools to streamline their overall shopping experience. As always-on behaviors spread, the question isn't if this approach will scale globally, but how quickly.

"AI has helped me discover new brands or products in the last six months"

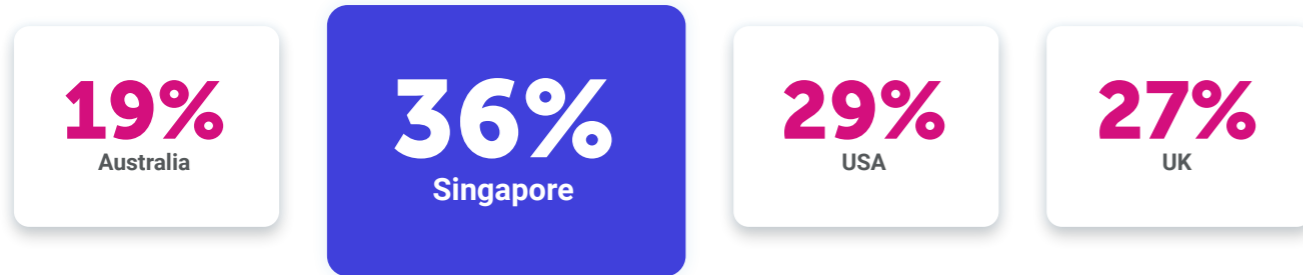
% of customers in each region who agree with this statement



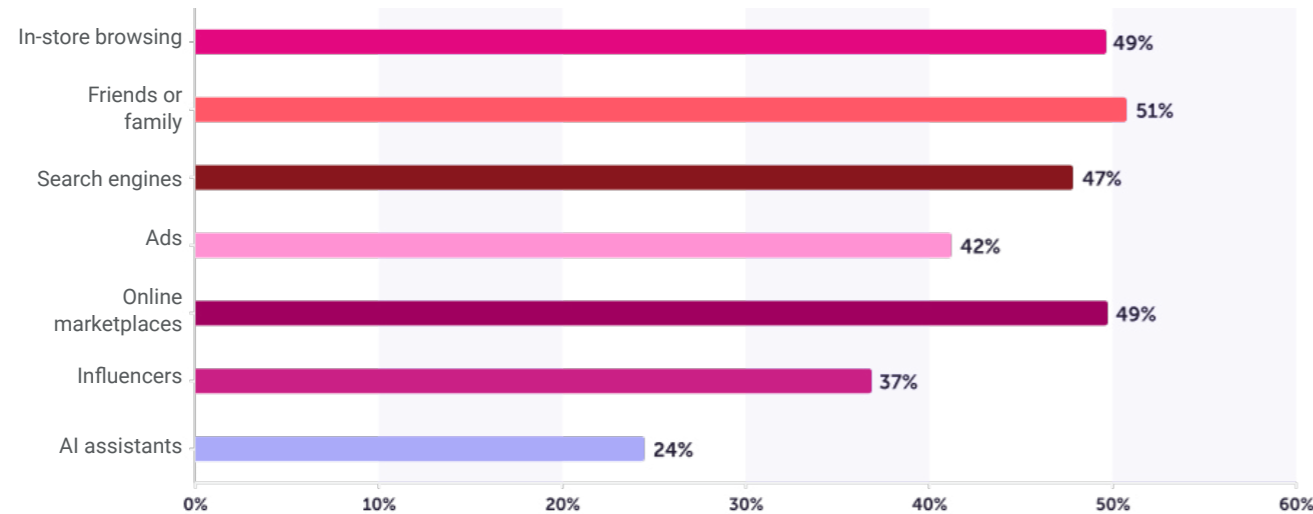
Singapore in a snapshot

AI shopping habits by region

% of customers in each region who "always" or "often" use AI for product recommendations

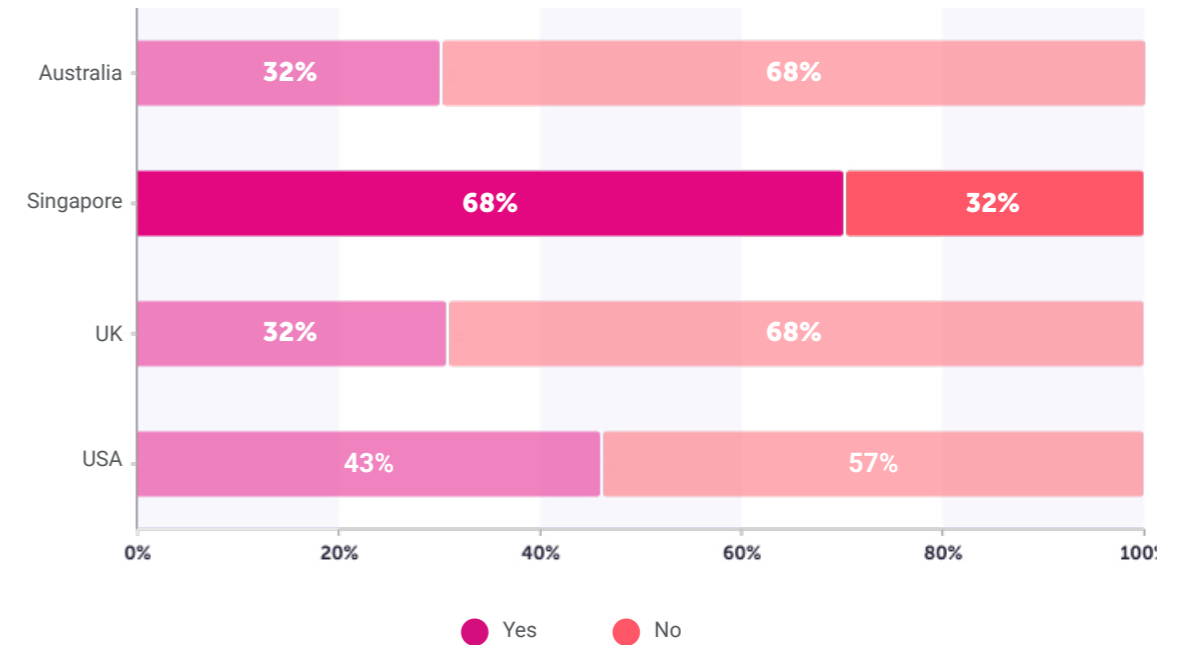


How do Singaporean shoppers typically discover new brands?



Has influencer content helped shoppers discover new brands or products in the last six months?

Responses by region



Eyes on the future

Q: How do brands stay visible when AI makes the shortlist?



AI prioritizes hard metrics like price, delivery speed, and accurate product descriptions; it decides based on data parameters, not emotion. If your product data isn't clean, structured, and instantly accessible, these agents simply won't be able to find you. Staying visible means optimizing your systems now, because AI will be evaluating your brand first.

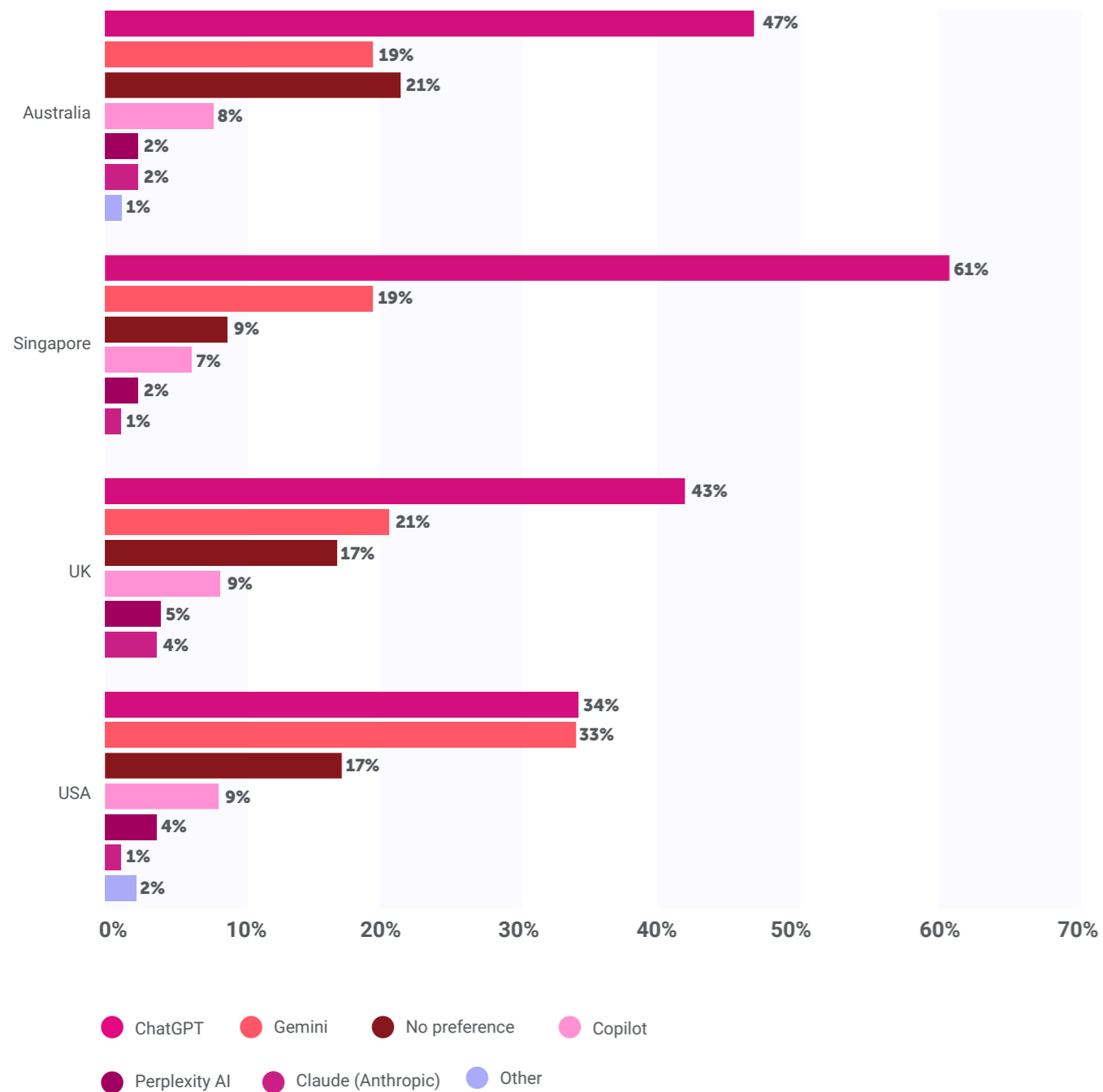
Ben Moreau, APAC Sales Director, GBG Loqate

Choosing the right assistant

When customers turn to AI for recommendations, ChatGPT leads overall, preferred by 48% of users for shopping-related questions. In the US, Gemini ranks second to ChatGPT (33% vs. 34%).

What is your preferred AI search engine?

Broken down by region



Your AI action plan

AI is already changing how shoppers compare and make decisions, so now is the time to ensure your content is written and structured to align with how AI agents crawl pages to make recommendations and generate citations. Here's how:

Meet customers where they are

Always-on shoppers don't sit still; they bounce between research, channels, and buying. Get ahead by showing up in their favorite places like email inboxes, SMS, and WhatsApp.

Make it easy for bots to crawl your pages

When crawling your site, AI agents want the hard facts: product descriptions, prices, availability, and how quickly you can ship. If your data is messy or incomplete, those agents will skip over you.

Tighten up product descriptions

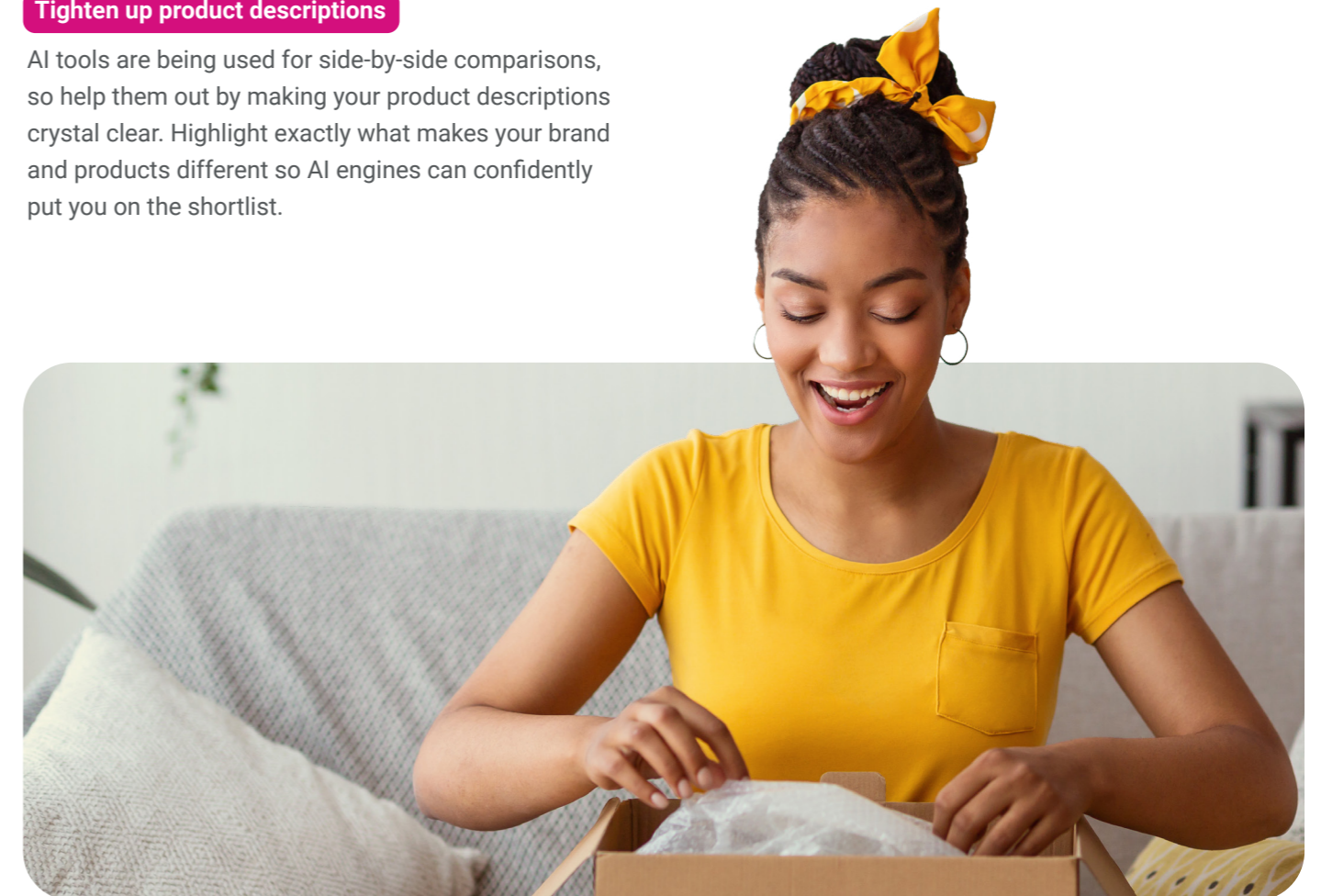
AI tools are being used for side-by-side comparisons, so help them out by making your product descriptions crystal clear. Highlight exactly what makes your brand and products different so AI engines can confidently put you on the shortlist.

Be helpful

What are your customers actually asking? Are they looking for the "best for beginners" or "X vs Y" comparisons? Create FAQs and buying guides that answer search questions directly so AI platforms can position your product as the best option.

Predict the next move

Use your data and what you know about how your customers browse and buy to offer recommendations before they even think to ask. Anticipating customer needs is the best way to meet the high expectations of the always-on shopper.



Trend 2

The trust gap



Despite growing comfort with AI, a trust gap remains. Shoppers are happy to use AI to simplify their research, compare options, and surface recommendations. But when it comes to choosing new brands to shop with, they still lean on peer recommendations and real-life brand encounters.

Where discovery actually happens

We're currently at a stage where AI can amplify visibility, but it can't replace the reassurance provided by physical presence, social proof, and established platforms. It's these real-world experiences that are still winning the discovery race. And the race is closer than ever with two channel tied in the first place spot.

How do shoppers discover new brands?

Top three global responses

49%

In-store browsing

49%

Friends and family recommendations

42%

Search engines

These channels win because credibility is built in. Seeing a product firsthand, hearing about it from someone trusted, or finding it through an established search platform reduces perceived risk in a way AI-generated suggestions can't replicate - yet!

The brands people see and hear about in real life earn trust and loyalty. The influence of personal recommendations is growing rapidly. Friends and family are now 45% more influential than they were a year ago, making human connection one of the fastest-growing drivers of brand loyalty.

What inspires loyalty to a brand?

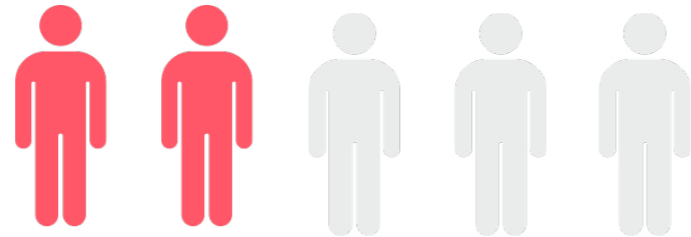
2025	2026
1. Best products (82%)	1. Best products (71%)
2. Customer service (61%)	2. Customer service (56%)
3. Sustainability (45%)	3. Friends and family (55%)
4. Cheapest products (40%)	4. Loyalty programs (52%)
5. Brand personality (39%)	5. Cheapest products (51%)
6. Friends and family (38%)	6. Sustainability (46%)
7. Influencer review (18%)	7. Brand personality (46%)

Accidental influence

Friends and family recommendations carry the most weight, but they aren't the only voices influencing discovery. Influencers occupy a middle ground. As real people on social media, they're more relatable than brands and have a much wider reach than organic word-of-mouth marketing alone.

While customers say they're unlikely to seek out new brands via influencers, 44% report doing exactly that. This isn't deliberate discovery; they aren't looking for it; it's just happening in the background. Eventually, repeated exposure builds familiarity, which in turn helps build trust.

2 in 5 customers have discovered new brands through influencers



For younger audiences in particular, influencer content doesn't always feel like advertising. Gen Z (74%) and Millennials (61%) are highly aware that influencer content drives them to discover new brands and products. They know when something is sponsored, but they're also watching which brands show up repeatedly, organically, and consistently within the content they trust.

This makes influencer marketing a prime channel for trust building. Consistent presence within the right creator ecosystems can build recognition and trust long before a purchase decision is made.

Eyes on the future

Q: Is influencer marketing just an awareness play?



As the lines between influencers, affiliates, and customers disappear, influencer marketing is moving beyond awareness into measurable acquisition. Every creator, from a loyal customer posting an unboxing to a TikTok Shop partner, will expect creative freedom and direct revenue share. Brands shouldn't just recruit influencers; they need to build automated, trackable creator networks where anyone who drives value earns a stake in the outcome.

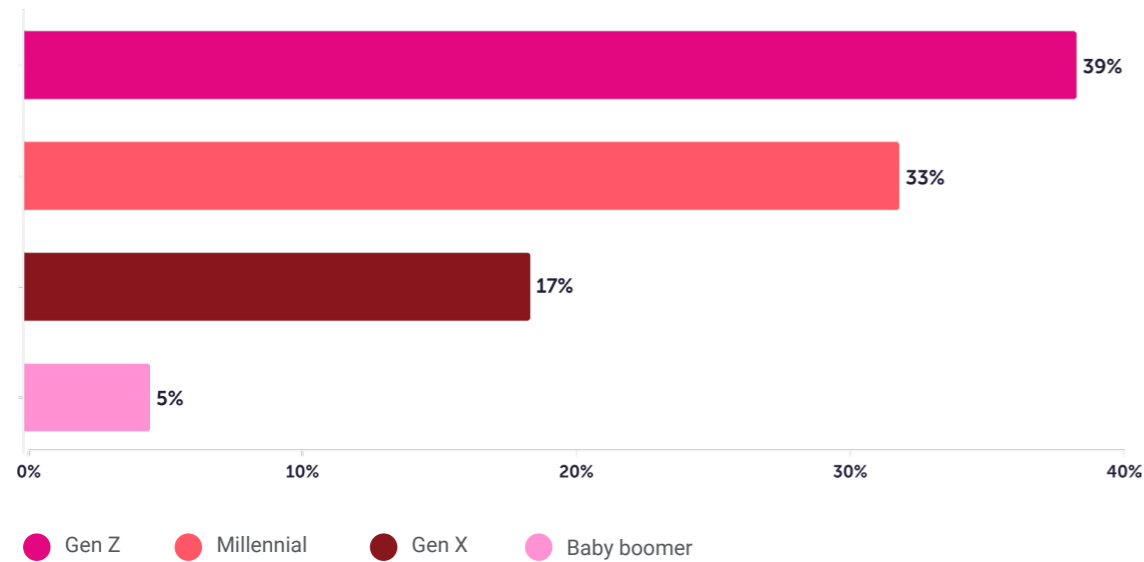
Clint Ross, VP of Marketing, Social Snowball



The influence of influencers in a snapshot

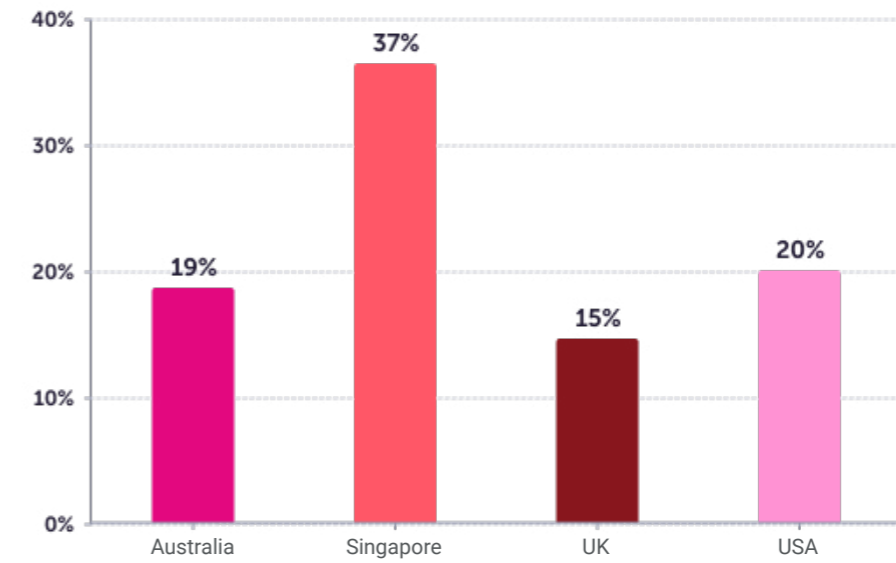
"Influencers or content creators help me discover new brands"

% of people in each generation who agree with this statement



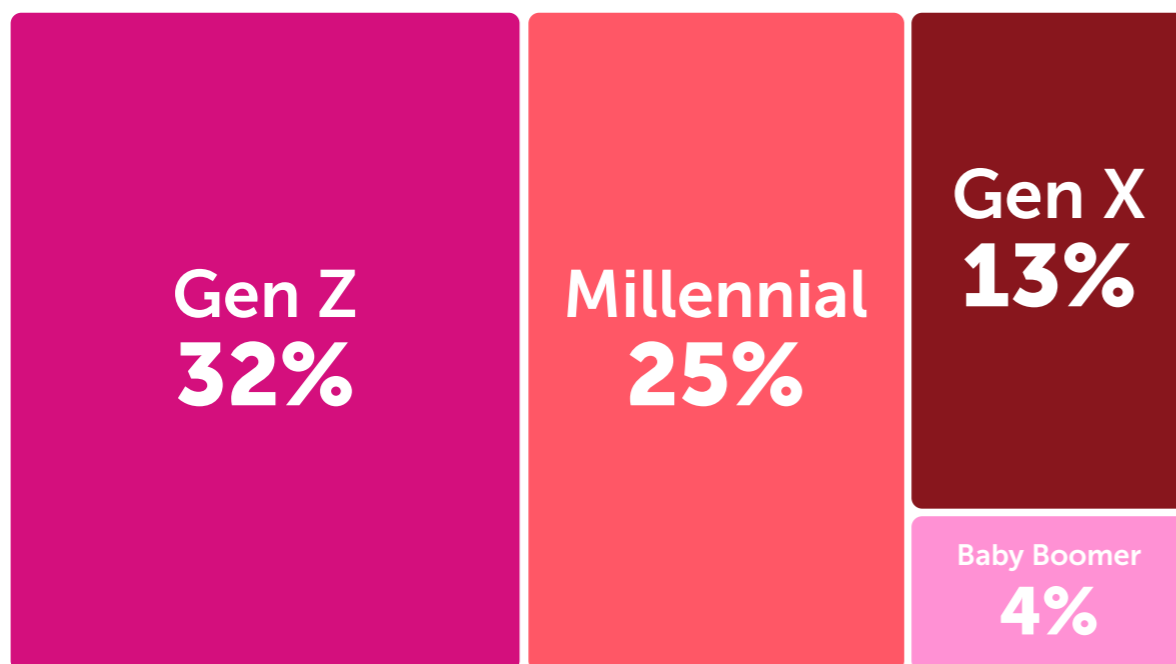
"Influencers or content creators help me discover new brands"

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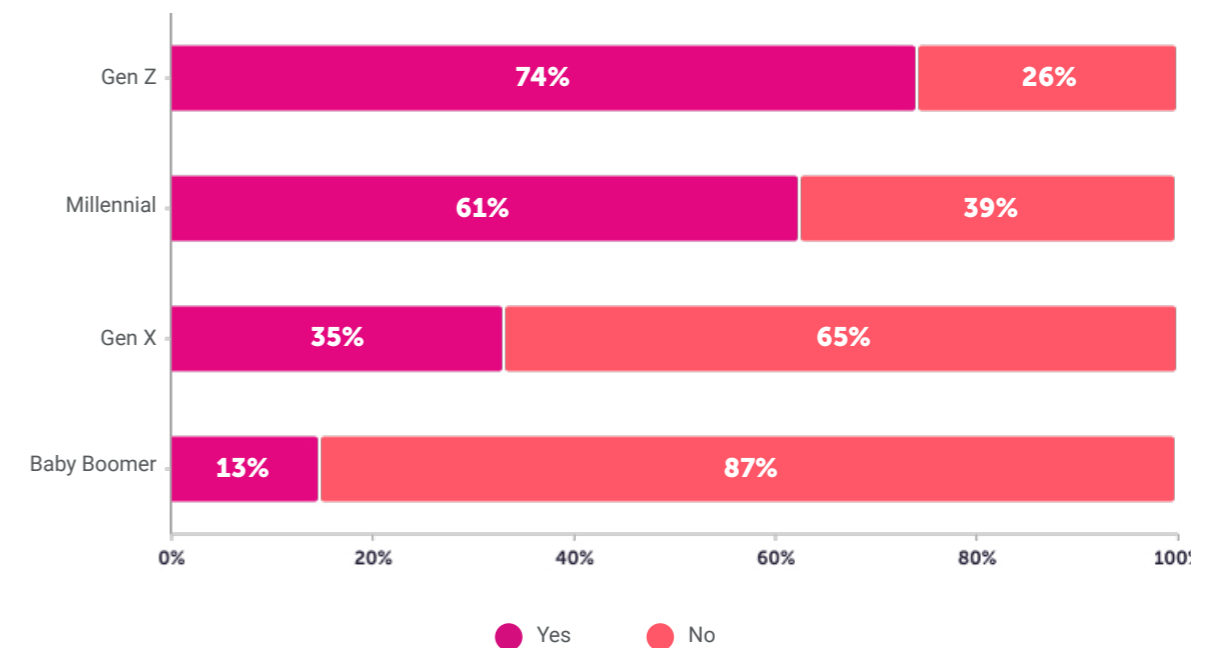
"Influencer content helps me make decisions on impulse purchases"

% of people in each generation who agree with this statement



Has influencer content helped you discover new brands or products in the last six months?

Responses by generation



Turning the trust gap into growth

Help your customers buy with confidence by adding real recommendations to every step of their buying journey.

Build a network of creators

Create workflows to simplify influencer recruitment, track performance better, and reward creators quickly.

Let your customers do the talking

Don't bury reviews on a product page; place them in your abandoned cart emails and on landing pages where they can address any 'should I buy this?' doubt. Authentic human voices are the key to bridging the trust gap and boosting loyalty.

Keep it real

Use trusted third-party sites to make sure shoppers know every review and star rating is genuine.

Show off user-generated content (UGC)

Highlight real customer photos, videos, and social posts across your website, social media, and newsletters. When new visitors see a product in the real world, it creates the kind of social proof that a polished campaign can't match.

Make sharing simple

Include social share buttons on product pages, confirmation emails, and post-purchase messages to make it easy for customers to recommend your brand and products. This is the fastest-growing driver of brand discovery.



Trend 3

The data-value exchange



As trust takes longer to build, customers are being more cautious about sharing their data. They're more aware of the value behind what they share and want to ensure it's a fair exchange.

Overall, email addresses remain the data point customers are most comfortable sharing (37%). Even those who hesitate aren't a lost cause: nearly a third (30%) of hesitant customers are willing to reconsider if the value exchange is clear. The clearer brands can be about what a customer gets in exchange for sharing their email address, the easier it becomes to secure sign-ups.

What information are customers comfortable sharing for a better experience?

Happy to share email address

35%

Happy to share postal address

18%

Happy to share phone number

16%

Uncomfortable, but will for the right rewards

30%

Would never share my data

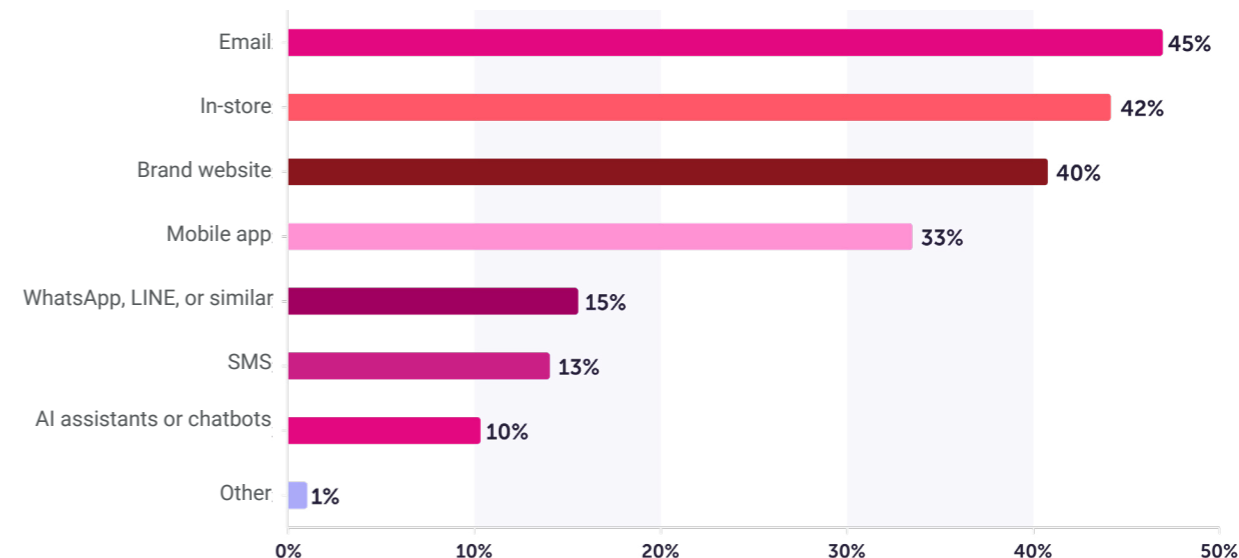
22%

Control beats convenience

When it comes to how customers want to hear from brands, the most popular channels share one thing: control. Email remains the top choice, followed by in-store interactions and brand websites. These channels give customers the freedom to engage whenever it suits them.

Customer channel preferences

The top channels shoppers prefer to interact with their favorite brands.



Eyes on the future

Q: What role does email play in an AI-driven marketing world?



Paid channels are more expensive and competitive than ever, so the smartest growth strategy is to focus on the channels you truly own, starting with email. With AI, you can predict intent, personalize content, and automate perfectly timed offers, turning each email address into a powerful, revenue-generating tool. Engaged subscribers also fuel smarter ad targeting, making every email a great asset for long-term growth.

Dirk Jansen, Managing Director, Lead Online

Meeting customers where they are

Loyalty starts with meeting customers on their terms. Show up on the channels they prefer, and your message is far more likely to resonate. What those preferred channels look like, however, varies by region.

Singapore's digital-first customers favor apps (45%), email (43%), and websites (41%). UK audiences lean heavily into email (47%) and web (35%), with in-store (33%) playing an important supporting role. In Australia (54%) and the US (46%), physical stores remain a strong preference, backed up by email (47% and 42% respectively) and brand websites (46% and 38%).

Eyes on the future

Q: Why does owning your channels matter more than ever?

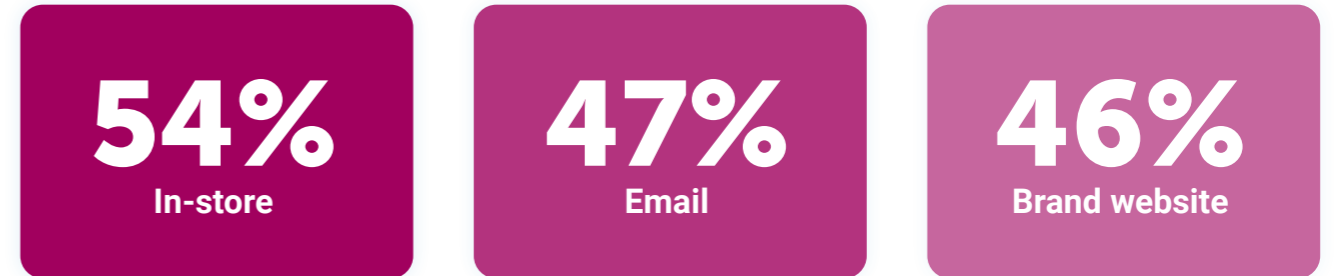


As audiences scatter across platforms, control of your channels becomes the new currency. Brands that use owned channels (email, apps, websites) to build communities, share shoppable content, or deliver branded experiences can listen better, learn faster, and build trust that doesn't vanish with the next algorithm update. Attention is scarce, making meaningful interactions matter more than ever.

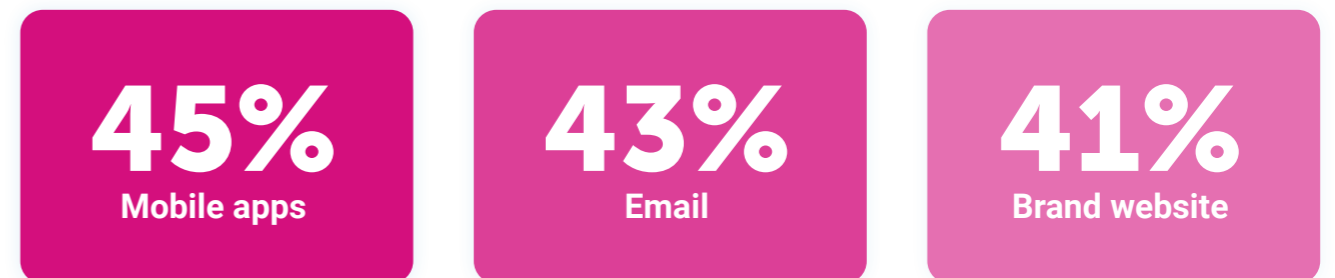
Jia Ling L, Assistant Head of Marketing & Partnerships, BeLive Technology

Top three marketing channels preferred by consumers

Australian customers



Singaporean customers



UK customers



US customers

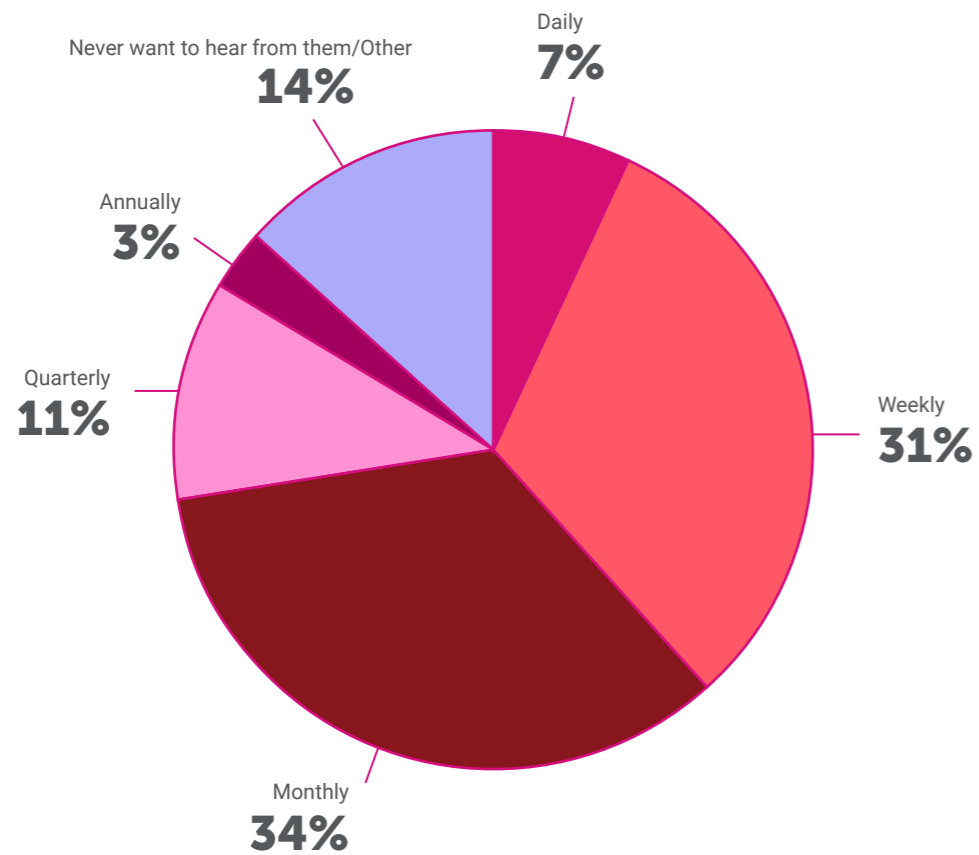


Finding the marketing sweet spot

How often brands reach out to audiences also has a big impact on the customer experience. Too much communication erodes trust, and brands come across as pushy, with no consideration for customers' needs. Too little, and the connection between the brand and the customer fades, leaving space for another brand to step in.

Most customers prefer monthly communication (34%) or weekly communication (31%). An overwhelming majority (93%) report that daily messages are too much. That's a clear warning sign for marketers still chasing volume over value. Customers want brands to respect their time and listen to their preferences (which involves collecting relevant information via a preference center).

How often do shoppers want to hear from brands?

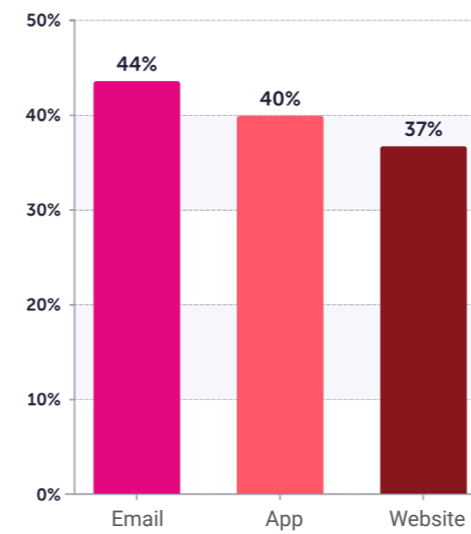


Customer expectations in a snapshot

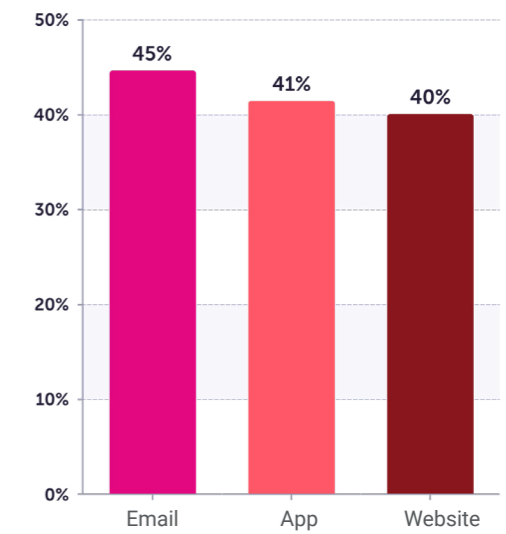
Understanding what customers value, and where they want to connect with brands, helps build a communication rhythm that converts. To find out what that rhythm looks like, we asked survey participants to pick their top three channel preferences.

Channel preferences by generation

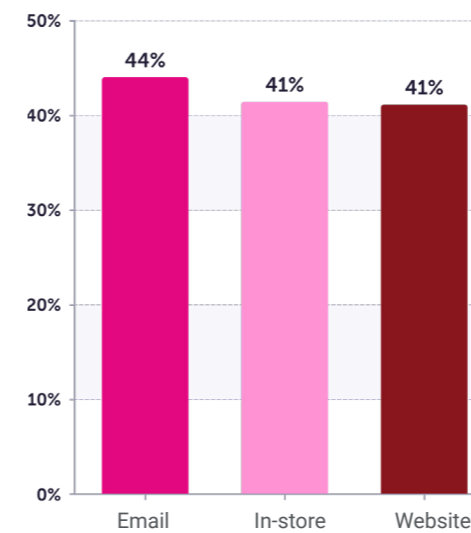
Gen Z



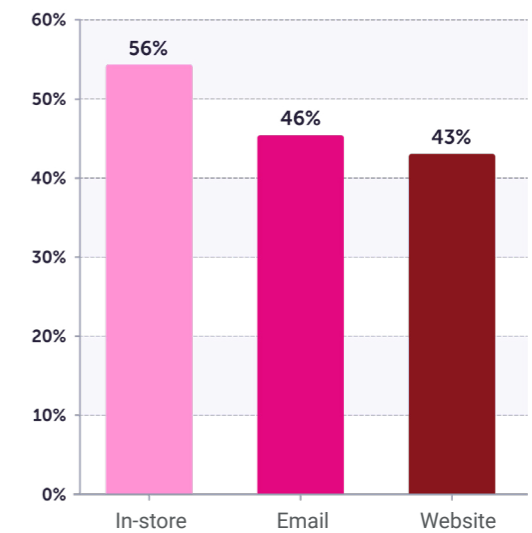
Millennial



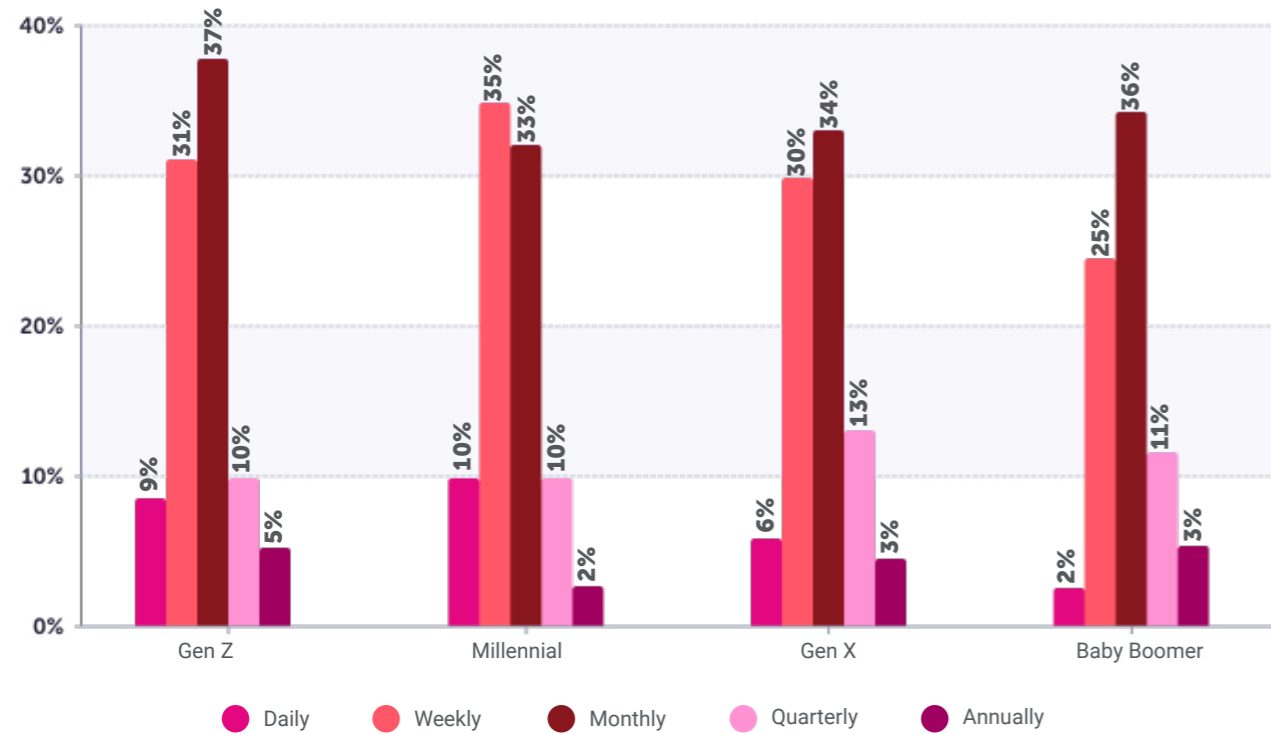
Gen X



Baby Boomer



Brand communication frequency preferences by generation



Responses of "Never want to hear from them" and "Other" have been excluded.

How to show up on customers' terms

Getting the sign-up process right is about more than just a form; it's about starting a relationship that meets customer needs.

Make your customer an offer they can't refuse

Don't just ask for an email address; tell shoppers exactly what's in it for them. Be clear at the point of sign-up about what they'll get in return for sharing their data. Also, make sure you're getting clear consent to keep your mailing list healthy and your sender reputation intact.

Ask for preferences

Let your customers tell you how, when, and where they want to hear from you. Whether it's their preferred product categories or how often they want an SMS, meeting their expectations is much easier when you know what they want.

Connect the data dots

Make all interactions feed into a single view of your customer. Every click, browse, and purchase tells a story, so having marketing platforms and software that play well together breaks down data silos and lets you build better customer experiences.

Quality over quantity

Use what you know about customers to send fewer, better-timed messages that shoppers are more likely to click. Create automation workflows that ensure your brand appears in the moments that matter, such as immediately after an abandoned browse, to deliver high-quality content.



Trend 4

The rise of considered consumerism

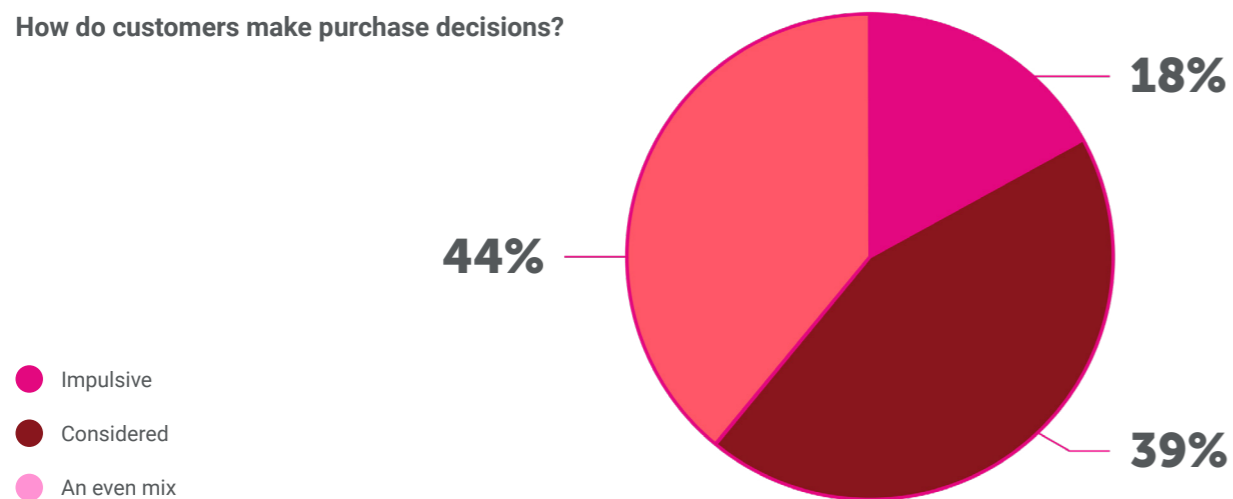
Across the board, shoppers are taking a beat before they buy, but they're not standing still. Instead, customers use every tool at their disposal to make the best possible decision. They're researching harder, checking prices, weighing alternatives, and asking one simple question: "Is this really worth it right now?"

While the **Consumer Confidence Index (CCI)** indicates consumer confidence is stable, it remains below the long-term average, reflecting ongoing uncertainty about jobs, inflation, and the broader economy. But the good news is we're not seeing a drop in demand; consumers are simply shifting toward more considered purchasing.

More checkpoints, not more friction

Nearly half of consumers (44%) describe their purchases as considered, compared with 18% who report buying on impulse. While the reasons behind this are complex, it likely reflects a mix of economic caution and increased choice. Value isn't just about price anymore; it's emotional, too.

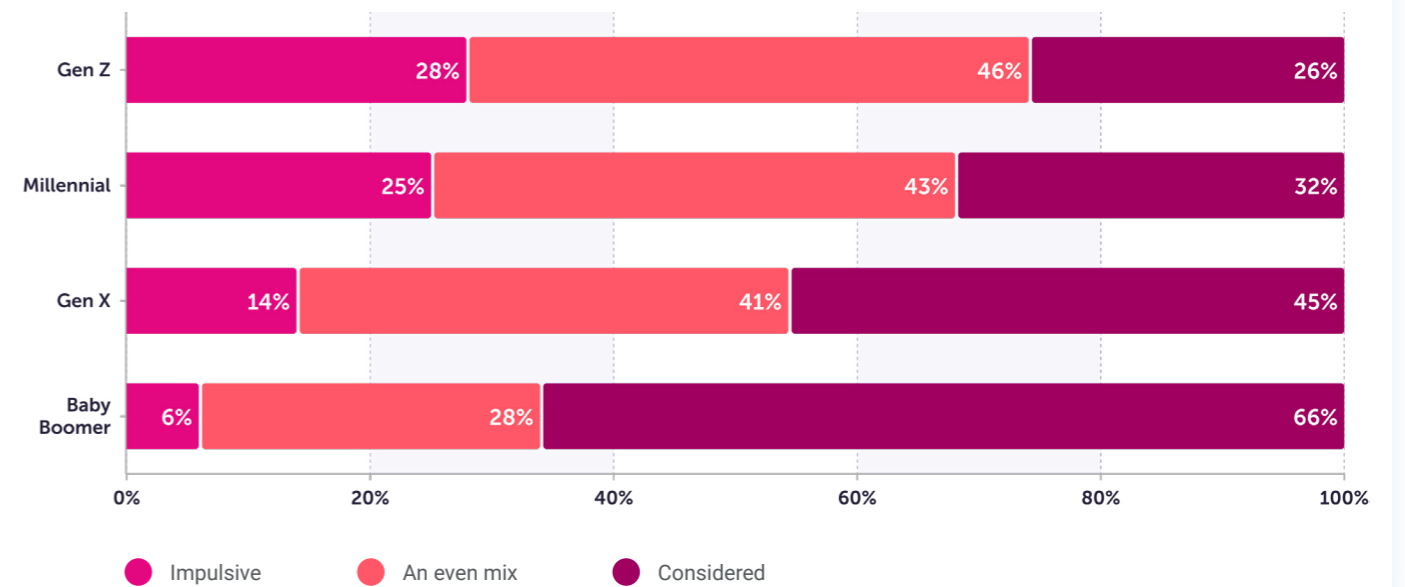
How do customers make purchase decisions?



Gen Z shoppers are the most impulsive (28%), but as the generation matures, we're starting to see that shift too. 46% of Gen Z consumers alternate between making fast, impulsive decisions and carefully considered, highly researched ones. This is a period of transition for younger shoppers, as they learn when to move fast and when to slow down.

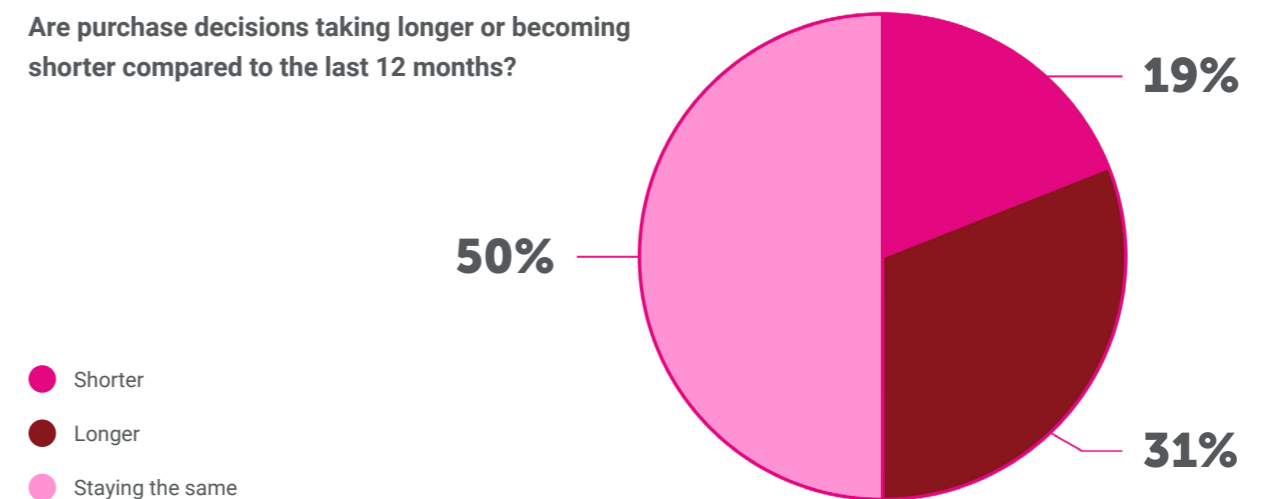
By contrast, Gen X and Baby Boomers are significantly more likely to make considered purchases, indicating a preference for shopping with confidence over prioritizing convenience.

How different generations make purchase decisions



This doesn't mean consumers are endlessly delaying decisions and extending purchase cycles. For 50% of shoppers, the time it takes to make a decision hasn't changed. With tools like AI assisting with product recommendations and comparisons, shoppers can conduct more thorough research without increasing the time required to make a decision.

Are purchase decisions taking longer or becoming shorter compared to the last 12 months?

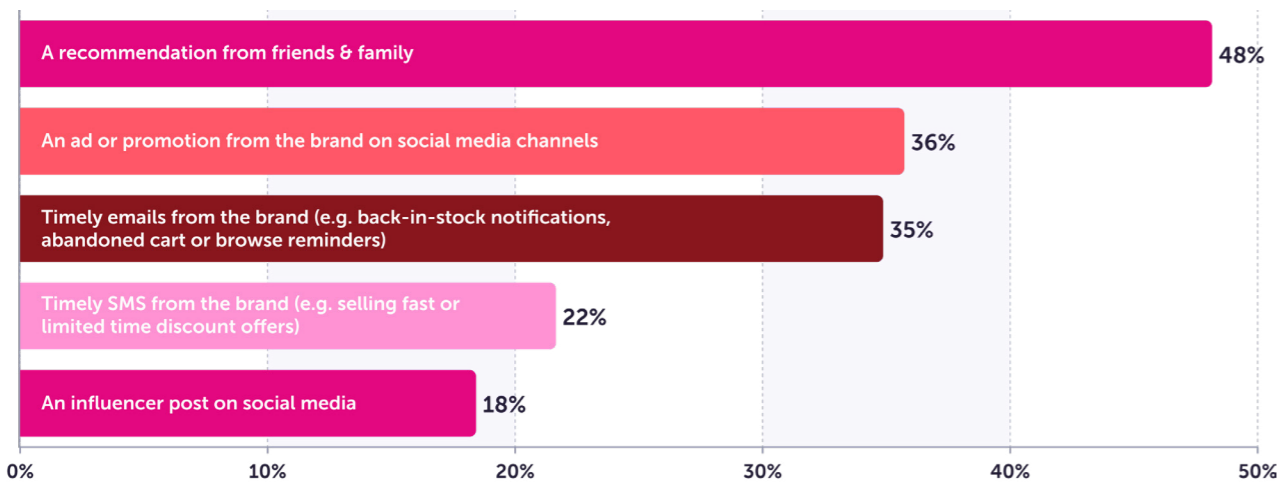


Even impulse needs reassurance

One interesting outcome we discovered is that even impulsive shopping requires reassurance. Nearly half of consumers (48%) say recommendations from family and friends prompt them to make faster decisions, followed by retargeting ads (36%) and timely emails (35%), such as back-in-stock or abandoned cart messages.

This suggests that impulse purchases aren't just about instant desire; they also rely on confidence. Social proof gives shoppers the reassurance to act quickly without overthinking, removing the need to compare products, question value, or stress over shipping.

What prompts customers to make an impulsive purchase?



These conversion drivers differ by region. Australian (38%) and UK (34%) consumers are more likely to respond to timely emails, while Singaporean (47%) and US (38%) consumers are more inspired by social ads. By focusing on the channels customers prefer, marketers can build campaigns that naturally guide shoppers to complete their purchases.

What prompts customers to make an impulsive purchase? (by region)	Australian customers	Singaporean customers	UK customers	US customers
A recommendation from friends & family	50%	49%	48%	43%
An ad or promotion from the brand on social media channels	34%	47%	28%	38%
Timely emails from the brand (e.g. back-in-stock notifications, abandoned cart or browse reminders)	38%	32%	34%	34%
Timely SMS from the brand (e.g. selling fast or limited time discount offers)	20%	25%	18%	24%
An influencer post on social media	13%	25%	13%	19%

Embrace the consideration phase

Make the consideration phase part of your customer journey and use smart automation to guide shoppers through their decision-making process.

Reach the 'just looking' crowd

Dive into your data to find exactly where people are dropping off your website. If they're lingering on a page and leaving, use abandoned browse emails to make sure you stay top-of-mind.

Convert the 'maybe later' shoppers

When a shopper leaves the checkout with a full cart, use cart recovery emails to bring them back. These are a second chance to be helpful, not just a nudge to get shoppers to convert.

Clear any roadblocks

Hidden shipping costs and vague return policies are conversion killers. Address them head-on. Include delivery timelines and return costs on product pages, in nurture journeys, and in cart recovery messages to build confidence.

Use social proof

Shoppers trust other shoppers more than they trust brands. Put top reviews and social media shout-outs front and center in your retargeting ads and win-back automation emails. Adding a little bit of real-world reassurance at the right moment goes a long way.



Trend 5

Personalization isn't just a first name



Consumers respond differently to personalization and relevance. Personalization, like using their name or noting a birthday, creates recognition, but relevance, speaking to their context or needs in the moment, drives impact. Many brands get the recognition right, but connecting at the right moment is where the experience often falls short.

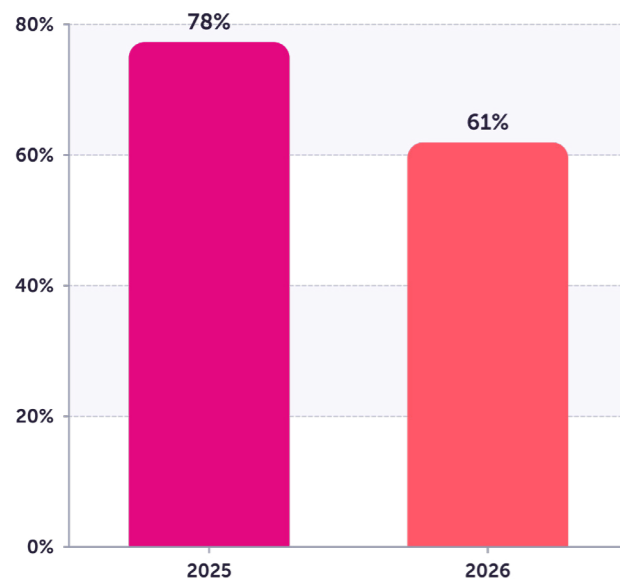
Recognition vs. timing

Satisfaction with personalization varies across generations. Baby Boomers (74%) and Gen X (66%) remain broadly satisfied, but Gen Z is the most dissatisfied, with a third (33%) saying marketing isn't personalized enough. For younger audiences, surface-level personalization doesn't seem to cut it. They expect brands to do more; to speak to them in the moment with on-point product suggestions or bespoke offers.

In Dotdigital's 2025 consumer research report, [The loyalty divide](#), most consumers (78%) told us personalized brand communications felt "just right." This remains true, although the level has declined to 61% in 2026. But when asked about the relevance of marketing messages, only 15% of consumers report that they are very relevant, down from 23% the previous year.

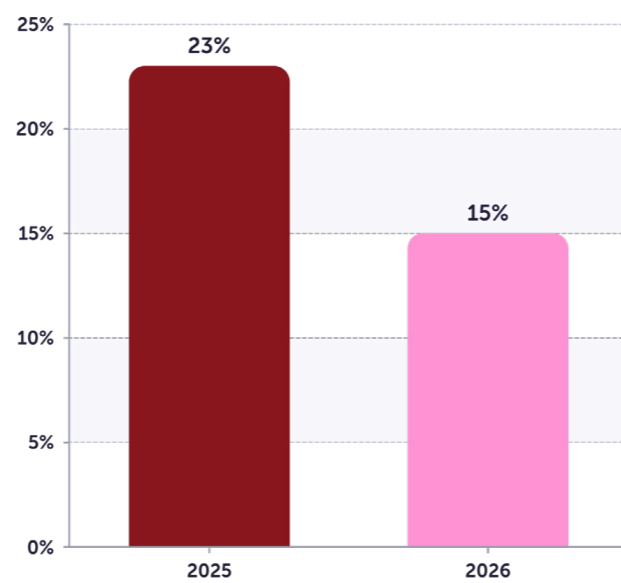
Personalized communications from brands are "just right"

% of customers who agree with this statement (2025 vs. 2026)



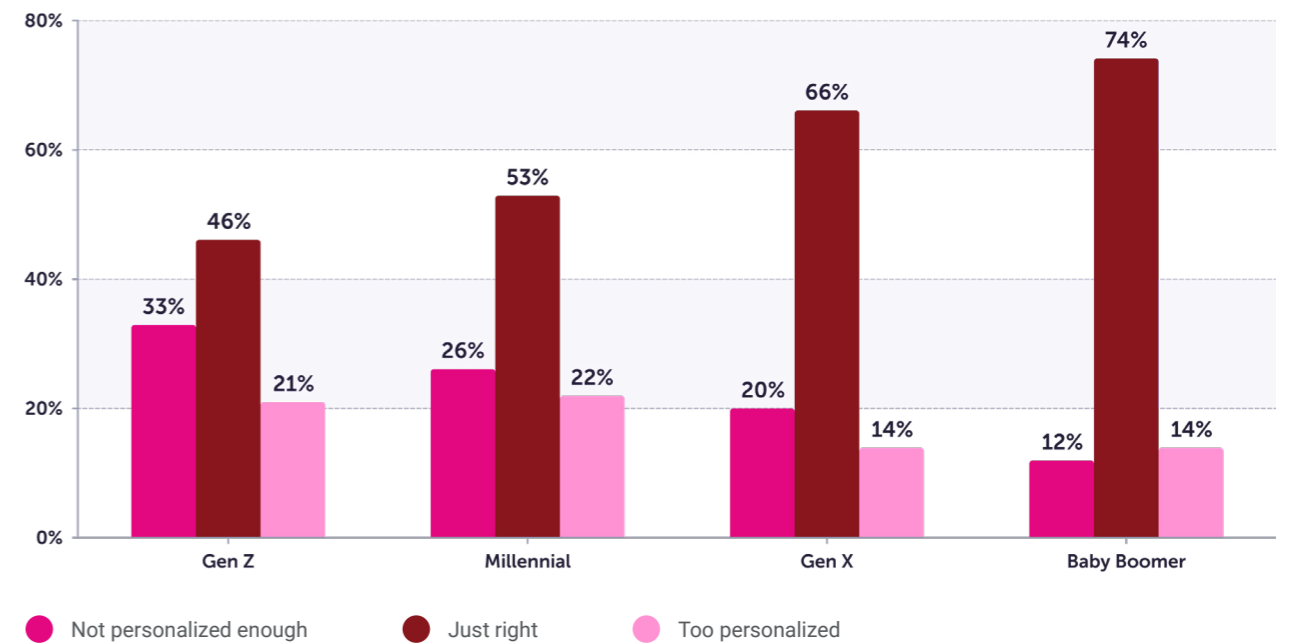
Marketing messages from brands are "very relevant"

% of customers who agree with this statement (2025 vs. 2026)



Are marketing messages personalized enough?

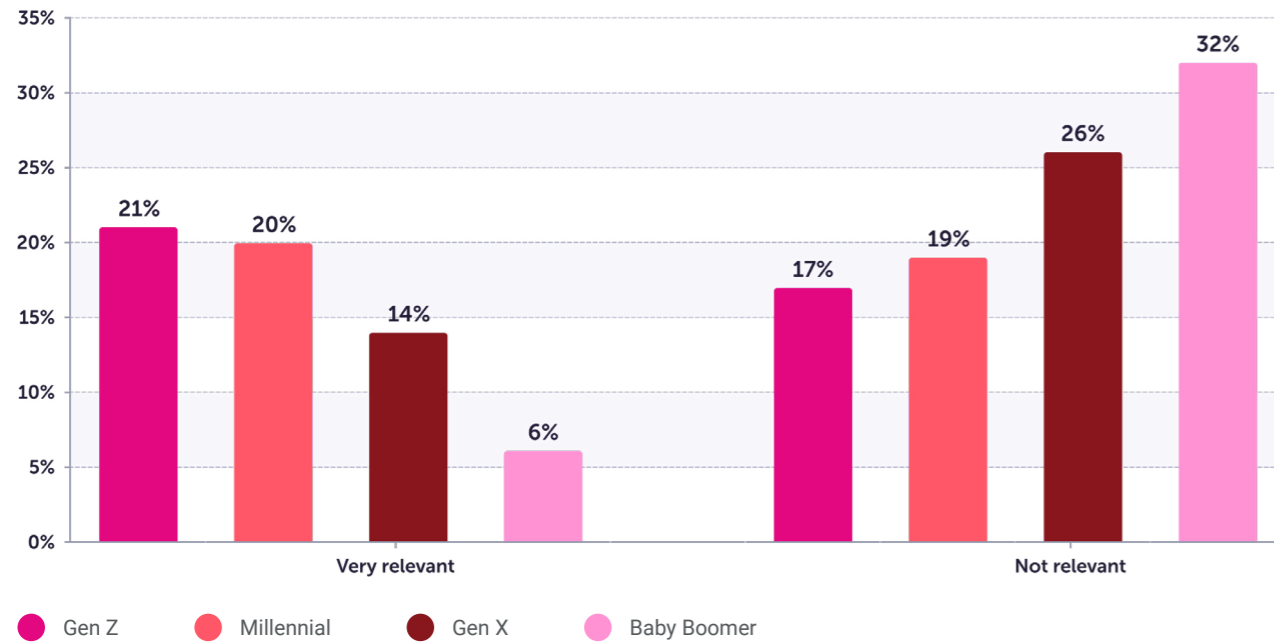
% of customers who feel brand communications meet their personalization needs.



When it comes to relevance, the picture flips. Gen Z (21%) and Millennials (20%) are the most likely to report that marketing feels very relevant, potentially because they have a better understanding of what they want from brand communications. Older generations are far less likely to feel messages are relevant.

Are marketing messages relevant?

% of customers who feel brand messages are relevant vs. not relevant, by generation.



Eyes on the future

Q: What does the future of personalized marketing look like?



Marketing is moving from reacting to predicting. Instead of asking, 'What should we send next?' marketers should start asking, 'What does the customer need next, and how do we deliver it before they ask?' AI powers living experiences that adapt with every click, scroll, and signal, letting brands anticipate what customers need before they even ask.

Ashley Gates, Senior Marketing Strategist, Shero Commerce

Moving beyond the first name

True personalization isn't just about a name in a subject line; it's about showing up at the right time with the right answer in moments you might be overlooking.

Surprise shoppers in the quiet moments

Find gaps beyond welcome and birthday automations, and fill them with something useful, like price-drop alerts for wishlist items or back-in-stock notifications for their favorite items. This guarantees you can grab attention because you're delivering genuinely relevant content.

Explain why

Don't just add product recommendations to emails and landing pages without giving your customers context. Adding a simple "Based on your last order" or "Since you liked [Product X]" shows that you're actually paying attention, and it turns a generic suggestion into a thoughtful recommendation.

Connect the journey

Create a seamless shopping experience by syncing your channels. When customers land on your site, use on-site personalization with messages like "pick up where you left off" or "your cart is still here" to make their return trip feel personal and easy.

Add a cool-down period

Relevant personalization also means knowing when not to send a message. If a customer just bought a high-ticket item, don't send them a 20% discount on the same product the next day. Create suppression segments to avoid delivering anything that might annoy a customer.



Trend 6

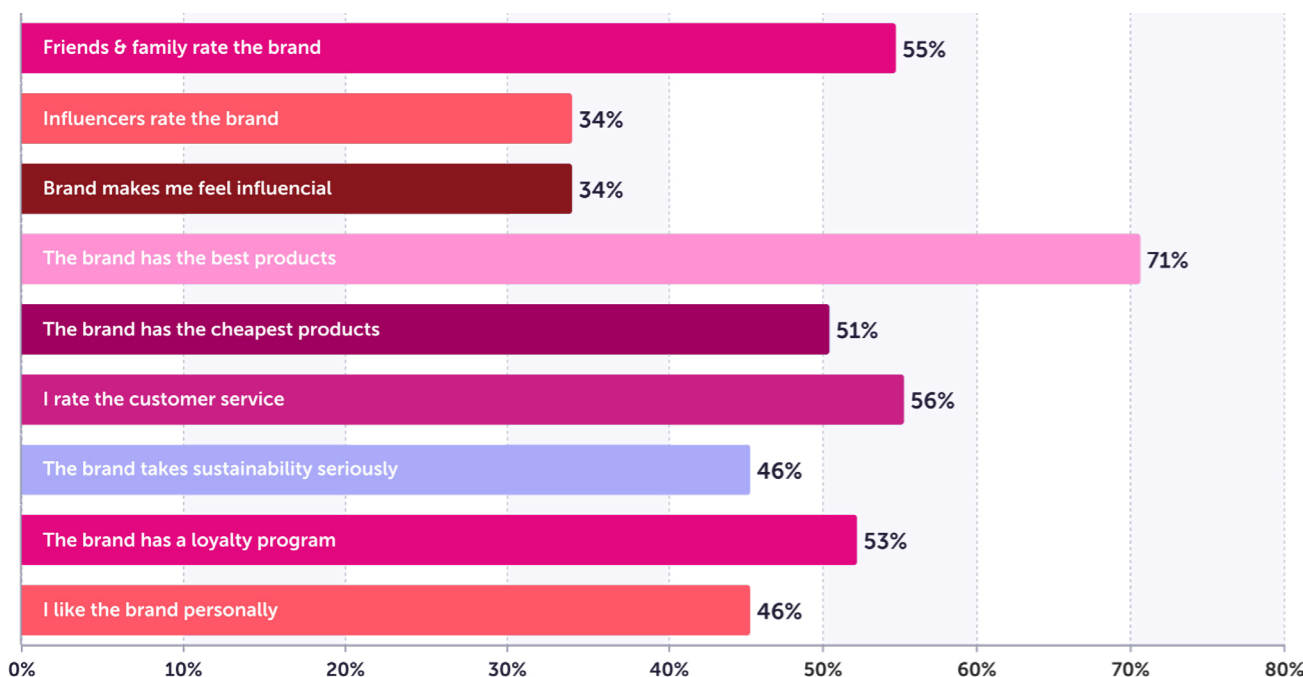
Loyalty is earned, not promised

A new kind of loyal customer is emerging: one who commits slowly, values their peers' opinions, and expects brands to work hard to earn their repeat business. All of the trends explored so far point to this shift. Consumers are making more considered decisions, they're socially influenced, and they expect brands to recognize them as individuals, not just a name in a database. All of this is affecting what loyalty looks like in practice.

The best products still matter most (70% of consumers agree), but loyalty is increasingly influenced by external factors too. In the year since our last report, the importance of friends and family has risen from sixth to third. This reflects how opinions about brands are increasingly validated among peers. 52% of consumers report that loyalty programs improve their relationship with a brand. However, what consumers want from a loyalty program has changed year-on-year. Successful loyalty programs should be more than just a tool to encourage repeat purchases.

Loyalty drivers

% of customers who consider loyalty drivers "important" or "extremely important."



A symbolic "thanks for your loyalty" doesn't resonate with consumers the way it once did. Instead, they're looking for brands that make buying feel safer, simpler, and less expensive in the moment. That's why real, tangible rewards dominate consumers' preferences.

Rewards like free shipping, cashback, and free products offer dual benefits: they reduce friction and provide value to shoppers. These types of rewards demonstrate to consumers that sticking with the same brand offers benefits they can enjoy immediately.

Customer preferences for loyalty rewards

Rank	Reward	% of Respondants	Rank	Reward	% of Respondants
1	Free shipping and returns	53%	6	Extended warranties or guarantees	27%
2	Cashback	52%	=	Early access to sales or new products	27%
3	Freebie products, gifts or samples	45%	7	VIP services	15%
4	Birthday and anniversary rewards	43%	8	Charitable donations	13%
5	Personalized discounts or offers	40%	9	Exclusive events or meet-and-greets	12%

When rewards remove cost, effort, or uncertainty at the point of purchase, they increase conversion rates, encourage repeat purchases, and strengthen retention in a way that points alone rarely can. These rewards turn loyalty programs from a passive perk into a real-time value exchange for shoppers.

Eyes on the future

Q: What does the future of loyalty programs look like?



Loyalty is becoming a product in its own right, with clear pricing, tangible benefits, and measurable impact. Brands that design programs to include VIP tiers, community perks, or lifestyle rewards will create experiences people choose to belong to, not just buy from. Delivering seamless value across every touchpoint turns loyalty into something operational, meaningful, and relevant.

Elly Chen, Brand Marketing Manager, Eber

The generational divide


Across generations, loyalty is anchored in value, but each defines value differently. Brands that shape their rewards, experiences, and communications around what their audience truly prioritizes see stronger engagement and repeat purchases over time. Here's how different generations prioritize value when deciding which brands to stick with.



Gen Z

The influenced

16-28 years old 50% work full-time



Millennial

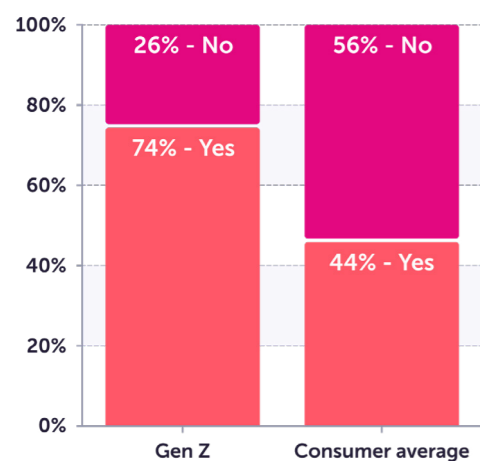
The loyalty program power-user

29-44 years old 71% work full-time

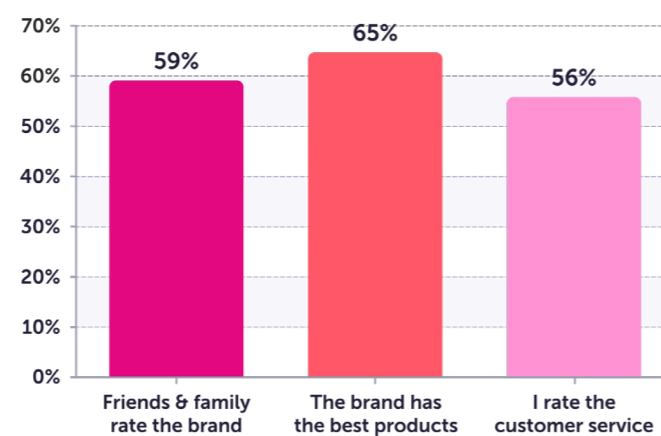
More than any other group, Gen Z relies on social proof to anchor their loyalty. 44% of Gen Z customers report that influencer ratings affect their commitment to a brand, and they are also strongly influenced by their immediate circles. 59% cite recommendations from friends and family as a major driver of loyalty.

29%
of Gen Z is more likely to consider influencers as "very important" or "extremely important" for brand loyalty

Influencer content has helped me discover new brands or products in the last 6 months



Top three loyalty drivers for Gen Z



Participants ranked each response on a 1-5 scale (1 = lowest, 5 = highest). Chart shows the top three combined 4-5 ratings.

Millennials see loyalty programs as a core part of the brand relationship. This generation leads in loyalty program engagement, with 59% reporting that loyalty programs are important or extremely important to their commitment to a brand. They're also the only generation to continue to prefer cashback over free shipping as a key loyalty reward, indicating that they desire a clear value exchange.

59%
of Millennial consumers consider loyalty programs to be "important" or "extremely important" for future loyalty

Top loyalty rewards preferences for Millennials



Respondents could select all options that applied.

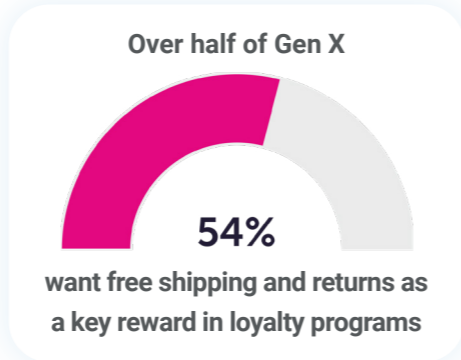


Gen X

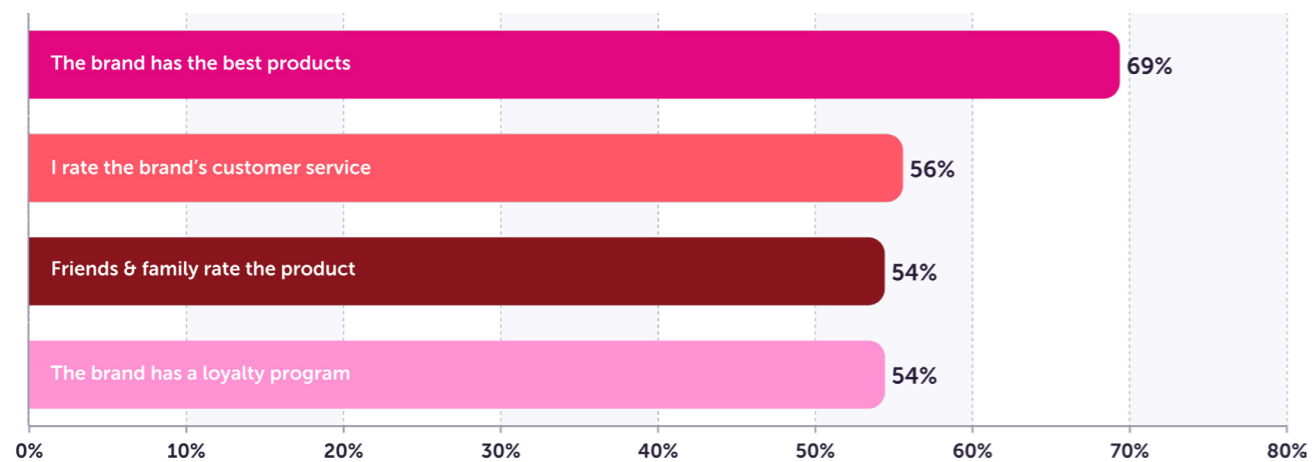
The pragmatists

45-60 years old 54% work full-time

Gen X expects consistent value throughout their shopping experience. While 69% prioritize the best products, they are also highly focused on the support they receive, with 56% citing customer service as a critical driver of their loyalty. This practical approach to brand loyalty is reflected in their top choice of reward, free shipping and returns (54%), which shows they value a friction-free experience with brands.



Top loyalty drivers for Gen X



Participants ranked each response on a 1–5 scale (1 = lowest, 5 = highest). Chart shows the combined 4–5 ratings.



Baby Boomers

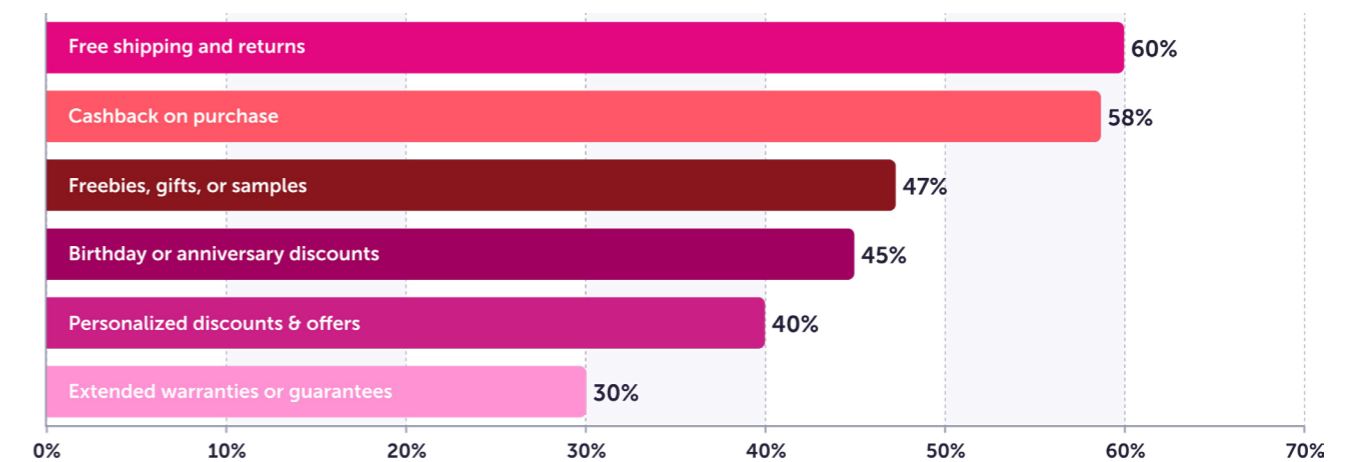
The product purists

61-79 years old 59% retired

Baby Boomers are the most demanding in terms of quality, with 75% prioritizing the best products, the highest rating for this factor across all generations. This is reflected in their reward preferences, where they are the generation most likely to seek extended warranties and guarantees to ensure the quality of the goods they purchase.



Preferred loyalty rewards for Baby Boomers



Respondents could select all options that applied.

How to build an irresistible loyalty program

A great loyalty program does more than just count points; it builds a community. Here's how to turn one-time buyers into loyal, repeat customers.

Put a price on word-of-mouth

Word-of-mouth is your most powerful sales tool, so treat it as such. Don't just reward customers for a purchase; reward them when they share your brand, too. Whether it's points for a review or a free gift for a referral, show your customers that you value their voice.

Give shoppers the VIP treatment

Points are great, but for today's shoppers, instant gratification is much more valuable. Offer loyalty program subscribers benefits that make shopping easier right away, such as free shipping, hassle-free returns, or priority customer service. These are the kind of perks that turn a one-time shopper into a lifelong fan.

Moments of unexpected delight

Send a "just because" reward (like a birthday treat, an anniversary surprise, or a random discount) to delight customers. But, you can only act on these moments when you collect the right data at the right time: purchase history, preferences, and engagement patterns let you deliver surprises that build long-term loyalty far beyond standard points emails.



In summary

Customers stay loyal when you make their lives easier, not when you shout louder. Shoppers want confidence, not pressure.

Across this report, a clear pattern emerges:

- AI usage is growing fast
- Trust still comes from real people
- Customers share data when the value is obvious
- Personalization works best when it's timely and genuinely relevant
- Loyalty is earned through reassurance, not relentless promotion

Your role isn't to push harder. It's to guide decisions, answer questions, and help people feel confident choosing you. AI has undeniably shifted behaviour, but it hasn't replaced human trust. It may support discovery, but when it's time to decide, people still look to friends, reviews, creators, and real-world experiences.

For marketers, that creates opportunity. Now is the time to strengthen the fundamentals:

- Keep your product details clear, accurate, and up to date
- Organize your site so people can quickly find what they're looking for
- Keep your product information tidy and consistent behind the scenes
- Be clear about what customers will get when they sign up for your emails or marketing lists
- Collect preferences and zero-party data (like birthdays or location) to make interactions more relevant
- Show real customer reviews and photos wherever you can
- Build reward systems, influencer partnerships, or referral programs to encourage advocacy and word-of-mouth recommendations

How Dotdigital can help

This is where Dotdigital comes in. We give you the tools to act on everything in this list, from collecting zero-party data and building preference centers, to sending the right message at the right moment. Whether you're improving onsite personalization, automating action-based campaigns, or building loyalty programs, we help you do it all.

[See us in action](#)

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