

Columbus®

The retailer's
guide to 2025

Welcome to “The retailer’s guide to 2025”

Retail has never moved faster than between 2020 and 2025. The convergence of rising customer expectations, economic uncertainty, and swift technological progress is rewriting the rules of retail in real time. To succeed, retailers must not only adapt, but they must also lead in these rapidly changing times.

“The Retailer’s Guide to 2025” is here for the second year in a row to support you on that journey. It captures the most critical trends, technologies, and best practices shaping this year’s retail landscape. From generative AI and Order Management Systems (OMS) to loyalty, sustainability, and retail media. This guide is not about buzzwords, it’s about creating the most business value for you.

At Columbus, we believe that innovation should be practical, and transformation should be measurable. In 2025, retailers are expected to deliver faster, more personalised, and more sustainable customer experiences, often with fewer resources. That’s where strategy, technology, and execution must align.

This guide is based on our hands-on experience with leading retailers, insights from industry events like NRF 2025 in New York, D-Congress in Gothenburg and Shoptalk Europe in Barcelona. As well as deep expertise across digital commerce, unified operations, and overall customer experiences. You’ll find real-life examples, actionable frameworks, and emerging technologies that can solve business value now and create more awareness around retail challenges and opportunities throughout the year.

Whether you’re navigating the next wave of AI, optimising operations through OMS, or rethinking your omnichannel model, this guide is designed to help you take bold, confident steps forward.

Let’s make 2025 the year of smarter retail.

Happy reading



Ole Johan Lindø

Industry Practice Lead, Retail Columbus

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Chapter 1

Customer demands in 2025 – Personal, purposeful, and convenient

1



Retail in 2025 is no longer just about price or product. Today's customers expect relevance, transparency, and immediacy. They want personalised offers, consistent experiences, sustainable practices — and they want it all now. Retailers must rise to meet these expectations with clarity, consistency, and conviction.

The retail landscape is now defined by one constant: customer expectations that never stand still. Consumers today want more than seamless transactions; they want seamless lives. They crave experiences that are curated, ethical, and instantly gratifying. Their loyalty is fluid, and their standards are high.

This generation of shoppers expects retailers to deliver relevance, transparency, and convenience in every interaction. Personalisation is no longer seen as a novelty; it's an expectation. From product recommendations and marketing messages to fulfilment options and customer service, everything must feel custom-made. The brands that succeed are those that listen deeply, adapt and respond in real time.

The experience mandate

Sometimes it might feel like we are living in the age of "experience over everything." Whether shopping online, in-store, or on a hybrid path, customers expect brands to anticipate their needs and remove friction from every interaction. Loyalty is no longer tied to discounts alone. It's driven by:

- **Personalisation:** Tailored product recommendations, curated collections, and localised offers.
- **Transparency:** Clear product origins, environmental impact, and fair pricing.
- **Convenience:** Fast checkout, flexible delivery, and real-time customer support.

• **Brands that deliver** value before the transaction earn trust after it.

• **Empowered employees** = Satisfied shoppers

Therefore, retailers need to address the growing demand for value-driven engagement. Shoppers want to align with brands that reflect their personal beliefs, whether that's sustainability, inclusivity, or local sourcing. This doesn't just apply to product development or messaging. It extends to how a company treats its employees, manages its supply chain, and takes accountability for its environmental impact.



The emergence of "phygital" retail, where physical and digital channels blend effortlessly, means customer journeys now defy traditional boundaries. Shoppers might browse in-store, compare online, complete purchases via mobile, and pick up at curbside. This fluidity requires retailers to integrate channels, unify data, and ensure that the customer never has to start over.

Customer service, too, has evolved. No longer confined to reactive support, it now plays a proactive role in shaping the entire experience. Brands that empower their staff with real-time data, mobile tools, and AI-driven assistance are transforming the store floor into a strategic advantage. Empowered employees build trust, reduce friction, and create the kind of high-touch moments that technology alone cannot replicate.

In 2025, the most forward-thinking retailers:

- Equip their teams with mobile tools and AI-driven insights.
- Train staff on soft skills, sustainability, and technology.
- Build cultures of autonomy, enabling faster decision-making and personalised service.

Speed remains a crucial factor in conversion and loyalty. Delivery expectations are higher than ever. Customers want the ability to choose how and when they receive their purchases, whether that's same-day, scheduled delivery, or click-and-collect. But speed isn't just logistical—it's also about the ease and intuitiveness of the entire shopping experience. Time-saving design, efficient checkout, and hassle-free returns all contribute to perceived value.

And yet, even with all these demands, customers remain willing to reward the brands that get it right. In 2025, loyalty is more fragile, but also more valuable. It is earned through thoughtful design, relevant content, shared purpose, and consistent delivery. It is sustained not by gimmicks, but by authenticity.

”Shoppers want to align with brands that reflect their personal beliefs, whether that’s sustainability, inclusivity, or local sourcing.”

The best retailers understand this is not a challenge to be solved once. It's an ongoing relationship to nurture. They are embedding customer-centric thinking into their strategy, operations, and culture. Because in 2025, being truly customer-first is the only way forward. Retailers increasingly recognise that great customer experience starts with empowered staff. Frontline employees are not just transaction handlers, they are brand ambassadors, advisors, and experience builders.

Retailers like Lush, Allbirds, and Eobuwie (Poland's digital-first footwear retailer) are setting the tone by integrating staff seamlessly into the omnichannel journey.



The loyalty paradox

Today's consumers value loyalty but they demand it be earned. That means going beyond point-based programs to build emotional connections and consistent value delivery. It's all about emotional connection, shared values, and meaningful engagement.

Consumers today want to feel understood, respected, and rewarded in ways that go far beyond a discount code.

” Consumers today want to feel understood, respected, and rewarded in ways that go far beyond a discount code.”





To evolve, loyalty strategies must:

- Reflect customer values, especially sustainability and ethics.
- Offer exclusive experiences, not just transactional benefits.
- Leverage real-time data to stay relevant and contextual.

Brands like Nike and Starbucks continue to elevate loyalty through exclusive content, experiential access, and member-only perks that truly resonate with their communities.

This shift marks the heart of the loyalty paradox: customers want to be loyal, but only to the brands that prove they deserve it. That means delivering personalised experiences, demonstrating ethical responsibility, and showing up consistently online and in-store.

Why time still matters

In a year where it is apparent that customers expect “right now,” time remains a strategic differentiator. Fast delivery, quick answers, and responsive service separate the best from the rest. But time also means respecting the customer’s time—don’t make them work for answers, search endlessly, or wait unnecessarily.

Final thought

Customers in 2025 are co-creators of the retail experience. Meeting their expectations requires more than just great products. It demands connected experiences, ethical practices, and operational agility. Time, trust, and technology are your currency. Use them wisely.

Innovators like Saks OFF 5TH, Office Depot, and Decathlon stand out by reducing delays, streamlining fulfilment, and building trust through dependability.

Best-in-class retailers



Digitally empowered footwear stores with tablet-assisted purchases, foot-scanning tech, and real-time online inventory access.



Merges sustainability and simplicity across all customer touchpoints.



Continues to lead with staff empowerment and seamless tech integration in-store.



Remains a leader in loyalty and mobile-first convenience.



Chapter 2

Sustainability at scale – From greenwashing to grounded action





Sustainability in retail has officially moved past trend status. In 2025, it's a business imperative. Climate-conscious consumers, tightening legislation, and the environmental impact of global logistics are placing sustainability front and centre. But today, it's not enough to simply talk the talk—retailers must walk it, measure it, and prove it.

In 2025, customers are holding brands accountable, legislators are tightening regulations, and shareholders are asking tougher questions. As the environmental and social stakes rise, retailers are being called to move beyond glossy promises and into measurable, operational change.

This evolution isn't just about reducing emissions or banning plastic bags. It's about rethinking how products are designed, sourced, fulfilled, and returned. It's about balancing the realities of commercial success with the moral imperative to do better for the planet, for people, and for long-term business resilience.

Retailers leading this charge have adopted sustainability, not as a side project but as a guiding principle across every part of the value chain. They're embedding circularity into design processes, investing in low-impact materials, and partnering with suppliers that meet higher standards. And they're building systems that can not only track sustainability metrics but turn them into levers for smarter decision-making.

One of the biggest challenges lies in reverse logistics. Returns continue to rise, particularly in fashion and lifestyle categories, and with them comes a hidden carbon cost. Packaging, transportation, and repackaging all contribute to a system that is expensive, inefficient, and environmentally harmful. Retailers that tackle returns from a sustainability perspective by offering smarter sizing tools, more accurate product visuals, and localised restocking are reducing waste while improving customer satisfaction.

“One of the biggest challenges lies in reverse logistics. Returns continue to rise, particularly in fashion and lifestyle categories, and with them comes a hidden carbon cost.”



“Retailers leading this charge have adopted sustainability not as a side project but as a guiding principle across every part of the value chain.”



Beyond eco-marketing: Building circular value

Circular business models are also gaining momentum. Brands like Patagonia, Arket, and Norrøna are leading with repair services, take-back schemes, and resale platforms. These efforts not only extend the product lifecycle but also create new revenue streams and deeper engagement with values-driven consumers. And, for emerging players, designing with circularity in mind from day one is no longer radical. It's smart business.

Rather than a linear model of produce-sell-dispose, forward-looking retailers are designing systems to extend the lifecycle of products and minimise waste. This includes:

- Offering resale and recommerce models, like Patagonia's 'Worn Wear' or Zalando 'Pre-owned' and dedicated apparel recommerce retailers or marketplaces such as The RealReal and Vinted
- Investing in rental platforms and repair services, as seen with H&M, Arket, and Norrøna.
- Launching take-back and recycling initiatives with in-store drop-off points.

Utilising store space as repair centres e.g. Levis, Arc'teryx and Patagonia These initiatives not only reduce environmental impact, but they also strengthen brand affinity and customer loyalty. Consumers increasingly prefer brands that support circular practices and make it easy to shop sustainably.

Sustainability at the forefront

The pressure isn't only coming from consumers. Regulations like the EU's Digital Product Passport (DPP) and Corporate Sustainability Reporting Directive (CSRD) are forcing transparency. Retailers must now trace and report everything from material origin to labour conditions, CO₂ footprint to disposal options. Those who are prepared, like Kappahl with its supply chain traceability by using tools like TrusTrace and the Higg Index to assess and communicate impact. Or Asket, with its full lifecycle disclosures, aren't just staying compliant. They're earning trust.

Sustainability in 2025 is also about technology. AI and data platforms are now helping brands measure impact in real time, automate carbon scoring, and simulate the environmental trade-offs of different fulfilment options. These tools turn intention into action and action into business advantage.

At its core, sustainability is no longer a communications exercise. It's an operational discipline. Retailers that build greener, smarter, more circular systems are finding that doing good and doing well are not at odds, they're in alignment.

In 2025, the retailers who are transparent, adaptive, and genuinely committed to sustainability won't just win hearts. They'll future proof their businesses.

The brands that are winning on this front have evolved their sustainability strategies from marketing narratives to operational blueprints. They recognise that responsible retail must be embedded into every function, from product development and sourcing to fulfilment and returns.

Tackling the returns challenge

Returns are a growing problem, financially and environmentally. The increase in online purchases, paired with flexible return policies, has created mountains of reverse logistics that strain operations and inflate carbon emissions. In 2025, retailers must address returns not just as a cost centre, but as a sustainability priority.

Solutions might include:

- Smarter sizing tools and fit visualisers to reduce unnecessary returns.
- Local restocking and consolidation of return shipments.
- AI-driven return predictions that help reduce returns rates through better product recommendations.

Best-in-class retailers



Combining AI, OMS, and sustainability scoring to optimise the delivery and return experience.



A pioneer in product repairs, with spare parts and DIY repair guides supporting long-term use.



A circular fashion brand utilising deadstock fabrics, transparent sourcing, and local production.



Leveraging supply chain traceability and lifecycle tools to align internal practices with EU legislation.

Customer case: Kappahl

Kappahl utilises the Higg Index, a suite of tools developed by CASCALE (former Sustainable Apparel Coalition), to assess and improve its sustainability performance across various aspects of the supply chain, including:

Environmental impact: The Higg Facility Environmental Module (Higg FEM) evaluates energy use, water use, waste management, and chemical management in manufacturing facilities, identifying opportunities for improvement.

Social impact: The Higg Facility Social & Labor Module (Higg FSLM) assesses workers' rights, health and safety, wages, and working hours, promoting fair labor practices and enhancing worker wellbeing.

Brand performance: The Higg Brand & Retail Module (Higg BRM) examines environmental and social impacts throughout the value chain, including product design, sourcing, logistics, and consumer use, guiding brands to improve their sustainability efforts.

“The Higg Index provides valuable insights into the environmental and social performance of fashion brands like Kappahl”

To further improve its sustainability efforts, Kappahl has implemented TrusTrace, a digital platform designed to provide comprehensive visibility across the supply chain. TrusTrace offers several benefits:

Supply chain mapping: TrusTrace enables Kappahl to map its entire supply chain, from raw materials to finished products, ensuring complete transparency.

Supplier collaboration: TrusTrace facilitates better collaboration with suppliers, allowing for information sharing and tracking progress toward sustainability goals.

Regulatory compliance: TrusTrace helps Kappahl meet upcoming EU regulations, such as the Forced Labour Regulation and the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive, by providing detailed visibility of the supply chain.

Consumer transparency: By using TrusTrace, Kappahl can offer customers detailed information about the factories involved in producing their purchases, including the name, address, number of workers, and parent company, enhancing DPPs are crucial to the brand trust and loyalty.



Kappahl
Read the full story

Explore



“DPPs are crucial to the fashion industry’s shift towards sustainability. Textile products will be among the first to comply with DPP regulations, underscoring the urgency for retailers to adapt”

Final thought

In 2025, sustainability is not a separate strategy, it’s the lens through which every decision must pass. From assortment planning to logistics and returns, retailers must measure, optimise, and innovate with the planet in mind.

The retailers leading this movement aren’t perfect. But they are transparent, intentional, and constantly evolving. In a world where consumers vote with their values, sustainability is no longer a differentiator. It’s a license to operate.



Chapter 3

Retail media matures, but are we there yet?

3



Retail media has evolved from a buzzword into one of the most impactful revenue streams in modern commerce. In 2025, it represents a major opportunity for brands and retailers alike, offering new ways to monetise digital traffic, enhance the shopping experience, and drive margin-rich growth. But as enthusiasm builds, so does the need for realism. Because while the US and UK markets are already scaling their retail media efforts, the Nordic landscape presents a different reality.

In the US, retail media has exploded. Giants like Amazon, Walmart, and Target are generating billions annually through sophisticated in-house media networks. These platforms offer brands high-intent audiences, first-party data, and closed-loop attribution at scale. It's no wonder retail media has become a priority in boardrooms across North America. But in Scandinavia, the infrastructure, investment logic, and retail maturity levels still vary widely.

At its core, retail media is mainly about turning owned retail spaces, both physical and digital, into high-performance advertising platforms. With first-party data, detailed purchase histories, and behavioural insights at their fingertips, retailers are uniquely positioned to offer brands something no third-party platform can: high-intent shoppers at the moment of decision.

So, while the dream of turning shopper data into ad revenue is compelling, Nordic businesses must proceed thoughtfully. For instance, during the largest ecommerce fair in Scandinavia, D-Congress, several sessions highlighted that retail media is gaining ground in Sweden, with digital ad revenue hitting \$45.82M in 2023 and projected to soar to \$674.2M in 2024 (Statista). Yet, few Swedish retailers have fully embraced it, signalling major untapped potential.

However, the technological foundations for retail media in the region are still relatively new, and the cost of entry remains high. What's more, many Swedish and Nordic brands lack the sales volume required to justify major investments in custom retail media platforms. That creates a dangerous tension: companies may feel pressured to act quickly, either delaying altogether or rushing in with fragmentary solutions that can't scale.



Expert's Blog Review

Why you shouldn't rush into retail media

“For consumers, the best retail media experiences don't feel like ads at all. They're helpful, relevant, and seamlessly integrated into the shopping journey.”

The result? A risk of misallocated budgets, unproven return on ad spend (ROAS), and missed strategic opportunities. The entry level for retail media has decreased substantially over the last year, making it easier for smaller markets and companies to start experimenting. But retailers and brands in Scandinavia need to balance ambition with strategy. The market is changing quickly, more standardised and cost-effective tools are emerging, offering plug-and-play retail media capabilities that were unthinkable just a year ago. That means the time to explore is now, but not to overcommit.

Being “retail media ready” means understanding where your business stands and what role media can play in your wider strategy. Begin with a candid evaluation: does your current traffic volume, data quality, and brand demand justify the investment? Can your organisation support cross-functional media operations, from content to analytics to sales? Smart businesses could start with pilot programs to test media placements on specific product categories, using loyalty data to inform campaigns, and learning which formats and platforms generate measurable returns. These early experiments might also help validate assumptions, refine messaging, and build internal capability without overexposing risk.

Take these key steps to prepare your company to use retail media effectively:

- Conduct a thorough analysis of your current marketing strategy. See where retail media can add value. Strategic and financial analysis provides a good basis for making the right business decisions.
- Start with small-scale pilot projects targeting specific products or markets. Implement trial-and-error testing to try out various approaches and fine-tune your efforts by adapting your messaging. These tests can give you an indication of the effectiveness of retail media and provide valuable insights to support future decisions.
- Scale up gradually. Use what you’ve learned from the pilot projects to scale up your activities. Ensure that the data collected from the pilots are used to adjust and optimise your campaigns.

Success in this space will automatically require more than ad space, it demands real operational capability. Leading retail media networks are therefore hiring editorial and creative teams, partnering with ad tech platforms, and offering brands closed-loop reporting. The ability to tie ad exposure directly to sales conversion is transforming how marketers allocate budgets and pushing retail media to the top of the funnel planning conversation.

Retailers casted as storytellers

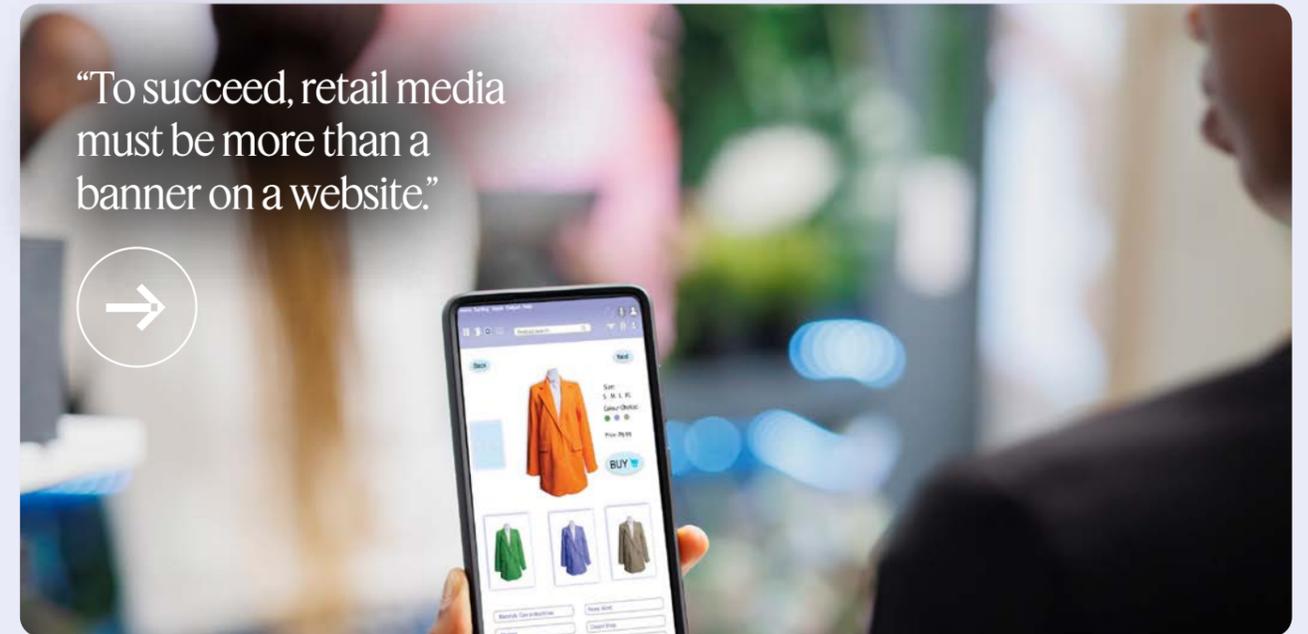
For consumers, the best retail media experiences don’t feel like ads at all. They’re helpful, relevant, and seamlessly integrated into the shopping journey. Think contextual search placements, personalised homepage takeovers, or product videos on mobile. The key is to add value, not noise.

Retailers are also extending their media footprint into new channels. In-store screens, self-checkout displays, loyalty apps, and even connected TV are being used to deliver targeted brand messaging with measurable outcomes. Meanwhile, AI is enabling real-time optimisation of media content, placement, and targeting. Allowing retailers to maximise performance across formats and touchpoints.

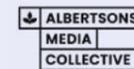
Therefore, retail media isn’t just a monetisation strategy, it’s a digital transformation accelerator. It forces cross-functional collaboration, better data infrastructure, and a more agile marketing mindset. And it’s giving retailers a new role in the brand ecosystem: not just as sellers, but as storytellers.

In 2025, the maturity of retail media will be measured not by impressions, but by how well it integrates into the broader customer journey. The most effective retail media strategies deliver value for all parties: the retailer, the brand, and, most importantly, the end-customer. While scale helps, even mid-sized and niche retailers can succeed by activating first-party data, building the right tech stack, and securing strong ad partnerships.

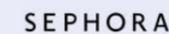
Mid-market retailers and category specialists might be eager to enter the space by leveraging marketplace models, loyalty programs, and ecommerce platforms that provide the reach and relevance needed to attract their audiences. Although, it does require a combination of market timing, strategic patience, and organisational readiness. Jumping in without a clear business case or operational plan can be costly. But moving too slowly could mean missing the window to lead in an emerging space.



Best-in-class retailers



A strong example of a grocer turning customer loyalty data into high-performing ad targeting.



Blends media and content beautifully across its ecommerce and app experience, driving discovery and conversion.



Offers brands opportunities to advertise through the loyalty program, app, and in-store displays — creating a seamless ecosystem.



Built its own internal advertising platform for marketplace sellers to bid on placements with full-funnel analytics.

Final thought

For retailers with strong digital infrastructure and trusted customer relationships, retail media can be more than just advertising; it can be part of a centralised business model. To succeed, retail media must be more than a banner on a website. Which requires a dedicated media team with ad ops, creative, and analytics capabilities. As well as integration with product, marketing, ecommerce departments and clear value propositions for brand partners.

Therefore, retail media can in many ways feel daunting for smaller or niche retailers, but they don’t have to go it alone. By teaming up with peers to combine inventory, data, and tech, they can boost scale and appeal to advertisers, without compromising control or profitability.

Whether you’re inspired by the US pioneers or exploring how it fits in the Scandinavian context, the advice is the same: start small, plan smart, and build momentum. Because when the infrastructure catches up, those who’ve done the work early will be the ones ready to scale fast and grow sustainably.

The loyalty paradox – Identity, time, and values

4



Loyalty in 2025 is no longer a simple equation of points and perks. Consumers today seek more than rewards, they seek resonance. They want to align with brands that continuously reflect their values, prioritise their time, and recognise them as individuals, not transactions. The paradox? Loyalty is harder to earn than ever, yet more essential to long-term business value.

While loyalty programs remain a cornerstone of customer retention, their role has evolved dramatically. Retailers who crack the loyalty code understand that it's not about pushing offers. It's mainly about earning attention, trust, and emotional affinity over time. In a landscape filled with competition and noise, loyalty is a relationship, not a program.

Thus, modern loyalty programs are evolving into ecosystems. Take NikePlus, for instance. What began as a rewards system has become a community platform. Members receive early access to products, exclusive content, personal styling, and fitness tools. Loyalty isn't just incentivised; it's nurtured through shared purpose.

Customers are drawn to brands that reflect their identity and values. Authenticity, transparency, and convenience have therefore become non-negotiables. And as time becomes more precious, so too does the role of trust: loyalty is built one dependable interaction at a time.

“Customers are drawn to brands that reflect their identity and values. Authenticity, transparency, and convenience have therefore become non-negotiables.”

Today's shoppers are also more selective, no longer satisfied with generic rewards or one-size-fits-all perks. They want loyalty programs that feel personal, relevant, and reciprocal. Retailers are responding by redesigning their programs to go beyond transactions, using data to tailor experiences, rewards, and content to everyone. Loyalty must now be earned through meaningful engagement, not just data collection.

The most effective programs in 2025 are those that reflect a deep understanding of customer preferences and return that insight in the form of convenience and exclusivity.



Beyond award points: Building emotional loyalty
Transactional loyalty schemes still have a place, especially in sectors like grocery and pharmacy. But they are table stakes. The next frontier is emotional loyalty, formed through relevance, shared purpose, and consistently positive experiences.

Leading retailers are:

- Delivering personalised content and rewards that reflect preferences and purchase behaviour.
- Creating exclusive communities and experiences to deepen engagement.
- Supporting social or environmental causes their customers care about.

Take Nike: with 'NikePlus', the brand offers more than discounts. It provides exclusive content, workout access, and early product releases, making loyalty feel like membership.

Time as a loyalty driver

Today, loyalty is often earned by saving customers time, not just money. Retailers that streamline browsing, simplify checkout, and guarantee fast delivery often outperform those with elaborate rewards programs.

- Office Depot's 20-minute pickup promise ensures convenience over complexity.
- Amazon Prime remains the benchmark for frictionless loyalty, combining speed, value, and content into one membership.

Aligning with customer values

More than ever, customers want to buy from brands that reflect who they are or who they aspire to be. This means transparency in sourcing, labor, and impact, driving authenticity in purpose-driven messaging and showing that you act – not just provide statements, on social and environmental issues.

Brands like Allbirds and Asket build loyalty through radical transparency, ethical production, and clear commitments to sustainability. For their customers, loyalty is a vote of alignment, not convenience.

Data-driven loyalty design

The most successful loyalty strategies in 2025 are built on data. Not just collecting it but acting on it. Using behavioural insights to:

- Predict next-best offers
- Personalise communication channels
- Incentivise long-term value over short-term spend

This data intelligence must be balanced with privacy and consent. Shoppers will continue to demand control over how their data is used and reward brands that respect those boundaries with trust.

Best-in-class retailers



A masterclass in app-driven loyalty, personalised rewards, and seamless omnichannel ordering.



Offers emotional connection through content, community, and exclusive access—not just discounts.



Enhances loyalty with personalised health insights and integrated services.



Combines loyalty with AI-driven personalisation, in-store events, and expert guidance.

Final thought

In 2025, loyalty is not something you can buy. It's something you build, with every click, visit, purchase, and message. True loyalty stems from relevance, recognition, and resonance. Retailers that lead in loyalty aren't those with the flashiest programs, but those who understand what their customers value most and deliver it consistently. Because in today's world, brand loyalty is earned one moment at a time.



Chapter 5

AI in Retail 2.0 – From pilots to productivity

5



In 2024, generative AI took centre stage as one of the most talked-about innovations in retail. But in 2025, the conversation has shifted from “what’s possible?” to “what’s working?” With nearly every major retailer experimenting with AI in some form, the winners are no longer the early adopters, they’re the fast integrators.

Retailers are no longer asking “What can AI do?” They’re asking, “How do we make it work at scale, with impact, and at speed?” This shift from exploration to execution has created a new frontier for AI in retail. It’s no longer confined to experimental labs or proof-of-concept demos. AI is becoming deeply embedded in the operational fabric of leading retailers, transforming how they forecast demand, engage customers, personalise content, and empower employees.

Today, AI in retail is less about flashy outputs and more about quiet excellence. It’s in the algorithms that optimise stock replenishment. The models that predict size preferences to reduce returns. The assistants that support store staff in real time. And the co-pilots that help marketers generate hyper-relevant campaign content in minutes, not days.

Multimodal AI, capable of interpreting text, image, voice, and even video has opened the door to richer, more intuitive customer experiences. Shoppers can now search using photos, chat with bots that understand context, or receive styling recommendations that adapt to both the weather and their purchase history.

“Today, AI in retail is less about flashy outputs and more about quiet excellence.”

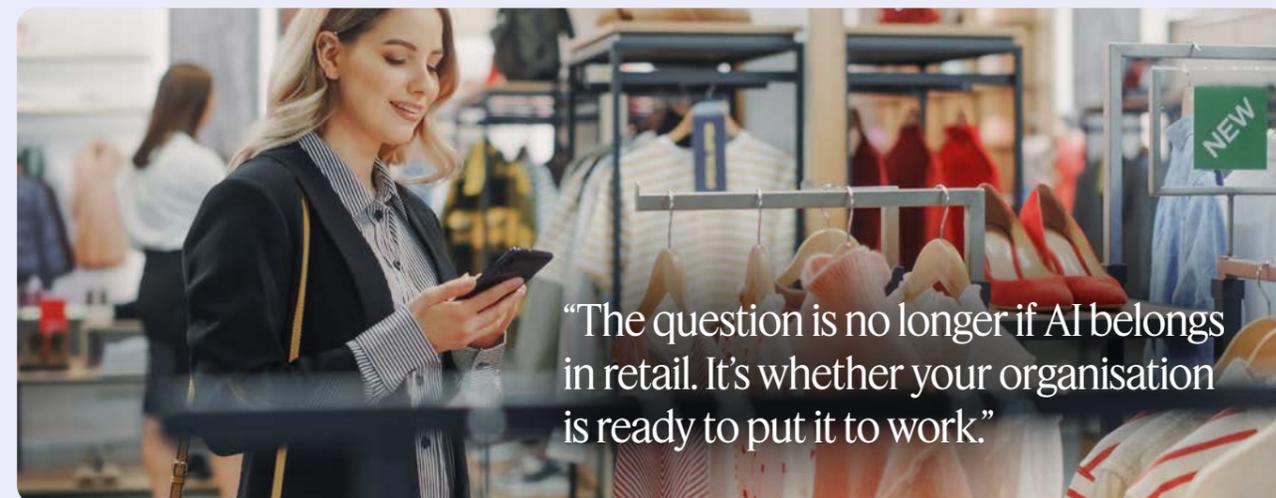
But for all its potential, AI still fails in many retail organisations. Not because the technology isn’t ready but because the organisation isn’t. The biggest barriers are not technical, they’re cultural and operational.

AI asks businesses to work differently. It blurs traditional roles, requires cross-functional collaboration, and challenges teams to trust data over instinct. Too often, AI is launched as a project without business alignment, stakeholder ownership, or the necessary change management. Models are trained but never deployed. Dashboards are built but never used. And employees are left out of the loop.

“AI asks businesses to work differently. It blurs traditional roles, requires cross-functional collaboration, and challenges teams to trust data over instinct.”

Retailers that succeed treat AI not as a tool but as a team member. They invest in enablement, rethink workflows, and create feedback loops between users and systems. They set clear goals tied to business outcomes and measure progress in terms of adoption and value—not just outputs.

The leading AI retailers of 2025 are finding ways to pair high-tech with high-touch. Ulta Beauty uses AI to power virtual consultations but anchors them in personalised, human service. Zalando leverages AI for styling and returns but couples it with a deep understanding of customer behaviour. Decathlon integrates AI into sustainability efforts, using it to forecast demand and reduce overproduction.



“The question is no longer if AI belongs in retail. It’s whether your organisation is ready to put it to work.”

AI is also going green. As the environmental footprint of digital services comes under scrutiny, retailers are exploring “green AI”—models designed for energy efficiency and low carbon impact. Therefore, choosing the right AI architecture is no longer just a technical decision, it’s also about taking sustainability into account.

In 2025, AI won’t win customers on its own. But the retailers who use it to streamline operations, scale creativity, and amplify human strengths will gain a serious competitive edge. The question is no longer if AI belongs in retail. It’s whether your organisation is ready to put it to work.

This year, the most competitive retailers are moving beyond pilot projects to embed AI directly into their operations, customer journeys, and employee experiences. The focus is no longer simply generative content or chatbots. Retailers are investing in AI that supports business-critical outcomes—from store operations and merchandising to customer service and sustainability.

What’s new in AI for 2025?

AI’s evolution is no longer about novelty, it’s about orchestration. Here’s what’s changing:

Multimodal AI: Retailers are now harnessing AI that can understand and generate across text, voice, and image. This unlocks richer product discovery, smarter styling assistants, and more intuitive customer service.

Autonomous agents: AI bots now act independently to manage inventory alerts, reorder low-stock products, optimize pricing, or escalate service issues—freeing human staff for high-value work.

AI co-pilots for employees: Store associates are getting real-time assistance from AI—whether it’s helping answer complex product questions or identifying upsell opportunities during interactions.

Generative design & merchandising: AI tools are supporting faster trend analysis, predictive fashion forecasting, and even initial product concepting—particularly in fast fashion and DTC brands.

Green AI: As sustainability gains ground, retailers are exploring AI models optimised for low carbon emissions, energy efficiency, and responsible data use.

Why most AI still fails: Adaptive > Technical challenges

Despite the wave of AI tools available, many implementations still stall. Not because the tech doesn’t work, but because the adaptive change it requires hasn’t happened. In many cases, retailers underestimate the cultural, organisational, and operational shifts needed to support AI. Here are the most common blockers:

- Lack of internal alignment on how AI connects to business outcomes
- Inadequate training and enablement for front-line employees
- Poor data governance and fragmented tech stacks
- Unrealistic expectations of AI as a magic bullet, not a co-pilot



The best-in-class retailers don't just install AI, they integrate it culturally and operationally. They're rethinking workflows, reskilling staff, and treating AI like a strategic partner, not a plug-in. It is a known fact that AI disrupts traditional workflows. It asks people to trust algorithms over instincts. It calls for cross-functional collaboration between data scientists, store staff, marketers, and supply chain leaders. And it demands clear governance, continuous training, and a culture of experimentation. These are not small asks.

Too often, AI is introduced as a technical project when it should be a strategic transformation enabler. Technology teams may build the models, but without business alignment, employee buy-in, or operational clarity, those models rarely get adopted. Retailers that succeed integrate AI into their processes, define clear goals, and make space for trial, feedback, and iteration. They involve teams from day one, educate employees on what AI can and can't do, and embed it within their daily tools and routines.

Real-world examples



Ulta Beauty continues to lead with AI-powered beauty consultations, virtual try-ons, and replenishment reminders. Their goal? Enhancing human connection — not replacing it.



Decathlon uses AI to forecast demand and reduce overproduction, tightly linking its sustainability goals with machine learning.



Zalando leverages AI not just in styling recommendations but to power their entire returns optimisation strategy — cutting both CO2 impact and costs.



Sephora deploys generative AI to help store staff deliver expert advice more consistently and confidently across all stores.

How to get AI right in 2025

Start with a business challenge, not a tool. Whether it's lowering return rates, increasing in-store efficiency, or scaling content creation, tie AI directly to a measurable outcome.

- Co-design with your employees. Your staff's insights are critical. Use AI to augment their strengths, not replace their roles.
- Focus on data readiness. Clean, unified, and accessible data is the bedrock of any meaningful AI deployment.
- Measure what matters. Instead of vanity metrics (like chatbot engagement), look at impact: time saved, revenue gained, waste reduced.
- Prepare for governance. Ethical use of AI, bias reduction, and data privacy are no longer optional—they're expected.

Final thought: Productivity over hype

AI isn't a future trend; it is today's differentiator. The question for 2025 isn't whether to adopt AI. It's whether you can operationalise it fast enough to create value. For retailers who succeed, AI becomes not just a competitive advantage, but also a foundational layer of modern retail.

Chapter 6

Order Management Systems – The unsung hero of retail success





Today's customer expects everything: instant availability, accurate stock information, and delivery options that fit their life—not the retailer's constraints. Behind the scenes, one technology makes this complexity manageable and scalable: the Order Management System (OMS).

Alongside unified commerce, Order Management Systems (OMS) have emerged as the quiet force behind some of the most admired retail experiences. These systems, once viewed as back-end infrastructure, are now proving to be strategic enablers powering flexible fulfilment, reducing carbon footprints, and delivering the convenience today's shoppers expect.

The modern retail journey is anything but linear. A customer might browse online, purchase via app, pick up in-store, and initiate a return through a third-party locker. Behind the scenes, an OMS is working overtime to ensure that journey is seamless by allocating stock, synchronizing channels, and keeping promises.

In 2025, customers don't just want speed. They want precision. They want to know if a product is available now, where it can be picked up, how soon it can be delivered, and whether they can return it conveniently. And they expect all this without friction. A robust OMS turns that complexity into clarity, orchestrating the flow of inventory, orders, and data in real time.

“The modern retail journey is anything but linear. A customer might browse online, purchase via app, pick up in-store, and initiate a return through a third-party locker.”

But it's not just about customer satisfaction, it's also about operational agility. OMS platforms help retailers adapt to disruptions in supply chains, labour, and demand by making inventory more visible and actionable. Rather than stock sitting idle in a warehouse or store shelf, an OMS can route that product dynamically by reducing markdowns and increasing profitability.

OMS also plays a pivotal role in reducing environmental impact. Smarter fulfilment decisions mean fewer shipments, shorter routes, and lower emissions. By enabling returns to be consolidated or restocked locally, OMS helps retailers cut waste and cost at once. The increase of carbon-aware fulfilment logic, where the system prioritises greener delivery methods is also becoming a standard feature in OMS implementations.

Retailers like Nordstrom, Decathlon, and REI are already reaping the benefits. Nordstrom's ability to offer flexible pickup and high touch returns hinges on OMS agility. Decathlon uses OMS data to avoid overproduction and manage inventory with sustainability in mind. REI connects stores, warehouses, and third-party partners through one orchestration layer, reducing last-mile emissions and improving service.

The power of OMS lies not just in logistics, but in experience. When customers trust the information they see online, when they can change their delivery method mid-journey, or when a return takes seconds instead of days - they remember it. These moments, orchestrated quietly by OMS, shape brand perception more than most advertising ever could.

For many retailers, OMS implementation used to be a daunting IT project. In 2025, it's a business transformation. It requires collaboration between operations, digital, sustainability, and customer service teams. But when done right, it becomes a growth engine.

The retailer payoff: Financial and operational gains from OMS

While customer convenience often headlines the value of an OMS, the real return for retailers lies in operational and financial impact. A modern OMS does more than orchestrate orders—it unlocks capital, reduces waste, and sharpens the efficiency of the entire retail engine.

Freeing up working capital is one of the most immediate gains. By providing real-time visibility across all stock locations and enabling dynamic fulfilment, retailers no longer need to hold excess inventory “just in case”. Inventory can be balanced across stores, warehouses, and suppliers with precision, reducing the need for safety stock and freeing up cash that can be reinvested elsewhere in the business.

Markdown reduction is another major benefit. Idle inventory in one location can be surfaced to online channels or redirected to high-demand areas before it ages out. Rather than reactive discounting, OMS enables proactive stock movement, minimising margin erosion and clearing seasonal goods on time.

Customer service costs also decrease. With better order transparency and real-time tracking, fewer customers contact support for status updates, missed deliveries, or return issues. Staff across channels—store, online, call centre—can access the same order data, enabling faster resolution and higher first-contact resolution rates.

Returns orchestration not only improves the customer experience but reduces internal handling costs by optimising restock logic and consolidating shipments. This has direct implications on reverse logistics budgets and resell potential.

Not all retailers benefit equally—retailers with high SKU counts, complex fulfilment flows, global growth and fluctuating demand patterns do see an extra need. OMS provides them with the agility to adapt stock to where demand is peaking, especially during seasonal spikes or promotional periods. For pharmacies, where availability and speed are critical, OMS enables safe, compliant, cost efficient and reliable delivery from the most suitable source.

In essence, OMS shifts fulfilment from a cost centre to a profit lever. For retailers navigating thin margins, fragmented demand, and rising service expectations, it's no longer a nice-to-have—it's a financial imperative.

Why it matters more than ever

Retailers can't afford to let back-end inefficiencies dictate the customer experience or miss their sustainability targets. Without a robust OMS, even the best-designed ecommerce site or in-store experience can fall apart post-click.

With the growth in marketplace models, distributed inventory, and hybrid customer journeys, agility is no longer optional. OMS is the digital backbone that enables retailers to flex with the market, minimise waste, and deliver on the promises made at checkout. As retail evolves from multichannel to truly unified commerce, OMS has become a business-critical enabler. And in 2025, it's one of the strongest levers to balance profitability, flexibility, and sustainability.

Retailers face growing pressure from all angles:

- Higher customer expectations around availability, delivery speed, and flexibility
- The rise in returns, which now account for up to 30% of all online purchases
- Sustainability demands, including emissions tracking, smarter fulfilment, and reverse logistics
- Increased costs and fragmentation across warehousing, 3PLs, and stores
- Demand for omnichannel excellence where digital promises must match physical performance
- An advanced OMS helps retailers stay competitive by creating a unified view of inventory and intelligently managing order routing across every channel.

Key business values of a modern OMS

Unified inventory visibility: Know exactly what's available, where, and when—across stores, warehouses, dark stores, and suppliers. This empowers better selling decisions and reduces overselling and stockouts.

Flexible fulfilment: Enable ship-from-store, click-and-collect, curb side pickup, drop shipping, and split shipments—all while optimising for cost, speed, or environmental impact.

Returns orchestration: Simplify reverse logistics while reducing emissions, accelerating refunds, and increasing the resale or restock rates of returned items.

Customer service empowerment: Provide real-time order tracking, fulfilment transparency, and order status resolution across all channels—allowing staff to serve customers faster and smarter.

Data-driven operations: Gain continuous insights from orders, fulfilment, and returns to optimise logistics, staffing, and assortment strategies in near real-time.

Don't overlook the sustainability factor

Returns and fulfilment are now among the biggest contributors to retail's environmental footprint. OMS can help drive meaningful change:

- **Smart routing:** Route orders to the closest fulfilment point to reduce last-mile delivery emissions.
- **Bundled returns:** Combine return shipments or restock products locally to reduce waste and transport.
- **Carbon-aware logic:** Prioritize eco-friendly delivery options at checkout, powered by real-time CO₂ scoring.
- **Circular economy:** Support recommerce platforms and in-store drop-off points for pre-loved or repaired goods.

Best-in-class retailers

NORDSTROM

Has long focused on premium fulfilment. Its OMS supports flexible delivery and high-touch returns—crucial for maintaining its luxury reputation.

DECATHLON

Leverages OMS insights for better demand planning, stock balancing, and reducing deadstock.

zalando

Integrates its OMS with its sustainability engine, offering customers the greenest shipping option at checkout and optimising the return loop.

REI CO-OP

Powers local fulfilment from stores, dark warehouses, and third-party partners—all seamlessly stitched together via its OMS.

MANGO

Uses OMS to streamline its click-and-collect service and optimise cross-border order flows from a central platform.

Final thought

Operational glue that drives growth Order Management Systems may not be flashy, but they are foundational. In 2025, they are to be seen as the operational glue that connects every part of a seamless, sustainable, and profitable retail journey. Retailers that master OMS aren't just improving efficiency — they're protecting brand trust, unlocking new experiences, and adapting faster than competitors. In a year where customer expectations are higher than ever, OMS is your engine of resilience.



Chapter 7

Omnichannel gets real – From patchwork to platform



For years, omnichannel was retail's favourite buzzword. Frequently promised, rarely delivered. In 2025, that's changing. Customers no longer differentiate between channels; they expect a single, seamless and unified brand experience whether browsing online, shopping in-store, or scrolling through social media.

Today's customers expect fluidity. They want to start their journey on one platform and finish it on another without friction, confusion, or delay. They expect the brand to remember who they are, what they like, and what they've done, no matter where they show up. This is omnichannel maturity, and it's reshaping everything from store design to tech architecture to staff training. True omnichannel isn't just about presence. It's about continuity. It's about one brand, one experience, everywhere.

“This is omnichannel maturity, and it's reshaping everything from store design to tech architecture to staff training.”

Retailers that are getting this right have unified not just their sales channels but their thinking. They no longer view stores and ecommerce as separate businesses. Instead, they've embraced the idea of “commerce everywhere”, backed by centralised data, shared inventory, and integrated customer profiles. This allows them to deliver consistent pricing, service, and personalisation whether the customer is on an app, in a flagship store, or speaking to a chatbot.



But omnichannel excellence doesn't stop at the front end. It extends deeply into operations. Distributed order management, real-time stock visibility, and flexible fulfilment options (like ship-from-store and click-and-collect) are no longer competitive differentiators, they're customer expectations. To deliver them, retailers are leaning on OMS platforms, API-driven architecture, and a service-oriented mindset.

The store itself has also been redefined. No longer a standalone unit, the store is now a hub for fulfilment, service, content, and community. Associates are empowered with mobile tools that allow them to access customer preferences, locate inventory across locations, and complete sales from anywhere on the floor. These capabilities turn the store from a channel into a platform that strengthens loyalty and accelerates conversion.

Retailers like Sephora, Nike, Starbucks, and Nordstrom are leading the way with experiences that feel effortless across all touchpoints. From in-app booking of in-store services to loyalty rewards that follow customers wherever they go, these brands have mastered the art of consistency in a fragmented world.

The store itself has also been redefined. No longer a standalone unit, the store is now a hub for fulfilment, service, content, and community.



Omnichannel in 2025 is also about sustainability. Reducing unnecessary shipments, consolidating deliveries, and enabling localised fulfilment are all ways that integrated commerce contributes to environmental goals. When done well, seamlessness is not only better for the customer - it's also better for the planet.

Ultimately, omnichannel success requires more than tech investment. It requires strategic alignment, cultural change, and operational courage. It asks retailers to break down silos, rethink roles, and constantly optimise for how customers shop, not how organizations are structured.

Because in 2025, omnichannel isn't the future. It's the foundation. And the retailers who build it right will unlock new levels of loyalty, efficiency, and growth. But true omnichannel success isn't just a matter of being present in every channel, it's about integrating them. And in 2025, retailers are learning that omnichannel only works when built on connected systems, consistent data, and coordinated teams. Otherwise, it would be as we simply refer to as 'omnichannel washing'.

The end of omnichannel washing

Too many retailers have claimed omnichannel status while still operating in silos. Separate inventory pools, disconnected customer data, and inconsistent experiences are signs of omnichannel washing.

Retailers who move beyond it are:

- Centralising inventory and order management across all channels
- Providing unified promotions, pricing, and service regardless of touchpoint
- Enabling staff to access full customer histories and preferences—anywhere

It's no longer about offering multiple channels; it's about making every channel feel like one brand. A shopper might discover a product on Instagram, check availability via mobile app, visit a store to try it on, and complete the purchase online, all within 24 hours. Retailers must adapt to this hybrid behaviour by:

- Creating consistent content and experiences across all platforms
- Using AI and personalisation to tailor messaging and recommendations
- Ensuring customers can start, pause, and complete their journey on their terms



Empowering the frontline

Omnichannel excellence isn't just about systems, it's about people. Retailers must equip store staff to function as digital ambassadors with mobile POS systems for endless aisle capabilities, access to customer profiles and order status and training on omnichannel workflows, fulfilment, and clienteling.

Retailers like Nike and Glossier blur the line between digital and physical by empowering employees to assist, recommend, and transact in any context.

Best-in-class retailers



Has long focused on premium fulfilment. Its OMS supports flexible delivery and high-touch returns—crucial for maintaining its luxury reputation.



Leverages OMS insights for better demand planning, stock balancing, and reducing deadstock.

SEPHORA

Integrates its OMS with its sustainability engine, offering customers the greenest shipping option at checkout and optimising the return loop.

NORDSTROM

Uses OMS to streamline its click-and-collect service and optimise cross-border order flows from a central platform.

Final thought

In 2025, omnichannel is not about where customers shop, it's more about how they experience your brand. The retailers who succeed are those who think beyond the store and the screen. When technology, data, and people come together to create unified journeys, omnichannel becomes more than a promise, it becomes a platform for growth.



Chapter 8

Conversion Rate Optimisation – Experience drives performance





In a time where every click counts and margins are tighter than ever, Conversion Rate Optimisation (CRO) has become one of the most effective strategies to improve both customer experience and business performance. In 2025, CRO is no longer limited to A/B tests on landing pages, it's a data-led, cross-functional discipline that transforms how retailers design, personalise, and refine their digital ecosystems.

CRO has evolved from a niche marketing practice to a core business capability. In 2025, it's no longer about squeezing marginal gains out of a button colour or landing page headline, it's about deeply understanding shopper behaviour and systematically removing friction from every part of the customer journey.

In today's competitive setting, where customer acquisition costs are high and expectations are higher, CRO is the fastest route to win revenue, build trust, and improve sustainability. When done right, it aligns user experience, data, content, and operations into a seamless, intuitive path to purchase.

Modern CRO starts with empathy as a series of micro-moments. What do customers really want in each moment, and what's getting in their way? Leading retailers are answering these questions by leveraging behavioural analytics, session replays, heatmaps, and AI-generated insights. The goal isn't just to optimise the website, it's also to optimise how the brand communicates, performs, and delivers value across all channels.

“When done right, it aligns user experience, data, content, and operations into a seamless, intuitive path to purchase.”

CRO as a strategy, not a sprint

Retailers in 2025 understand that optimising conversion means understanding the entire customer journey. From first impression to final purchase (and beyond), CRO helps identify and eliminate friction, build trust, and align messaging to moments. CRO might be seen as the connective tissue that aligns UX design, content, analytics, and development into a single goal: seamless conversion.

“Retailers in 2025 understand that optimising conversion means understanding the entire customer journey.”

From the first homepage visit to the final delivery notification, every click, scroll, and swipe has the potential to create momentum, or resistance. CRO specialists now work together with UX designers, merchandisers, developers, and customer service teams to optimize across:

Homepages and navigation: Guiding users intuitively toward relevant products.

Product detail pages: Leveraging reviews, size finders, rich imagery, and sustainability info.

Checkouts: Reducing abandonment through guest options, autofill, and flexible payment.

Post-purchases: Enhancing confirmation flows, upsell opportunities, order tracking and easy returns.

CRO also plays a critical role in sustainability. Smarter sizing tools and more accurate product descriptions reduce returns. Clear material information helps customers make informed decisions. Optimising conversion is not only about increasing sales, but also about improving quality of sales and reducing waste.

Retailers like Zalando, ASOS, and Glossier are setting the bar. Zalando combines deep product data with AI-driven personalisation to simplify decision-making. ASOS delivers a mobile-first UX that adapts to different user behaviours and preferences. Glossier's minimalist design, transparent reviews, and community content make the journey feel effortless and trustworthy.

CRO meets sustainability

With growing concern over waste and return emissions, CRO is now being used to align performance with purpose. By optimising toward lower returns and smarter purchases, CRO becomes a driver of both profit and sustainability:

- Smarter sizing tools reduce fit-related returns
- Clear material information supports ethical decision-making
- Simplified paths to pre-owned or alternative products reduce overconsumption

In 2025, CRO is also helping retailers balance automation and emotion. While AI tools can test, predict, and personalise at scale, the best results come when those tools are guided by human insight and brand integrity. The winning formula is data-informed, creatively driven, and relentlessly customer-focused.

Because at the end of the day, conversion isn't just about getting a sale, but about earning relationships. And that's a metric every brand should care about.

The power of personalisation

Personalisation has become one of CRO's most powerful tools. In 2025, AI and customer data enable retailers to dynamically recommend relevant products and categories, adjust content by location, weather, or buying intent and show urgency and social proof without overwhelming users.

Retailers like Zalando and ASOS are using hyper-personalisation to reduce returns, improve size confidence, and tailor messaging based on individual behaviour patterns.

Best-in-class retailers



Focuses on simplifying the journey, offering visual search, predictive sizing, and user-generated content to improve decisions.



Innovates with lifestyle photography, mobile-first UX, and fast load times across all devices.



Combines high-quality content with clear specifications and flexible payment to support confident conversion.



Builds trust with transparent reviews, community-driven content, and minimalist UX.

Final thought

Retailers in 2025 can't afford to leave conversion to chance. Every friction point is a lost opportunity, and every improvement compound business value. CRO is the most pragmatic way to turn visitors into customers, reduce returns, and enhance satisfaction, without increasing ad spend. In a market defined by experience, it's not just what you sell, but how you help people buy it that matters.



Chapter 9

Conclusion – The most adaptive retailer wins



Retail in 2025 is not for the static. It belongs to the brands and businesses that move with intention, evolve with curiosity, and adapt with speed. This year has brought us a more demanding, more conscious, and more digitally fluent customer, and they're expecting more than ever.

They want shopping to be purposeful and instant. They want brands that reflect their values and make life easier. They want fulfilment that's fast, flexible, and sustainable. And they want every experience, digital or physical, to feel like it was built just for them.

This guide has explored the major forces shaping that reality: from customer-centricity and personalisation to AI, retail media, sustainability, OMS, loyalty, and CRO. Together, these aren't just to be seen as trends, they are to be seen as transformation switches. And for every switch, one principle stands firm: agility wins. The retailers who will thrive are not the ones with the most tools or the biggest teams. They're the ones who move fast, test boldly, and make smarter decisions by aligning technology with business value.

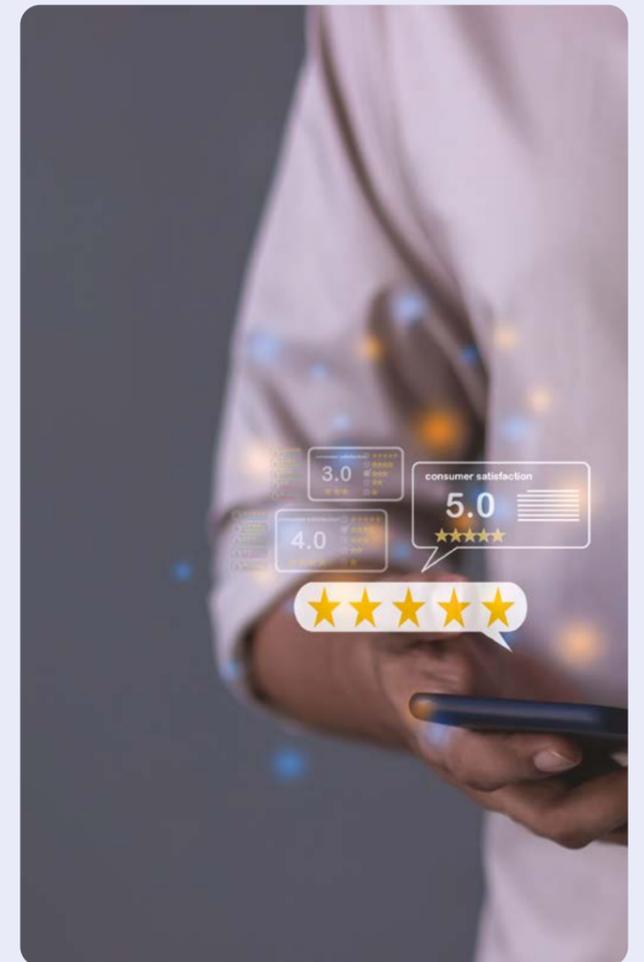
If there's one trait that defines 2025's leading retailers, it's adaptability. The ability to pivot when needed. To double down when it matters. And to connect vision with execution.

- Build partnerships that help you go further, faster.
- Measure progress not just in profit, but in loyalty, satisfaction, and sustainability.

So where do you want to go from here?

Start with your customers. Then use the tools, insights, and best practices in this guide to:

- Identify the biggest friction points in your customer journey and turn them into opportunities.
- Align your tech stack with your business goals, not the other way around.
- Train and empower your people—because your staff are your differentiators.





Columbus

The future of retail is not a fixed destination, it's a moving target. This is where Columbus can help you progress and keep a steady pace.

So, ask yourself:
Are you ready to take the lead?



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