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DIGITAL RETAIL

COMMERCE 360

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THE NEW ERA OF ECOMMERCE:

MANAGING NEW CHALLENGES IN OPERATIONS & TECHNOLOGY

Retailers and brands explore new ways to capture a piece of the ecommerce market by investing in trending technology while learning to live with supply chain disruptions. Shoppers want a personalized, often mobile, shopping experience. Plus, Digital Commerce 360 shares the latest data trends from the largest online retailers.

Compliments of



TRENDING TECH FOR AN EXPLODING ECOMMERCE MARKET

Online retail sales shot up during the pandemic, and that has retailers and brands exploring new ways to capture a share of that growth. They're finding better ways to personalize offers, fulfill orders, increase marketplace sales and market to online shoppers amid tougher privacy regulations. Here are four case studies of recent tech-driven successes.

By Don Davis

Driven by the pandemic, U.S. consumers spent \$609 billion more online from March 2020 to February 2022 than they did during the preceding 24 months. And that explosive growth — a 50% increase in the online retail market in just two years — has prompted retailers and consumer brands to test technologies that would help them win a bigger share of that ecommerce growth.



Their shopping list is long, according to a late 2021 survey of 93 online retailers by Digital Commerce 360. Ecommerce platform was the top tech priority for the coming year, but many others are looking for systems and software that will improve marketing, omnichannel performance, order fulfillment, marketplace sales and more.

Many retailers are looking for technology that will help them sell across channels — including via social media and online marketplaces — as well as in stores and on the web. A big focus among marketers is how to leverage data consumers share voluntarily, given that it's increasingly difficult to collect data without shoppers' permission.

That's because of several recent consumer privacy initiatives. A big one was Apple Inc.'s introduction last year of a version of its mobile operating system that requires iPhone and iPad users to opt in — rather than giving them the option to opt out — for their online activity to be tracked as they move about the web. Only 18% of users are allowing tracking, according to February 2022 data from Flurry, a firm that provides analytics software used by apps on 2 billion mobile phones, the company says.

In addition, Apple's Safari browser by default blocks third-party cookies that track online behavior, as does Firefox. Google says it will do the same with Chrome in 2023. Meanwhile, privacy laws from the European Union and the State of California give consumers the power to prevent tracking by many companies, and online retailers face fines if they don't comply.

All these changes make it essential that e-retailers take maximum advantage of the data they can use for marketing purposes, particularly the so-called first-party data an ecommerce site collects when consumers browse a website or purchase.



"It's the insights we're after. Even if we didn't convert on any of those digitally assisted interactions, it's still money well spent."

— Steve Douglas,
vice president of
business development,
Malouf

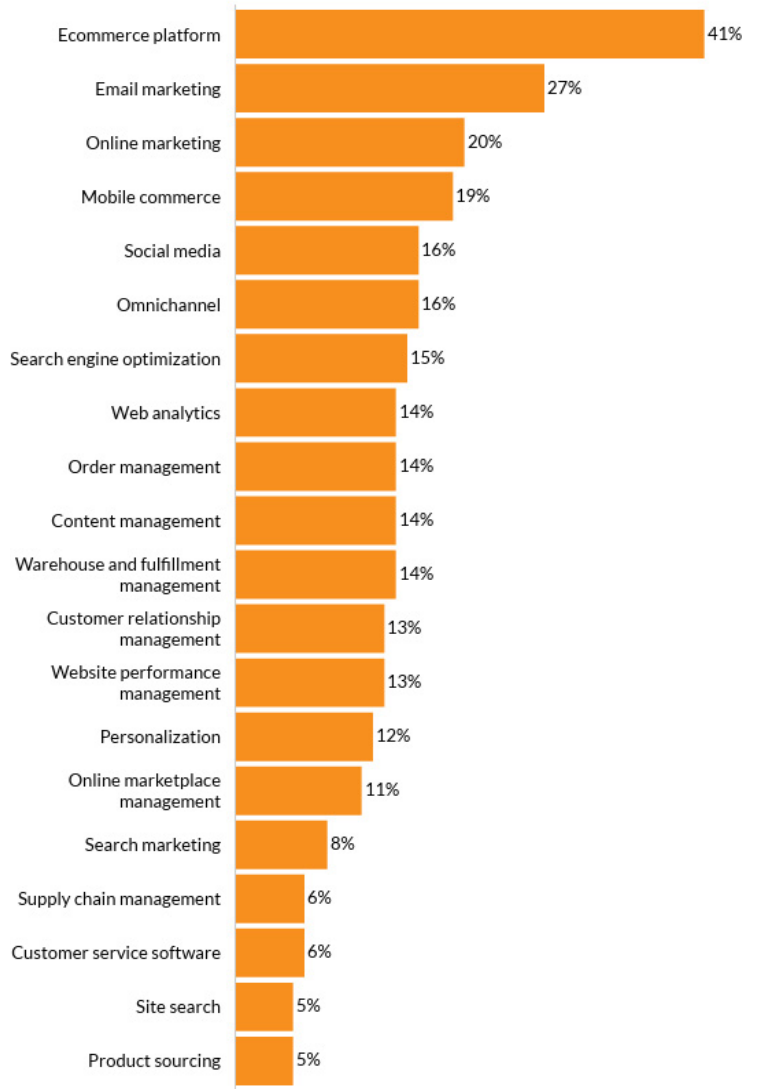
“The changes in privacy rules put more pressure and create more opportunities for me as a marketer,” says Chuck Condon, director of CRM [customer relationship management] at Mercari, an online peer-to-peer marketplace. “I’m working with customers’ actual behavior, the first-party data that we’re allowed to use based on that relationship, and I need to get more emphatic than I have been about using customer-intent data to guide them to their next action.”

Other marketers have come to the same conclusion. They’re using not only browsing and buying history, but also information shoppers provide voluntarily in response to style quizzes and exchanges with website chatbots. Some are mining information consumers share on social media or relying on social influencers that consumers choose to follow for help in promoting their products. They’re using that data to better personalize website and email offers, and to sell more effectively on marketplaces.

Here are four case studies of how online retailers and brands are using technology to more effectively sell online despite the growing privacy restrictions, as well as other steps they’re taking to increase their online sales amid the ecommerce boom.

RETAILERS HAVE A LONG LIST OF TECHNOLOGY PRIORITIES

What are your top three ecommerce technology budget priorities over the next year?



Source: Digital Commerce 360 survey of 93 retailers, October 2021

Q&A

Chasing customers is an impossible task; instead, start showcasing your products

An executive conversation
with **Fred de Gombert**,
CEO, Akeneo



Customers today are in command of their purchasing journeys, and they expect brands to meet them on their terms – whether that’s on the brand’s website, in a marketplace, on social media or in a brick-and-mortar store. But as the customer journey becomes more varied, merchants are finding it harder to predict how and where customers will interact with their brands. To discuss the best way to solve for the unsolvable by focusing on product experiences instead of customer journeys— Digital Commerce 360 spoke with Fred de Gombert, CEO at Akeneo.

What relevant trends emerged as a result of the ecommerce boom that began in 2020?

Businesses have overemphasized the customer journey at the expense of product experiences. Customer journeys changed abruptly at the outbreak of the pandemic, and businesses that didn’t have strong product experience strategies and centralized product information weren’t prepared to make the pivot.

They’ve also overcompensated toward digital-only strategies. Shoppers today are adopting an online-offline hybrid approach. According to a 2022 Akeneo survey, nearly nine out of 10 consumers say they research products online before buying in a store. Consumers want an integrated, omnichannel approach to shopping, not just a digital one.

What have been the big lessons during this unprecedented ecommerce spike?

In 2021, Babolat – a tennis racquet manufacturer that had always relied on distributors for sales – decided it wanted to sell direct-to-consumer (D2C) to better serve its customers globally. By partnering with Akeneo to implement a D2C strategy and centralize product information, Babolat was able to decrease time to market for its D2C products while still catering to its legacy B2B audience. The lesson learned is that it’s much easier and faster to make a major pivot if you have product information ready to move as your business needs demand it.

What challenges specific to the fast shift to ecommerce did retailers face?

The number of touchpoints that people access on the path to purchase is growing. A consumer might come across your product during an Amazon search, navigate to your online store

for more info, read product reviews on Instagram and come into your brick-and-mortar store to make the purchase.

Inconsistent product information across these touchpoints undermines customers’ trust in your brand. If a third-party marketplace has better product information than your own website, that calls into question a brand’s credibility. Maintaining consistency across all the places consumers find information about your products poses a significant challenge.

How has technology helped retailers address these challenges?

Businesses that successfully navigated the ecommerce boom took two key steps.

1. They developed a comprehensive product experience management (PXM) strategy. They redesigned internal processes and upleveled skill sets all aimed at establishing a compelling story about each product. That story was then communicated across every touchpoint – from product conceptualization, production, product description and storytelling through to marketing, sales and customer support.
2. They invested in product information management (PIM) technology to power that PXM strategy. A PIM system ensures consistency in product specifications and descriptions, and any stakeholder can access it. Along with the customer experience tools, it’s the source that feeds all other processes and technologies in the tech stack.

Best-in-class PIM technology, such as Akeneo’s, gets products to market quicker, increases sales, reduces returns and increases customer satisfaction by ensuring consistent implementation of a PXM strategy. Companies that take full advantage of best-in-class PIM and PXM methodologies will see a significant lift in revenue from higher conversion rates across all sales and marketing channels.





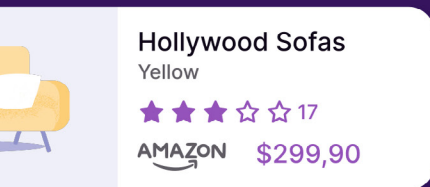
Unlock Growth with Best in Class Product Experiences

Selling online today is where it's at. Reach more customers, carry more items, and sell in more countries more easily than ever before. But simply creating a product listing isn't enough. You need to be found, be seen, and be compelling. You need to be consistent with your offline efforts as well. Akeneo PIM for eCommerce is the solution for retailers and distributors, brands and manufacturers, to help you get online faster and more efficiently than any other approach.

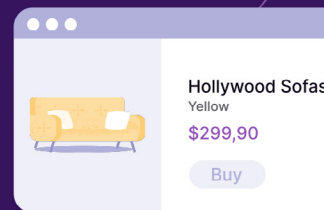
Organize your product information and SEO tags, develop the right catalogs for your eCommerce strategy, and deliver compelling product experiences to support great customer experiences with Akeneo PIM.

Contact us

Request a demo



Hollywood Sofas
Yellow
★★★★☆ 17
AMAZON \$299,90



Hollywood Sofas
Yellow
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Buy

MERCARI: PERSONALIZED MESSAGING RESONATES WITH SELLERS AND BUYERS ON A PEER-TO-PEER MARKETPLACE

Problem: Mercari is a peer-to-peer marketplace focused on casual sellers and buyers, not the kind of power sellers that make their living on the shopping sites of eBay Inc. or Amazon.com Inc. Heading into the 2021 holiday season, the marketplace wanted to, first, increase the selection of items listed on Mercari and then promote sales of those items.

Solution: Mercari launched a campaign called 12 Days of Listings to spur more consumers to list items, then promoted sales through a second campaign called the 12 Days of Gifting. In both cases, Mercari used technology from Braze to personalize messages to previous sellers and buyers.

For example, if Braze sees that a shopper generally responds to an email or browses the Mercari site at a particular time of day, it will send an offer to that shopper at that time, says Condon, the CRM director at Mercari. The system also tracks the terms a shopper searches to glean clues to what they might be interested in selling or buying, he says.

It also makes recommendations based on activity. If a customer sells a stroller on Mercari, the site will offer her a tricycle, figuring the child is growing up and ready for a bike, says Sara Spivey, chief marketing officer at Braze.

The technology also is aware of how close a Mercari shopper is to receiving an additional discount based on their activity. For example, it might send a text or email reminding the consumer he can get a \$10 discount off his next purchase with one more listing. During the 12 Days of Gifting promotion, Mercari also sent

limited-time promotions offering coupons for purchasing items in categories that generated more seller listings during the first part of the promotion.

The machine learning built into Braze technology allows the software to combine multiple signals from customers to determine what each shopper might be interested in. A system like Braze built with machine learning can suggest personalized recommendations at a scale that's beyond the capacity of human beings, Condon says. It's one thing to segment customers into categories, such as parents or golfers, but another to offer truly personalized offers within those segments.

“The fundamental problem we're trying to solve is: how do we make smart recommendations for millions of people?” he says. “Segmentation doesn't necessarily do that properly because it's too broad, not tailored to your personal experience.

“Machine learning can make better educated guesses, and it can be fine-tuned over time. Braze allows us to deliver real-time messaging to customers in a relevant manner.”

Results: The holiday campaigns led to an 8.5% increase in sales compared with what Mercari would have expected without the promotion, Condon says. And he says his team measured results rigorously. It put aside certain previous customers and deliberately did not send them promotions, and then it compared their activity with similar customers it received. That's how Mercari concluded that sales grew 8.5% over what they otherwise would have been.

While Condon would not say how much Braze charges, he does say fees are primarily based on the number of customers who interact with Mercari each month. For the 2021 holiday campaign, he says the return on ad spend was a healthy 184%.

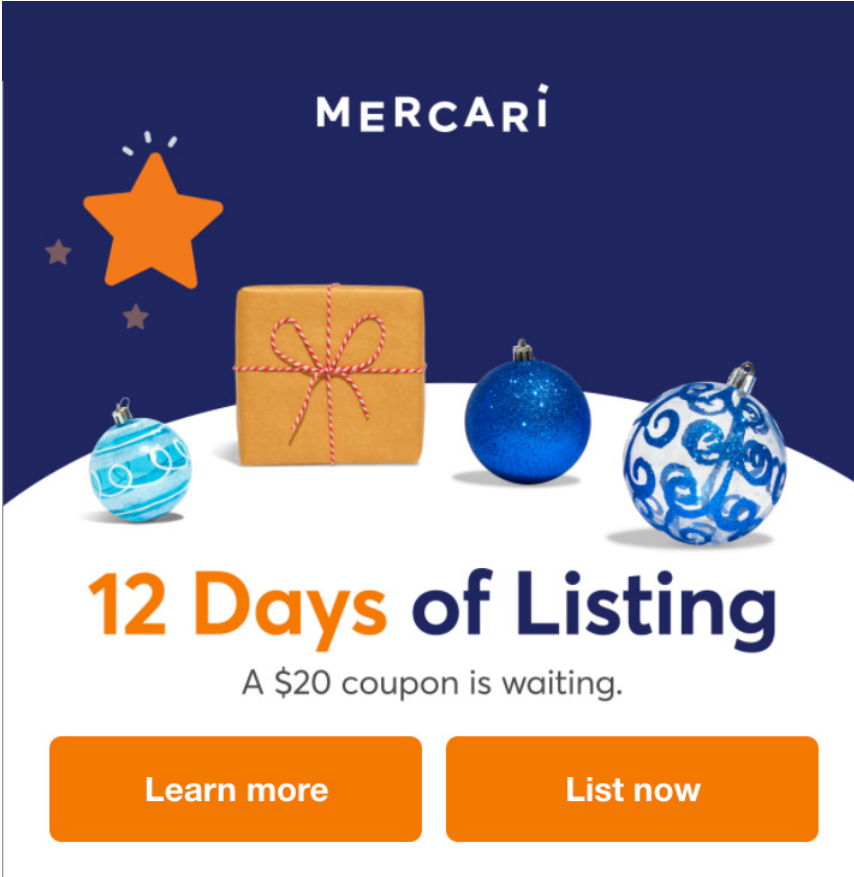
8.5%

Sales increase from AI-driven campaigns to drive added listings and purchasing during the 2021 holiday season over what peer-to-peer marketplace Mercari would have expected without the promotion.

Takeaway: Tools like Braze that incorporate artificial intelligence help retailers “deliver personalization at scale — something that’s impossible to do otherwise,” says senior consultant Jessie Jackson of ecommerce advisory firm FitForCommerce, a subsidiary of technology implementation and consulting firm OSF Digital.

“AI tools can also provide the right information (reassurance), the right incentive (an offer) and the right product (based on your search or browse history) to create a great customer experience — and a sale for the retailer,” Jackson says.

Other AI-based tools that help online retailers personalize offers include Salesforce Inc.’s Einstein and Wunderkind, from the provider of marketing technology of the same name.



MERCARI

12 Days of Listing

A \$20 coupon is waiting.

Learn more List now

The advertisement features a dark blue background with a white curved surface. On the surface are a brown gift box with a red and white striped ribbon, a blue and white striped ornament, a solid blue ornament, and a white ornament with blue swirls. There are also several orange stars of varying sizes in the upper left corner.

Using machine learning to identify consumers likely to respond, Mercari offered incentives to list items to sell on its marketplace during the 2021 holiday season.

“These technologies have been around for a long time,” she says. “But they’re getting more sophisticated, taking cues from what shoppers are interested in, and preemptively removing obstacles to buying in the moment — as with the Mercari tool.”

L'ORÉAL: AI TURNS WEAK SOCIAL MEDIA SIGNALS INTO USEFUL INSIGHTS

Problem: It takes global cosmetics brand L'Oréal a year or so to develop a new product, and beauty trends move faster than that. The brand wants to identify trends ahead of its competition so it can be first to market with new products that are in vogue.

Solution: L'Oréal's technology hub in Paris two years ago developed a tool called TrendSpotter that scans 3,500 online sources — social networks like Facebook and YouTube as well as cosmetic-focused online publications and bloggers — looking for what's new, including “what's hot now and weak signals,” says Charles Besson, global social insights and AI director at L'Oréal Groupe.

“The main idea is to make sure we can detect before the competition the trends of tomorrow,” Besson says.

The team's algorithms each year pick up some 25 million data points, mostly text and hashtags from posts and articles, as well as words embedded in images and videos. The system focuses on six countries from which cosmetics trends often emerge: the United States, United Kingdom, France, South Korea, Japan and Brazil. In time, it may be expanded to other geographies, Besson says.

Because millions of pieces of data would be impossible for humans to process efficiently, the inputs flow into a social listening platform from Synthesio that uses artificial intelligence and



“All that new information is gold for the digital, marketing and consumer intelligence teams because they can use the right content that comes from the consumer voice.”

— Charles Besson,
global social insights
and AI director at
L'Oréal Groupe

machine learning to distill patterns from online speech. Synthesio is a subsidiary of market research firm Ipsos Group S.A.

Synthesio turns over the patterns it detects to human moderators who assess whether they represent trends that could be useful for L'Oréal product development and marketing teams.

Besson says the TrendSpotter system has, to date, come up with between 700 and 800 trends that merited study.

Besson declines to reveal any current developments under study, but he points to one that emerged earlier in the pandemic: Consumers using filters to make themselves look better in online conversations with workmates, friends and relatives.

Previously, L'Oréal had acquired augmented reality technology that let consumers see how they would look in various types of



makeup and hairstyles. Because of the data from TrendSpotter, L'Oréal encouraged more of its brands to deploy the technology in response to consumer interest in changing their online appearance, Besson says.

Results: L'Oréal uses the insights it gains from TrendSpotter to develop new products that address the latest consumer desires, whether that's for sustainable ingredients or on-trend colors.

Meanwhile, TrendSpotter helps the manufacturer's digital marketing team incorporate terms consumers are using today into their website product pages, social media posts and online ads.

"With TrendSpotter, you have access to the hashtags and the main terms sources are mentioning," Besson says. "All that new information is gold for the digital, marketing and consumer intelligence teams because they can use the right content that comes from the consumer voice."

Takeaway: TrendSpotter is especially timely because it accesses data that is publicly available, contained in posts consumers and others voluntarily share online. That means access to that information isn't blocked by privacy laws, such as the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation or the California Consumer Privacy Act, or by consumers taking steps to keep from being tracked online.

This system is "a perfect use case" for AI and machine learning that can process far more data than humans can, says John Coniglio, a senior consultant at ecommerce advisory firm FitForCommerce. However, he says, brands using such systems should make sure their web crawlers do not pick up personal information, such as a consumer's name, as that would violate laws requiring consumer consent to use their personal information.

“The process can be built to ignore any or all personal data it may encounter while crawling these websites, and only collect the relevant data it needs to run through the algorithms,” Coniglio says. “The risk of running into privacy issues using this type of methodology is low.”

MALOUF COMPANIES: CUSTOMER INSIGHTS INFORM PRODUCT DESIGN, MARKETING AND MERCHANDISING

Problem: Malouf Companies is largely in the dark about who many of its customers are and what they’re looking for, says Steve Douglas, vice president of business development.

Malouf operates some 45 mattress and bedding brands. While it sells wholesale to specialty retail stores, a sizable portion of its revenue comes from online sales. Douglas declined to specify the ecommerce percentage.

Malouf operates nine ecommerce sites, but they produce relatively little of the online revenue. Most of the company’s web sales come from such online marketplaces as those operated by Amazon.com Inc., Walmart Inc., Wayfair Inc. and Overstock.com Inc.

Because most of its sales are from marketplaces, Malouf doesn’t have a lot of its own data about those customers, Douglas says.

“One of the key challenges with marketplaces is that you don’t own that customer,” Douglas says. “You don’t get insight on why they’re buying and who they are. Anything we can do to get insights into that customer is immensely valuable to us.”

Solution: To acquire such insights, Malouf uses chatbot technology from Zoovu to ask visitors to its own ecommerce sites what they’re looking for and to make recommendations.

115%

The increase in conversion rate for consumers who interact with a Zoovu digital assistant on Malouf Companies sites versus those who don’t.

If they buy on a Malouf site, that's fine, but even if they don't, the chatbot interactions provide useful information.

"It's the insights we're after," Douglas says. "Who are you? Why are you buying a mattress? What is the purchase cycle? What does the customer journey look like? Even if we didn't convert on any of those digitally assisted interactions, it's still money well spent."

One of the seemingly counterintuitive insights Malouf gleaned is that most consumers are buying mattresses they're not going to sleep on, such as bedding for their children's bedroom or guestrooms.

While some mattress brands compete primarily for the master bedroom purchase, Douglas says many households have five or six beds, and Malouf would like to sell mattresses for all of them. The Zoovu digital assistant helps the company learn about the prices, features and options shoppers want.

"You can guess at that all day, but you'd really rather know," he says. "It's a super valuable tool for us in that regard."

Understanding that many consumers are shopping for mattresses for rooms in which visitors will sleep, Malouf started optimizing its listings on marketplaces for search terms like "guest bedroom" and showing more images related to guestrooms.

It also learned that consumers typically want a mattress that's of medium to soft firmness for themselves, but they prefer a firmer mattress for kids. That led the Malouf brand Linenspa to add a firmer 8-inch-thick mattress in addition to its standard 10-inch-thick product. Douglas says the thinner version is now its best-selling mattress.

Results: The conversion rate for consumers who interact with a Zoovu digital assistant is 115% higher than for those who don't, Douglas says. That alone provides a return on investment of 20 times the \$2,000 a month Malouf pays Zoovu, he says.

"Given that we use their tool primarily to gather customer insights," Douglas says, "the high ROI is a nice bonus."

Takeaway: "The Malouf chat bots provide meaningful information for the retailer while they are helping the shopper make choices," says Jackson, the FitForCommerce consultant. "When technology can help to provide the right info, at the right time — that's a win-win."

"AI will become increasingly critical to retailers because it can deliver personalization at scale — something that's impossible to do otherwise," Jackson adds.

And, because the consumer volunteers the information, brands like Malouf are free to use those insights both to personalize offers to that shopper and to inform product development and marketing.

TRONUS: SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCERS GENERATE SALES FOR A FEMALE ATHLETE'S FOOTWEAR BRAND

Problem: Tronus is small, with just five full-time employees who began selling its high-end, unisex sneakers in November 2020. It was founded by Santia Deck, a prominent female athlete — she was reportedly the first woman to win a multimillion-dollar football contract when she signed with the Women's Football League Association in 2020 — who has become an online celebrity with 891,000 Instagram followers.

As a small startup, Tronus needed help getting out the word about its product. It launched a marketing campaign with online

influencers who have social media followers of their own, and it relies on technology to automate that campaign as well as to handle fulfillment.

Solution: Tronus began last year recruiting social media personalities to promote its sneakers, the prices of which start at \$120 for children's footwear and \$135 for adults. The younger consumers Tronus targets are more likely to respond to expert testimonials than to ads, says Cynthia Cureton-Robles, chief operating officer of Tronus and Santia Deck's mother.

"This Gen Z and millennial population can see through something that's not real," she says. "Having the brand ambassadors, it's like our shoes, it's coming from a real place. That is what helps us generate sales."

Tronus uses Refersion, which specializes in online affiliate marketing programs, to keep track of sales from influencers and calculate commissions. Each social media personality gets a unique code, and when a consumer makes a purchase on the Tronus online store after clicking on an influencer's link, Refersion tracks the commission the brand ambassador earns.

That commission varies based on the influencer's social media following, Cureton-Robles says. She says the Tronus program has three tiers, with the celebrities in the top tier earning the highest commission.

Through the Refersion program, brand ambassadors can sign in to see their sales and commissions. And Refersion handles payments to the influencers without Tronus intervention, Cureton-Robles says.

"We don't have to do a lot, other than monitoring and approving applications to be brand ambassadors," she says. "They create



Santia Deck, founder of sneaker brand, Tronus

these reports, what is owed [to] every ambassador, and they're paid at the end of the month.”

Tronus also uses a vendor to efficiently fulfill its orders and automatically communicate shipping status to customers. Orders placed on the Tronus ecommerce site go directly to Verte LLC, a fulfillment company and warehouse management software provider that generally ships out the product the same day, Cureton-Robles says.

Once a product ships, Verte automatically issues a tracking number, which goes through the Tronus store on the Shopify Inc. platform to the customer without manual intervention.

“That sounds very simple, right? But if you don't have that in place and you're dealing with this manually, humans make errors,” Cureton-Robles says. “We had lots of problems with our previous fulfillment center, probably due to the fact it was a manual process.”

Results: While the brand ambassador program only began a few months ago, Cureton-Robles says it already accounts for between 10% and 20% of Tronus' sales. She declined to disclose company revenue. She says Tronus plans to put more emphasis on the brand ambassador program in 2022.

Refersion's starting price is \$89 per month for tracking up to 130 conversions. The company negotiates pricing for brands with higher volumes.

Takeaway: For a brand like Tronus aiming to reach younger consumers, influencers can be effective, says Forrester Research principal analyst Kelsey Chickering.

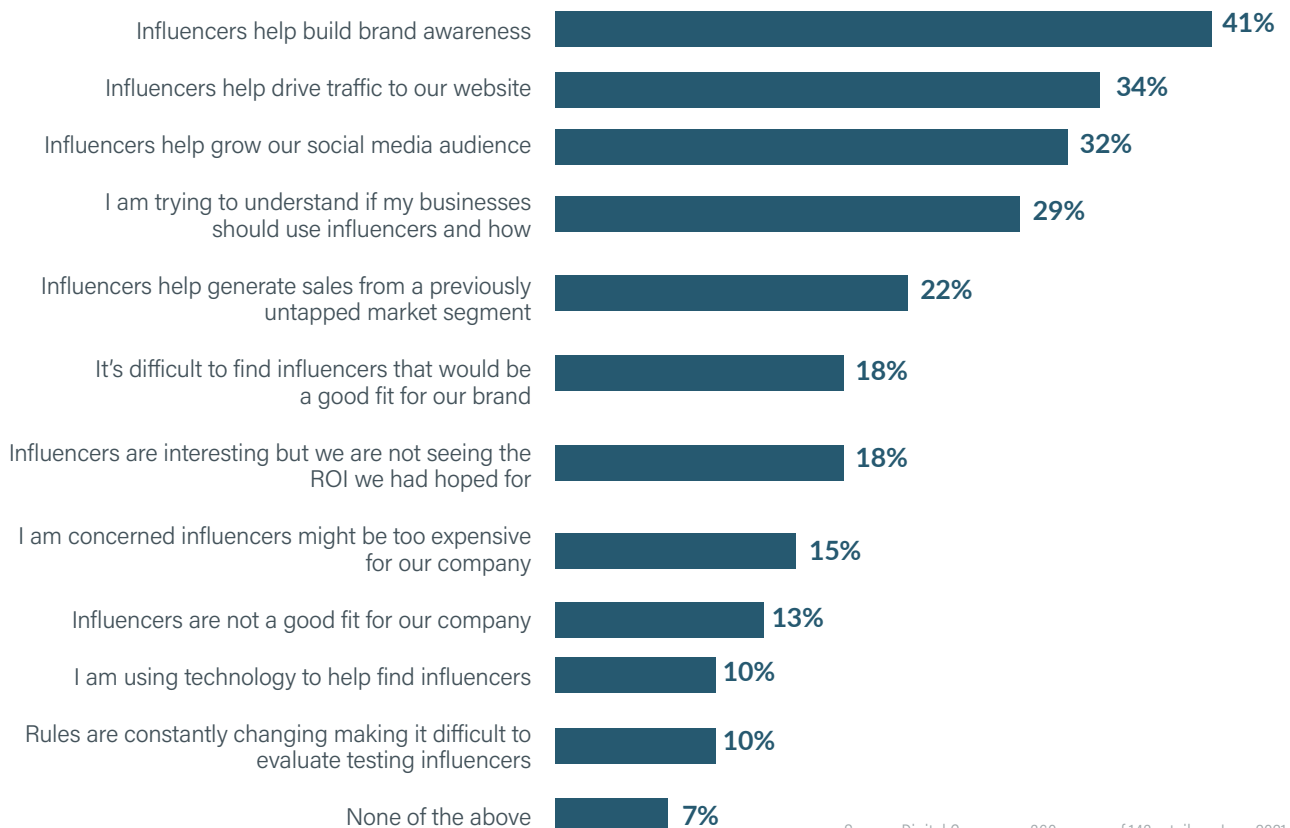
“As brands look to build relationships with a younger audience, influencers are a smart way to get into Gen Z feeds,” she says.

She points to a 2021 Forrester survey in which the third most popular social activity Gen Z consumers do weekly is following influencers, cited by 37% of respondents.

She adds that consumer brands are investing in influencer marketing and in related services. In a 2021 Forrester survey of 770 consumer marketers, 34% said they planned to use influencer marketing services in the coming year. And in a 2022 survey of 800 marketing executives, 43% said they planned to increase their influencer marketing spend.

BRAND AWARENESS IS THE BIGGEST BENEFIT, BUT MANY STRUGGLE TO GENERATE ROI FROM INFLUENCERS

What is your perspective on influencers? Please select all that apply.



Source: Digital Commerce 360 survey of 143 retailers, June 2021

Connecting with the right social media advocates is a key to success, Chickering says.

“To build a successful influencer program, brands must invest in consistent, longer-term partnerships with influencers, versus one-off sponsorships,” she says.

It’s not surprising that marketing through social media celebrities and bloggers would catch on at a time when privacy regulations limit retailers’ ability to find new customers through cookie-driven, targeted ads. After all, consumers voluntarily follow people on social media, so they’ve already given their permission for those influencers to communicate with them. Retailers are piggybacking on that permission to reach their target audience.

These examples show that marketers can make personalized offers and gather consumer information, even in this privacy-focused age, if they can find the right way to connect with shoppers.

But even a technology as powerful as artificial intelligence won’t help a retailer or brand if it’s not appealing to consumers.

“As helpful as AI tech is to the shopping journey, retailers need to give shoppers a reason to want to create an account or sign up for email or SMS to stay in touch,” says Jackson of FitForCommerce. “Connecting the AI with relevant content, helpful messaging, and tying it together with an invitation to connect that benefits the shopper — that’s a win-win. That one-to-one connection is more important than ever.”

That’s especially true now that consumers often have to give their consent for retailers to use their personal data. Shoppers will only do that if they believe they’re getting value in return.

don@digitalcommerce360.com | @DonDavisDC360

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