

Omnichannel Shopping Puts A New Spin On Ecommerce

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Retailers must provide a smooth experience across channels to satisfy consumers

US retail ecommerce sales, including digital downloads and event tickets but excluding travel, will rise 15.4% to \$224.2 billion this year, eMarketer estimates. Fast-growing categories like apparel and accessories will help boost online sales figures, but underlying the trend is a deeper shift in the mindset of many consumers, which has turned them into omnichannel shoppers.

“In the past, cross-channel shopping amounted to using a retailer’s different channels one at a time for separate transactions,” said Jeffrey Grau, eMarketer principal analyst and author of the new report, “US Retail Ecommerce Forecast: Entering the Age of Omnichannel Retailing.” “But today, consumers are moving between a retailer’s channels—”websites, stores, mobile devices, social media—in a fluid way.”

A February 2012 survey by price comparison service PriceGrabber, a part of Experian, found most US online consumers plan to shop this year by combining online, brick-and-mortar and mobile retail channels.

Also notable, a large share of respondents (42%) told PriceGrabber they will shop mostly online in 2012—three-and-one-half times more than those that said they would shop mostly in brick-and-mortar stores (12%).

“A consumer might research a product online, look at it up close in a store, solicit opinions from friends via social networks, use a mobile phone to check competitors’ prices, but ultimately buy it in-store using PayPal on their phone,” said Grau. “What will matter most is whether the experience was smooth. If the retailer disappoints the shopper during any of these channel handoffs, it will reflect poorly not only on that channel but on the brand as a whole.”

Smartphones have become an important tool in the omnichannel shopper’s arsenal. Post-holiday research from Google and Ipsos OTX illustrated the different ways US smartphone users combined smartphones and in-store shopping during the 2011 holiday season.

Smartphones were used most frequently to drive consumers to stores. Once in stores, consumers used their devices to look up product information, which then lead to a purchase.

“Social media sites also influence online and offline purchases for a small percentage of consumers,” noted Grau. “But the number is bound to rise as marketers become more adept at connecting with social network users.”

The full report, “US Retail Ecommerce Forecast: Entering the Age of Omnichannel Retailing,” also answers these key questions:

- What is the outlook for retail ecommerce in the US?
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- What trends are driving ecommerce sales?
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- Who shops online?
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- How has online shopping behavior evolved?

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