

Reverse logistics goes from cost center to competitive edge - DHL data shows

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Bonn - As the peak holiday shopping season concludes, the global logistics industry has entered "Returns Season." The returns segment of the e-commerce supply chain plays an increasingly critical role. In the past few years, returns have moved from a back-office cost center to a front-line strategic differentiator. Drawing on findings from the 2025 E-Commerce Trends Reports and recent operational data, the winners in global commerce are no longer those trying to eliminate returns, but those mastering the value cycle. This focus is a core pillar of DHL's Strategy 2030, which draws upon the Group's global network and diverse capabilities to offer comprehensive, efficient, and sustainable e-commerce logistics solutions in a growing digital market. Because returns are a part of this and now an unavoidable consumer demand, the industry focus has shifted to who can handle them most efficiently and sustainably.

Returns in fashion are no longer a footnote; in certain sectors, they are the business model. The consumer habit of ordering multiple sizes or colors (known as 'bracketing') is driving average return rates

to above 50%. For high-sensitivity categories, such as women's dresses, return rates can hit almost 90%, according to a report about bracketing from IHL Group.

When returns are this frequent, a brand's bottom line and sustainability profile are heavily influenced by the logistic provider's infrastructure. DHL addresses this through a massive commitment to more sustainable operations, utilizing 42,000 electric vehicles globally and a dense network of round about 170,000 access points. By offering "out-of-home" drop-off points, DHL shortens the physical distance a return travels and maximizes customer service. This effort is further supported by DHL's labelless returns solution, which allows consumers to return items using only a QR code, reducing paper waste and meeting the expectations of digital-native shoppers, such as Gen Z.

This volume also creates what experts call an "Invisible Value Pool" - an estimated \$62.5 billion in potential global revenue that remains untapped annually. This figure represents the lost profit opportunity when returned goods are treated as waste rather

than assets. Through systematic inspection, refurbishment, and resale, companies can recover significant value that otherwise flows into low-value disposal paths. In the United States alone, where the NRF estimates retail returns reached \$890 billion in 2024, the sheer scale of returned merchandise is increasingly prompting a re-evaluation of supply chain resilience at many retailers.

Persistence of "Click to Quit"

Findings from the DHL eCommerce Trends Report: Shopper Edit show that a frictionless return process is a primary driver of conversion. 79% of online shoppers will abandon a purchase if the return policy does not meet their expectations. Furthermore, while businesses often blame "transit damage," shoppers consistently point to incorrect sizing (54%) and poor product quality (55%) as the real drivers of the return wave.

Pablo Ciano, CEO of DHL eCommerce: "Returns are now an unavoidable expectation. Data shows consumers want a 'hybrid' experience - buying online but returning via a dense network of parcel lockers or service points. We are meeting this demand with nearly 170,000 access points across Europe and digital solutions such as labelless returns, which are preferred by 32% of Gen Z shoppers. This not only adds convenience but directly supports our

goal of shortening transport distances."

Building the circular supply chain: The DHL ReTurn Network

To move returns beyond a "cost center" designation, DHL has scaled its specialized DHL ReTurn Network in one of the largest global retail markets. Following the acquisition of Inmar Supply Chain Solutions, this network now operates 11 strategically located sites in North America, handling everything from e-commerce returns to complex overstocks. By co-locating fulfillment and returns operations, DHL allows returned items to be inspected, restocked, and resold - sometimes within the same day - significantly reducing "idle time" for inventory and keeping products out of landfills.

Hendrik Venter, CEO DHL Supply Chain EMEA: "An efficient supply chain is the backbone of any successful return strategy. Through the DHL ReTurn Network, we are not just moving boxes; we are remarketing products. Our programs batch goods for secondary markets, ensuring that, instead of entering landfills, products remain in the supply chain. This approach allows retailers to earn up to 90% of a product's resale value, turning unproductive inventory back into revenue. With DHL, sustainability and profitability are two sides of the same coin."

Source: [DHL Group](#)

