

Fashion Adds Fuel To Fast-Growing Retail Ecommerce Sales

Contributed by eMarketer
Friday, 23 March 2012
Last Updated Friday, 23 March 2012

2011 brought bigger-than-expected growth to a maturing market

Online buying in 2012 has expanded far beyond early-adopter favorites like books, music and video. While sales of such ecommerce staples continue to grow, the apparel and accessories category—a product type for which shoppers’ desire to touch, feel and try on items before making a purchase was long seen as a deterrent to online sales—is now climbing faster than any other ecommerce product segment.

eMarketer expects US retail ecommerce sales to reach \$224.2 billion this year, up 15% from 2011, as online sales continue to record strong growth despite a slowing penetration rate for US online shoppers and buyers that in 2011 topped 80%. (Note: These figures exclude travel and ticket purchases, but include sales made on mobile devices and tablets.)

The apparel and accessories category will lead ecommerce sales growth throughout the forecast period, with sales gains of 20% predicted for this year. By 2016 the category will tally \$73 billion worth of online purchases, eMarketer estimates, accounting for just over 20% of all US online retail ecommerce sales.

The category’s sales gains are attributed primarily to retailers’ improved methods for displaying products online, as well as policies that make online purchasing of apparel, in particular, less of a guessing game.

“Online merchandising and visualization have come a long way,” said eMarketer principal analyst Jeffrey Grau. “Retailers continue to increase the scale of their ecommerce operations, particularly by investing in online sales platforms that display products and convert shoppers more effectively; apparel sales have benefitted more than any other category. Apparel has become an online success due largely to easy and free returns, innovative visualization tools and the presence of customer reviews.”

Even with apparel and accessories’ growth, however, computers and consumer electronics remains the largest single category of online spending. The tech-focused product segment will grab a nearly 22% share of ecommerce sales this year and continue to grow as a percentage of the annual total through 2016.

On the other end of the spectrum, online food and beverage sales will grow 17% in 2012, but remain the smallest US ecommerce category with expected sales of just \$5.09 billion in 2012.

eMarketer forms its US retail ecommerce forecast through a meta-analysis of research estimates from firms that track ecommerce sales, data from its benchmark source, and reported revenues from major online retailers. eMarketer also conducts interviews with industry executives who provide perspective on the ecommerce sales trends.

eMarketer benchmarks its retail ecommerce sales figures against US Department of Commerce data, for which the last full year measured was 2011. This is the first year eMarketer has also broken out online sales by product category.

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