A person wearing a blue uniform is applying a roll of blue shipping tape to a brown cardboard box. The tape features repeating logos for 'parcellab' and 'ShipStation'. The background is dark and out of focus.

eCommerce shipping experience study 2025

*How the largest online retailers in the U.S. handle the
post-purchase journey*

A joint analysis by parcellab and Metapack examining the
customer experience during the checkout and delivery process.

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Introduction

In today's fast-paced world of eCommerce, it's not enough for online retailers to keep up. They need to stand out. This doesn't just apply to the path to purchase. It also includes the critical moments after the "buy" button is clicked: order processing, shipping, returns, and customer service.

So, how do 57 of the largest online retailers in the U.S. perform in these areas? What unique services do they offer at checkout, during delivery, throughout the returns process, and when customers reach out for support?

This study by parcelLab and ShipStation takes a deep dive into those questions. Our goal was to establish clear, data-backed benchmarks that both established U.S. retailers and international brands looking to enter the U.S. market can use to evaluate and elevate their post-purchase experience.

The study not only highlights current strengths but also uncovers critical areas of improvement where retailers can create a real competitive advantage and foster long-term customer loyalty.

We hope you enjoy this report and, more importantly, find valuable insights to power your growth.

Why the post-purchase experience matters

The post-purchase experience is one of the most overlooked yet emotionally charged phases of the customer journey. In fact, more than half of all online shoppers say the period between placing an order and receiving it is the most emotionally significant part of their purchase.

A positive experience after checkout doesn't just build satisfaction. It reduces service inquiries and drives repeat business. It's a powerful driver of brand loyalty and long-term revenue growth.

What is the post-purchase experience?

The post-purchase experience includes every customer touchpoint that happens after the "Buy Now" button is clicked, from order confirmation to shipping and delivery, unboxing, returns or exchanges, and customer support.

Why it pays to get post-purchase right

In a market where products quickly become commoditized, barriers to entry are lower than ever, and consumers are increasingly price-sensitive, delivering an outstanding post-purchase experience can be a true differentiator.

Retailers who prioritize this phase of the journey can set themselves apart with reliable service and smart communication. Keeping customers informed about their orders reduces "Where Is My Order?" (WISMO) calls and frees up customer service teams to handle more complex or high-value interactions.

Done right, post-purchase communication reduces costs, accelerates support response times, and improves customer satisfaction. With the help of AI, businesses can further streamline support workflows while enhancing the quality and personalization of assistance.

This study evaluates how service-oriented 57 of the largest online retailers in the U.S. are when it comes to the crucial post-purchase phase.

Methodology

To evaluate the post-purchase experience offered by U.S. online retailers, we placed one real order with each retailer and assessed the entire journey, from shipping and delivery communication to returns handling.

For this study, the parcelLab USA team conducted 57 test purchases between February and March 2025. The retailers selected are among the largest in the country, based on the 2024 NRF Top 100 list. Wherever possible, we built shopping carts that qualified for free shipping.

Because package reception was guaranteed at all delivery addresses, nearly all orders were successfully delivered on the first attempt.

Our goal with this analysis is to highlight where retailers are excelling and where there's room to grow. We hope to spark new ideas and provide actionable insights to help businesses elevate their post-purchase experience.

Because no matter how good the experience is today, there's always potential to do better.

Top U.S. retailers in the test

Electronics

Best Buy
Dell Technologies
GameStop
HP
Timex

Health & Beauty

Bath & Body Works
Sally Beauty
Sephora
Ulta Beauty
Walgreens

Fashion & Apparel

Abercrombie & Fitch
American Eagle
Bass Pro Shops
Bloomingdale's
Boot Barn
Dick's Sporting Goods
Dillard's
Foot Locker
J.Crew
Kohl's
Lululemon
Macy's
New Balance
Nike
Nordstrom
Ralph Lauren
Spanx
Tiffany & Co
Torrid
Ugg
Uniqlo
Vans
Victoria's Secret
Zara

Homeware

Ace Hardware
Home Depot
Lowe's Companies
Menards
Tractor Supply Co.
Wayfair

Multi-Category

5.11 Tactical
Barnes & Noble
Chewy
Costco
Five Below
GNC
Hobby Lobby
J.C. Penney Company
O'Reilly Auto Parts
Orthofeet
Overstock.com
Petco
Staples
Target
TJX Companies (Marshalls)
Williams-Sonoma

Key findings

60%

of major U.S. electronics retailers offer free shipping, more than any other category.

80.7%

of U.S. online retailers handle returns through a digital portal.

57.9%

of top U.S. retailers use shipping confirmation emails for marketing purposes.

1.8%

only one retailer in the study offers carbon-neutral shipping.

\$16.36

is the average return shipping cost in the Health & Beauty category—the highest across all verticals.

14%

of leading U.S. online retailers offer free shipping with no minimum order value.

55.6%

of retailers use plastic materials inside their shipping packaging.

9.1%

of U.S. retailers offer doorstep return pickup as a service.

28.1%

of large online retailers do not notify customers via email once a package has been successfully delivered.

50%

of retailers use resealable packaging to simplify returns.

8.8%

of retailers display an exact delivery date on the product detail page, showing when the order is expected to arrive.

66%

of tested retailers do not offer any option for product exchanges.

In-depth findings

Shipping costs

If there's one factor that defines the online purchase experience and puts pressure on retailers' bottom lines, it's shipping costs. Few elements are as emotionally charged for customers or as economically sensitive for merchants. With rising logistics expenses and growing consumer expectations around free delivery, retailers face a constant balancing act. In the U.S., that balance typically tips in favor of the business: ordering online often means paying for shipping, and it's not a small amount.

Free shipping remains the exception

Only 14% of retailers in our study offer unconditional free standard shipping. For the remaining 86%, shipping comes at a cost, typically between \$5.00 and \$10.00.

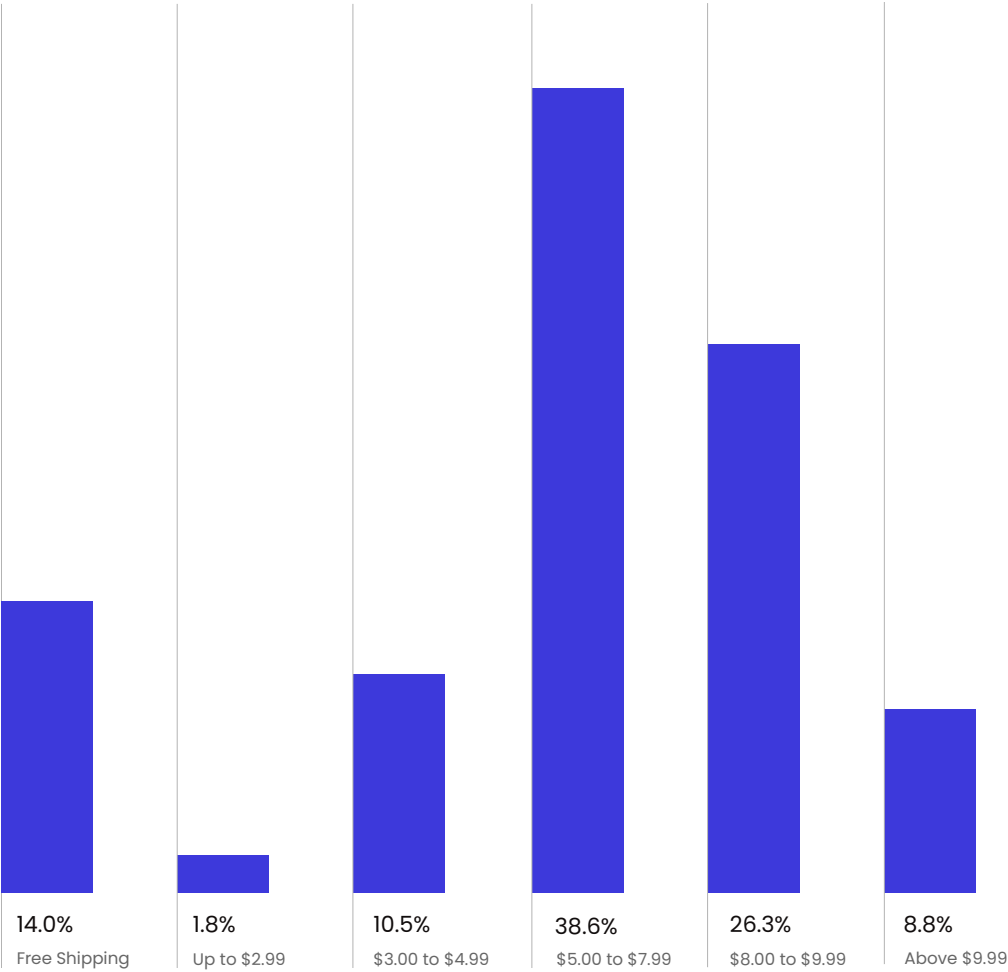
The most common price range is \$5.00 to \$7.99, charged by approximately 39% of retailers. About 26% charge between \$8.00 and \$9.99. Shipping fees above \$10 are relatively rare, as are ultra-low rates under \$5.00.

The average shipping fee across all tested retailers is \$7.45. Prices ranged from a low of \$2.99 at Home Depot to a high of \$12.99 at GNC.

FIG. 01

Standard shipping costs

How much do U.S. retailers charge for standard delivery?



Source: parcelLab / ShipStation, March 2025, based on n= 57 of the top U.S. online shops (Source: NRF Top 100 2024)

14%

Standard shipping typically comes at a price: only 14% of retailers offer it free of charge.

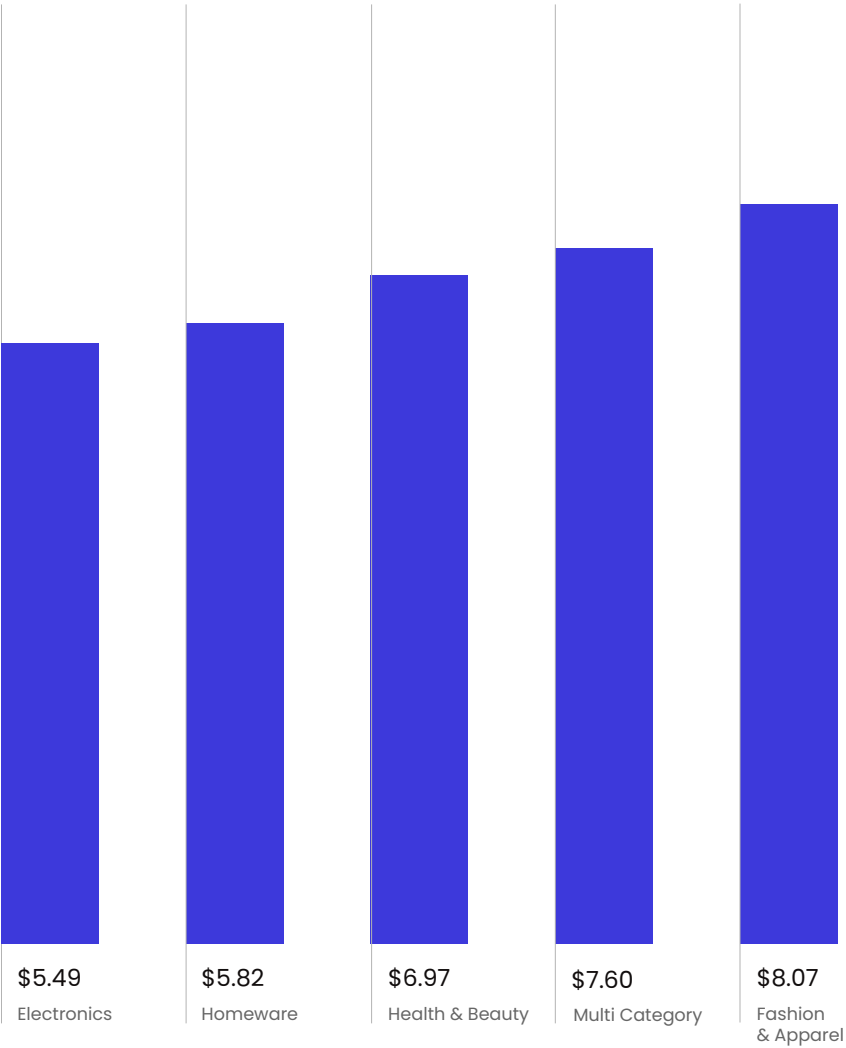
Low-cost electronics,
high-cost fashion

Shipping costs vary significantly by product category. Electronics are the cheapest to ship, with an average fee of \$5.49, lower than any other category. Homeware is also relatively affordable, with an average of \$5.82. Costs rise notably in other categories. Health & Beauty averages \$6.97, while multi-category retailers come in at \$7.60. The most expensive category is fashion, where customers pay an average of \$8.07 for standard shipping when ordering apparel.

FIG. 02

Average shipping costs
by category

How much do customers
pay for standard shipping
depending on what
they buy?



Source: parcelLab / ShipStation, March 2025, based on n= 57 of the top U.S. online shops (Source: NRF Top 100 2024)

Electronics and Homeware are the most affordable to ship, with average costs of \$5.49 and \$5.82, respectively.

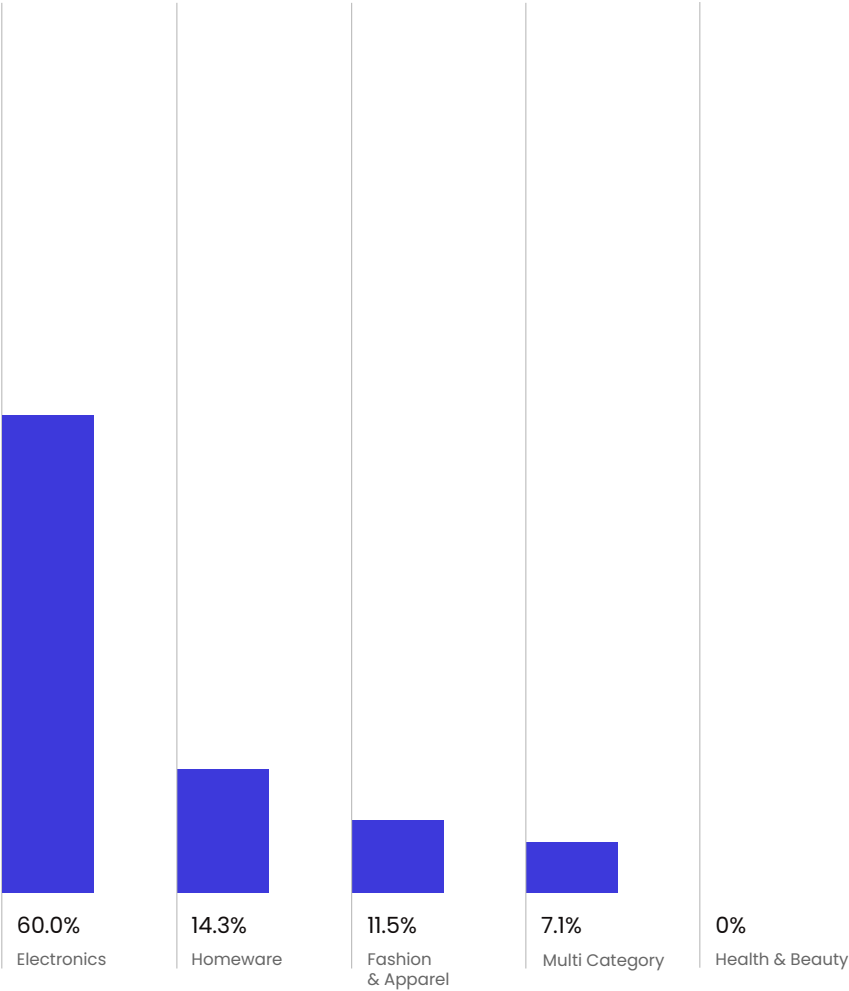
Free shipping is rare in many categories

A breakdown of free shipping availability by retail category reveals clear differences. Electronics retailers are the most generous, with 60% of them offering free standard shipping to their customers. This kind of offer is much less common in fashion, where only 11.5% of retailers provide it, and in the Homeware segment, where the figure stands at 14.3%. In the Health & Beauty category, not a single retailer in the study offered a free shipping option.

FIG. 03

Free shipping by category

In which product segments is standard shipping most likely to be free of charge?



Source: parcelLab / ShipStation, March 2025, based on n= 57 of the top U.S. online shops (Source: NRF Top 100 2024)

60%

Electronics retailers are by far the most generous when it comes to shipping fees: 60% offer free standard delivery.

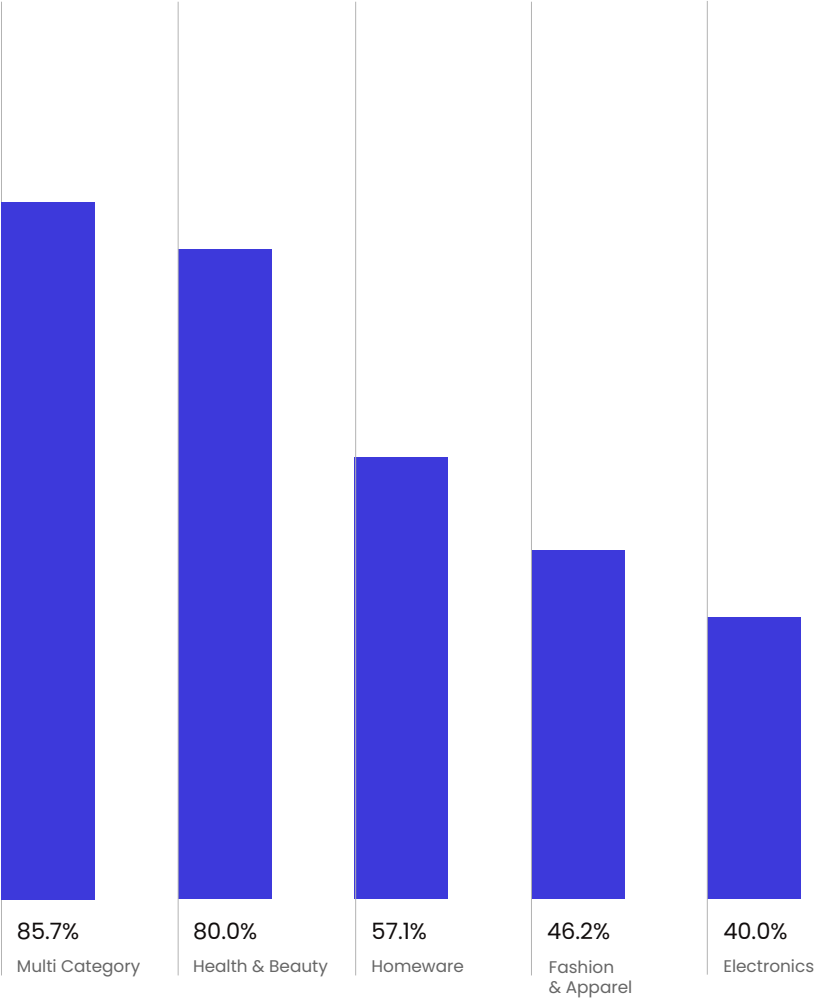
Free shipping often comes with strings attached

Where free shipping is available, it’s frequently tied to a minimum order value (MOV). Nearly 60% of online retailers in the study require customers to reach a spending threshold to qualify. This model is especially common in the multi-category and Health & Beauty segments, where over 80% of retailers use an MOV. In the Homeware category, the figure is 57%; in fashion, 46%. Even in electronics, where free shipping is most prevalent, 40% of retailers set a minimum spend for free delivery.

FIG. 04

Free shipping thresholds by category

In which product segments do retailers offer free shipping above a minimum order value?



Source: parcelLab / ShipStation, March 2025, based on n= 57 of the top U.S. online shops (Source: NRF Top 100 2024)

80%

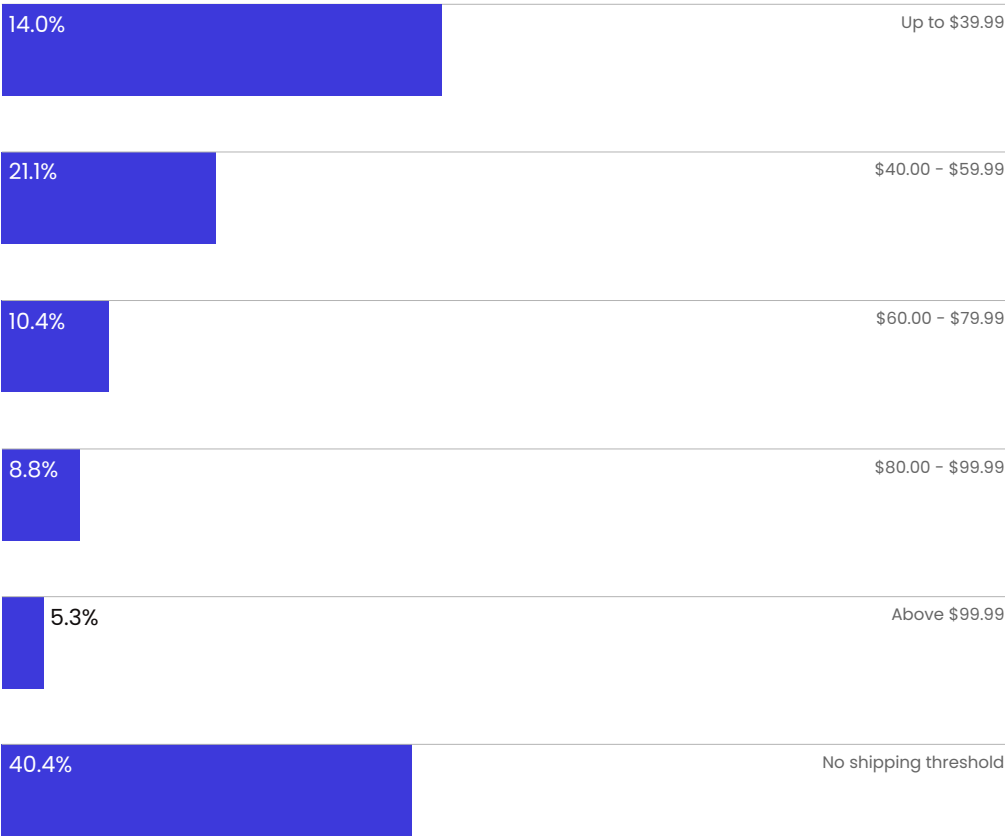
In the multi-category and Health & Beauty segments, over 80% of retailers offer free shipping only above a certain order value.

But how high is the threshold? There’s no clear standard. Some retailers offer free shipping starting at just \$30, while others require orders of over \$100 to qualify.

FIG. 05

Free shipping thresholds (USD)

At what cart values do retailers offer free shipping and how many skip it altogether?



Source: parcelLab / ShipStation, March 2025, based on n= 57 of the top US online shops (Source: NRF Top 100 2024)

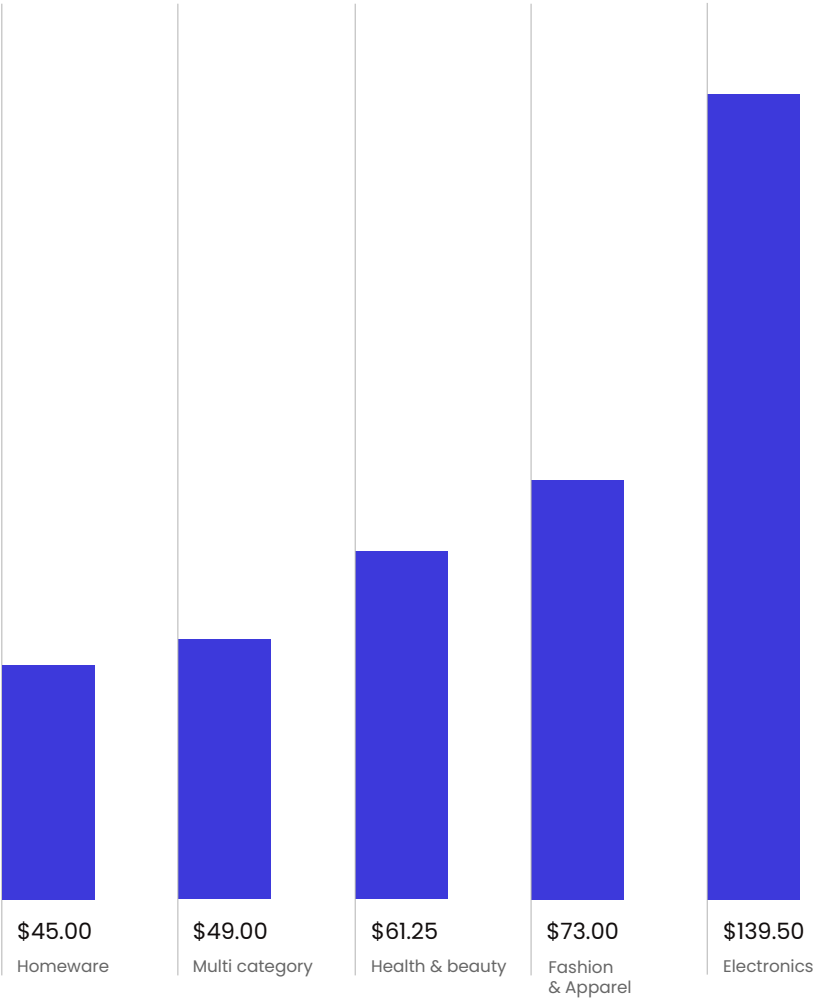
There’s no single standard for when free shipping kicks in.

The lowest minimum order values for free shipping are found in the Homeware segment, averaging \$45, and among multi-category retailers, at \$49. Thresholds are notably higher in other sectors. Health & Beauty requires an average of \$61.25, while fashion retailers set the bar at \$73. Electronics has by far the highest threshold, with customers having to spend an average of \$139.50 to qualify for free shipping.

FIG. 06

Average free shipping threshold by category

How much do customers need to spend to qualify for free shipping in each segment?



Source: parcelLab / ShipStation, March 2025, based on n= 57 of the top U.S. online shops (Source: NRF Top 100 2024)

Electronics has by far the highest threshold, followed by Fashion & Apparel and Health & Beauty.

Delivery

For many customers, delivery time isn't just a logistical detail. It's a key factor in the purchase decision. When someone orders online, they want to know when their item will arrive and trust that the promise will be kept. Our analysis of 57 leading U.S. online retailers reveals that delivery communication is still often too vague.

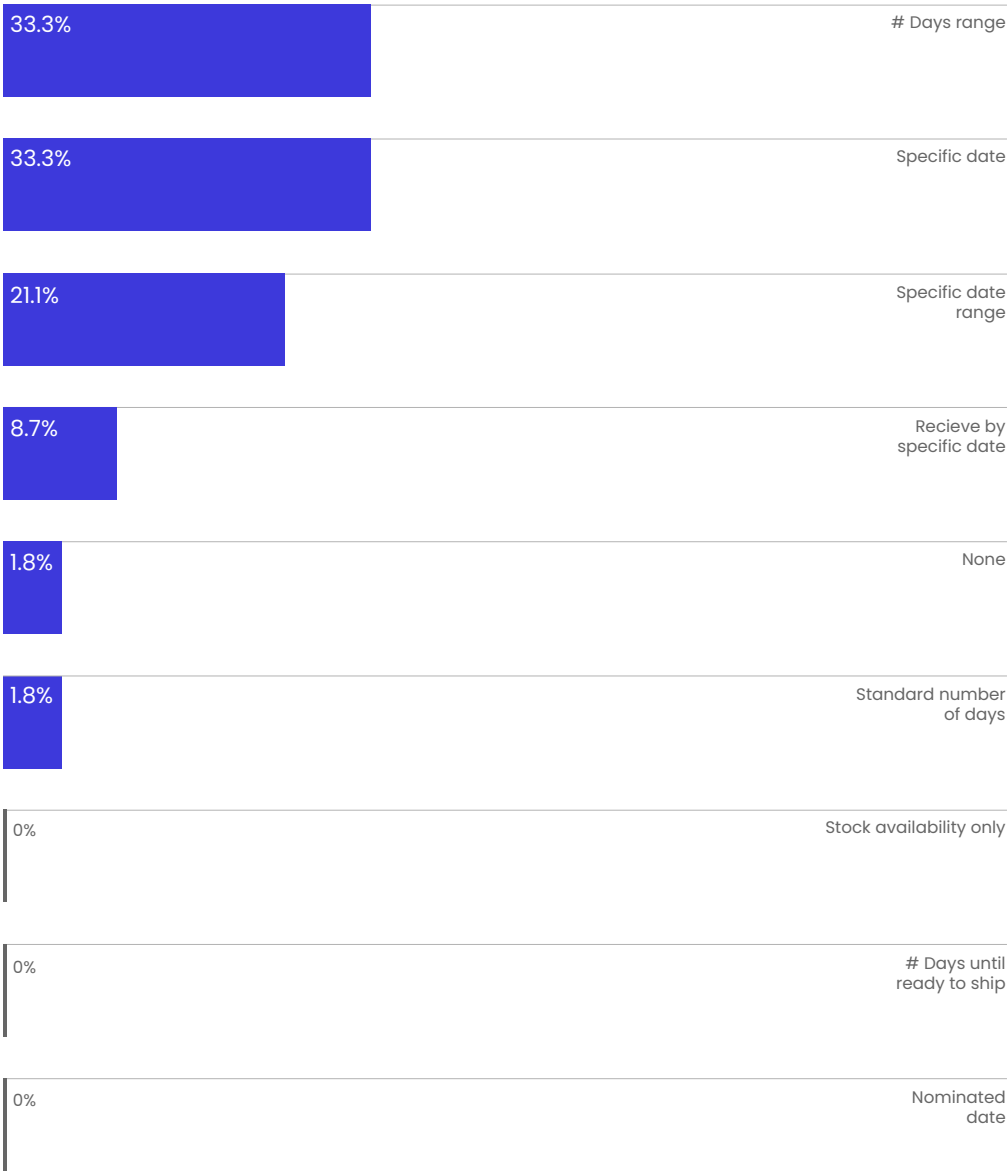
Promises with plenty of leeway

The good news: nearly two-thirds of retailers provide a specific delivery promise on the product detail page (PDP), either as a range of business days (e.g., “3-5 business days”) or as a fixed calendar date. Another 21% offer a date range (e.g., “between May 5 and May 7”). However, fewer than 9% commit to a definitive “by” date, promising that the product will arrive no later than a specific day. One retailer (Chewy) provides no delivery estimate at all.

FIG. 07

Delivery promise on product page and checkout

How precisely do retailers communicate shipping expectations at the point of purchase?



Source: parcelLab / ShipStation, March 2025, based on n= 57 of the top U.S. online shops (Source: NRF Top 100 2024)

66%

Two-thirds of U.S. retailers provide clear delivery expectations on their product pages and during the checkout—split evenly between a general time range (e.g., “3-5 days”) and a specific delivery date.

Limited choice when it comes to carriers

One surprising finding: U.S. customers have very little say in who delivers their orders. Across all 57 retailers tested, only two, UGG and Sephora, allow shoppers to choose their preferred shipping carrier. In all other cases, the retailer makes that decision.

Yet this choice can be critical, especially when fragile items are involved or when the delivery needs to fall within a narrow time window. The lack of flexibility isn't just a logistical detail—it's a real inconvenience for the customer.

6.2.3

Fast shipping?
Yes, but not for everyone

About 58% of retailers offer expedited shipping for an additional fee, giving customers the option to receive their orders faster than with standard delivery.

However, roughly 42% of retailers do not offer any express option at all, regardless of product category or order value.

FIG. 08

Carrier selection at checkout

Can customers choose their preferred shipping provider?



Source: parcelLab / ShipStation, March 2025, based on n= 57 of the top U.S. online shops (Source: NRF Top 100 2024)

3.5%

Only 3.5% of the 57 top U.S. retailers, specifically UGG and Sephora, allow customers to choose a preferred shipping carrier at checkout.

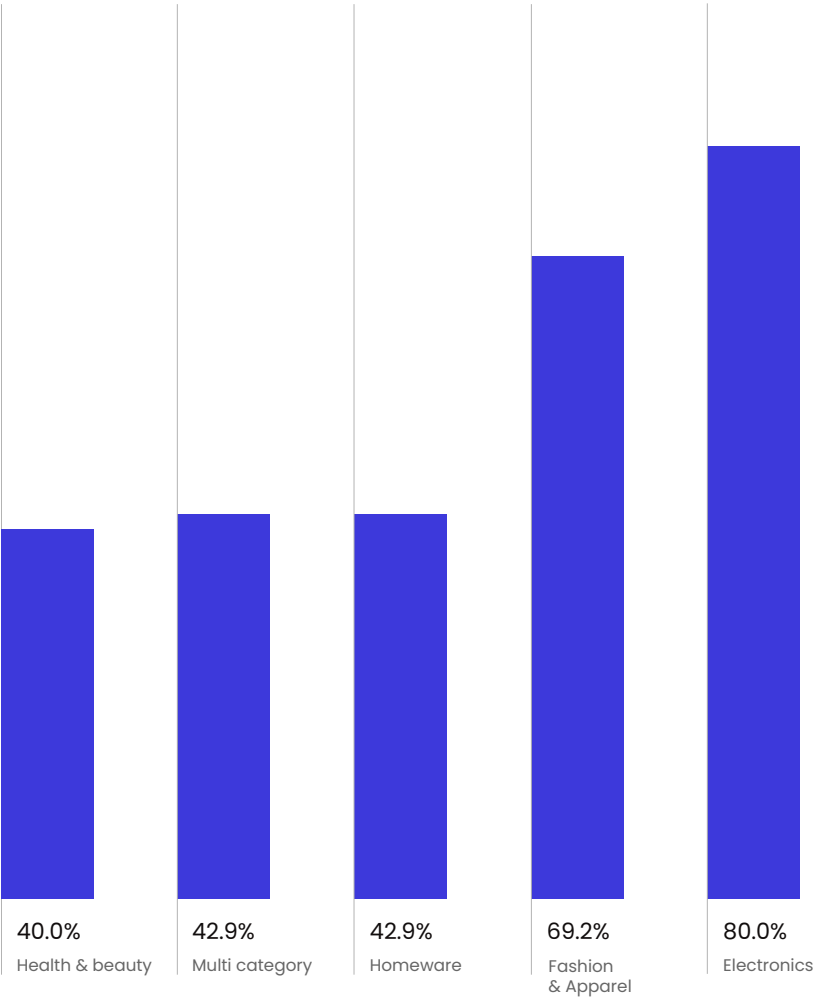
A closer look at the data reveals clear differences across retail categories. Express delivery is most commonly offered by electronics retailers (80%) and fashion brands (69.2%). In contrast, fewer than 50% of retailers in the Homeware, Health & Beauty, and multi-category segments offer expedited shipping.

In the case of bulky Homeware items, which are often delivered by freight carriers, this may be understandable. But in the health sector, where customers might need products urgently, the lack of a faster shipping option can lead to a disappointing post-purchase experience.

FIG. 09

Express shipping by category

In which retail categories is expedited delivery most commonly available?



Source: parcelLab / ShipStation, March 2025, based on n= 57 of the top U.S. online shops (Source: NRF Top 100 2024)

Electronics and Fashion & Apparel retailers are the most likely to offer express shipping.

No weekend delivery
across the board

One striking finding:

Not a single retailer
in the study offers
weekend delivery.

Customers waiting for a package on a Saturday or Sunday will need to be patient or consider buying in-store instead.

6.2.5

Visible delivery dates
build trust

One often-overlooked touchpoint in the checkout journey is the mini cart. It's a critical moment where purchase decisions are finalized, and a visible delivery promise can strongly influence conversion.

In our study, only 32 out of 57 retailers displayed a delivery estimate in the mini cart, such as "Delivery in 2-4 days" or "Expected by Tuesday." The remaining retailers provided no delivery info at this stage, an easily avoidable oversight, especially for lesser-known brands that still need to earn customer trust.

Average delivery: four business days with some major outliers

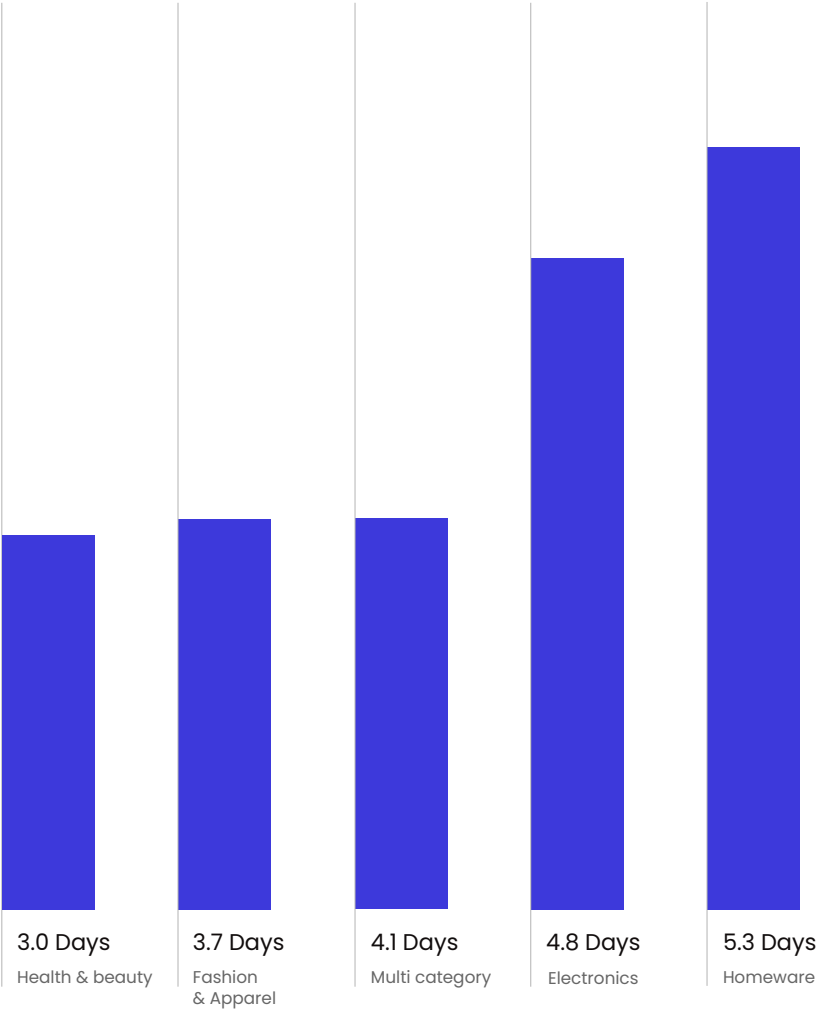
On average, it takes four business days (excluding weekends) for a package to arrive in the U.S. The fastest performers in our test were J.Crew and Footlocker, delivering orders within a single business day. On the slower end, Spanx took 11 days, and Petco 10.

Delivery speeds also vary by category: Health & Beauty (3 days) and Fashion & Apparel (3.7 days) are the quickest. Electronics take about 4.8 days, while Homeware has the longest average delivery time at 5.3 days.

FIG. 10

Average delivery time (Business days)

How long does it take for orders to arrive—excluding weekends?



Source: parcelLab / ShipStation, March 2025, based on n= 57 of the top U.S. online shops (Source: NRF Top 100 2024)

Delivery times vary noticeably across categories: Health & Beauty products arrive the fastest, within 3 business days on average.

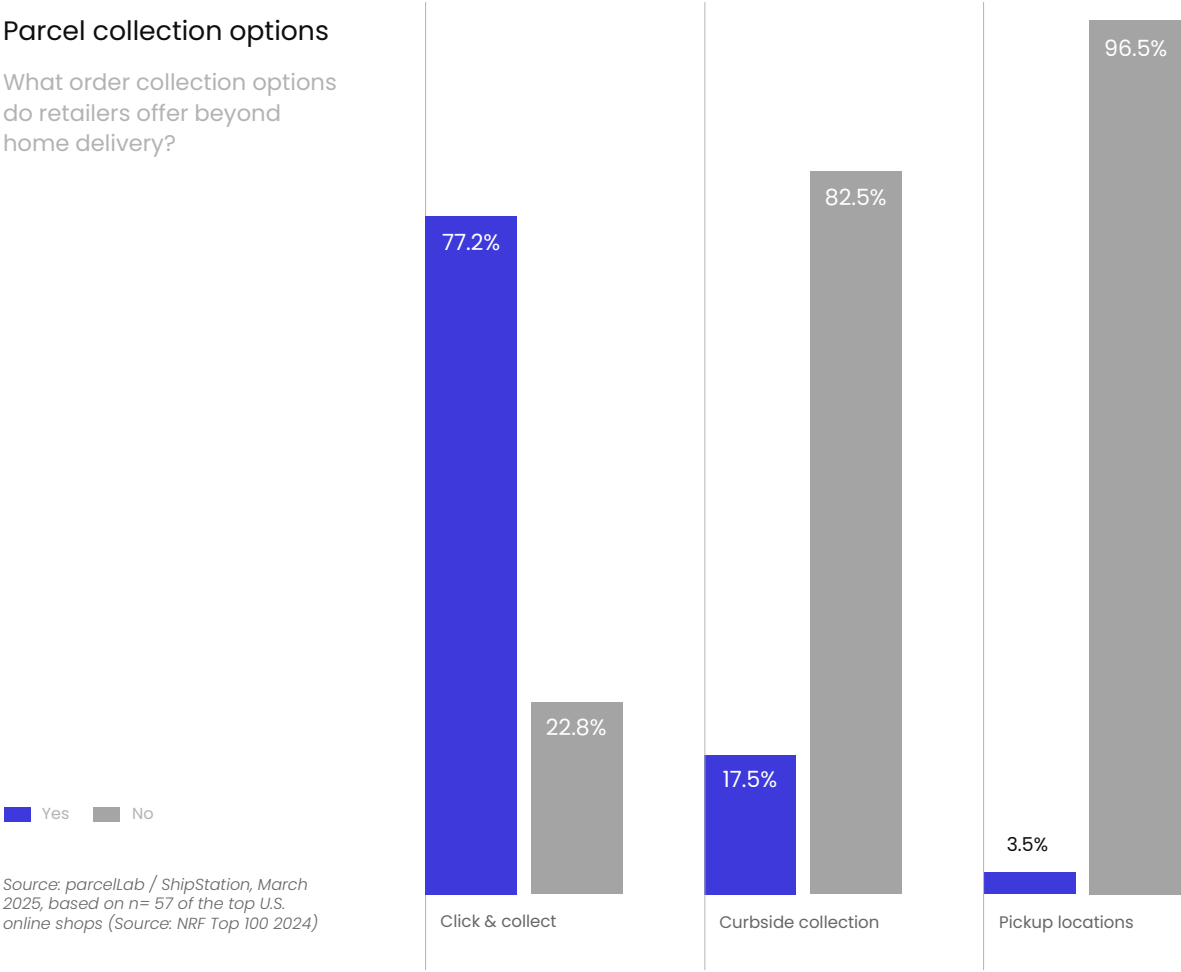
Alternative delivery methods: Click & Collect is the norm

Among U.S. online retailers with physical store locations, in-store pickup for online orders, commonly known as Click & Collect, is widely available. In our study, 77% of retailers offered this option. Other pickup formats are far less common. Curbside collection, where customers retrieve their orders from designated parking spots outside the store, is available at just 17.5% of retailers. Dedicated off-site pickup stations, such as lockers in supermarkets or convenience stores, are even rarer, offered by only 3.5% of major U.S. retailers.

FIG. 11

Parcel collection options

What order collection options do retailers offer beyond home delivery?



Curbside pickup is available at just 17.5% of stores, and dedicated pickup locations outside of retail stores are offered by only 3.5% of retailers. This suggests that most brands still rely heavily on in-store fulfillment for alternative delivery.

Climate-conscious delivery?
Still not part of the equation

While sustainability is gaining visibility in public discourse, it remains largely absent from the logistics strategies of most U.S. retailers. Only one company in our study, J.Crew, offered a carbon-neutral shipping option. All other retailers focus on what’s most cost-efficient, not necessarily what’s most climate-friendly.

FIG. 12

Carbon-neutral shipping

Do US retailers offer environmentally friendly shipping options?



Source: parcelLab / ShipStation, March 2025, based on n= 57 of the top U.S. online shops (Source: NRF Top 100 2024)

Sustainable delivery remains the exception rather than the rule in U.S. eCommerce. J.Crew was the only retailer to offer a carbon-neutral shipping option.

Packaging & sustainability

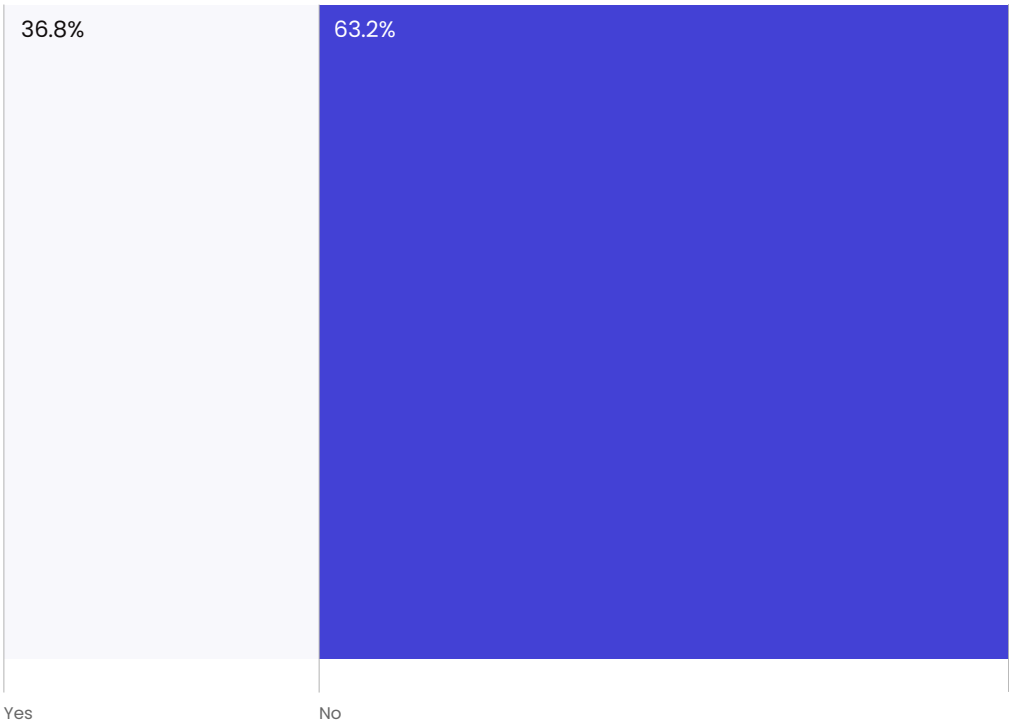
The emotional peak of any online order doesn't happen at checkout. It happens at the doorstep. When a package arrives—whether at the front door, in the hallway, at the apartment mailroom, or in a locker—a digital transaction becomes something tangible. It's no surprise that unboxing videos continue to thrive across social media. That's why this study also looked at how U.S. retailers design this first physical touchpoint with the customer.

The results are mixed. Some brands go to great lengths to create a memorable unboxing experience. Others intentionally avoid any branded elements. Out of the 57 retailers tested, only 21 shipped their products in branded packaging. Most opted for neutral boxes, often for cost reasons, but sometimes out of caution. In many parts of the U.S., package theft is a real concern. Branded boxes can attract unwanted attention and make deliveries more vulnerable to so-called “porch pirates.”

FIG. 13

Branded packaging

Do retailers use packaging as a visible extension of their brand?



Source: parcelLab / ShipStation, March 2025, based on n= 57 of the top U.S. online shops (Source: NRF Top 100 2024)

The majority of U.S. retailers use neutral, unbranded boxes, in some cases deliberately, to avoid theft risks associated with recognizable packaging.

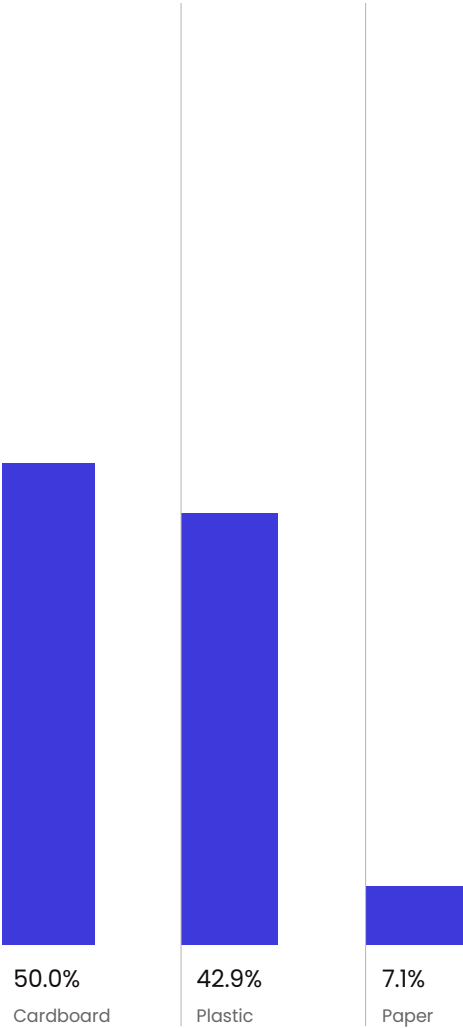
Cardboard or plastic?
Sustainability starts on
the outside

When it comes to packaging materials, the picture is mixed. Half of all orders were shipped in traditional cardboard boxes. Another 42.9% of retailers used plastic packaging, typically in the form of poly mailers. Only 7.1% opted for paper-based alternatives. The environmental pros and cons of each material type vary depending on the product being shipped. Still, the continued reliance on plastic is notable.

FIG. 14

Material of outer packaging

Do retailers use cardboard, plastic, or paper to ship their products?



Source: parcelLab / ShipStation, March 2025, based on n= 57 of the top U.S. online shops (Source: NRF Top 100 2024)

7.1%

of top U.S. online retailers use paper, suggesting that sustainability concerns have yet to reshape the industry's packaging practices.

Right-size packaging:
a positive trend

There’s encouraging progress when it comes to packaging formats. In over 90% of the orders, the package size matched the actual size of the product inside. This suggests that many retailers have optimized their logistics to minimize excess air, filler material, and oversized boxes.

6.3.3

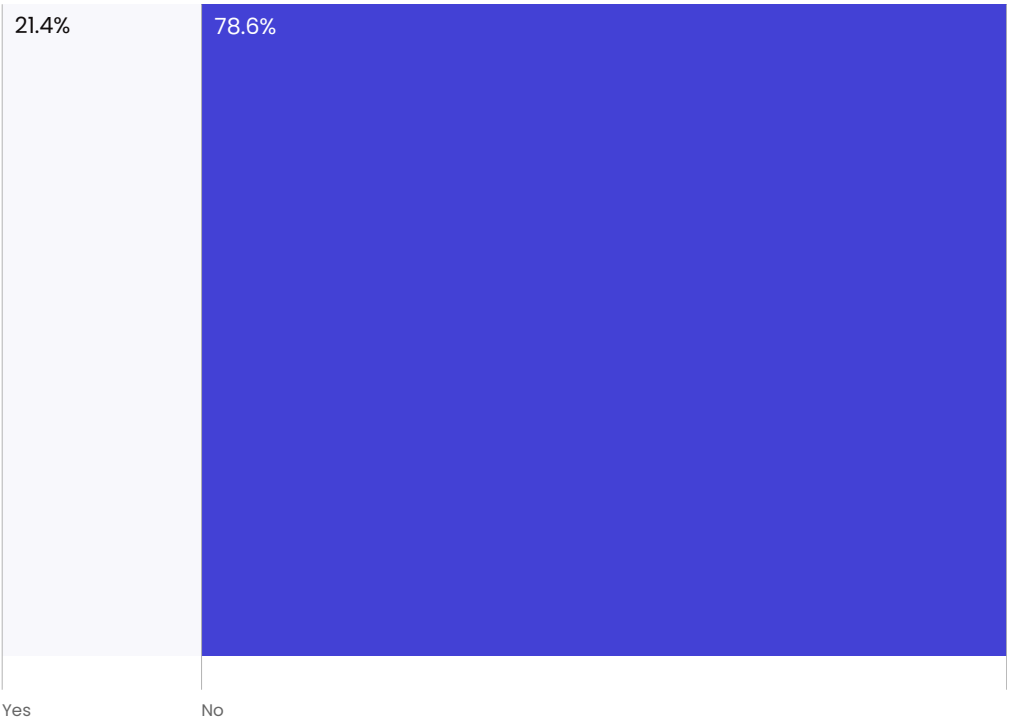
Plastic inside, little
purpose outside

The picture is less promising when it comes to packaging content. More than half of all packages (55.6%) included plastic components, whether as filler, inner wrapping, or protective film. Eco-friendlier alternatives like paper, cardboard, or grass-based materials were rarely used. Even rarer was any indication that sustainability had been considered at all. Just over one-fifth of retailers (21.4%) included messaging about sustainable practices on the packaging through icons, slogans, or printed information. For most U.S. retailers, the shipping box remains a silent vessel rather than a visible expression of values or brand commitment.

FIG. 15

Sustainability messaging
on packaging

Do retailers use packaging
to communicate their
environmental efforts?



Source: parcelLab / ShipStation, March 2025, based on n= 57 of the top U.S. online shops (Source: NRF Top 100 2024)

21.4%

Not even a quarter of retailers use their packaging to highlight sustainability measures, missing a clear opportunity to communicate environmental values at the doorstep.

Resealable packaging makes returns easier and reduces waste

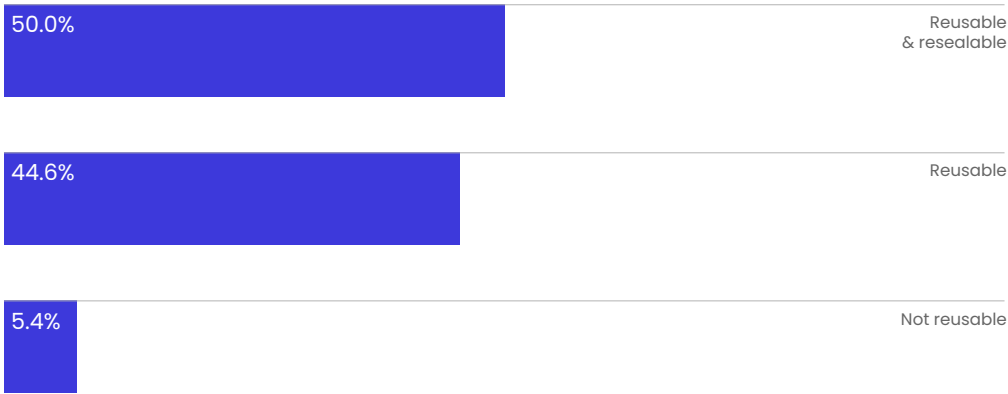
Half of the retailers in the study use shipping packaging that can be resealed, making returns more convenient for customers and reducing packaging waste. An additional 44.6% offer at least some option for reuse, such as extra adhesive strips or reversible mailers. Only 5.4% ship their products in packaging that becomes unusable once opened.

FIG. 16

Reusable and resealable packaging

Do retailers offer packaging that can be reused—or even resealed for returns?

Source: parcelLab / ShipStation, March 2025, based on n= 57 of the top U.S. online shops (Source: NRF Top 100 2024)



50%

of all retailers ship their products in packaging that is both reusable and resealable, making returns easier and reducing waste.

One way retailers are reducing material waste is by eliminating printed return labels. Only about one-third of the retailers in our study still include a return label in the package. The other two-thirds rely on digital solutions, allowing customers to generate labels via QR code, email, or online portals. This not only saves paper. It also improves data accuracy and minimizes error-prone manual processes.

Returns

Alongside shipping costs, returns are one of the core focus areas of this study. Much like shipping, return policies—including handling, timelines, and fees—have a direct impact on conversion rates and revenue.

Our analysis of the return processes across 57 leading U.S. online retailers reveals a wide range of strategic approaches and plenty of room for differentiation.

Two-thirds of retailers offer a 30-day return window or less

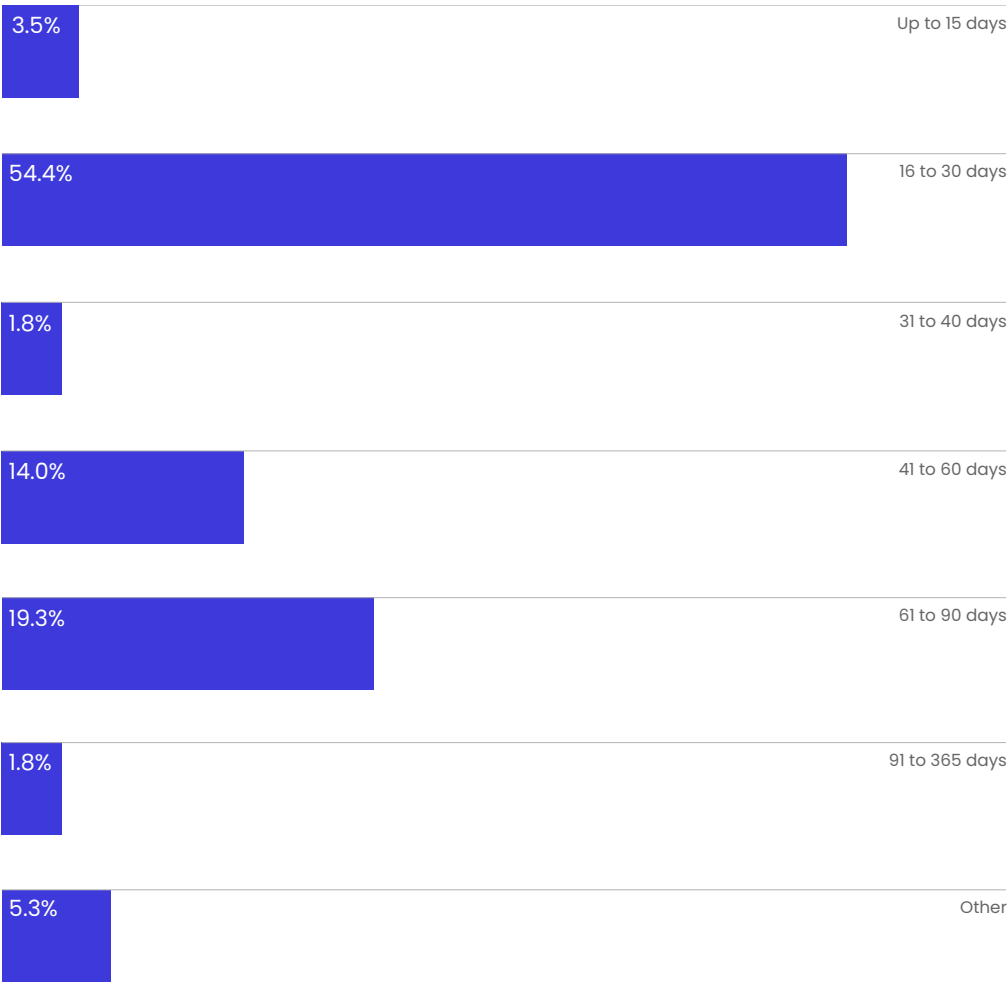
The majority of retailers take a fairly strict stance on return timelines. Around 60% allow returns within a maximum of 30 days. Roughly one-third offer more generous policies, with return windows of 60 or even 90 days.

A few retailers stand out with notably flexible policies. Nordstrom, for example, places no time limit on returns. Chewy offers an especially customer-friendly 365-day return window. At Staples and O'Reilly Auto Parts, the return period depends on the specific product.

FIG. 17

Returns windows

What return period do online retailers offer their customers?



Source: parcelLab / ShipStation, March 2025, based on n= 57 of the top U.S. online shops (Source: NRF Top 100 2024)

58.1%

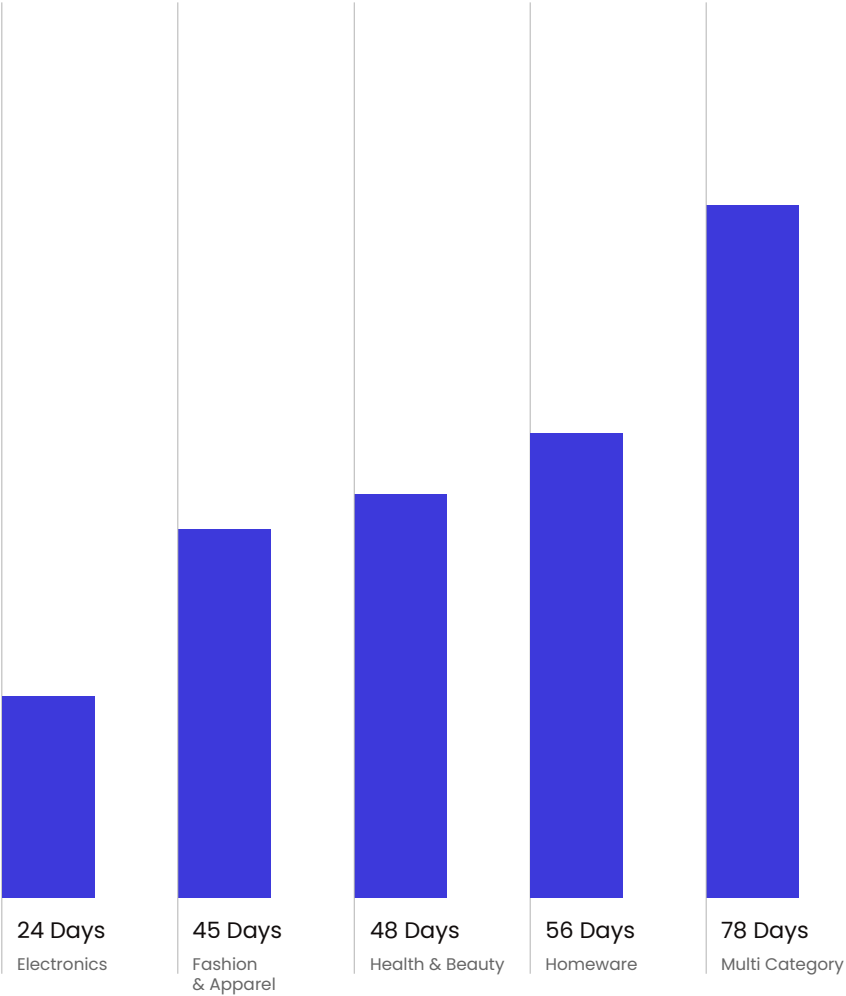
Nearly two-thirds of retailers give customers 30 days or less to return their items.

The average return period also differs noticeably by retail category. Retailers with broad assortments (multi-category) offer the most generous timelines, averaging 78 days. Homeware retailers follow with an average of 56 days, while Health & Beauty allows for about 48 days. Fashion retailers fall in the mid-range with an average return window of 45 days. Electronics retailers are the most restrictive, offering just 24 days on average.

FIG. 18

Return periods
by categories

How do return windows vary by
product category?



Source: parcelLab / ShipStation, March 2025, based on n= 57 of the top U.S. online shops (Source: NRF Top 100 2024)

Return windows vary significantly across categories, with multi-category retailers offering the longest return periods, while electronics retailers provide the shortest.

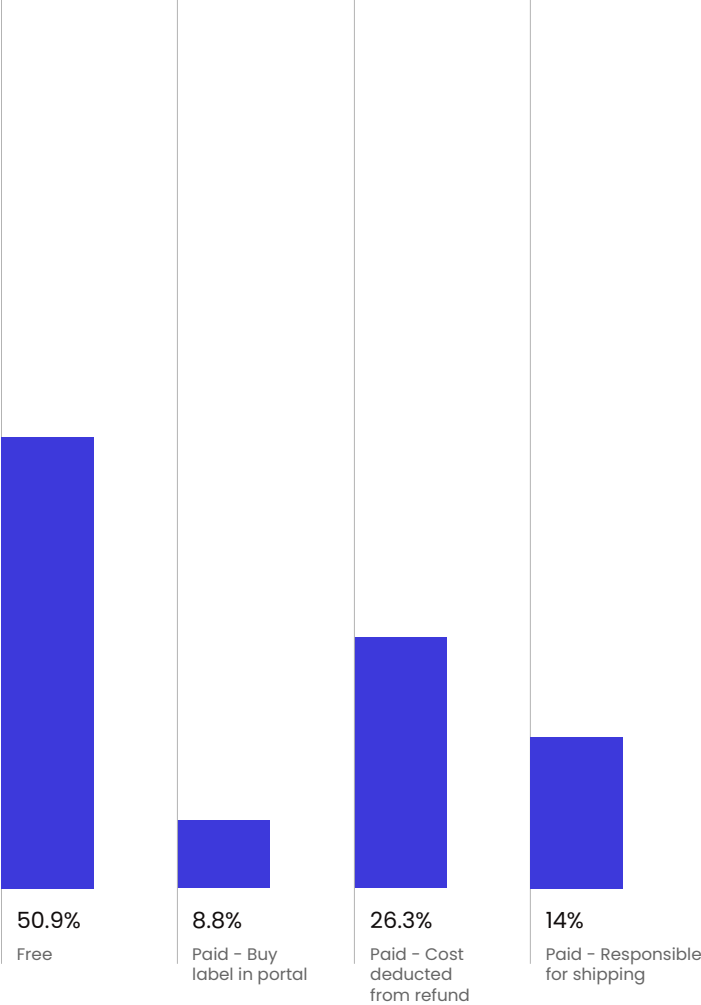
Only half of all returns are free

While free shipping remains rare in the U.S., just over half of the top online retailers do offer free returns. In our study, 50.9% of retailers did not charge any return fees. The remaining 49.1% pass the cost on to customers in various ways: About 26.3% deduct the return fee directly from the refund amount. Another 14% require customers to organize and pay for the return themselves. 8.8% offer return labels for purchase via an online portal.

FIG. 19

Return shipping costs

Do customers have to pay to return items—and if so, how?



Source: parcelLab / ShipStation, March 2025, based on n= 57 of the top U.S. online shops (Source: NRF Top 100 2024)

50.9%

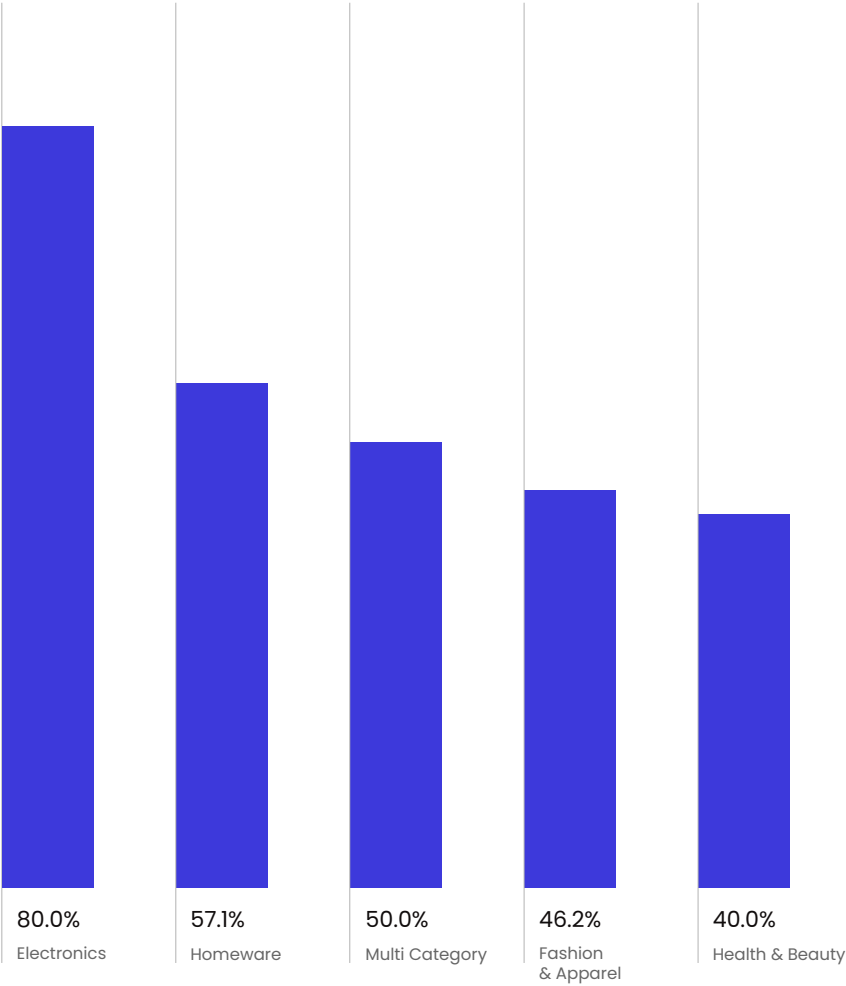
Just over half of retailers offer free returns.

Return policies differ by product category. A full 80% of electronics retailers offer free returns, which is the highest rate in the study. In contrast, only 40% of Health & Beauty retailers provide this option. Homeware performs relatively well at 57%, while Fashion & Apparel lags slightly behind at 46.2%. Multi-category retailers fall right in the middle, with 50% offering free returns.

FIG. 20

Free returns by category

In which product categories are free returns most common?



Source: parcelLab / ShipStation, March 2025, based on n= 57 of the top U.S. online shops (Source: NRF Top 100 2024)

80%

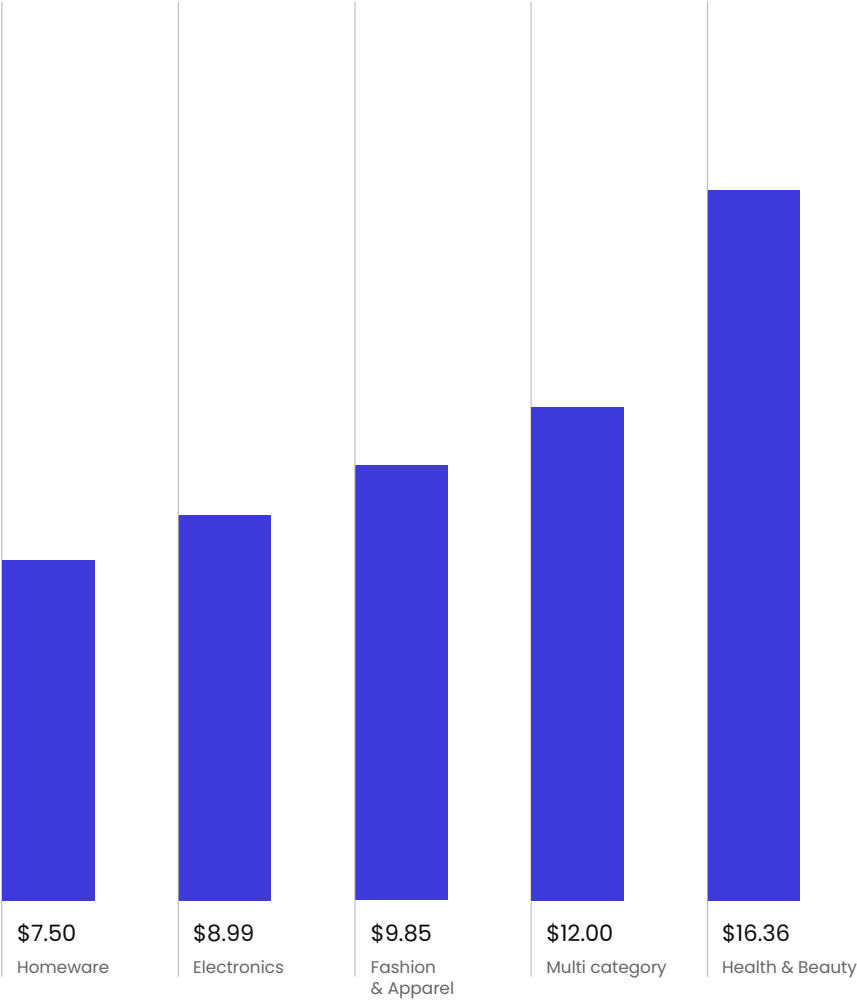
Electronics retailers lead the way with 80% offering free returns, while Health & Beauty and Fashion & Apparel lag behind.

Return shipping fees in the U.S. differ significantly depending on the retailer and category. On average, customers who pay for returns are charged \$10.92. The most affordable return fee in the study was at Zara, at \$4.95. The most expensive was at Hobby Lobby, where returns cost \$24.57. Return costs are especially high in the Health & Beauty category, with an average of \$16.36. In comparison, Homeware (\$7.50) and Electronics (\$8.99) are considerably more affordable.

FIG. 21

Average return costs by category

How much do customers pay to return items—depending on what they bought?



Source: parcelLab / ShipStation, March 2025, based on n= 57 of the top U.S. online shops (Source: NRF Top 100 2024)

Return costs vary widely across categories: Health & Beauty products are the most expensive to return (\$16.36 on average), whereas Homeware and Electronics are less expensive to return.

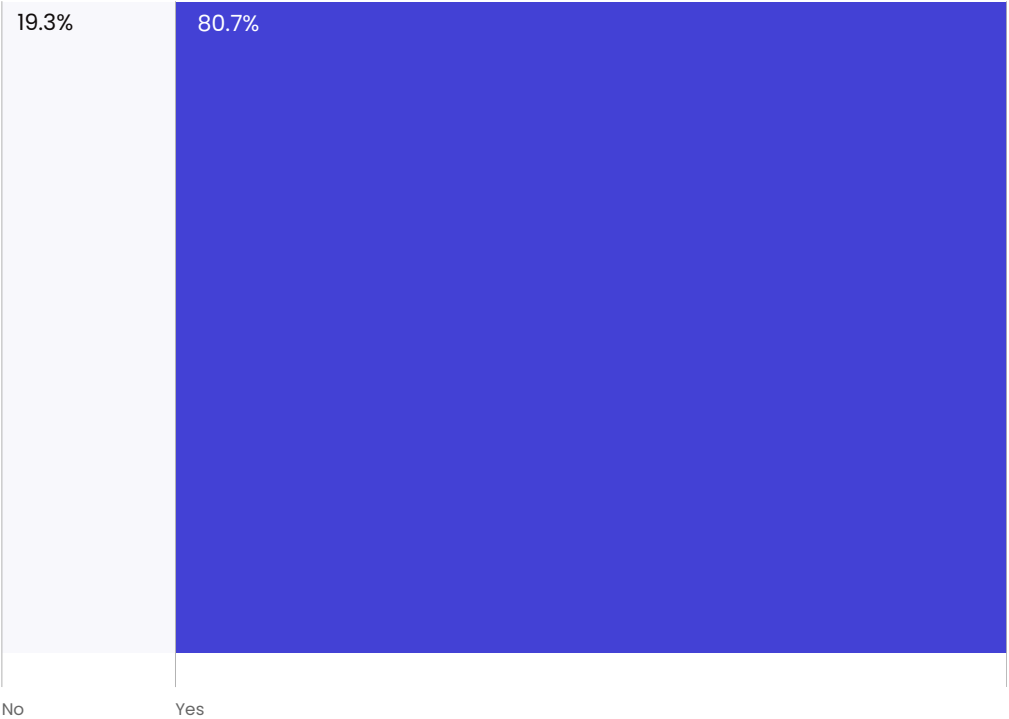
Digital return portals are gaining ground, but not paper-free

An encouraging trend in returns is the growing adoption of digital portals. More than 80% of the retailers in our study now use an online interface to manage returns. However, fully paperless processes remain the exception. Only 29 out of 55 retailers offer return options that do not require customers to print a label. As a result, the market remains split between modern, user-friendly systems and outdated workflows that still demand printers, paperwork, and extra effort from the customer.

FIG. 22

Return portal usage

Is the return process handled via a digital portal?



Source: parcelLab / ShipStation, March 2025, based on n= 57 of the top U.S. online shops (Source: NRF Top 100 2024)

80%+

Over 80% of retailers now process returns via a digital portal, reflecting a clear shift toward self-service and streamlined post-purchase experiences.

When it comes to how returns are physically handled, drop-off remains the dominant model. Out of 55 retailers analyzed, 45 allow customers to return items via designated drop-off points, either in-store or through logistics partners. By contrast, only five retailers offer the added convenience of at-home pickup. Given the frequent emphasis on customer-centric service, this surprisingly low number highlights a significant gap between expectations and actual service offerings. The remaining retailers either require customers to manage shipping themselves or provide no flexible return option at all.

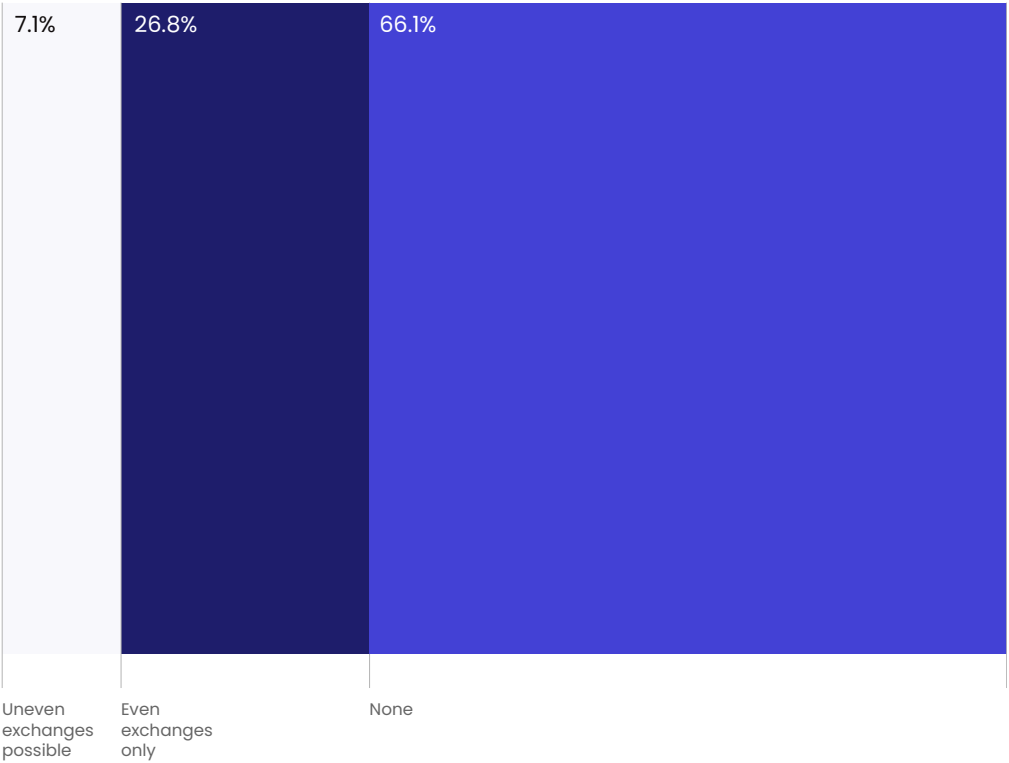
Exchanges? Largely absent

Exchange policies are particularly underdeveloped. A full 37 retailers in the study offer no exchange option whatsoever, instead requiring customers to return the original item and place a new order. Fifteen retailers support what’s known as an “even exchange,” allowing a customer to swap for the same product in a different size or color. Only four retailers enable “uneven exchanges,” where customers can choose a different item or a different price point. From a customer loyalty and convenience standpoint, this leaves a great deal of untapped potential.

FIG. 23

Support for exchanges

What types of product exchanges do retailers support?



Source: parcelLab / ShipStation, March 2025, based on n= 57 of the top U.S. online shops (Source: NRF Top 100 2024)

Most retailers do not support exchanges at all.

While most retailers still fall short when it comes to offering seamless exchange options, many appear to be taking a data-driven approach to improving their returns process. A full 93% of retailers in the study actively ask customers for a reason when initiating a return. This shows a strong intent to learn from return behavior. However, this study did not examine how retailers actually use the collected data.

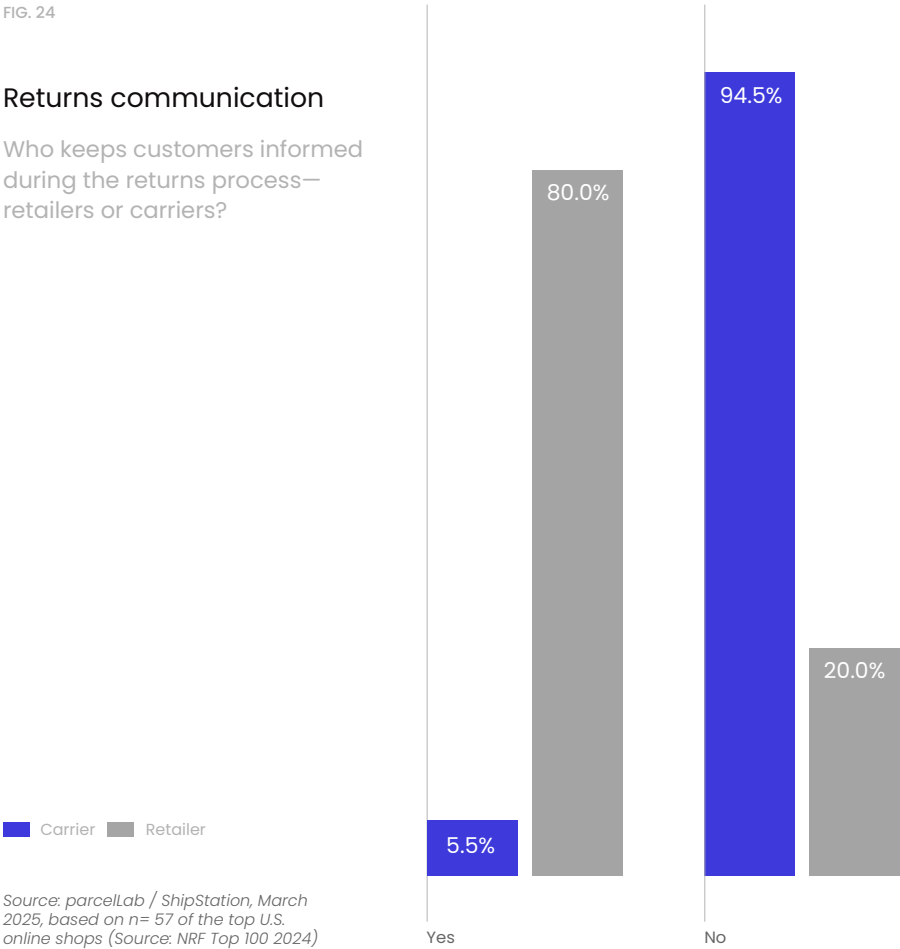
Communication:
a mixed bag

A well-functioning return process is about more than timelines and fees. It also hinges on communication. Customers want to know what happens next once they’ve sent an item back. Here, too, the study reveals room for improvement. While 80% of retailers communicate proactively during the return journey via email or customer account updates, 20% do not provide any return-related notifications. The result? Uncertainty, increased inquiries to customer service, and, in the worst cases, lost trust.

FIG. 24

Returns communication

Who keeps customers informed during the returns process—retailers or carriers?



Source: parcelLab / ShipStation, March 2025, based on n= 57 of the top U.S. online shops (Source: NRF Top 100 2024)

80%

of retailers actively inform customers about the status of their return, only 5.5% rely on carriers for this task.

Unusual return experiences — both good and bad

Our test purchases also revealed some unexpected, and sometimes surprising, return experiences. On the positive side, Dell and HP refunded the purchase amount without requiring the item to be returned. Chewy went a step further, encouraging us to keep the unwanted product and donate it instead. Other retailers, however, stood out more for their complexity than their generosity.

At Five Below, for example, returns had to be requested via email and manually documented with a tracking number. Walgreens and Ace Hardware required in-store returns only, and Williams Sonoma excluded certain items from exchanges entirely. At Menards, return shipping costs in some cases exceeded the value of the item itself.

Ordering and returning online in the U.S. remains a gamble.

Sometimes you get lucky, sometimes not.

Shipping communication

Effective shipping communication is a powerful way for online retailers to demonstrate transparency, reliability, and customer care. Yet this touchpoint is still often underestimated. When a customer sees only a vague delivery estimate on the product page, they expect clear and timely updates the moment they click “Buy Now.” That expectation can only be met when order confirmations, shipping updates, and delivery notifications are tightly integrated.

Ideally, this communication happens where customers are already engaged—via email, in their online account, or directly on their smartphone. But as our analysis of 57 leading U.S. online retailers shows, while warehouse logistics may be highly automated, shipping communication is still far from standardized.

One email and then silence?

Let's start with the good news: all retailers in the study send an order confirmation email. Shipping confirmation is also universally provided. But communication falters at the final step. Only about 72% of retailers notify customers by email when a package has been delivered. That means nearly one-third leave customers without a final delivery update.

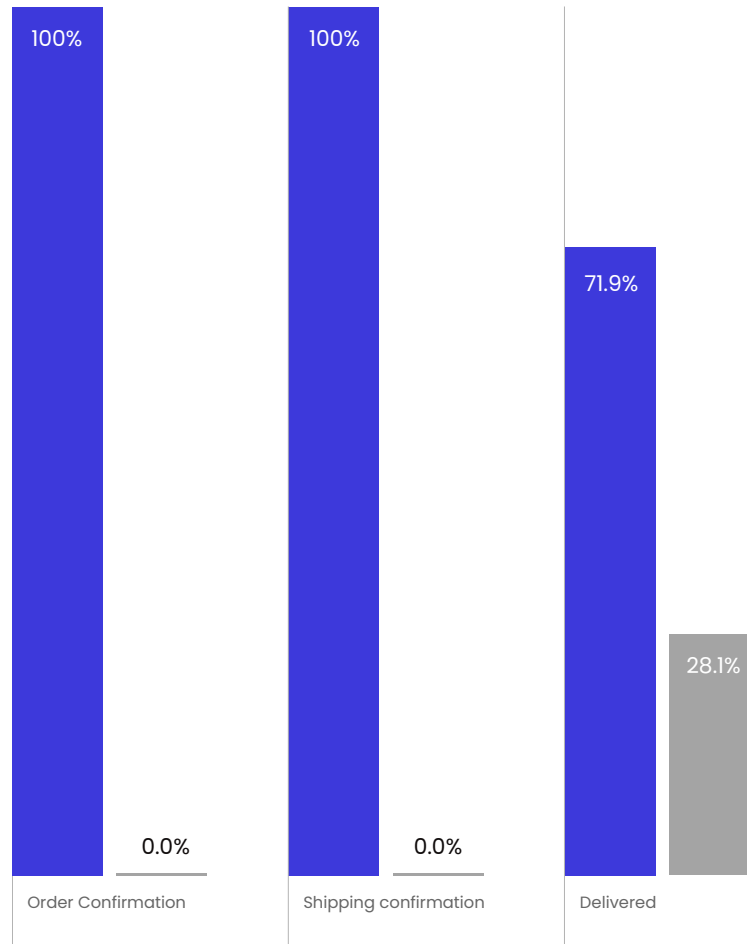
FIG. 25

Delivery notifications

Do retailers notify customers at each step of the shipping journey?

■ Yes ■ No

Source: parcelLab / ShipStation, March 2025, based on n= 57 of the top U.S. online shops (Source: NRF Top 100 2024)



71.9%

inform customers when an item has arrived, leaving nearly a third without final confirmation.

What may seem harmless at first glance can have real-world consequences. In many cases, packages are left unattended on doorsteps or in entryways. If customers aren't promptly notified, they run the risk of theft. It is a problem so widespread in the U.S. that it has earned its own term: porch piracy.

In larger apartment complexes, deliveries often end up at the front desk or in lockers, where they can be overlooked or picked up late. Carrier notifications or internal handoffs by building staff don't always work reliably.

That's precisely why retailers should take it upon themselves to notify customers when a delivery has been completed, regardless of whether the carrier sends an update. By taking ownership of the last mile, retailers don't just improve transparency, they earn trust.

6.5.2

Sender: reachable or radio silent?

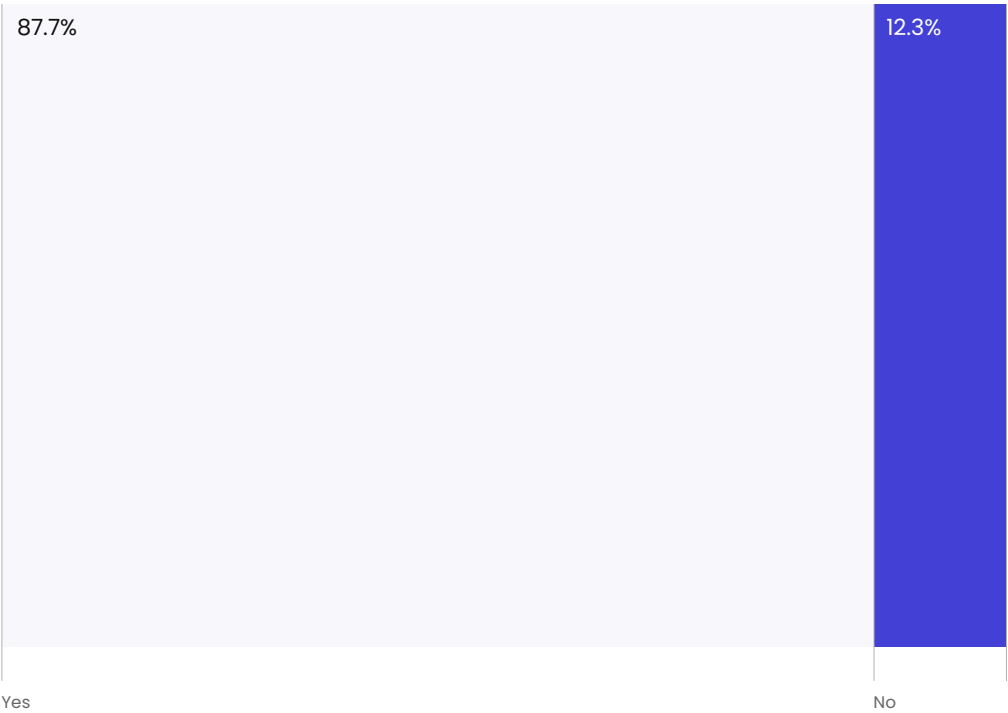
Not all top U.S. retailers seem to recognize that shipping communication can also be an invitation to dialogue. While 87% of retailers send order confirmations from a reply-enabled email address, about 12% still use "no-reply" senders. In the best-case scenario, customers receive an automated response. In the worst case, their messages go unanswered.

The message this sends? *Don't call us, we'll call you.*

FIG. 26

No-Reply order confirmations

Do retailers send order confirmations from an address that customers can reply to?



Source: parcelLab / ShipStation, March 2025, based on n= 57 of the top U.S. online shops (Source: NRF Top 100 2024)

12.3%

Despite industry efforts to improve customer communication, 12.3 % of top U.S. online retailers still use no-reply addresses, sending a subtle signal that questions and feedback are not welcome.

Who’s doing the talking and how?

The question of who communicates with customers is easy to answer: in more than 96% of cases, it’s the retailer themselves. In our test, only two retailers left this responsibility entirely to their shipping partners or involved them directly. The vast majority prefer to maintain control over the communication flow. That, too, can be seen as a sign of growing brand maturity. Those who ship the package want to be the ones explaining where it is.

FIG. 27

Sender of shipping emails

Who communicates shipping updates to customers—retailers, carriers, or both?



Source: parcelLab / ShipStation, March 2025, based on n= 57 of the top U.S. online shops (Source: NRF Top 100 2024)

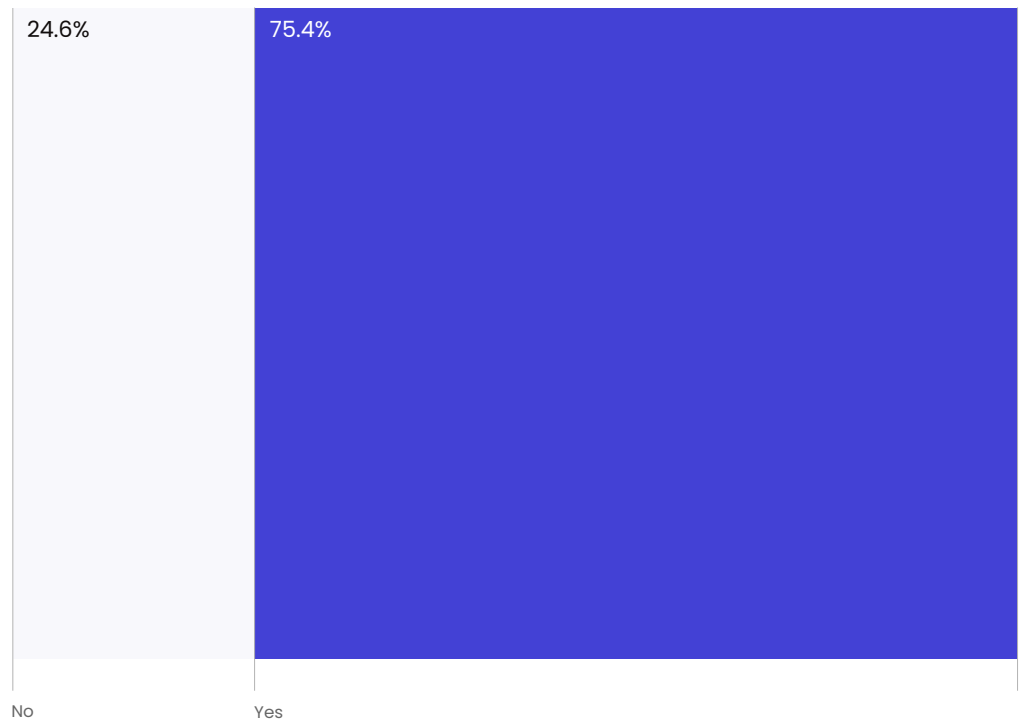
Nearly all shipping emails are sent solely by the retailer, highlighting the strong preference for brand-controlled post-purchase communication.

Just as important as who communicates is how that communication happens. Among retailers, 75% integrate shipping updates directly into the customer account. One in four does not. Instead of providing a centralized tracking overview on their website, these retailers leave customers to piece things together, navigating emails, tracking links, and possibly even third-party apps, assuming a tracking link is provided at all.

FIG. 28

Shipping updates in customer account

Do retailers provide tracking updates directly within the user's account?



Source: parcelLab / ShipStation, March 2025, based on n= 57 of the top U.S. online shops (Source: NRF Top 100 2024)

75%

of top U.S. online retailers offer shipment tracking within the customer account section, providing a seamless experience without relying solely on email notifications.

Tracking: who links where?

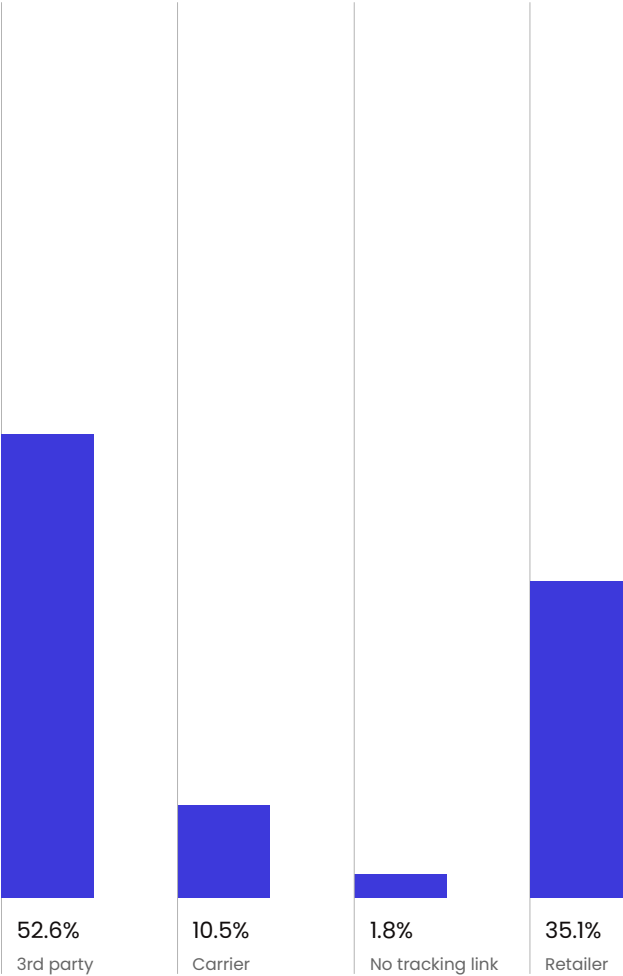
A closer look at tracking practices reveals a fragmented landscape. While nearly all retailers offer some form of shipment tracking, more than half (52.6%) link to external tracking pages hosted by third-party providers. Only about one-third (35.1%) route tracking links back to their own shop environment. And at least one retailer in the study provides no tracking link at all.

FIG. 29

Tracking link destination

Where do retailers send customers to track their orders?

Source: parcelLab / ShipStation, March 2025, based on n= 57 of the top U.S. online shops (Source: NRF Top 100 2024)



More than half of retailers direct customers to third-party tracking pages, missing a key opportunity to build trust and retain brand visibility.

By linking externally, many retailers miss an opportunity to keep customers engaged on their own platform. Those tracking a package might also discover inspiration for their next purchase or be reminded that the brand offers more than just functional logistics.

6.5.5

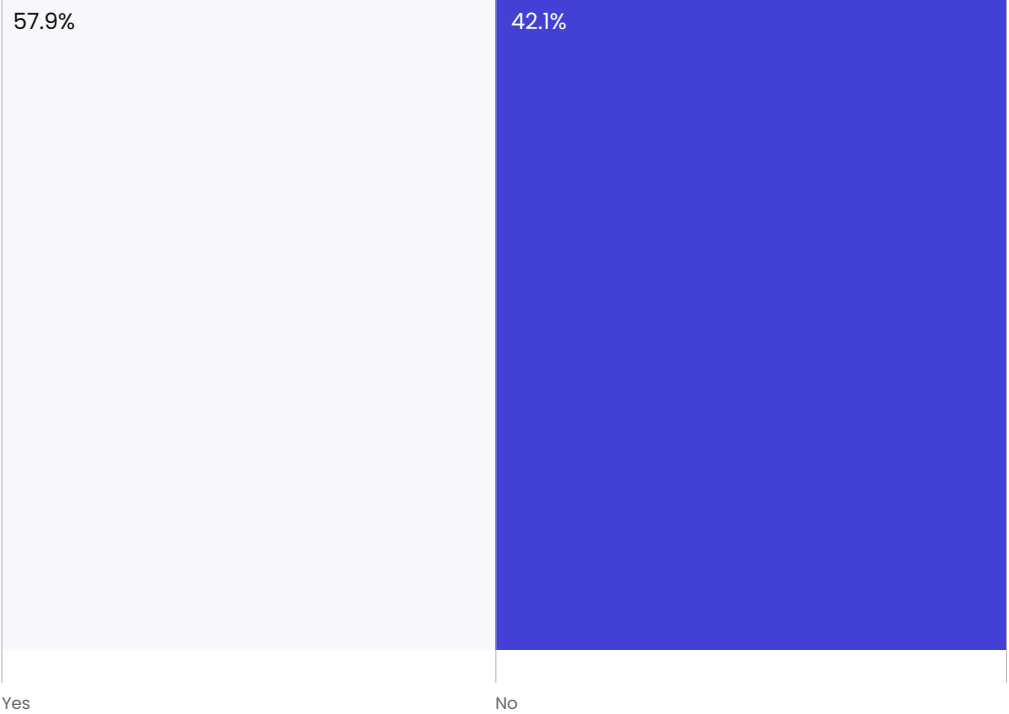
Shipping emails as a sales tool

The role of shipping communication is evolving, with 58% of retailers acknowledging its potential beyond status updates. They use shipping emails to promote additional products. In 93% of those cases, the content was contextually relevant to the original purchase, such as complementary items or useful add-ons.

FIG. 30

Marketing in shipping emails

Do retailers use shipping notifications as an opportunity to promote products?



Source: parcelLab / ShipStation, March 2025, based on n= 57 of the top U.S. online shops (Source: NRF Top 100 2024)

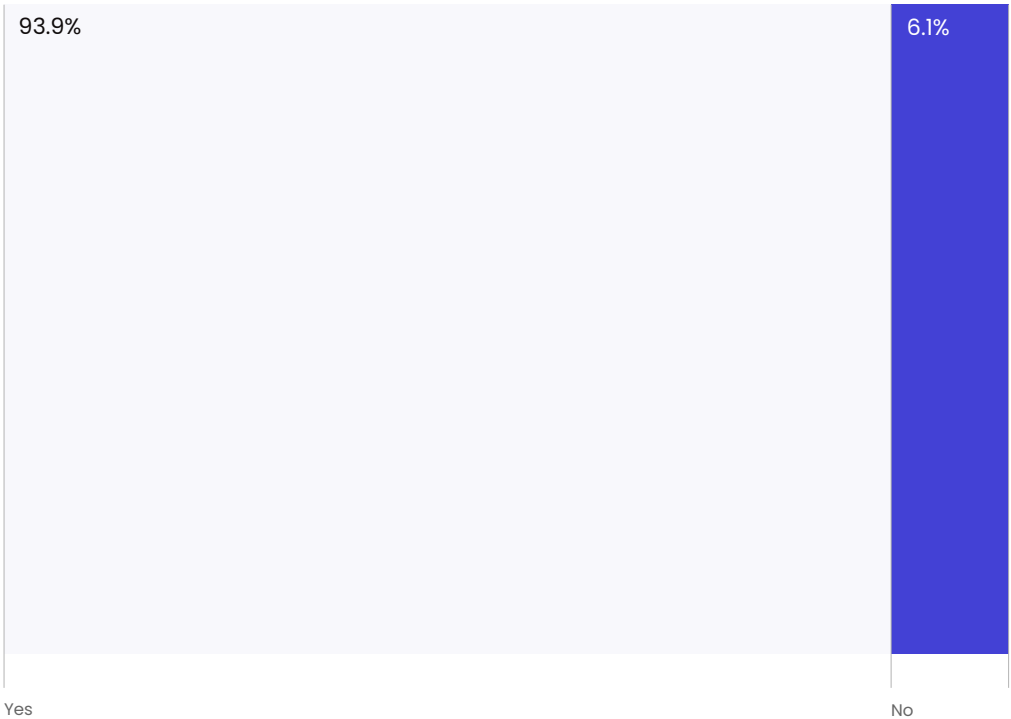
33 out of 57 retailers include marketing content in their shipping notifications, indicating that many see post-purchase communication as a strategic touchpoint for further engagement and cross-selling.

FIG. 31

Relevance of marketing in shipping emails

If marketing is included, does it relate to the customer's actual order?

parcelLab / ShipStation, March 2025, based on n= 33 of the top US online shops, that include marketing in their shipping e-mails (Source: NRF Top 100 2024)



Among the retailers that include marketing in their shipping emails, nearly all tailor the content to the customer's order, suggesting a high level of contextual targeting in post-purchase communication.

It's surprising that this number isn't even higher. Shipping emails typically see high open rates because they're perceived as transactional. With thoughtful curation, these touchpoints can unlock conversion potential without incurring additional advertising costs. Yet many U.S. retailers are still missing out on this opportunity.

Communication via email only? For most, yes.

The choice of communication channels also reveals a fairly conservative approach. More than two-thirds of the retailers tested (68.4%) rely exclusively on email. Just under one-third supplement email with SMS notifications. Messaging platforms like Facebook Messenger are almost entirely unused—only one retailer in the study, parcelFashion, sent order updates through that channel.

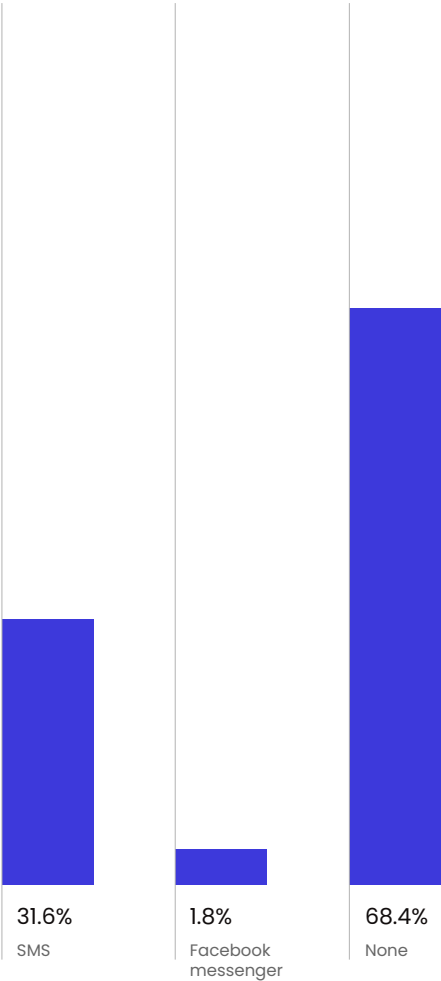
FIG. 32

Alternative messaging channels

Beyond email—do retailers use other channels to communicate order updates?

Multiple responses possible

Source: parcelLab / ShipStation, March 2025, based on n= 33 of the top U.S. online shops, that include marketing in their shipping e-mails (Source: NRF Top 100 2024)



More than two-thirds of top U.S. online retailers rely exclusively on email, missing opportunities to reach customers on their preferred platforms.

Other channels such as WhatsApp, in-app push notifications, or Apple Business Chat were entirely absent from our analysis. That's surprising, especially considering younger audiences, for whom email is no longer the preferred medium. Brands that meet customers where they already communicate stand to gain. Those that don't risk losing relevance and reach.

6.5.7

Between standard and standout

Beyond the quantitative results, several individual cases stood out during our tests. Vans, Ulta Beauty, and Petco, for example, proactively sent emails about shipping delays, an important gesture in an often friction-prone process. Lowe's regularly delivered personalized SMS tracking updates, even supplementing them with friendly phone calls to announce deliveries. Chewy included a printed welcome letter in the box. A tangible gesture in an increasingly digital world.

These examples show that shipping communication is more than just pushing emails. It's an extension of brand identity. And for those willing to be bold, even something as mundane as a tracking update can become a moment of delight, connection, and brand recognition.

Summary

Delivery, returns, packaging, communication—what happens after the click is what truly builds trust, drives repeat purchases, and fosters brand loyalty. Yet even among the biggest players in U.S. eCommerce, the post-purchase experience often feels more functional than inspiring. Orders are reliably delivered but the overall experience still lacks refinement.

14%

of retailers offer standard shipping at no charge

This becomes most evident when looking at shipping costs. Only 14% of retailers offer standard shipping at no charge. The vast majority charge between \$5 and \$10 regardless of category or product type. The average fee is \$7.45. In Fashion & Apparel, it rises to over \$8, while Electronics averages just \$5.49.

There are also notable differences in delivery speed. While 58% of retailers offer expedited shipping, a full 42% provide no faster option at all. None offer weekend delivery. Perhaps more concerning: only about 9% of retailers give a guaranteed delivery date at checkout. The rest remain vague, offering estimates as date ranges or general time windows.

The average delivery time is four business days. In the best case, a package arrives the next day, in the worst, it can take 10 or 11 days, depending on the retailer. Health & Beauty products ship the fastest on average, while Homeware tends to take the longest. And although a visible delivery promise in the mini cart is a simple but powerful tool for building trust, just over half of the retailers in our study provide one.

In terms of packaging, there are both signs of progress and areas that still lag behind. In more than 90% of cases, packaging size matched the item ordered—a positive indicator of logistical efficiency. Yet over half of all packages still contain plastic, whether as filler, wrapping, or protective film. Only 21% of retailers use their packaging as a branding surface. Most remain neutral either to save costs or reduce theft risks. Reusable and resealable packaging is standard at half of the retailers, and two-thirds have already moved away from including printed return labels, favoring digital solutions instead.

When it comes to climate-conscious shipping, however, there's virtually no movement. Only one retailer in the study (J.Crew) offers a carbon-neutral shipping option. Everyone else prioritizes operational efficiency.

51%

of retailers offer free returns

Returns tell a similar story. About 51% of retailers offer free returns. The remaining 49% charge customers either through flat fees, deductions from refunds, or by requiring customers to arrange and pay for shipping themselves. The average cost of a paid return is just under \$11. In Health & Beauty, that figure climbs to \$16.36—higher than any other category. Home pickup for returns, one of the most convenient services available, is exceedingly rare: just five out of 55 retailers offer it.

Exchange options are also underdeveloped. Two-thirds of retailers offer no exchange process at all. Fifteen allow basic “even exchanges” for the same product in a different size or color. Only four support “uneven exchanges” that let customers switch to different items or price points.

Digital return portals are now the standard: over 80% of retailers use an online system to manage returns. But the process isn't always paperless. Only a little more than half allow returns without requiring customers to print a label.

Shipping and returns communication is a mixed bag. All retailers send order and shipping confirmations via email, but only 72% notify customers when a delivery has been completed. Nearly one-third leave customers uncertain about the final step—an oversight with real consequences in a market like the U.S., where unattended deliveries are common.

"No-reply" email addresses are still in use by seven retailers missing a key opportunity to signal openness and approachability.

Few retailers are using shipping communication strategically to deepen customer relationships. While 33 include marketing content in their shipping emails, many fail to fully capitalize on the moment. Open rates are high, and delivery is a prime opportunity to spark the next purchase if used wisely.

66%

of retailers rely exclusively on email.

Channel use also reflects a conservative mindset: two-thirds of retailers rely exclusively on email. SMS is used by just under one-third, while messaging services like WhatsApp or Facebook Messenger are nearly absent. As a result, younger audiences who favor real-time, mobile-first communication remain largely unreached and unheard.

In the end, the picture is mixed: solid operational basics, a few excellent individual examples but few retailers with a truly cohesive and ambitious post-purchase strategy. Those who invest in making the "last mile" not just efficient but emotionally resonant have a powerful chance to stand out. After all, good products can be found anywhere. But how a brand makes customers feel after the purchase determines whether it stays top of mind or fades into the background.

About parcelLab

parcelLab is the only truly global post-purchase software provider, empowering brands to increase revenue, reduce operational costs, and deliver a customer experience unlike anything else on the market.

Our award-winning platform transforms routine transactional moments into personalized brand experiences. Leading companies like IKEA, Chico's, H&M, and Yeti trust parcelLab to power their post-purchase journey.

We actively manage post-purchase experiences in 175 countries and track shipping data from more than 350 carriers worldwide—helping brands and customers stay connected at every step.

Specifically, we help brands:



Drive revenue growth by delivering unique, personalized post-purchase experiences that enable seamless cross-sells, upsells, increased site traffic, and improved eCommerce conversion rates



Reduce operational costs and WISMO/WISMR inquiries through timely, event-driven communication



Recover more revenue and improve sustainability with a user-friendly, branded returns portal

Delight your customers with proactive order communication and real-time updates—building stronger satisfaction, deeper engagement, and long-lasting brand loyalty.

About ShipStation

ShipStation helps ecommerce and delivery professionals meet consumers' growing expectations of delivery while maintaining and optimising operational efficiency. ShipStation's solution offers a wide range of personalised services, from delivery options to tracking and returns, through a catalogue of 100+ carriers and 4,900+ services available that span every country in the world. Thanks to ShipStation, more than a billion packages are sent annually by many of the world's leading ecommerce retailers. ShipStation is a member of the Auctane family of companies and is headquartered in Austin, Texas.

Find out more at www.ShipStation.com

