

Achieving success in the age of the digital consumer

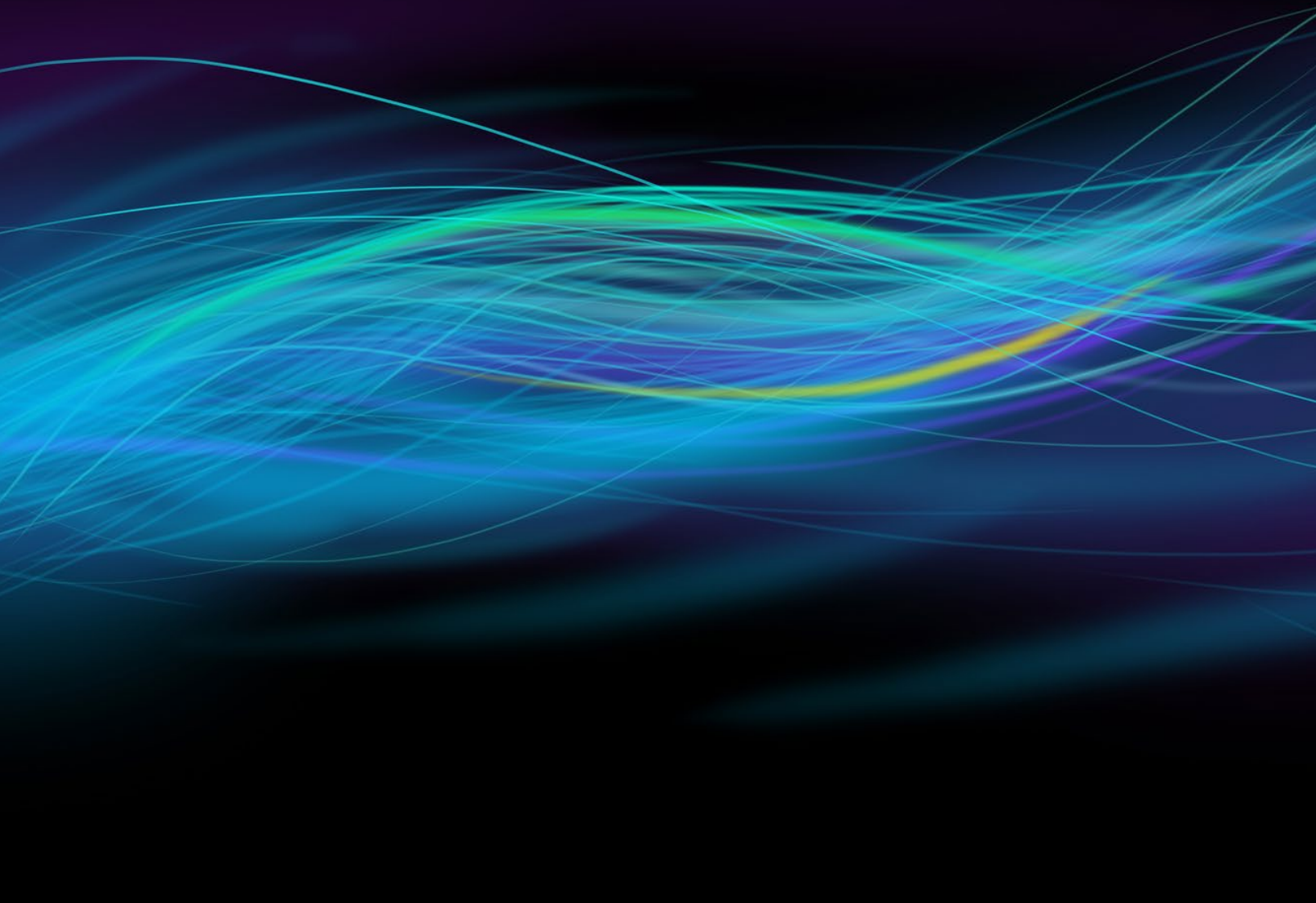
How embracing a D2C mindset can help manufacturers capitalize on powerful new digital-engagement strategies



A Siteimprove market report with partners Adobe and Capgemini

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Executive summary

As consumers increasingly turn to digital channels throughout the buying journey, business-to-business (B2B) manufacturers have the opportunity to create positive direct-to-consumer (D2C) experiences—and reap the benefits.

To capitalize on this opportunity, manufacturers need to identify changing consumer preferences and develop an agile web strategy that responds to ever-evolving consumer needs.

Siteimprove partnered with Adobe and Capgemini to survey 3,025 U.S. consumers to discover what key elements currently distinguish B2B and D2C digital experiences—and what consumers expect from online experiences and brand relationships.

These expectations include website performance, seamless and intuitive navigation, brand building, availability of information, and accessibility and compliance. Building digital brand equity through these means will be an integral step for B2B manufacturers looking to establish direct connections with consumers.



Introduction

Learning about today's digital consumer




After years of steady growth, online shopping exploded in 2020, largely due to COVID-19. Yet analysts anticipate the ecommerce boom will persist. In the US, ecommerce was already on a steady trajectory of 13 to 15 percent year-over-year growth and it accounted for \$600 billion in sales last year alone, [according to eMarketer](#).

Beyond the sales impact, the pandemic has also presented a strong case for creating positive web experiences throughout the buyer journey. Almost overnight, buyers turned to online retail, including manufacturer websites, to explore, research, and purchase just about everything. In fact, [according to numbers from McKinsey](#), many traditionally “in-person” shopping categories saw the largest growth – rising by as much as 35 percent in some cases.

In this new digital ecosystem, B2B manufacturers have a clear opportunity to integrate direct-to-consumer (D2C) strategies that capitalize on changing online behaviors. The digital customer journey looks different. It leverages unique product research strategies, requires a tailored user experience, and includes additional technological barriers that can make or break a brand's digital success. Understanding and addressing each of these new challenges will be key to capitalizing on this rapidly evolving ecosystem in the months and years to come.

The age of the digital consumer is here—so what comes next?

While some B2B manufacturers were prepared for this opportunity, most found themselves identifying the right branded web strategy for the first time. Savvy manufacturers looking to capitalize on the opportunity now have a new three-fold challenge:

-  • Identify the buyer journey preferences that will “stick” moving forward
-  • Create a prioritized list of strategies to meet shopper needs
-  • Execute those strategies effectively to strengthen consumer relationships and build valuable brand equity.

To overcome these challenges, manufacturers must better utilize the consumer data points they already own and apply best practices to move beyond traditional brick-and-mortar retail stores and accelerate their journey toward digital-first consumer strategies. Those who are able to move quickly and meet evolving expectations stand to gain considerably, not just at the bottom line but also in intangible ways such as brand equity and consumer sentiment.

Survey says:

To design a winning digital presence, start with knowing your consumers

To identify the insights that will drive the next phase of the digital consumer revolution, Siteimprove partnered with Adobe and Capgemini to survey 3,025 U.S. consumers. These consumers represent a wide range of online shopping behaviors and frequencies. All respondents included in the survey reported shopping online at least once per month, with nearly 80 percent shopping online two to four times per month.

The following report identifies many of the key trends that will define the future of digital web strategies – and separate the manufacturers who will see rapid success in their new digital ecosystems.



Section 1

The customer journey takes a detour

For years, many manufacturers relied on the same time-tested approach to craft their customer journey: drive consumers to customer service reps and retail stores, where they could ask questions, check prices and, in many cases, experience the product for themselves. But in the digital age, these service intangibles are lost, forcing online shoppers to turn to new ways to make confident buying decisions.

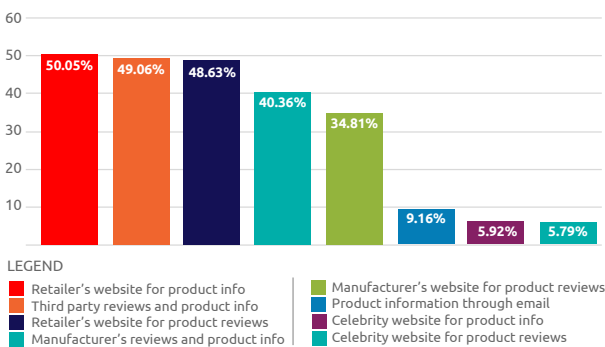
Insight 1: The path to purchase starts online

Without an in-person retail experience to anchor the buying journey, consumers are turning to new trusted sources and experiences to help them navigate options and answer key questions. More specifically, 83 percent of respondents said their online research experience is somewhat important to very important in the purchase process—with 43 percent saying it is very important.

Sources of product research

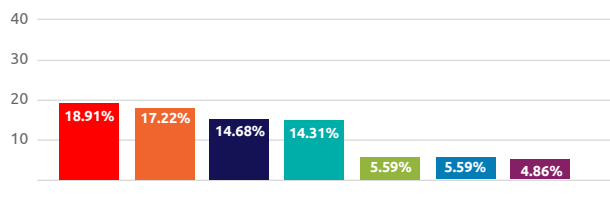
As digitally centered buyer journeys become the norm, interesting patterns are emerging that can help brands predict the approach consumers will take when they head online. Across product categories, manufacturer websites have become a critical point for consumers to gain new information—and even make purchases.

Consulting reviews and product information

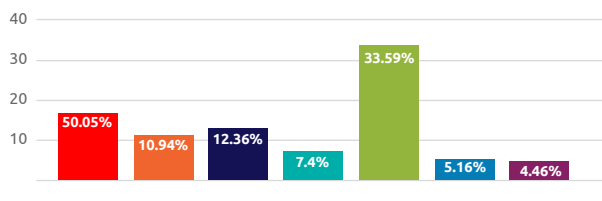


For example, when purchasing high-priced, high-tech, technical, or complicated products, respondents indicated they prefer to buy directly from a manufacturer rather than through a retailer. Only consumer goods, including health, beauty products, and food, are still much more likely to take place at a retailer.

More likely to buy from manufacturer



More likely to buy from the retailer



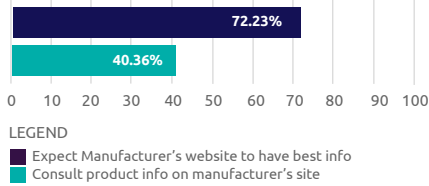
LEGEND

- Higher priced product
- High-tech products
- Customer support needed
- Technical or complex item
- Consumer goods
- Construction materials
- Vehicles

These divergent pathways suggest consumers are attempting to meet different needs when shopping in highly technical categories vs. when they are buying consumer goods. When it comes to big-ticket purchases, consumers now expect manufacturer websites to provide a reliable starting place by helping them collect key information and discover helpful content about technical features to support more informed decision making.

Yet many manufacturer websites may be missing the mark in this regard. While nearly three-quarters of respondents said they expect these benefits from manufacturer websites, far fewer actually consulted product information on a manufacturer's website before making a purchase. To reverse this trend, manufacturers must make websites more appealing destinations for product information and purchase.

Where do consumers get their information?

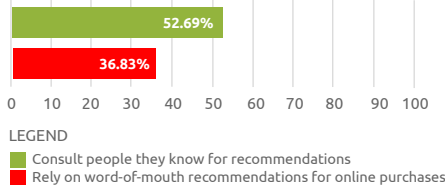


Additionally, investing in innovative search and SEO strategies can help put a manufacturer's brand front and center during the online research phase. This also supports consumer demand for personalized product content that is tailored to their specific questions and concerns.

Insight 2: Word-of-mouth matters more than ever to inform decision making

To overcome the inability to try out new products for themselves, consumers are doubling down on the insights they can gain from others' experiences – via trusted sources and general word-of-mouth (WOM).

Word of mouth matters

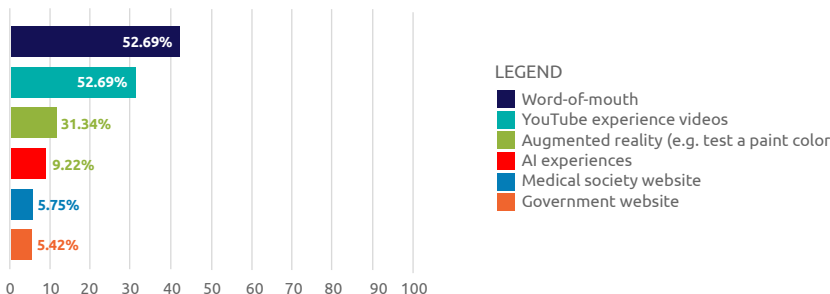


These trends suggest consumers are looking for more than just product information during the research phase; they are also looking for answers to specific questions about use, product reliability, safety, and other key questions. Moreover, they suggest that failing to accommodate consumer expectations with the right mix of helpful content, intuitive navigation, and accessibility features can have a detrimental effect on consumer opinions about your brand and its products.

This WOM has taken on some new forms in the digital world. For one, online influencers have now largely replaced retail employees as a primary pre-purchasing voice. While 52.69 percent of respondents indicated they still rely on word-of-mouth, 31.34 percent also turn to YouTube review videos, 11.47 percent take advantage of augmented-reality tools, and 9.22 percent use AI experiences to collect product information and insights. Additionally, retailer and third-party reviews are both frequently used to garner unbiased product reviews (48.63 and 49.06 percent, respectively).

Easy access to reviews, digital product experiences, and comprehensive information all play a role in turning a prospect into a customer, but they also generate positive consumer sentiment. Online, consumer opinions can spread quickly. When a few customers are unhappy, it can jeopardize the bottom line. In fact, [research from McKinsey](#) shows WOM is the primary factor driving 20 to 50 percent of purchasing decisions. Focusing on creating positive digital experiences is critical for brands to begin building a solid foundation for long-term WOM success.

Asking others, checking YouTube, relying on other sources



Section 2

Evolving customer expectations

The pre-purchase tools and insights consumers rely on in-store are not the same ones they need to make a purchase online. Manufacturers must relearn what their customers want in the digital age and plan their web experiences accordingly.

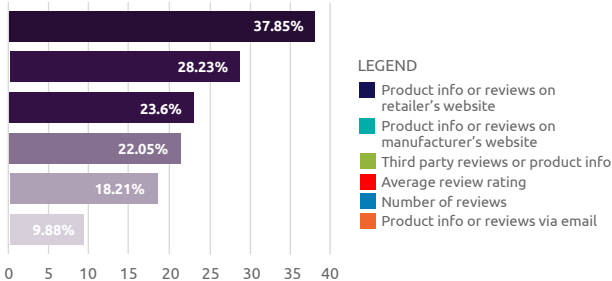
Insight 1: Product information and reviews take the spotlight

As you can see in the charts below, even as traditional purchase influencers continue to play an outsized role in the digital experience—such as WOM at 36.83 percent—retail and manufacturer websites are now expected to do much of the heavy lifting in both collecting and organizing the referrals and information that consumers need.

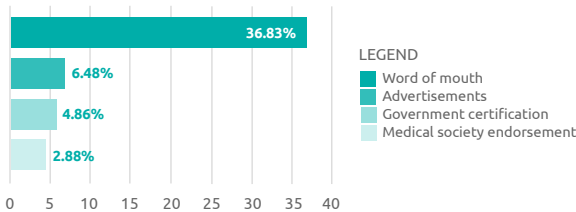
Product information or reviews on a retailer’s website are considered the most important factor in an online purchase decision (37.85 percent). In fact, six of the top seven factors all come directly from the product pages found on a manufacturer or retailer website.

As the functionality of the manufacturer website grows to accommodate all of these new consumer-focused features, the potential for execution failure grows as well. And each time a user experiences website friction—leading to frustration, a customer support request or, worse, abandonment—it can lead to negative experiences that chip away at otherwise positive brand sentiment.

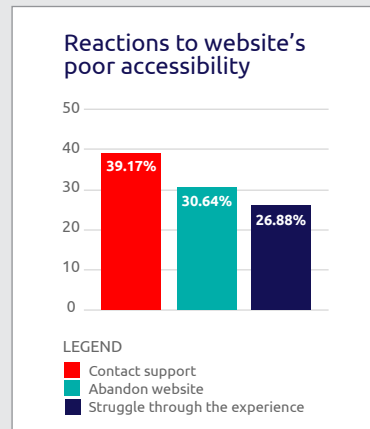
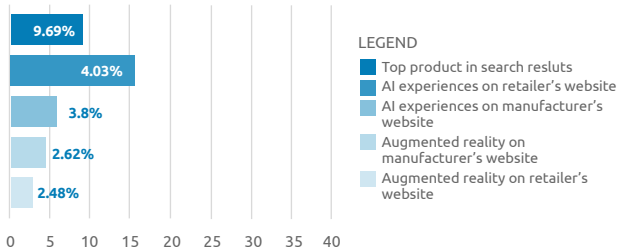
Product information and reviews



Traditional factors



Technical factors



Insight 2: Most manufacturer websites don't meet consumer standards

At the heart of the purchase decision, price remains one of the most critical considerations before a consumer chooses to buy or pass on a product. As the availability of products continues to expand across retailers, resellers, brand websites, and more, price inconsistencies have become a frustrating part of the online search process. More than 60 percent of consumers in this survey reported finding inconsistent product pricing on manufacturer websites compared to retailer sites. In many cases, respondents indicated they were able to access cheaper prices when they shopped for a product from a retailer. Consistency issues like these can slowly erode consumer trust—and they actively discourage users from visiting your branded website.

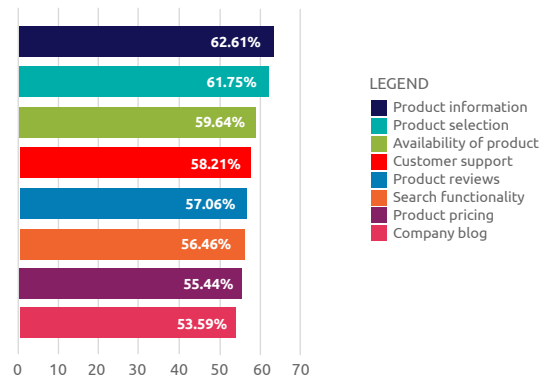
But inconsistent content/pricing is just the beginning of the problem. When consumers do visit manufacturer websites, many reported encountering a host of other issues, with each further jeopardizing the chances of driving a new sale. Some frequently cited website issues include:

- Lack of delivery/return information
- Out-of-stock products
- Poor user experiences.

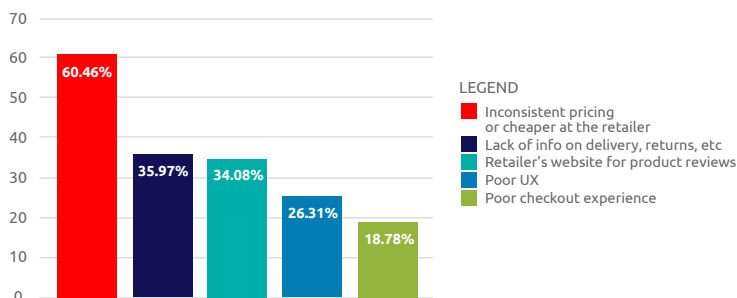
To begin to address these challenges, website administrators must monitor users' experiences looking for pain points, and they need to continue to evolve their content offerings and accessibility standards to reflect expectations. The right mix of website analytics and performance metrics represents a key starting point for identifying the issues holding back branded websites.

As a starting point, here are a few of the top features, based on survey data, that site administrators should prioritize first as they strategize the path forward:

Important for manufacturer's website



Barriers to buying from manufacturer



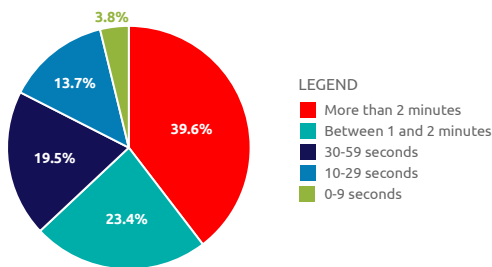
Envisioning web experiences designed for the digital age

To address digital limitations and enhance consumer experiences, manufacturers don't have to look far. Digital-native brands have already spent millions of dollars identifying what works and what doesn't. Now it falls on manufacturers to identify and select the best insights from their web experiences and tailor them to meet the specific needs of their own emerging digital audiences.

Insight 1: It's no surprise that weak UX and poor accessibility are bad for business

New advancements in website technology emerge daily, with each upgrade offering improvements in speed and performance and continuing to separate the websites that "get it" from those that don't. As a result, it doesn't take much website friction to turn potential sales into missed opportunities. In fact, the majority of survey respondents (76.6 percent) indicated they abandon a website with poor UX in less than two minutes. As many as 37 percent of respondents move on after less than one minute. And the risks associated with poor consumer experiences? They are simply too high to ignore. Research commonly suggests consumers are often willing to walk away from a brand after just one bad experience.

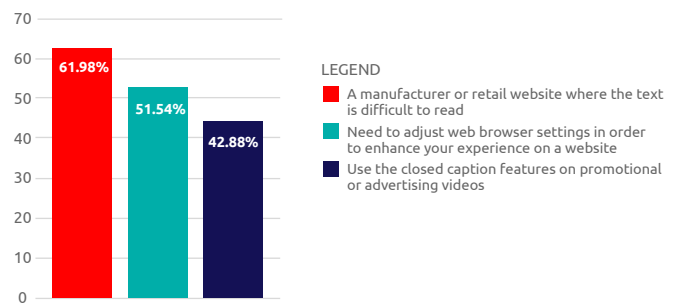
Speed of abandoning website due to bad UX



So, what does a bad consumer web experience look like? While slow page load times and 404 errors often come to mind, website accessibility has also become a common failure point, especially as more consumers shop and conduct product research from their mobile devices. Underserving consumers with disabilities is legally risky and sidesteps a large population of consumers.

Moreover, savvy online retailers recognize that accessibility and usability are inextricably linked. Here are some of the most common accessibility challenges web users experience:

Reactions to website's poor accessibility



Together, UX and accessibility issues represent the single biggest threat to digital success. When carefully designed to work together, these features help drive a more intuitive experience for every user that comes to your website. When left unchecked, accessibility issues can damage sales in the short term and even chip away at a brand's reputation over time.

To address UX and accessibility problems, admins must see what their users see. Abandonment rate is a good starting point, but the ability to replay user sessions and learn from performance analytics can help a brand understand customer expectations at a deeper level, and develop a digital-optimization strategy that meets their needs.

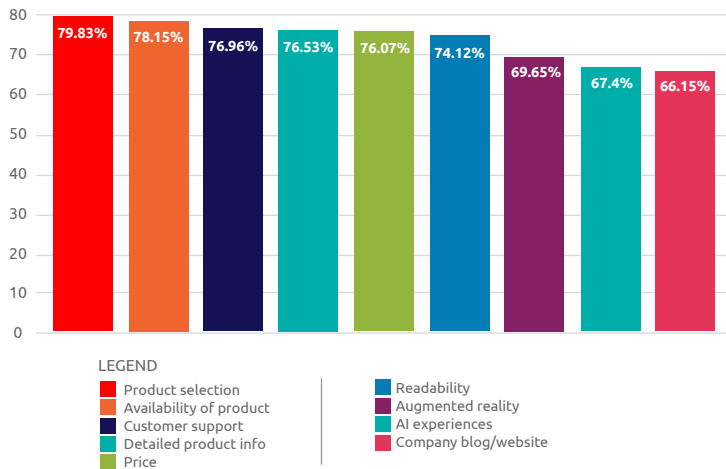
Insight 2: Positive experiences start with product selection and availability, but it goes much deeper

Even though consumers credited product selection (79.83 percent of respondents) and product availability (78.15 percent of respondents) as the most important building blocks to a positive web experience, it's telling that every feature offered to respondents received an overwhelmingly positive response.

While basic features (including product selection, price, product information) would appear to be non-negotiables, additional UX and accessibility features such as customer support, readability, and AI enhancements are not far behind. And remember, when customers experience poor UX, their negative experiences can spread quickly by WOM – deterring other consumers from giving you a chance and damaging brand equity.

Looking to the future of the ecommerce ecosystem, it will be key for manufacturers to prioritize UX-friendly websites that provide the tools and agility they need to keep up with rapidly evolving customer expectations and competitor capabilities.

Building blocks of positive experience



Building brand equity beyond the web

By adopting the right elements from D2C brands, manufacturers can turn positive shopping experiences into positive brand experiences in ways not previously available through a traditional retail model.

Insight 1: Brand reputation matters more than ever

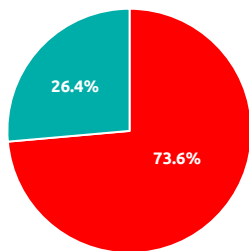
While traditional retail shopping environments augment a manufacturer's brand with customer support and service feature offerings provided by the retailer, the D2C model puts manufacturer brands front and center—for better or for worse. If executed well, D2C can generate a huge payoff.

When asked about the importance of brand name and brand reputation when making purchasing decisions, respondents overwhelmingly agree: it matters.

Brand reputation and brand equity can produce powerful, long-term, marketing advantages. For example, [Shopify found](#) companies with positive brand equity can often:

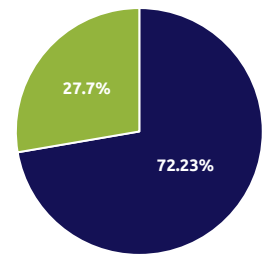
- Charge more for a product
- Leverage that equity to create new product lines and line extensions
- Boost their stock price.

Brand name and reputation



In fact, brands that consistently produce great customer experiences can charge a price premium on products and services. At the same time, negative brand experiences can also have the opposite effects: distracting from otherwise quality products and limiting a consumer's willingness to buy from you.

Expectation of best product information



LEGEND
Other
Product manufacturer's website

Nearly three quarters of respondents said they expect a manufacturer's website to provide the best product information. For manufacturers who fail to deliver the right mix of content, navigation, and accessibility, these poor web experiences are one of the fastest ways to damage consumer trust and even lose out on future sales.

In a competitive, highly saturated product ecosystem, brand equity built on seamless digital experiences can be the difference between the companies that excel in the digital age and those that struggle.

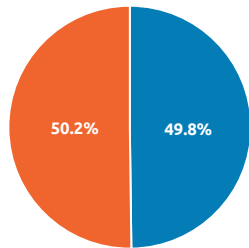


Insight 2: A brand's website offers a powerful place to start building equity

Branded websites also exist as powerful new touchpoints for manufacturers to communicate directly with their customers. As such, consistent, helpful content and UX-optimized designs can turn those touchpoints into exceptional customer experiences. The data shows positive product research experiences can have a big impact on buyer decision-making; more than 80 percent of respondents cited a positive research experience as a critical factor in their purchase decision.

It can also be a powerful place to showcase brand values. For example, 50 percent of respondents rated a company's commitment to diversity and inclusion as an important or very important factor in their decision to purchase a product.

Commitment to diversity and inclusion



LEGEND
■ Other
■ Product manufacturer's website

While content dedicated to these initiatives is important, building diversity and inclusion into your website design can enhance accessibility and demonstrate this commitment in an actionable way.

One in four Americans claim some form of disability, including 61 million adults, according to the CDC. Website accessibility principles deliver frictionless experiences for more users through adaptive web design and closed-captioning services, among many other potential tools and features. Committing to digital accessibility signals your brand's intentions and values toward all users and it can help position your business as a leader in next-generation, inclusive customer experiences.



Conclusion

The digital consumer age is here. Now what?

In the digital ecosystem, branded web experiences are becoming a crucial part of the buyer journey. As consumers move online, manufacturer websites are one of the first sources of information consumers look to for product information and other helpful content, and it's an area where many manufacturers have significant room to grow.

Consumer needs are changing

With a changing customer journey comes new customer needs. In the digital consumer age, website performance and accessibility can act as a powerful fast track—or roadblock—to sales. When consumers have trouble navigating your website, they are quick to give up and move on. As web experiences across the board continue to improve, manufacturers must identify and prioritize the consumer needs that will lead to more seamless, streamlined buyer journeys.

Additionally, as corporate responsibility becomes an increasing topic of conversation, manufacturer websites present an opportunity to showcase virtuous intent – and back it up. Creating an accessible website, providing detailed product information, and ensuring transparent practices all take a step in the direction of trust for consumers.

UX has become a powerful purchase predictor

Manufacturers need to provide a frictionless, accessible website that delivers an exceptional digital experience to retain and grow customers. And customers won't waste their time on sites that do anything less. With the right set of tools, manufacturers can begin to gather analytics data on page speed, customer frustration or drop-off points, search strategies, and more to refine these digital experiences. Once excused from exceptional UX's rigor, manufacturers now need to take a closer look if they wish to keep positive WOM buzzing.

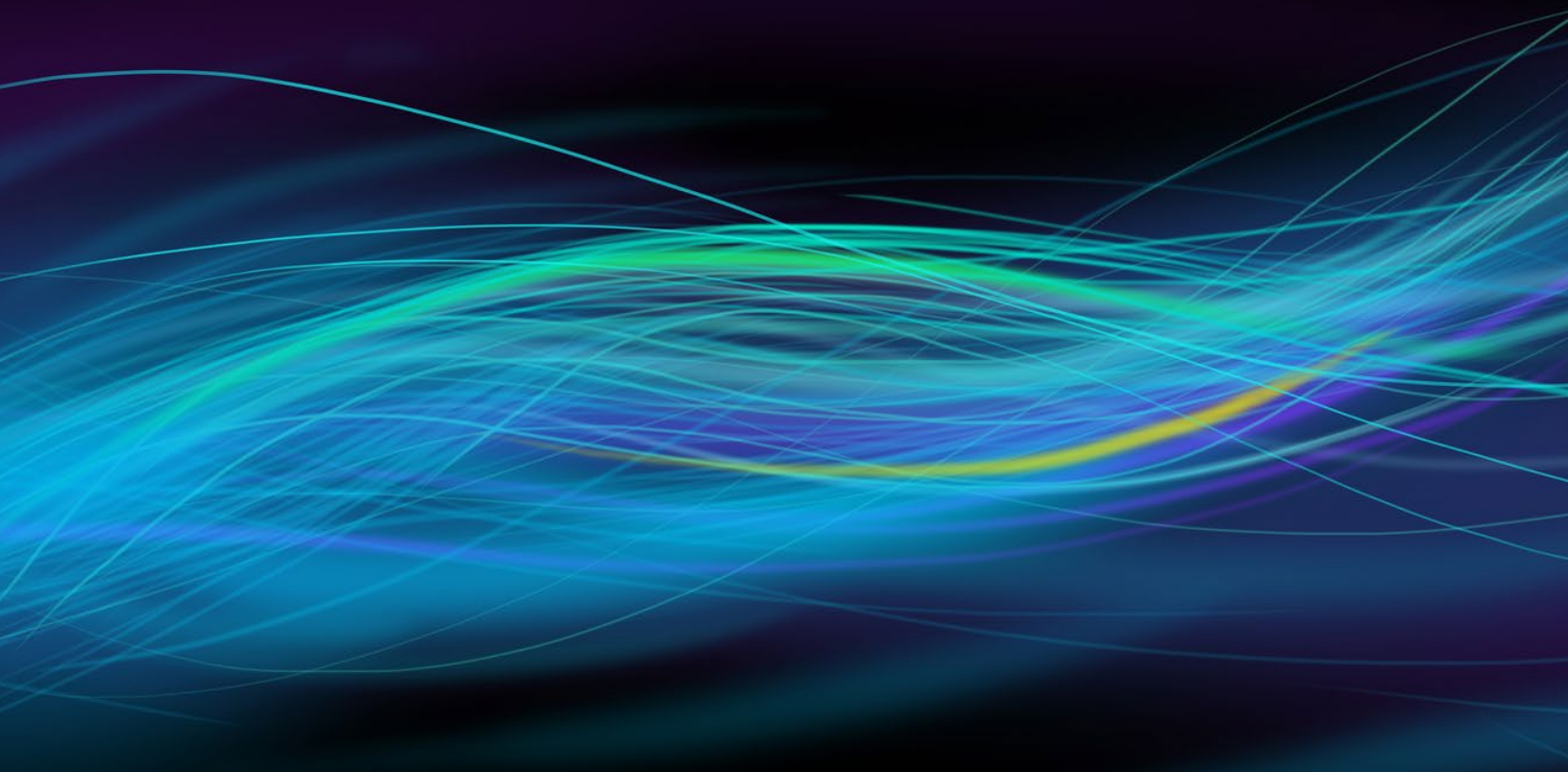
This is an opportunity to set the standard for branded web experiences

D2C experiences can have a big impact on brand sentiment. Positive experiences, consistent UX, and inclusive, accessible web experiences can all build brand equity and help companies take the lead in the race for customer loyalty like never before. Those that lean into these changes and move quickly to master these digital capabilities stand to gain a considerable advantage as digital consumer behaviors continue to rewrite the buyer journey.

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