



# DHL E-Commerce Trends Report 2026: Old rules don't apply in the age of AI

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The global e-commerce market is experiencing rapid behavioral shifts, widening an expectation gap between what modern shoppers demand and what online businesses are prepared to deliver.

Bonn - AI could soon choose what we buy, sustainability has shifted from nice-to-have to non-negotiable, and second-hand shopping is rapidly becoming mainstream, according to new DHL eCommerce research. The 2026 E-Commerce Trends Report, based on survey findings from 29,000 online shoppers and 5,800 e-commerce businesses across 29 countries, highlights the biggest shifts retailers need to prepare for in the coming years and how best to respond to the changing e-commerce landscape.

The global e-commerce market is experiencing rapid behavioral shifts, widening an expectation gap between what modern shoppers demand and what online businesses are prepared to deliver. AI is transforming buyer habits and accelerating innovation across the e-commerce ecosystem. In doing so, it is beginning to upend traditional formats and could even lead to the disappearance of virtual storefronts. Securing consumer loyalty in this changing landscape requires moving past transactional speed to

master checkout trust, payment choice, and localized delivery convenience.

Pablo Ciano, CEO of DHL eCommerce, said: "The ability to understand and respond to customer needs has always defined success - but our new eCommerce trend report shows that AI is now redefining that advantage at hyperspeed. Consumers can identify the best offer in milliseconds, and retailers can gain insights that allow them to instantly capitalize on changing demand. For those of us powering the delivery infrastructure behind e-commerce, AI enables new levels of speed, flexibility, and precision. In this new era, the winners will be those who move fastest - and translate that speed into superior customer experiences."

To help brands navigate this rapidly evolving landscape, DHL eCommerce and Applied Futurist Tom Cheesewright have identified the key short and longer-term trends that businesses simply can't afford to ignore:

The next online shopper may not be human



Almost a third (29%) of shoppers (rising to 33% of Gen Z and 36% of millennials) say they would be happy to hand over control of their shopping to AI and let it make shopping decisions or purchases for them in the next five years, with almost two thirds (59%) of businesses expecting shoppers to browse and buy through virtual assistants in the future.

As generative AI continues to reshape the entire shopping journey - from product discovery to post-purchase support - 73% of businesses anticipate using it more over the next five years, despite consumer concerns about privacy and trust (48%).

When it comes to the future of AI and online shopping, Cheesewright suggests that 'the growth of open source AI agents as proven the consumer appetite for true AI assistants that can take on some of the cognitive overhead of modern life,' and predicts that 'this desire to streamline the admin associated with everyday tasks could extend even further, with shops and brands soon operating 'bot fronts' rather than traditional storefronts in the form of a website or app. These AI-powered bots will be communicating with the consumer's own AI to negotiate personal offers and secure the best deals.

Out-of-home delivery becomes the new standard

For consumers, the desire for delivery innovation comes from a continued need for convenience and flexibility, with a fifth (20%) of shoppers stating that faster delivery would encourage them to complete their purchase, and three in ten now looking to OOH delivery locations to meet the needs of their busy lives. Cheesewright predicts that "demand for flexible delivery options will continue to grow, driving the expansion of out-of-home delivery and returns." To capture this trend, businesses will need fulfillment setups that offer greater flexibility, reliability, and convenient pickup and return options.

Free delivery and returns remain a key motivator for shoppers to close sales, posing an ongoing challenge to online retailers' costs and margins in a competitive marketplace, although trust and choice of delivery partners are highlighted by 7 out of 10 shoppers as critical factors when choosing a brand to shop. A similar misalignment is occurring at the digital checkout counter: A massive 62% of shoppers say they will immediately abandon a purchase if their preferred payment method is unavailable, yet only 45% of businesses currently recognize this as a key driver of cart abandonment.

The home will become a sustainable side hustle

The line between shopper and seller continues to blur as second-hand consumer-to-consumer (C2C) shopping is set to go



mainstream. One in two (52%) consumers have sold an item on an online marketplace, rising to 62% amongst Millennials and 58% amongst Gen Z, although Baby Boomers trail behind on 35%. Globally, Europeans are the most active in C2C selling, with 57% saying they sell on marketplaces.

While not the case for every consumer, many are turning to online buying and selling to adopt more sustainable habits, with 45% saying they purchase second-hand and refurbished items for sustainability reasons, and a further 15% saying they would consider it in the future.

Cheesewright predicts: "Within the next decade, three-quarters of adults will be recycling their furniture, fashion, and tech through marketplaces." The reasons for this will be varied, from those looking to alleviate the burden of rising living costs to others who wish to reduce their impact on the planet by avoiding new purchases. For businesses, this

means there's a new competitor in the mix - previously, it was other brands, but now it's the consumer themselves, increasingly acting as both target market and rival.

Overall, sustainable logistics - once seen as a competitive differentiator for retailers and logistics partners - is now expected to become a standard expectation by 42% of consumers over the next five years.

#### About the DHL eCommerce Trends Report 2026

The DHL eCommerce Trends Report 2026 surveyed 29,000 consumers and 5,800 businesses across Europe, North America, Asia-Pacific, Latin America, the Middle East, and Sub-Saharan Africa. By combining shopper and business perspectives into a single unified view, the report provides practical insights to help e-commerce brands respond to evolving operational demands.

Source: [DHL Group](#)