

Title C: The Evolution of the eCommerce Customer

Subtitle C: A brief timeline of digital consumer behavior



[Source](#)

*By 2020, brick and mortar retail spaces will be little more than showrooms.” –
Eddie Machaalani & Mitchell Harper*

As an eCommerce business, it always pays to understand your consumer base in greater depth and a big part of that lies in understanding the landscape that surrounds you.

With the rise of artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning (ML), virtual reality (VR), [chatbots](#), personalization and a host of other disruptive technologies changing the way consumers interact with today’s brands, eCommerce business owners must respond to these seismic shifts and leverage these new developments to remain competitive in the digital age.

But how did we get here and how have advancements in technology steered the evolution of the eCommerce consumer over the decades? By understanding how eCommerce - and eCommerce consumers - have changed over time, you'll gain a broader insight into the industry and, in turn, gain an all-important competitive edge in today's cutthroat commercial environment.

Looking back can be as valuable as analyzing your present or looking into the future and here, we're going to look at the origins of eCommerce and how the behavior of online consumers has transformed over the years.

When did eCommerce begin?

The history of eCommerce - or electronic commerce - has close ties to the invention and development of the Internet, but it's possible to trace the first incarnation of eCommerce back to the 1970s where [Electronic Data Interchanges](#) and teleshopping built the foundations of online shopping in its more modern form.

It's said that UK inventor, [Michael Aldrich](#), pioneered the concept of online shopping in 1979 by connecting a modified version of a regular television through a telephone line to a real-time-based, multi-user processing computer. In short, this system allowed consumers to purchase goods and services remotely, in a visual sense, for the first time ever - and it became particularly popular in the business-to-business world.

When the Internet became public in 1991, eCommerce, as we know it today, came to fruition and as you may have guessed, [Amazon](#) was one of the first sites open to online shoppers, paving the way for the many brands, businesses and service providers that followed.

The eCommerce consumer timeline

"History never really says goodbye. History says, 'See you later.'" - Eduardo Galeano

From its primitive roots in the late 1970s right through to its modern day cultural significance, here we explore the primary shifts in eCommerce over the decade and how it has shaped people's buying habits.

1980s

During the 1980s, the first-ever personal computer was launched by [IBM](#). Not only did this invention offer consumers a means of storing and processing information electronically, but more significantly, it offered businesses a means of creating more meaningful relationships with their customers.

The launch and development of the PC during this decade gave forward-thinking retailers the tools to store, arrange and analyze consumer information, empowering them to offer their target customers deals both in-store and via post while providing a more tailored customer experience rather than simply pushing their products on people.

While in the 1980s, the vast majority of retail customers shopped in brick-and-mortar stores, it was this decade in which the retailer-shopper relationship became more closely-knit, with consumers demanding more from retailers in terms of innovation and service.

1990s

During the 1990s, the World Wide Web became widely accessible to consumers and as such, a total of [16 million internet users](#) were recorded worldwide. Moreover, In 1996, those in the US were reported to spend an average of [30 minutes online](#). And, in 1998, Google was unleashed on the world.

Over this 10-year period, the rise in retailer websites, the launch of the likes of Amazon and PayPal, the introduction of the search engine and a significant surge in international internet use made shoppers more information-hungry, inquisitive and hungry for convenience.

At the end of the decade, Yahoo! Stores online entered the eCommerce arena, an event that increased the popularity of online shopping. While on the whole, the consumers of the 90s still preferred to shop in-store, the technological developments of the 1990s served to prepare people for the eCommerce explosion that was soon to come.

2000s

Post-millennium, the world of eCommerce started to expand and evolve at an exponential rate. In 2002, [558 million people](#) were using the Internet worldwide and advancements in website functionality began to make the online shopping experience all the more convenient.

Moreover, it was during this decade that Google and other search engines became an everyday research tool for consumers, meaning that more people than ever conducted extensive research before purchasing a product.

From 2000 to 2010, a sharp shift towards online shopping became apparent across the globe with the prevalence of social media in addition to the invention of the iPhone in 2007, empowering consumers to conduct research, connect with their peers and buy products from retailers while on the move.

By the end of the decade, the eCommerce customer was well and truly in the driving seat, with brands required to offer more value, flexibility, and information than ever to entice repeat custom and brand loyalty.

Present

Experts project that global eCommerce sales will soar to [\\$4.5 trillion](#) by the year 2021, with the overall share of eCommerce profits [spreading beyond the Western World](#).

As a shopping species, we're now more connected, more tuned in, more curious, more information-rich and more reliant on the reviews, opinions, and validation of our peers than ever before. It's a brave new world where the possibilities are seemingly endless.

What we can learn

Being an ambitious eCommerce business, you will no doubt be aware of the core habits, wants, needs and demands of today's online shoppers, as well as the technology people use to purchase products and services, but here are three observations that define the general outlook of today's digital consumers:

- **People are comfortable answering questions about themselves online:** While online consumers even a decade ago were incredibly skeptical about sharing information about themselves, people in today's world are more comfortable with answering personal questions about themselves than ever before. This current trend offers eCommerce businesses a wealth of opportunity concerning the acquisition of valuable data that can help you offer your customers a more seamless, personalized and satisfying online shopping experience.
- **Brand loyalty is becoming an increasingly challenging concept:** One of the biggest things that we can learn from looking at the evolution of the eCommerce shopper over the decades is that change is swift and constant. Technology is in a state of continual flux, as are the behaviors of consumers, and a customer that you were targeting three years ago may be very different today. That said, as an eCommerce business, you need to ensure you embrace new technologies, trends, platforms, and touchpoints, evolving your efforts to meet the changing needs of your customers with the passing of each new year.
- **Online shopping remains on the rise:** It's clear that eCommerce is going from strength to strength. Spending is on the up, and the majority of that growth is happening [online](#). Traditional brick-and-mortar retailers are grappling with the profound transformation of their business in a bid to become more digital. As an eCommerce retailer, this puts you in an excellent position. By harnessing the right data to understand your target audience on a deeper level and providing a flawless [omnichannel shopping experience](#) across all of your key channels, platforms and touchpoints, you stand to cut through the noise and remain competitive in an increasingly cutthroat landscape.

“Amazing things will happen when you listen to the consumer.” – Jonathan Mildenhall, CMO at Airbnb

By glancing back at the origins of eCommerce and online shopping over the years, it’s clear that regardless of technology or shopping habits, the ability to listen to your customer and offer them what they want is paramount to success. Akin to the 1980s, the retailers that take the time to get to know their audience, forge meaningful relationships and offer real value are those that will come out on top, time after time.

Moreover, businesses that remain abreast with the [latest industry trends](#) and adapt to the landscape around them will not only survive but thrive long into the future.

Online shoppers aren’t going anywhere and by taking the right measures to give them exactly what they want by delivering the right content at the right time, spark up meaningful conversations via social media and offering an exceptional level of [customer experience \(CX\)](#), you stand to reap great rewards on an ongoing basis.

If you're looking to enhance your online store to appeal to a wider audience and boost your profitability, we have [solutions that can help](#). Want to know more about our products, services, and solutions? Please [connect with us](#) and we’ll be happy to answer any questions you may have.

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