



THE SEARCH FOR SMARTER SHOPPING:

The Power of Product Content

2025 Online Shopping Consumer
Research and Insights Report

Executive summary

Three decades into the e-commerce revolution, the promise of truly personalized and seamless online shopping experiences remains more hype than reality. Consumers are frustrated and it's still often difficult to find just the right thing. Why? Retailers are often overlooking the first step of personalization: make it easy for buyers to find what they are looking for. It's not that the product doesn't exist, it's that the language used to describe the product doesn't exist in consumers' everyday vocabulary.

In an age where AI has transformed nearly every industry, retailers need to harness its potential to bridge the gap between “merchant speak” and “consumer speak.” Product content optimization answers this call.

Most retailers are missing one of the most basic tenets of marketing – lose the jargon and connect with buyers in a language they understand.

A recent survey of 2,081 U.S. consumers — all of whom shop online on average at least once a month for clothing, shoes, accessories, home goods, and/or beauty products — uncovers new insights into shopper expectations and behavior, and what merchants and marketers need to do to stay both relevant and competitive.

As we know, today's shoppers are online to buy and, in most cases, are searching for a specific item (e.g. Clinique face lotion with sunscreen) or type of item (crisp white blouse). While shoppers are willing to conduct a few searches to find what they want, their patience is limited. In the survey, 80% of consumers said they've given up on an online search because they couldn't find what they were looking for. Of those, more than 50% said they would attempt four to six searches before quitting and not buying anything; 18% said they would give up after only three searches

With all of the advances in retail operations and technology, why is it still so difficult for online buyers to find what they are looking for? And why do many still feel the need to see an item before they buy it? The answer lies in words and details.

For example, does the average person search for a “cerulean ultra crop full zip athleisure,” or simply look for a “blue hoodie?” Do they search for a “cardinal luxe sweater” or a “red cashmere sweater?” According to the survey, two-thirds (66%) of people believe that retailers use product language and descriptions that make it challenging for them to find what they want.

Retailers need to move beyond their own “merchant speak,” their tendency to use industry jargon, and embrace the natural language of the consumer, or “consumer speak.” Online buyers — whether on Google, a social platform, or a retailer's e-commerce site — tend to use simple, plain language when they search, and often add descriptive details when they have something very specific in mind. The natural, everyday words and phrases of consumers needs to be reflected throughout the entire retail value chain, starting with initial item setup through to site merchandising, and SEO and SEM execution, to ensure a more fruitful and satisfactory experience for online shoppers.

The difficulty for retailers is that people use different words and phrases to find the same thing. How did we not recognize this when we've always known that people are unique?

For example, what words would you use to search for a light to go over your six-foot-wide kitchen island in a beach house? A similar question was posed to our survey panel, with responses ranging from basic searches like “five-foot ceiling light fixture” to highly descriptive searches like “modern, beachy, stainless steel kitchen island light.” There were dozens of slightly different searches using different descriptions. The challenge for retailers is to be able to respond appropriately to each search, recognizing that one person's “modern kitchen pendant light” is another person's “kitchen island beach house light.”

Consumers are online to buy, but they need clearer, more informative details.

Consumers want basic questions answered to ensure their purchase is a good one. Nearly 90% of respondents said they've found a product online but then gone to a physical store to buy it because they had unanswered questions about details such as quality, fit, color, or size, among others. For retailers that are online-only or that have a limited number of physical locations, what does this mean? More than likely, it means an abandoned shopping cart or a never-ending cycle of purchase and return — a less-than-desirable experience for both the consumer and the retailer.

People want and need product content that helps with purchase decisions. Product images (74%), reviews (60%), and short descriptions (52%) are the most commonly used types of content to inform purchases. In addition, 44% of people will take the time to read long product descriptions, and over 30% will use videos.



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Retailers must rethink how they describe their products — both in the words they use and in the associated details they provide.

Most consumers (75%) use details and descriptive terms when looking for something specific or for a special occasion or particular need. Generally, shoppers know what they want and expect retailers to be able to understand their needs and respond accordingly. Retailers that can do so are financially rewarded.

For shoppers who feel that their search experience impacts their spending (71%), nearly three-quarters estimate spending \$25 or more per visit with retailers where they have a positive experience. Some in this category report spending \$100 or more. Conversely, respondents overwhelmingly said (85%) that if they can't find what they are looking for, they will spend their dollars elsewhere.

So, how do we make shopping smarter? We embrace AI.

Like every other industry, retail is being impacted by both generative AI and large language models. Already 40% of shoppers report having used an AI-powered search engine to assist them in online shopping. While a majority (61%) of those have explored using ChatGPT, a small cohort (15%) has used emerging AI search and answer platforms like Perplexity.

Retailers need to reevaluate how they describe their products, the amount of detail in their descriptions, and how they will prepare for the inevitable consumption and redistribution of their content by AI-powered search engines. This needs to be done everywhere — not only in the consumer-facing text and content, but also on the backend (e.g. improved meta descriptions and schema markups).

Thirty years in, Amazon remains a go-to destination for online shoppers to discover new products (69%); search for specific items, like clothing, shoes, and accessories (42%); and make purchases (40%). In looking at their operations, maybe they deserve to be. The Company has expanded from its humble beginnings to a global powerhouse, offering a wide range of products, including specialty storefronts for everything from handmade items (Amazon Handmade) and low-price goods (Amazon Haul) to luxury designer products (Amazon Luxury Stores), all while harnessing AI to personalize and enhance the customer search experience. Their approach to product content is effective — and, more importantly, financially smart.

As AI increasingly influences how consumers shop and buy online — from ads to the searches themselves to product information that guides purchase decisions — retailers need to respond. But how? **The answer is simple: product content optimization.**

Driven by the latest advancements in artificial intelligence (Generative AI, LLMs, Agentic AI, etc.), product content optimization will define the next generation of online shopping. By better listening to the consumer and understanding their personal context, retailers and brands will be empowered to create and enhance important descriptions, details, images, and buying criteria for each product, in real-time. They will be able to optimize their content upfront when initially setting up items in their master data management systems, and then also dynamically continue to optimize content as consumers shop and search. The result of this front-end and real-time product content optimization is what retailers and brands want — increased sell-through, greater customer satisfaction, and an improved brand reputation.

****NOTE:** See page 8 for Methodology details. All percentages cited throughout this report have been rounded to the nearest whole number and, therefore, may not equal exactly 100%. Specific data available upon request.

Consumers are online to buy, but the experience isn't perfect

Today, online shopping is a [\\$4 trillion industry](#), with over [270 million online shoppers](#) in the U.S. Over the past few decades, since Amazon and Google launched, online shopping behavior has evolved with elevated buyer expectations of simple, streamlined search and discovery across retailers and channels.

- | **Online shopping is preferred.** When asked to choose, the majority of surveyed consumers (66%) prefer shopping online versus in-store.
 - When looking at the generational breakdown, Baby Boomers (71%) surprisingly prefer online shopping more than Gen Zers (63%).
- | **Convenience is key.** Of consumers who prefer to shop online compared to in-store, 80% said convenience is the primary reason. Nearly two-thirds (62%) said they like shopping online because they can access stores, brands, and products that aren't available nearby, and more than half (52%) prefer shopping online because it's easier to discover new brands and products.
- | **Each generation uses different channels to discover new products.** When online for the purpose of discovery, a variety of channels are in play. Across all generations, respondents said they prefer to start the discovery process using Amazon, but from there, channel preferences vary:
 - Gen Zers prefer using social media for discovery (56%).
 - Millennials prefer to browse big box retail sites like Walmart, Target, etc. (46%).
 - Baby Boomers (41%) and Gen Xers (41%) prefer using search engines to discover new products.
- | **Social media is popular for discovery.** 40% of surveyed shoppers said they typically use social media to discover new trends, clothing, shoes, accessories, or beauty products. Of those, TikTok (38%) and Instagram (33%) were favored most.

Despite online shopping's convenience, consumers are often challenged to find what they want. According to Accenture, [72%](#) of consumers say researching potential purchases takes more time and effort than it should. Multiple searches and irrelevant results create frustration — a retailer's worst nightmare when looking to capture consumer attention and dollars.

- | **Consumers aren't finding what they want in a single search.** 84% of those surveyed said it can take up to six searches to find what they are looking for; 16% said it only takes one to two searches on average to locate an item they want.
- | **Consumers are impatient.** Most people (80%) have given up on an online search because they couldn't find what they were looking for. More than half (51%) said they'd attempt four to six searches before quitting and not buying anything, while 18% said they would give up after only three searches.
 - Results differ among generational groups. For example, Gen X consumers are the least patient in their searches — 21% of Gen X respondents said they would quit after three searches compared to 15% of Gen Zers.

Online shopping is here to stay, and big dollars are on the line. Retailers need to better understand — and react to — consumers' feedback on search and discovery.



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Words matter: retailers need to get back to basics

According to Accenture, **67%** of consumers say it's too difficult to distill the available product information into something meaningful that helps them make a purchasing decision. When searching, consumers favor simple, plain language and when typing their search queries, they often add descriptive details when looking for a specific item. In contrast, retailers tend to use more complex vocabulary — known as “merchant speak” — resulting in a significant disconnect between how consumers search for products and how retailers describe them.

- Consumers want retailers to use clearer, more obvious descriptions.** 66% of surveyed consumers believe that retailers use descriptions and product language that make it difficult for them to find what they want. For example, retailers use product descriptions like “cardinal luxe crew” instead of “red cashmere sweater.”
 - More Gen Zers (69%) and Millennials (69%) feel that retailers’ descriptions make it harder for them to find what they’re looking for, compared to Gen Xers (64%) and Baby Boomers (51%).

When retailers use unclear words or terms to describe their products, consumers interpret them differently. Nearly half of survey respondents (49%) said the color “midnight” represents black, while almost 30% said it’s blue. Other responses included grey, blue/green, or all of the above.

Additionally, retailers need to provide consumers with relevant product details so they can easily make purchasing decisions.

- Retailers need to instill confidence in consumers’ purchase decisions.** 89% of surveyed consumers said they’ve previously found an item online, but ultimately bought it in-store because they had unanswered questions regarding key details like quality, fit, color, or size. Of those that purchased in-store:
 - 52% said they wanted to see or try on the item.
 - 48% said they wanted to assess quality.
 - 42% said they had open questions about fit based on descriptions/reviews.
 - 29% said the online product information wasn’t detailed enough.
 - 20% said the online product description used confusing or overly complicated terms.

- The more detail, the better.** Product images (74%), reviews (60%), and short product descriptions (52%) are the most commonly used content to help with purchase decisions. Additionally, 44% of consumers will read long product descriptions, and 31% will use videos as part of their decision-making.
 - Gen Zers, Millennials, and Gen Xers were consistent with product images, reviews, and product short descriptions as their top 3 selections, respectively. Baby Boomers prefer long product descriptions over short descriptions and are more likely to use reviews compared to Gen Z.
 - When looking at how genders differed, 66% of women use product reviews to help make their purchase decisions compared to 49% of men.

What words would you use when searching for a light to go above your six-foot-wide kitchen island in a beach house?

Surveyed shoppers were asked a similar question, and responses ranged from simple searches such as “light for kitchen island” to highly descriptive searches like “modern, beachy, stainless steel kitchen island light.” In total, there were dozens of different search terms and descriptions used, illustrating the major challenge retailers face every day when trying to render relevant assortments for each shopper’s uniquely articulated context.



Retailers that make search and discovery easy will win

Consumers know what they want and expect retailers to be able to respond quickly and relevantly – **63%** of consumers worldwide want to move from inspiration to purchase as quickly as possible.

We've reached a turning point in today's landscape: online retailers must reevaluate how they describe their products. Those that do so will be rewarded and those that don't risk losing customers, not to mention profitable sales.

| **Consumers will use extra details to find the exact item they want.** Three-quarters (75%) of respondents have used extra details or descriptive terms when searching for a specific occasion or need.

- Women are slightly more likely to use extra details or descriptive terms in their search (77%) compared to men (72%).
- 54% use descriptive words to convey a specific style or vibe (e.g., Bohemian chic, preppy, western, Mediterranean, rustic, etc.) to help narrow down their search or when looking for something specific.

| **Relevant results matter.** More than half of the respondents (57%) report using a retailer's search bar and said it's important for the results to be relevant and aligned with what they are looking for.

- Despite retailer's efforts, 6% won't use the search bar because they don't feel the results are helpful or accurate.

| **Consumers will reward a positive online experience.** For respondents who said the search experience impacts their spending (71%), nearly three-quarters (74%) estimate spending \$25 or more per visit on sites where they have a positive experience; 15% estimate spending over \$100 per visit.

| **Brand loyalty can't overcome a poor search experience.** 85% of shoppers said they'd purchase a similar item from another brand or retailer if they aren't able to find what they are looking for from their initial brand or retailer choice.

- Women (87%) are more likely than men (82%) to purchase a similar item from another brand or retailer if they can't find what they want from their originally preferred brand or retailer.



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Product content optimization can support online shoppers by simplifying search and making buying more efficient and effective. In turn, it will provide retailers with increased revenues, greater customer satisfaction, and improved brand reputation.



So, how do we make shopping smarter? We embrace AI.

AI is here to stay, and as consumers embrace anything and everything that makes life easier, so too must retailers. This technology is only getting better each day and should be embraced to help retailers bridge the gap in product language. This will not only make products easier to find, but easier to buy with the details consumers seek and expect.

The impact that good product content has on consumer buying behavior is profound. Retailers can no longer risk losing out because they can't effectively connect with their customers. What's more, the introduction of new AI-powered search and answer engines will shape a new era of online shopping, especially as these search engines connect with AI-powered e-commerce sites.

| Consumers are using AI to shop: 40% of shoppers surveyed said they have used an AI-powered search engine to assist them in online shopping.

- While a majority (61%) of those have used ChatGPT, a small cohort (15%) has used emerging AI search technologies like Perplexity.
- More men (56%) have used an AI-powered search engine for shopping compared to women (32%).
- More than half of Gen Zers (51%) have used AI, such as ChatGPT, for shopping. The usage was less for Millennials (45%), Gen Xers (32%), and Baby Boomers (22%).

- When asked if they would pay for Perplexity™'s "Buy with Pro" option, a shopping feature that allows users to research and purchase products directly within the search engine for \$20/month, more men said they'd spend money for the search experience if they loved it (34%) compared to women (22%).

Retailers are at the intersection of increased consumer expectations, the power of AI, and the need to drive profitable growth. They must prepare for the inevitable consumption and redistribution of their content across platforms. As these elements come together, dynamically optimizing product content is critical.

- | Product content optimization is critical:** Product content optimization leverages AI and other technologies to convert consumer language into product understanding, which in turn gives merchants and marketers the ability to better connect shoppers with the right products based on their queries.
- | Product content optimization is retail's future:** Machine-to-machine queries that are started with AI-powered search engines must be answered by a retail site built to respond. Product content optimization creates that connection between search and results.

In today's retail landscape, product content must be optimized for consumers and machines. Retailers and brands that embrace the power of AI can change the trajectory of their performance whether it be in ads, search results, or in product content descriptions.

Methodology

A consumer survey was fielded via SurveyMonkey with the goal of better understanding current consumer sentiment and preferences towards the search and discovery process of online shopping. The survey garnered 2,081 responses, with the criteria of respondents making at least 12 or more online purchases of clothing, shoes, accessories, home goods, and/or beauty products in 2024.

Respondents answered 31 logic-driven questions, and responses were collected on January 22, 2025. The survey audience was comprised of the following demographic groups:

- **Ages: 18-65**
- **Male: 34%**
- **Female: 66%**
- **Respondents were distributed across the United States**

Respondents self-identified into the following generational groups based on the above age range:

- **Gen Z (1997 and after) — 447 respondents (21%)**
- **Millennial (1981 - 1996) — 755 respondents (36%)**
- **Gen X (1965 - 1980) — 678 respondents (33%)**
- **Baby Boomers (1964 and before) — 201 respondents (10%)**

People who made less than 12 online purchases of clothing, shoes, accessories, home goods, and/or beauty products in 2024 were excluded from the survey.

There is an inherent bias observed in the survey. People who complete surveys are more likely to be technically savvy and are potentially more likely to shop online. The majority of respondents (98%) completed this survey using a mobile phone or tablet device. This should not affect the value of the responses for different weighted use levels of online shopping habits.

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ABOUT



Lily AI is the leading AI-powered Product Content Optimization Platform that bridges the gap between consumers, merchants, marketers, and machines. Lily AI is transforming e-commerce and advertising by using AI to decode consumers' true shopping intent and bridge the language and metadata gap between how retailers describe their products and how consumers express what they want. The Lily platform dynamically converts nuanced consumer language into precise product understanding, helping consumers easily navigate millions of products to find the perfect item for their unique context. Leveraging a suite of advanced AI technologies fueled by high-quality, human-verified proprietary data, Lily optimizes product content, enabling retailers to understand complex consumer search behaviors, improve product attributes, titles, and descriptions, and personalize shopping experiences, resulting in operational efficiency and increased sales. More information can be found at www.lily.ai.

