



# Rethinking Last-Mile Delivery: Building Customer-Centric Retail Experiences

CUSTOM REPORT

# **Executive Summary**

Last-mile delivery is not just a logistical necessity but a defining moment in shaping the customer experience; it is integral to building brand loyalty. Aligning delivery services with consumer expectations is imperative for brands and retailers to enhance perceived value and secure lasting customer relationships. Leveraging proprietary findings from US consumer and brand/ retailer surveys, we explore delivery challenges, preferences and priorities to uncover the current state and future potential of the last-mile opportunity.

# Market Scale and Opportunity

- Despite prolonged inflation and other macroeconomic headwinds in 2023, online retail sales in the US increased by 8.4% year over year, taking the online market to nearly \$1.1 trillion, Coresight Research estimates.
- Looking forward through 2027, we expect positive annual online retail sales growth to continue (though moderate) and e-commerce penetration to increase, reaching 23.8%. Online sales expansion will be driven by brands and retailers continuing to invest in enhancing their e-commerce capabilities as well as consumers' retention of pandemic-induced buying behaviors.
- Accompanying continued online sales growth is evolving consumer demand for convenience and immediacy when shopping, underscoring the need for brands and retailers to offer efficient, reliable delivery services. Innovative last-mile delivery service providers can tap this trend by helping brands and retailers enhance and scale their operations as well as improving customer satisfaction and operational efficiency. Overall, we see the last-mile delivery market developing into a more sustainable and customer-centric ecosystem.

# Coresight Research Analysis

## The State of Last-Mile Delivery

- Our January 2024 survey of brands and retailers found that last-mile delivery accounts for a substantial portion of supply chain costs: three in five (61%) respondents reported that at least 30% of their supply chain costs are related to the last mile. Furthermore, high delivery costs are the top challenge faced in the last mile, cited by two in five respondents. High costs are likely being driven by operational inefficiencies in delivery processes, which is evidenced by a reported inability to integrate last-mile data with earlier stages in the supply chain (ranking as the second most widespread challenge). The focus is shifting toward efficient fast-delivery solutions to address these and other issues.
- The offerings of retailers and actual utilization by consumers seem to vary substantially. The delivery speed option offered by the highest proportion of surveyed brands and retailers is "within two days," at 56%, but the largest share of overall deliveries used

by consumers is attributed to "more than two days." Brands and retailers must assess if pain points in their supply chain are leading to gaps between their offerings and actual service utilization. Retail companies can take corrective action to close gaps and achieve efficiencies with technology-powered strategies and solutions.

• Fast delivery is tied to tangible business benefits: offering quicker delivery options (two days or faster) correlates with a huge 10.5% increase in conversion and an 8.9% increase in repeat purchases on average, our survey revealed. However, our survey highlighted that fast delivery also leads to a rise in fulfillment costs and customer returns. Brands and retailers need to strike a delicate equilibrium of strategically investing in fast delivery to achieve key benefits while managing the incremental costs and complexity it introduces to their operations.

### The Shopper's Perspective

- Consumer expectations around last-mile delivery are becoming a decisive factor in online retail success.
  Preferences for delivery cost and speed are shaping the future of customer engagement and retention. As these factors hold significant influence over where and how often consumers shop online, they may be deal-breakers if consumer preferences regarding these factors are not met.
- The cost and speed of delivery appear to be the most important factors for consumers when they shop online, according to our consumer survey: these factors were ranked as the first or second most important factor when choosing a brand or retailer by the highest net proportions of

Building the Last Mile

 Brands and retailers are aligning their strategies with consumer preferences, recognizing secure and prompt delivery as key to customer satisfaction. Influential factors for enhancing last-mile delivery include economic efficiency (84% of surveyed brands and retailers cite this as the top or second most important factor), interoperability and privacy considerations. respondents. In addition, more than two-thirds of consumers reported that they would be unlikely to make a purchase if the delivery cost is too high.

• Flexibility in delivery, including the ability to choose delivery times and locations, stands out as a key driver for customer retention. Nearly two in five consumers ranked the ability to specify the delivery time in the first or second spot when it came to key attributes of last-mile delivery, making this the most important by quite some margin. Brands and retailers should look to offer such options to enhance the overall shopping experience, cut down on missed deliveries and drive sustained customer loyalty.

 Retailers are seeking a broad spectrum of capabilities from their delivery partners, with a particular emphasis on customer service. In addition, over 40% of respondents stated that limitations in delivery speed and geographic coverage can negatively influence satisfaction with their primary external delivery partners. Satisfaction with external providers hinges on their ability to offer varied and technologically integrated delivery solutions.

# What We Think

In today's competitive e-commerce era, choosing the right lastmile delivery solution is critical for brand and retailer success, particularly in their ability to meet evolving consumer demand for speed, reliability and flexibility in the last mile. Retail companies can gain a competitive edge by partnering with solution providers that can offer on-time delivery, end-to-end transparency and advanced technology integration, enabling them to exceed customer expectations, foster loyalty and drive growth. Embracing tailored last-mile delivery services enables retailers to optimize the customer experience, reduce operational challenges and, ultimately, build a resilient and customer-centric business model for the modern marketplace.

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# Introduction

Although it is often perceived as a mere logistical function or transactional step, last-mile delivery holds the power to transform the customer experience. Just as brands and retailers meticulously craft seamless discovery, browsing and checkout processes, last-mile delivery deserves equal attention in its elevation to an integral component of the end-to-end shopping journey and rich brand experience.

In today's intensely competitive landscape, customer satisfaction reigns supreme: last-mile delivery serves as a critical touchpoint, shaping the brand's perceived value among consumers and influencing future interactions between the customer and brand/retailer. It is therefore critical that businesses align their last-mile offerings with customer expectations, but understanding those expectations is critical: what customers want from the delivery experience may be at odds with what brands and retailers think customers want. Adapting last-mile offerings to consumer expectations may incur greater costs in an already expensive process, but it is a crucial investment as the potential benefits are huge. Brands and retailers can convert the delivery stage into a distinctive experience, strengthening loyalty and promoting repeat business to drive overall customer lifetime value (CLV).

In this report, we explore the scale of the last-mile delivery opportunity in the US and the current state of the landscape, including major challenges and gaps, what customers seek from last-mile delivery experiences, and what brands and retailers must do to create positive delivery experiences that drive further business. Our analysis is informed by Coresight Research surveys of US consumers and US-based brands and retailers (see Methodology at the end of this report).

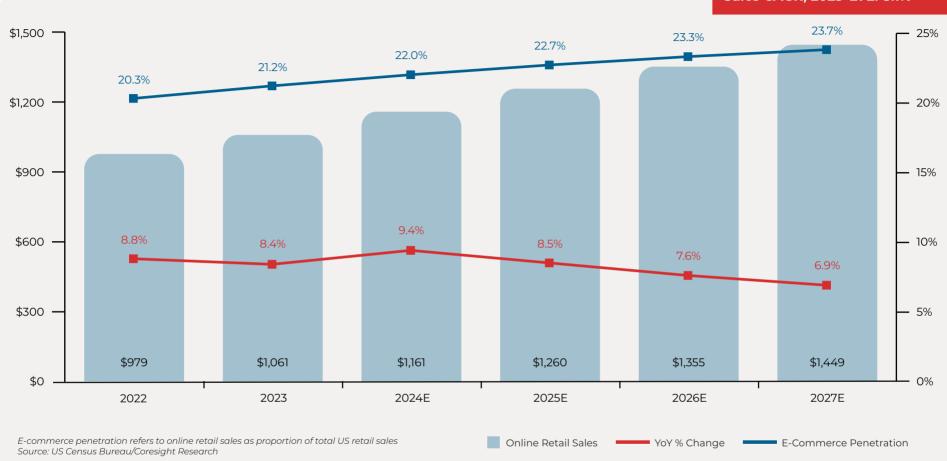
For the purposes of this report, we refer to delivery in two hours or less as quick/rapid delivery, delivery within two days (including same-day or next-day delivery) as fast delivery, and delivery in more than two days as standard delivery.

This report is produced, and made available to non-subscribers of Coresight Research, in partnership with last-mile delivery solution provider Jitsu (formerly known as AxleHire).

# Market Scale and Opportunity

Despite prolonged inflation and other macroeconomic headwinds in 2023, online retail sales in the US increased by 8.4% year over year, slightly slower than the 8.8% growth in 2022 and taking the online market to nearly \$1.1 trillion, Coresight Research estimates.

Looking forward through 2027, we expect positive annual online retail sales growth to continue (though moderate) and e-commerce penetration (online sales as a share of total retail sales) to increase, reaching 23.8% (see Figure 1). Online sales expansion will be driven by brands and retailers continuing to invest in enhancing their e-commerce capabilities—such as automating their fulfillment centers and utilizing data-driven inventory management and personalization strategies—as well as consumers' retention of pandemic-induced buying behaviors.



#### Figure 1. US Online Retail Sales (Left Axis; USD Bil.); YoY Sales Growth and E-Commerce Penetration (Right Axis; %)

Sales CAGR, 2023–27E: 8.1%

E-commerce is a significant sales channel for US-based brands and retailers, and it also presents opportunities for ancillary businesses, such as last-mile delivery service providers. Accompanying continued online sales growth is evolving consumer demand for convenience and immediacy when shopping, underscoring the need for brands and retailers to offer efficient, reliable delivery services.

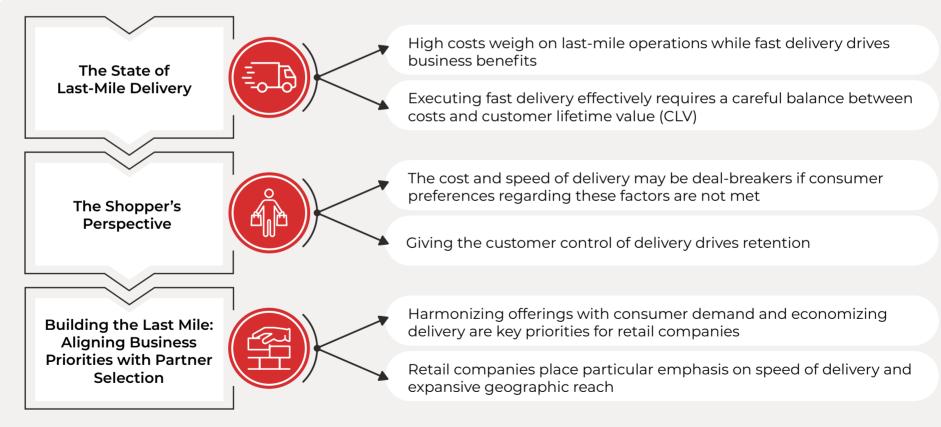
Innovative last-mile delivery service providers can tap this trend by helping brands and retailers enhance and scale their operations as

well as improving customer satisfaction and operational efficiency. Solutions could include integrating advanced technologies such as AI (artificial intelligence) and machine learning—for route optimization and real-time tracking, enabling flexible delivery schedules that allow customers to choose time slots, and making deliveries more economical for retail companies. Overall, we see the last-mile delivery market developing into a more sustainable and customer-centric ecosystem.

# Building Customer-Centric Retail Experiences with Last-Mile Delivery: Coresight Research Analysis

We summarize the key themes unveiled by our survey analysis in Figure 2, each of which we delve into in this report.

#### Figure 2. Building Customer-Centric Retail Experiences with Last-Mile Delivery: Key Themes



Source: Coresight Research

## High Costs Weigh on Last-Mile Operations

Our January 2024 survey of brands and retailers found that lastmile delivery accounts for a substantial portion of supply chain costs: three in five (61%) respondents reported that at least 30% of their supply chain costs are related to the last mile. Furthermore, high delivery costs are the top challenge faced in the last mile, cited by two in five respondents, as shown in Figure 3.

High costs are likely being driven by operational inefficiencies in delivery processes, indicated by the inability to integrate lastmile data with earlier stages in the supply chain ranking as the second most widespread challenge. This suggests that there is an urgent need for brands and retailers to optimize last-mile logistics to reduce overall costs. Leveraging technology for better data integration and cost management could be instrumental for retail companies in improving margins and enhancing customer satisfaction. Brands and retailers also face complexity in managing multiple service providers, with 32% of respondents reporting that it is challenging doing so across multiple regions and the same proportion finding managing service providers across product categories to be a challenge. In addition, 30% of respondents are experiencing slow deliveries. To address these issues, brands and retailers need to develop robust partnerships with delivery providers that can offer consistent service quality across different geographies and product lines. This would enable retail businesses to speed up delivery, reduce the complexity of their delivery networks and ensure a seamless experience for the customer all of which are critical goals to effectively compete in the e-commerce market.

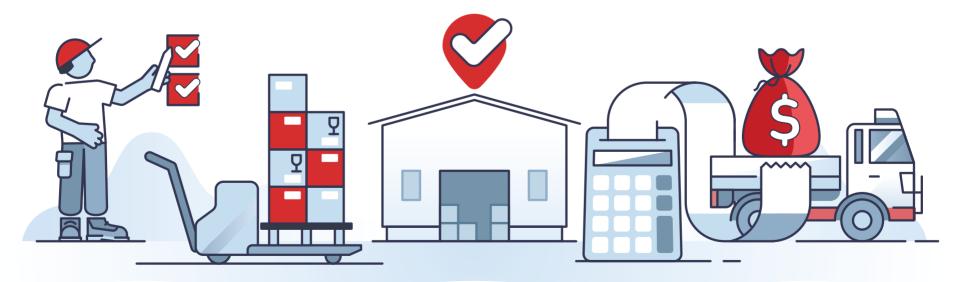
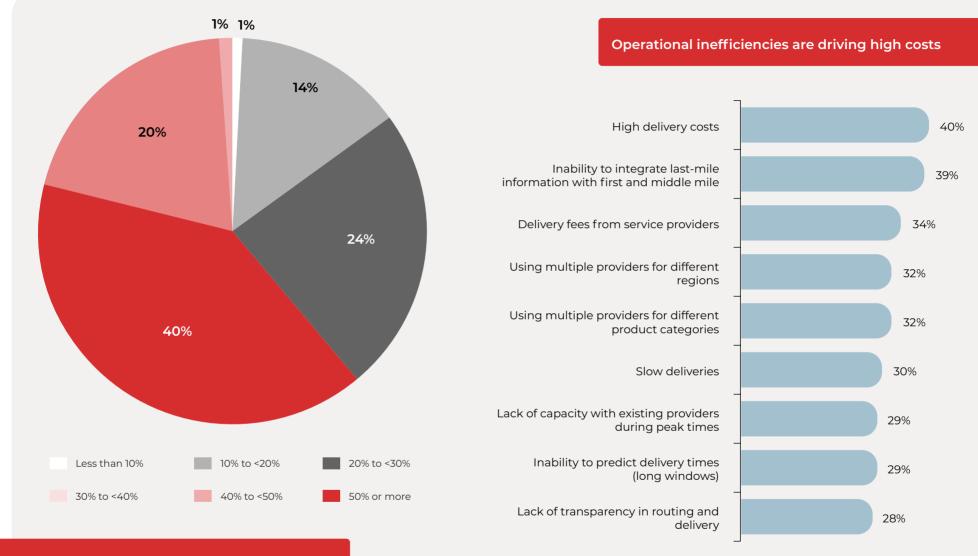


Figure 3. Share of Supply Chain Costs Attributed to Last-Mile Delivery (Left) and Key Challenges Faced in the Last Mile (Right) (% of Respondents)



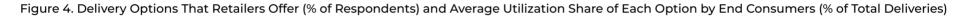
Base: 250 US-based brands and retailers, surveyed in January 2024 Source: Coresight Research

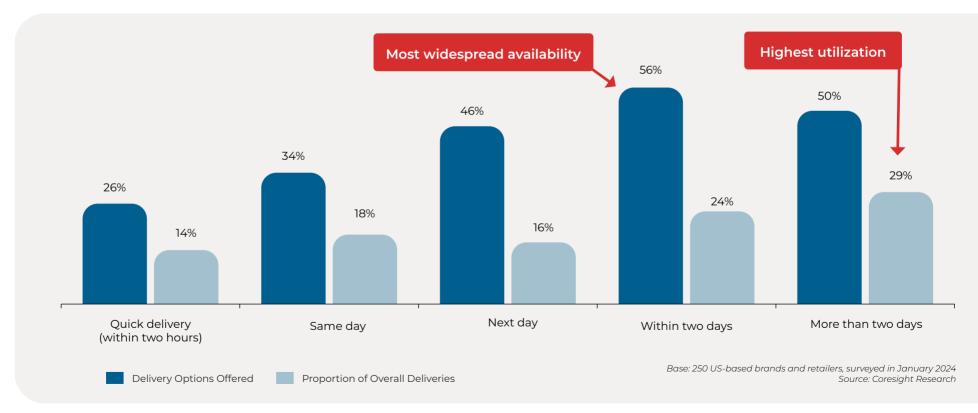
**Three in five** respondents attribute at least 30% of supply chain costs to the last mile

The offerings of retailers and actual utilization by consumers seem to vary substantially. The delivery speed option offered by the highest proportion of surveyed brands and retailers is "within two days," at 56%, but the largest share of overall deliveries used by consumers is attributed to "more than two days," at 29%, as shown in Figure 4. With these two being the most offered options, retailers seem to prioritize a balance between speed and wide geographical coverage, suggesting that they aim to cater to both customers who need fast delivery and those who are willing to wait for longer periods, possibly for a lower cost.

The "quick delivery" option, while offered by the lowest proportion of surveyed brands and retailers (26%), still accounts for a significant portion of overall deliveries (14%). Customers may not be choosing the fastest delivery options as much as the slower ones due to additional costs or the non-urgency of the items being ordered.

Brands and retailers must assess if pain points in their supply chain are leading to gaps between their offerings and actual service utilization. Retail companies can take corrective action to close gaps and achieve efficiencies with technology-powered strategies and solutions.

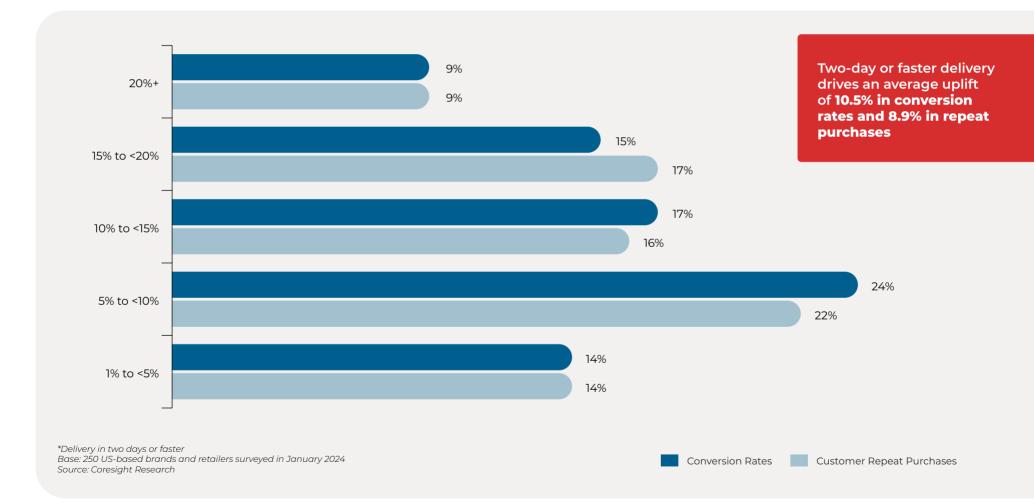




## Fast Delivery Drives Business Benefits

Fast delivery is tied to tangible business benefits: offering quicker delivery options (two days or faster) correlates with a huge 10.5% increase in conversion and an 8.9% increase in repeat purchases, on average, our survey revealed. This underscores fast delivery as a lever for not only attracting but also retaining customers, thus enhancing CLV for brands and retailers.

#### Figure 5. Positive Impact of Offering Fast Delivery\*: Percentage Increase in Conversion Rates and Repeat Purchases (% of Respondents)



## Fast Delivery: Balancing Costs and CLV

While expedited delivery is a powerful driver for increasing conversion rates and securing customer loyalty, it also brings with it a rise in fulfillment costs:

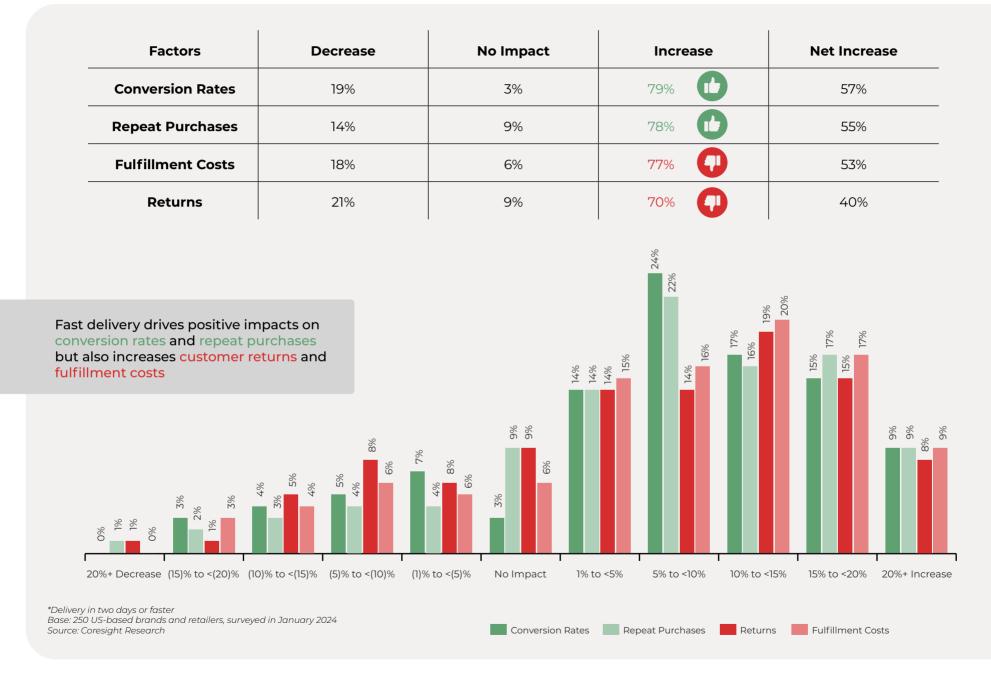
- Fast delivery often requires special handling, such as prioritized processing and faster transport options, which incur additional expenses.
- Meeting tight delivery deadlines efficiently and reliably may necessitate investments in infrastructure, staffing and technology.
- Expedited delivery services often come with higher fees charged by shipping carriers.
- In addition, fast delivery can lead to increased returns:
- Customers may make impulse purchases without fully considering their needs or preferences and may later realize that the product doesn't meet their expectations or requirements, and thus return those products. Consumers may choose fast delivery due to the instant gratification afforded by this option, or choose convenience over value, among other reasons, and later realize they do not need the products they have ordered.
- In a rush to fulfill orders quickly, staff may include incorrect items or compromise on quality control processes. leading to customers receiving the wrong or damaged products and then returning them.

As discussed in the previous section, offering fast delivery has predominantly led to positive impacts on conversion rates and customer repeat purchases—and these benefits are widespread: net 57% and 55% of surveyed brands and retailers cited positive impacts in these areas, respectively, as shown in Figure 6. However, our survey highlighted that fast delivery also leads to a rise in fulfillment costs and customer returns, cited by net 53% and 40% of respondents, respectively.

Brands and retailers need to find a delicate equilibrium of strategically investing in fast delivery to achieve key benefits while managing the incremental costs and complexity it introduces to their operations. Retail companies can achieve this balance by forging partnerships with specialized service providers that have deep expertise in each stage of supply chain operations in order to successfully execute fast delivery services.



#### Figure 6. Impacts of Offering Fast Delivery\* (% of Respondents)



## Seizing the Last-Mile Delivery Market Opportunity

As the US e-commerce market grows, brands and retailers must upgrade their delivery operations to remain competitive. There is white-space opportunity for delivery service providers to expand and offer tech-driven services tailored to brands' and retailers' last-mile delivery goals.

As we saw earlier, our survey indicates that 34% of brands and retailers are able to provide same-day delivery and 26% offer delivery within two hours, but only 32% of deliveries are completed within a day, on average, spotlighting the potential for tech-driven players to help brands and retailers improve the appeal of their fast delivery options, such as by improving efficiency, convenience for the consumer or cost effectiveness. Brands and retailers can turn to specialized delivery partners to enhance customer satisfaction and secure a competitive edge in the market.

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## The Shopper's Perspective

## Cost and Speed of Delivery Can Be Deal-Breakers

In the increasingly dynamic landscape of e-commerce, consumer expectations around last-mile delivery are becoming a decisive factor in online retail success. Preferences for delivery cost and speed are shaping the future of customer engagement and retention. As these factors hold significant influence over where and how often consumers shop online, they may be deal-breakers if consumer preferences regarding these factors are not met.

The cost and speed of delivery appear to be the most important factors for consumers when they shop online, according to our December 2023 survey: these factors were ranked as the first or second most important factor when choosing a brand or retailer by the highest net proportions of respondents, as shown in Figure 7. Strong consumer emphasis on lower or complimentary shipping means that brands and retailers must also prioritize cost efficiency in last-mile delivery in the e-commerce space, over other factors that they believe are differentiators.

Given that cost of delivery is the most critical factor for shoppers, retailers must be thoughtful when building their reverse logistics strategies. A Coresight Research survey of US-based apparel brands and retailers conducted in March 2023 revealed that the average online apparel returns rate was 24.4% in the US in 2023; we estimate that this equated to the doubling of delivery costs for retailers for every one in four orders (assuming equal costs for last-mile and reverse pickup rates offered by delivery partners).

Brands and retailers should explore ways to optimize their reverse logistics processes to reduce costs associated with returns. This could involve:

- Negotiating better rates with delivery partners specifically for reverse logistics to decrease the financial impact of returns.
- Implementing data analytics to understand the reasons behind returns and address the root causes directly, some of which could be delivery-process related.
- Encouraging exchanges over returns, to safeguard revenue and potentially reduce shipping costs if the exchange item can be sent with the reverse logistics partner picking up the return.

By addressing the return process strategically, brands and retailers can not only offset the burden of delivery costs but also potentially drive customer lifetime value through an efficient returns experience.



#### Figure 7. Consumers: Degree of Importance of Six Delivery-Related Factors When Choosing a Brand/Retailer (% of Respondents)

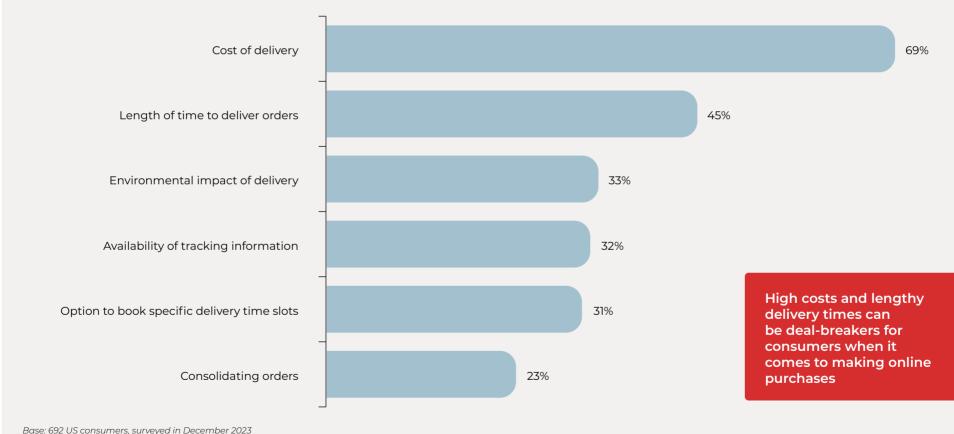
#### Net Difference (PPTs) Cost of delivery 8% 18% 45% 49 Length of time to deliver orders 8% 36% 22% 44 Availability of tracking information 11% 10% 16% 11% 6 Consolidating orders 16% 26% 13% 9% 20 Option to book specific delivery time slots 26% 27% 9% 6% 38 Environmental impact of delivery 36% 22% 7% 7% 44 Increasing Importance Rank 6 (Least Important) Rank 5 Rank 2 Rank 1 (Most Important)

Cost of delivery dominates as the most important factor when shopping online

Respondents were asked to rank the options according to the degree of importance each holds when choosing a brand/retailer online, from Rank 1 (most important) to Rank 6 (least important) Base: 692 consumers, surveyed in December 2023 Source: Coresight Research

Further underscoring that delivery cost and speed are critical to consumers when shopping online, our survey revealed that the potential for lost revenue is notably high when online retailers fail to meet customer expectations in these areas: more than two-thirds of consumers reported that they would be unlikely to make a purchase if the delivery cost is too high, and 45% reported the same of slow delivery speeds. Brands and retailers must closely align their delivery strategies and services with consumer expectations to maximize revenue potential.

#### Figure 8. Consumers: Proportion Who Are Unlikely To Buy Online If Expectations Are Unmet (% of Respondents)

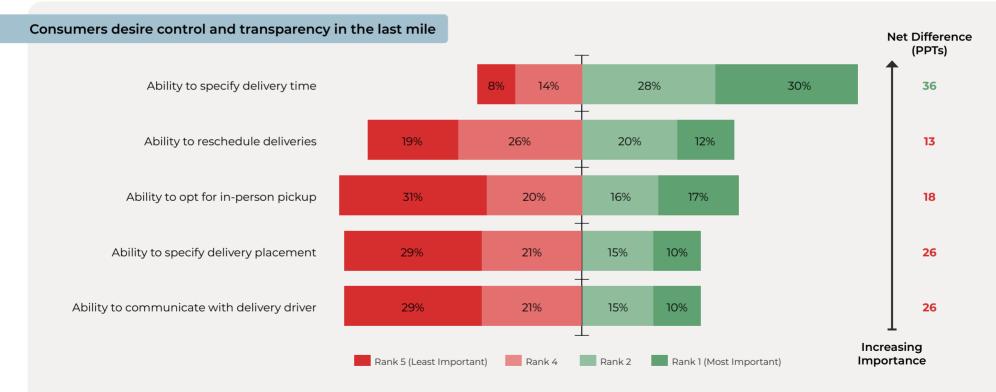


Source: Coresight Research

## Giving the Customer Control of Delivery

We delved into the concept of customer control in the last mile, and found that flexibility in delivery, including the ability to choose delivery times and locations, stands out as a key driver for customer retention—ultimately, the customer seeks greater control and transparency. Nearly two in five (58%) consumers ranked the ability to specify the delivery time in the first or second spot when it came to key attributes of last-mile delivery, making this the most important by quite some margin (see Figure 9). Brands and retailers should look to offer such options to enhance the overall shopping experience, cut down on missed deliveries and drive sustained customer loyalty.

Figure 9. Consumers: Degree of Importance of Five Attributes of Last-Mile Delivery When Choosing a Brand/Retailer (% of Respondents)



Respondents were asked to rank the options according to the degree of importance each holds when choosing a brand/retailer online, from Rank 1 (most important) to Rank 5 (least important) Base: 692 consumers, surveyed in December 2023 Source: Coresight Research

# Building the Last Mile: Aligning Business Priorities with Partner Selection

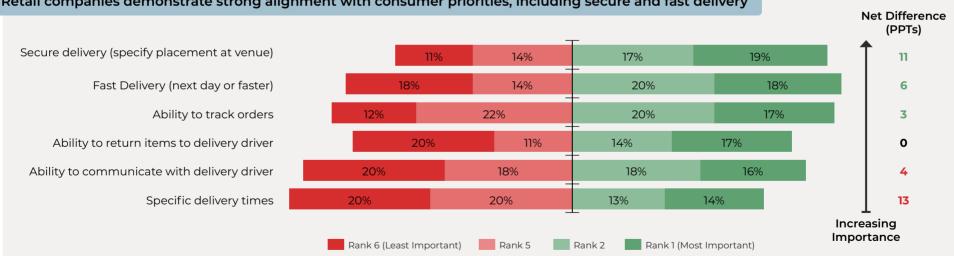
Retailers must take evolving consumer preferences into consideration when choosing external delivery partners. Their selection is pivotal to ensuring customer satisfaction and operational excellence.

### Harmonizing Offerings with Consumer Demand

Surveyed brands and retailers demonstrate a strong alignment with consumer priorities, with some 85% offering free delivery—a key preference among shoppers. In addition, they recognize the importance that customers place on secure delivery (specifying package-drop locations, such as on the patio or hidden from

plain sight) and fast delivery options, understanding that these elements drive customer satisfaction. The alignment extends to the delivery journey's visibility, which is crucial for consumer trust and reflects a strategic focus on meeting customer desires proactively.

Figure 10. Retail Companies: Perceived Degree of Importance of Six Attributes of Last-Mile Delivery Among Their Customers (% of Respondents)



Retail companies demonstrate strong alignment with consumer priorities, including secure and fast delivery

\*Excluding free delivery

Respondents were asked to rank the options according to the degree of importance they believe each holds among their company's customers, from Rank 1 (most important) to Rank 6 (least important) Base: 250 US-based brands and retailers, surveyed in January 2024

### Economizing Delivery: The Retailer's Decisive Criteria

When it comes to selecting external delivery partners, cost efficiency stands out as the primary consideration for retailers, influencing their choice significantly—84% of surveyed brands and retailers cited this as the top or second most important factor.

The focus on economical solutions is followed by strong demand for skilled delivery personnel and robust data privacy, suggesting that retailers prioritize a blend of cost effectiveness, ease of integration and quality service that resonates with their brand values.

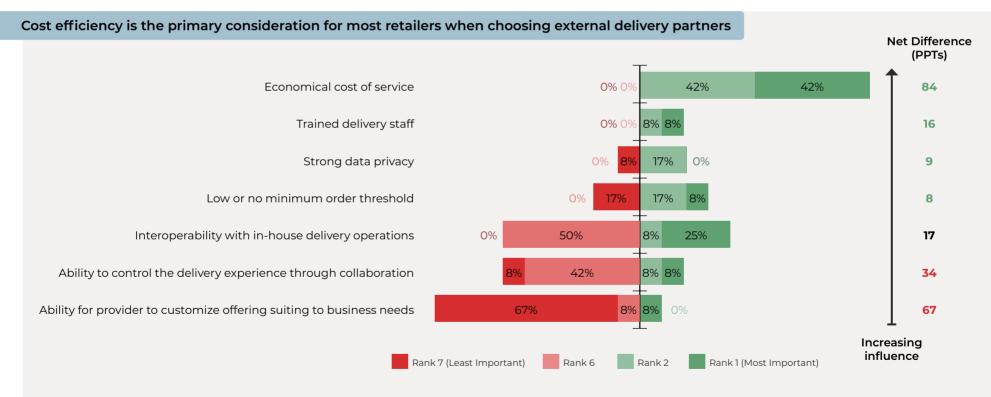


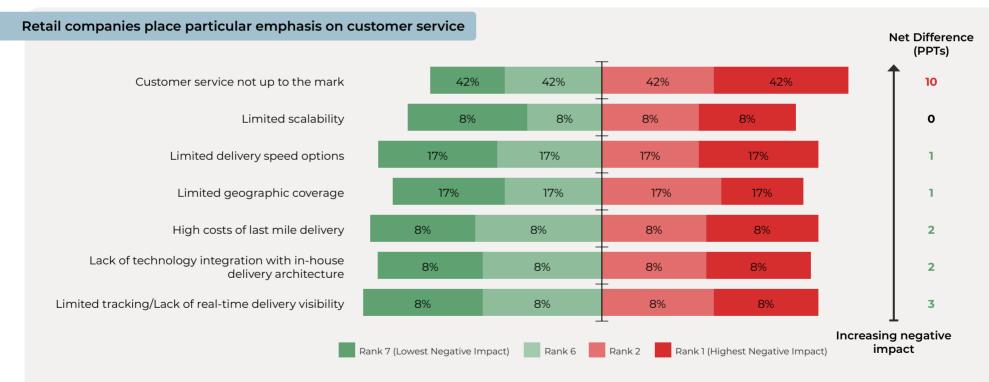
Figure 11. Retail Companies: Degree of Influence of Seven Factors on Decision-Making When Selecting an External Delivery Partner (% of Respondents)

Respondents were asked to rank the options according to the degree of influence each has on choosing an external delivery partner, from Rank 1 (most influential) to Rank 7 (least influential) Base: 250 US-based brands and retailers, surveyed in January 2024 Source: Coresight Research

### Expanding Horizons: What Retailers Want from Delivery Partners

Retailers are seeking a broad spectrum of capabilities from their delivery partners, with a particular emphasis on customer service, according to our survey. In addition, respondents pointed to scalability, speed of delivery and geographic reach as having negative impacts on their satisfaction with an external delivery provider, as shown in Figure 12. This indicates a growing need among retail companies to target diverse markets with delivery options that enhance customer satisfaction: brands and retailers are looking to address logistical challenges head-on.

Figure 12. Retail Companies: Degree of Negative Impact of Seven Factors That Determine Satisfaction with Primary External Delivery Service Provider (% of Respondents)



Respondents were asked to rank the options according to the degree of negative impact each has on how satisfied they are with an external delivery partner,

from Rank 1 (highest negative impact) to Rank 7 (lowest negative impact)

Base: 250 US-based brands and retailers, surveyed in January 2024

Source: Coresight Research

# What We Think

In today's competitive e-commerce era, choosing the right last-mile delivery solution is critical for brand and retailer success, particularly in their ability to meet evolving consumer demand for speed, reliability and flexibility in the last mile. Retail companies can gain a competitive edge by partnering with solution providers that can offer on-time delivery, end-to-end transparency and advanced technology integration, enabling them to exceed customer expectations, foster loyalty and drive growth. Embracing tailored last-mile delivery services enables retailers to optimize the customer experience, reduce operational challenges and, ultimately, build a resilient and customer-centric business model for the modern marketplace.

# Implications for Brands/Retailers

- Brands and retailers need to embrace sophisticated last-mile delivery strategies and partner with solution providers that can offer highly specialized services, enabling them to provide tailored delivery options that can drive repeat business and CLV.
- As delivery speed becomes a differentiator in consumers' decision-making processes, brands need to optimize their supply chain to reduce delivery times without inflating costs.
- Retailers should invest in transparent delivery processes, giving customers real-time updates to build trust and manage expectations effectively.

# Implications for Technology Vendors

- Tech vendors must develop and provide tailored logistics solutions that facilitate faster delivery times while maintaining or reducing operational costs.
- There is a growing need for tech solutions that provide end-to-end visibility of the delivery process. Vendors should focus on delivering real-time tracking capabilities to their retail partners.
- To stay ahead, tech vendors must continuously innovate and expand capabilities, such as leveraging Al for smarter routing and delivery forecasting. These enhancements not only anticipate customer needs but also offer a significant edge in a crowded marketplace with optimizing processes and driving efficiency.

# Notes

Data in this report are as of February 6, 2024.

# Methodology

Informing the data in this report are three online surveys conducted by Coresight Research.

- 1. A survey of 692 US consumers aged 18+ conducted on December 26, 2023. The results have a margin of error of +/-4%.
- 2. An online survey of 250 senior personnel at US-based brands and retailers, conducted during January 5–8, 2024. The results have a margin of error of +/-6.2%.

Respondents in the survey satisfied the following criteria:

- Company—US-based brands and retailers with annual revenue of \$25 million or above
- Sector—Apparel and footwear, beauty, drugstore, food and beverages, or furniture and home furnishings
- Role—Holding level of responsibility across C-suite, Division President/GM, EVP/SVP/VP and Director/ Senior Director, and involved in functions impacting the supply chain
- Departments including e-commerce, marketing, sales, operations, logistics and warehouse/fulfillment center operations
- **3.** An online B2B survey of 100 decision-makers at US-based apparel brands and retailers, conducted on March 6, 2023. The results have a margin of error of +/-10%.

Respondents in the survey satisfied the following criteria:

- Brands and retailers that sell products online
- Annual revenue—\$10 million or above
- Retail sector—Apparel
- Role—Senior Manager or above and familiar with how their companies manage their apparel business and handle returns

### About Coresight Research Custom Reports

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This free report is produced, and made available to nonsubscribers of Coresight Research, in partnership with Jitsu (formerly known as AxleHire).

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### About Jitsu

Jitsu specializes in last-mile delivery, leveraging technology to provide end-to-end visibility and real-time tracking. The company provides same- and next-day delivery services, striving to support customer retention and increase customer lifetime value with competitive rates. It offers extended cut-off times, adjustable delivery windows and customizable tracking notifications to enhance the overall delivery experience.

For more information, visit <u>https://gojitsu.com</u>.