





## The State of Ecommerce: Creating competitive advantage in 2021

25% of the global population shops online and that number is growing everyday. In fact, it's predicted that 2.14 billion people will be searching, browsing, clicking, and converting on ecommerce channels in 2021.

For brands, the on-going growth of ecommerce represents both a challenge and an opportunity.

On one hand, demand is greater than ever. But so too is the standard of competition and ecommerce innovation.

As more shoppers head online in uncertain times, websites continue to enrich and rework their customer experience to stand out from the crowd. This, in turn, helps increase a customer's expectation of the ecommerce experience. It's a self-fulfilling cycle; one that brands either win or lose.

This simultaneous growth of challenge and opportunity begs the question: how do you stay ahead of the curve?

The answer lies in knowing what your competition is doing.

In this **State of Ecommerce 2021** report, we've done that legwork for you.












# The State of Ecommerce in 2021: pulling the numbers

In researching this report, we wanted to compare ecommerce experience best practice in 2021 with the real-on-site experience of over 100 leading ecommerce websites, across nearly all sectors.

Which features, policies and functions are ecommerce websites implementing? And which sectors are blazing the way as others fall behind. Here's how we did it:

### 100+ ecommerce websites across 11 different sectors






From \$5,000 dresses to dog food cans costing 75 cents, we explored the on-site experience of 108 different ecommerce websites in these categories:

-  1. Automotive
-  2. Beauty
-  3. Bookstore
-  4. Department Store
-  5. Electronics
-  6. Fast Fashion (apparel and accessories)
-  7. Health
-  8. High-End fashion
-  9. Home/Furniture
-  10. Pet Supplies
-  11. Sporting Goods

### 100+ hours of hands-on exploration

In total, the SimplicityDX team spent over 100 hours reviewing the ecommerce experience of a broad range of websites, including Sephora, Lululemon, Prada and Home Depot. And many more hours compiling data, assessing insights, and distilling our learnings down, too.




We traced the customer journey from product page consideration to post-sale, and recorded quantitative data about each of the experiences:

-  Does the site have a chatbot? If so, how are they using it?
-  Are there upsells in the checkout flow?
-  Do they offer free delivery?
-  Can customers checkout using a credit plan?
-  Which sectors offer the most generous return policies (and what's the ecommerce standard?)

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## What to expect from this guide / Table of contents

This report is divided into **three sections**, focused on the critical parts of a user's on-site journey.

-  **CHAPTER 1** Consideration: what are brands doing to instil trust and make their product pages really shine?
-  **CHAPTER 2** Increasing checkout conversion and upselling: once an item's in the cart, how do businesses encourage purchase today and in the future?
-  **CHAPTER 3** Post-purchase support: what's the average return policy and how long are customers given in each sector?

Within each chapter, we'll highlight the most surprising insights. We'll also provide context to these learnings by comparing within, and against, the industries explored.

Lastly, we'll round everything up in **CHAPTER 4**; sharing key insights and provocations for the future of ecommerce for the rest of 2021 and beyond.

## Chapter 1: Considerations

For our report, we wanted to hone in on product page design, and follow the user journey from there. Why? Because once a potential customer has landed on a website and decided to look around, the hard work isn't over. In fact, it's only just beginning.

When shoppers first start exploring your site, you must reassure them that your business is legitimate, trustworthy and worthy of further consideration, too. Only then will they be open to the idea of making a purchase.

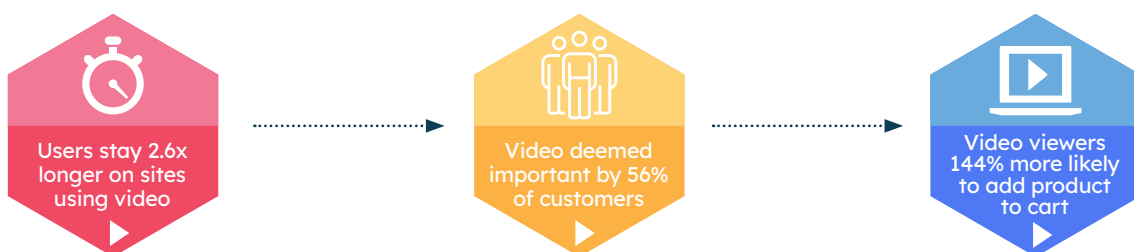
### What we looked for

In ecommerce, consideration relies on so-called "hygiene factors". Necessary inclusions like store locators, contact details, and so on. These are things that might seem small, but they all add up to create reassurance in the customer... and make them more likely to "add to cart".

Also playing a major role for consideration:

**Live support.** Questions may arise from any customers, shopping any brand, in any sector. Last year, 80% of businesses said they'd have a chatbot on-site in 2021. But have they managed it? If yes, how are these chatbots being applied? TrustPilot suggests that 44% of consumers are more likely to buy if a live person is available to answer questions. Are ecomm sites today keeping up?

**The power of social proof.** Customer reviews are one of the most powerful tools available to brands today, with theory suggestions that good reviews can drive the purchase of higher-ticket items.



**Drive engagement with video.** Images and copy will always be at the heart of the website experience, but video is quickly catching up. In fact:

- Studies suggest that users stay on a site 2.6 times longer if it features video
- That 56% of customers deem on-site video content as important
- And a customer who watches a product video is 144% more likely to add that product to their cart.
- (It helps your SEO, too, but that's a story for another day)

## What we found

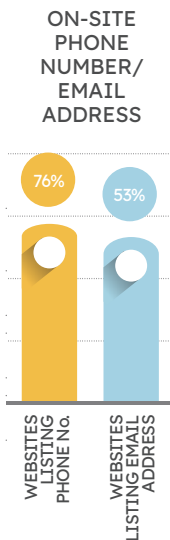
That's what the books (or blogs) tell us, but what did we find in our real-world testing? In terms of customer support...

### 76% of websites list a phone number on their website, but only 53% list an email address

In a digital-first world, it might be surprising to learn that more ecommerce sites direct customers to phone numbers, rather than email addresses, if they need to get in touch. But actually, in quick-moving sectors like Fast Fashion, consumers wouldn't even think to send an email. That's simply too slow and they have too many other options. The immediacy of a phone call gets the job done faster and gives the brand a chance to encourage the sale more directly.

Of course, where many brands also do well is in linking their social media pages to the website, too. This way, customers have multiple channels to choose from (all of which offer speedy response and resolution).

Chatbots also add value for users looking to avoid the potential delay of email communication, which we'll come on to in a moment.

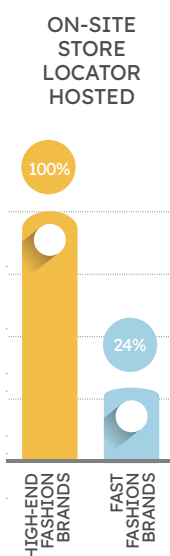


### 100% of High-End Fashion brands host store locators on their sites, while only 24% of Fast Fashion brands do the same

Speaking of fashion, we can even see splits on the High Street within this area.

In the Fast Fashion sector, less than quarter of the websites explored provide store locators and addresses for on-site visitors. That's surprising considering the vast majority of our Fast Fashion sample are clicks-and mortar-businesses (and not operating as pure play ecommerce).

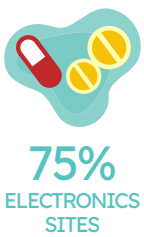
Of the High-End Fashion brands, **100%** of them feature a store locator on their website. Does this clientele still crave the in-store experience, with its personal shoppers, multi-sensory browsing, and reassurance when parting with a lot of money? It could be.





The Health and Electronics sectors are leading the way on chatbot usage. 88% of Health sites hosting chat support, and 75% of Electronics sites doing the same

On average, only 60% of the ecommerce sites tested using chatbots during the experience. And even fewer, just 25%, use chatbots globally across their website.

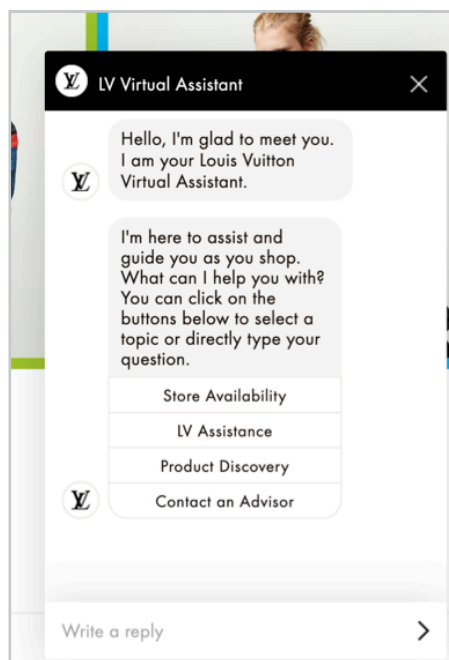


So why Health and Electronics? What’s the purpose of chatbots in this sector? If you ask us, both Health and Electronics are high consideration sectors — you want to know what a pack of vitamins will do before you buy them, and you need to make sure that \$100 hard drive will be compatible with your laptop. To clear up these confusions, and more, chatbot support can help move a site visitor further along the journey, toward conversion.



**A word of warning though:** you should only offer a chatbot if you can manage it effectively. A response time of <20 seconds and a useful answer? That’s a success. But anything longer than that and/or an unreliable, useless stream of information? That will quickly add struggle to a user’s shopping experience and, potentially, lose you the sale.

Of course customers will be somewhat understanding that support staff can only be available during certain hours. But if your store is global, with an audience spread over time zones, you really need to be investing in round-the-clock support staff. Or AI...



**AI bots aren’t applied as often as they could be. Only 7% of the sites tested automated their customer support**

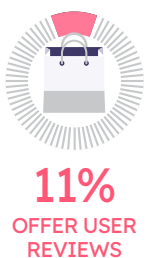
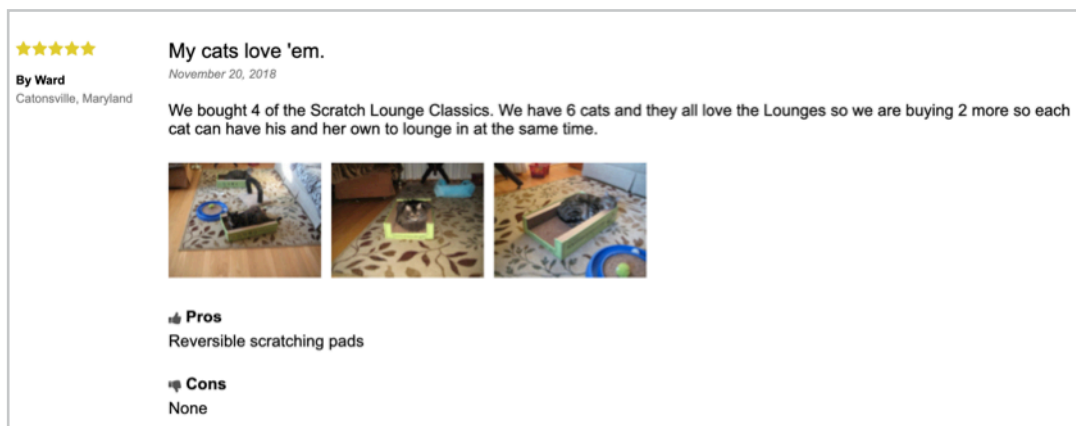
Only 4 of the sectors explored used AI chatbots to their advantage: High-End Fashion (22%), Fast Fashion (18%), Health (13%) and Home/Furniture (9%). The big surprises there? High-End Fashion is certainly an interesting one. While on one hand you may expect some of the world’s most expensive brands to be at the forefront of cutting edge ecommerce tech, you could also question how fitting this feels for their brand language.

User reviews are prevalent in many sectors (as expected) but in Beauty, Electronics, Home & Furniture and Pet Supplies, they're a *prerequisite*

Our research suggests that user reviews have become another key "hygiene factor" in ecommerce today, with **85%** of our total sample using reviews on their product pages.

Leading the pack, though, is the Beauty sector, where **100%** of the websites made reviews available. Understandable, given the *huge* range of products and the community that often forms around make-up and cosmetics.

What's more interesting, perhaps, is the other sectors which also had **100%** coverage for product reviews: Electronics, Home & Furniture, and Pet Supplies. The takeaway? If you're in any of these niches and *haven't* started requesting and hosting user reviews... then what are you waiting for?



**Only 11% of High-End fashion websites offer user reviews**

Seriously bucking the trend, with reviews on only **11%** of websites, is the High-End Fashion sector. Why? We can only speculate, but the following three theories hold weight.

**One:** reviews are user-generated content and can be unpredictable. Could High-End Fashion brands simply be too wary of receiving disappointing reviews on high-ticket items?

**Two:** it's an aesthetic thing. If you can't control the content of user-generated reviews, then it's difficult to control the look and feel, too. When your website is built of sleek lines and a less-is-more design approach, user reviews could look plain messy. Plus, high-end shoppers could deem the feature as tacky and too mainstream?



**Three:** maybe there's just no role for reviews in the High-End Fashion sector? Due to the high-ticket price and label awareness, the website needs to do a lot less work to convince a prospect to buy. That and, chances are, social proof doesn't carry quite as much weight when you're buying within a niche.



11%  
HOSTING  
VIDEO

**We've still got far to go for video content on product pages**

It's hardly surprising that **100%** of the product pages we explored all had photos and images. What we were more surprised to see, though, was how few sites were experimenting with video.

On average, only **11%** of our sample was hosting video on their product page. Coming in slightly higher than the rest, at **13%:** Automotive, Beauty, Health and Pet Supplies.

Electronics brands are exploiting this content medium more often than others, with **25%** of our sample using video. How? Here, video can be used to help describe a product's capabilities and tech specifications. Why might you want one camera model over another, for example? What tells them apart? Especially for those less au fait with what they're looking at, video explanations and in-hand demos can make *all* the difference.

The screenshot shows a product page for the Canon EOS R5 Mirrorless Digital Camera (Body Only). The page includes a navigation bar with tabs for Overview, Specs, Q&A (205), Quick Compare, and Accessories. A video player is embedded in the main content area, titled 'The Canon EOS R5 Compared'. To the right, there is a 'Read More >' button. Below the video player, there is a section titled 'AND MORE CANON ANNOUNCEMENTS' with a video thumbnail and a link to 'Canon EOS R5, R6, RF Lenses and More! | Hands-on Review'. The main text describes the camera's features, including its 45MP CMOS sensor, 8K raw video recording, and 12 fps continuous shooting. A 'In the Box' section lists accessories like the Canon LP-E6NH Lithium-Ion Battery, Canon LC-E6 Charger, Canon R-F-5 Camera Cover, Battery Pack Cover, Strap ER-EOSR5, Canon IFC-100U Interface Cable, IFC Cable IFC-100U Protector, and Limited 1-Year Warranty. A 'Not in the Box' section lists 'Essential Memory Cards (Not Included)' and 'Essential Lenses (Not Included)'. The footer includes the Explora logo and a chat button.

## Chapter 2: Increasing checkout conversion and upselling

At this point in the journey, you've got the consumer's attention, you've reassured them that your brand is legitimate, and you've got them thinking about making a purchase.

The next step? **Conversion.**

This stage of the funnel is all about **pulling the customer in and reducing friction in the experience.** Don't forget: just because someone's decided to make a purchase doesn't mean it's in the bag. Losing the sale can easily come down to a friction-filled payment process, too high postage and package costs, or a too slow delivery time.

At this stage, "pull" is also about upselling and offering discounts for loyalty. If someone's already buying one item, why wouldn't they buy another? And if they think they might buy again, maybe they'd be interested in some sort of membership?

### What we looked for

Before we jump into what we found out in our own research, let's consider what best practice suggests we *should* expect. Thankfully, there's plenty of research out there about website conversion rates (although not *all* of it is completely consistent).

Other ideas



#### **Ecommerce loyalty schemes are a great way to drive customer loyalty.**

When it comes to encouraging repeat purchases, it doesn't get much better than a customer loyalty scheme. But, **according to third-party research**, the experience can be mixed. **53%** of people agree that they're easy to use; **39%** believe they offer great discounts; and **37%** agree they're easy to understand.



#### **Good delivery options improve conversion rate.**

Who doesn't love free delivery? Or next-day delivery? Or even *same-day* delivery? All of these things are solid ways to boost potential conversion rates. Especially when your competitors may be relying on high delivery rates, with no free or express options at all. **According to third-party research**, consumers are **93%** more likely to buy when free delivery is an option.



#### **Upsells can be something of a golden ticket.**

Once a user hits the checkout, a door is open to offering them some irresistible deals at a time when — with any luck — they're receptive to spending more. Upselling at checkout isn't a myth, either. **According to sumo.com**, up to **95%** of revenue can come from upsells and renewals. In addition, the cost of acquiring the sale via an upsell is **68%** cheaper than via a new customer.

### What we found

So that’s some of the theory, but how does it stand up to the empirical data we collected during our research?

The results might surprise you.



### 50% of the 108 sites we reviewed offer loyalty schemes

When it comes to memberships and store “cards”, you’d expect them to be popular with sites which thrive on repeat custom, like the Fast Fashion sector and at Department Stores. In reality, half of our sample was using loyalty as a sales level. And interestingly, despite assumptions, just 41% of Fast Fashion brands had an active loyalty scheme.

That said, and somewhat predictably, only 1 of the 9 High-End Fashion brands we analyzed offered a loyalty scheme, while an overwhelming 88% of Beauty ecommerce sites had one running. Considering how habitual cosmetics, toiletries, and fragrances purchases can be, this seems very wise indeed.

	LOVER LEVEL 01 <small>When you make it official</small>	DEVOTED LEVEL 02 <small>When you spend \$100 or more*</small>	OBSESSED LEVEL 03 <small>When you spend \$500*</small>
<b>M·A·C LOVER</b>			
LOVER-ONLY PRODUCTS	●	●	●
BACK-TO-M·A·C EXPANDED PLUS TRACKER*	●	●	●
SPECIAL SEASONAL OFFERS	●	●	●
FREE MAKEUP SERVICES** (DEVOTED: 30-MIN / OBSESSED: 2 X 40-MIN)		●	●
EARLY ACCESS TO NEW COLLECTIONS AND COLLABORATIONS		●	●
BIRTHDAY GIFT		●	●
FIRST ACCESS TO NEW PRODUCTS			●

## Next day delivery is fast becoming the standard, with 62% of ecommerce businesses now able to achieve this



**62%** OF  
ECOMMERCE  
BUSINESSES  
OFFER  
NEXT DAY  
DELIVERY

Whether you're buying a new suit, a new book, or a new portable battery for your cell phone, all these purchases can be on your doorstep the next day. That's great news for customers, and it's a rallying cry for any ecommerce business that's struggling to keep up.

**100%** of Electronics companies tested had next day delivery as an option.

Also out-performing the rest, are Bookstores (**88%**) Health and Pet Supplies (**75%**) and Fast-Fashion.

Beauty brands, who seem to be ahead of the ecommerce game in so many other ways, tend to fall behind here, with only **63%** (just over average) offering quick delivery to their customers.



**27%** OF  
WEBSITES  
OFFER  
BUY NOW -  
PAY LATER

## 27% of websites offer the choice to “buy now, pay later” and it's most common in Home/Furniture with 82% penetration.

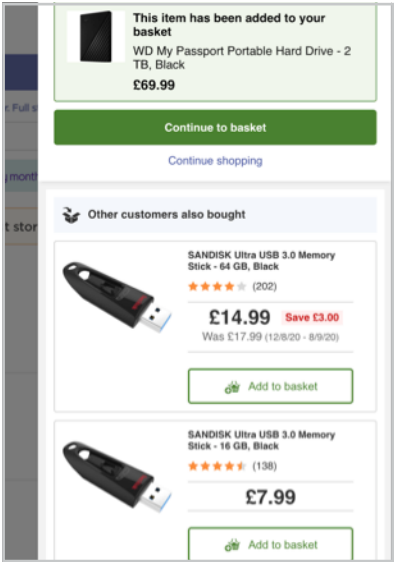
“Buy now, pay later” is an up and coming trend, and its nascence is borne out in the data: only **27%** of our sample offered this option at checkout.

Again, the Beauty sector performed higher than the average, with **50%** of websites providing pay-by-credit methods. The same figure is true for Sporting Goods, too. In these sectors, some purchases will be expensive. Some bikes, for example, can retail at \$8,000+, while some cosmetics can be cost-prohibitive for a High School/early employment audience.

**82%** of Home/Furniture websites offered payment plans, as well — although this sector was one of the first to move to credit schemes, many years ago.

With “buy now, pay later” provider Klarna boasting a **44% conversion boost to retailers**, we're expecting to see much more of this across all sectors in the near future.

Upsells are common, but not that common: fewer than 50% of websites actively try upselling at checkouts



As we saw in the theory of conversion, upselling can be a powerful tool to land sales, but do we see ecommerce brands taking advantage of it in 2021? Yes and no.

Just under 50% of the sites give it a try, but this does vary sector to sector. In Electronics, 88% of sites are using the tool, with Sporting Goods and Beauty coming in close behind with 75% each.

Where we see this psychology used more often in our sample was on product pages — a.k.a the “customers also looked at...” approach made famous by Amazon. 82% of our sample tried this strategy while users were browsing. But this figure breaks down in a very interesting way, when you look on a sector-by-sector basis:



So what’s going on there? Why is the Electronics sector dragging behind? Possibly, it’s because many electronic purchases are high-ticket items, TVs, laptops, cameras, etc. Or perhaps it’s harder to accurately predict what a shopper may be interested in, as products tend to come bundled up already.

## 89% of ecommerce sites offer the option for discount codes at checkout

Finally, let's take a look at another very popular tool for landing conversions: discounting. If you've ever done a last-minute Google search for a discount code to use at checkout, you'll know what we mean.

From our sample of 100, **89% of ecommerce sites offer the option for discount codes at checkout**. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the sector least likely to offer discount codes is High-End Fashion, with just **11%** making space. At the other end of the spectrum, ecommerce sites in the Beauty, Bookstore, Electronics, Pet Supplies and Sporting Goods sectors all allow customers to use discount codes. Do you?

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There's pros and cons to this conversion method, and they're worth unpacking quickly.

When present, the possibility of a discount could be just the thing to clinch a sale or upsell even. However we also know that if a user jumps from your ecommerce page to somewhere else in search of a discount to apply, then they've taken a step away. They might get distracted and abandon their cart. And if they can't find a satisfactory discount to enjoy, they may decide not to check out at all.

Unless the customer's using an extension tool like Honey, PayPal's recent acquisition, this is always going to be a risk.

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## Chapter 3: Supporting customers post-purchase

In ecommerce, once the sale is made, your job is done. Everyone's happy?

Not quite.



Returns are an integral part of ecommerce business, and it's critical that any and every brand accounts for them. Why? Because if they don't, they can probably say goodbye to repeat customers. And when many brands live and die on repeat custom, that really matters.

### What we looked for

Since the advent of ecommerce shopping, return policies have always been important for customer satisfaction. When you can't try clothes on, feel the weight of a tablet in your hand, or get a sense for how a lipstick color looks in real life, users need the option to change their mind.

And they often do. In fact, **30% of goods bought online are returned** (compared to just **9%** in bricks-and-mortar). And in a world coming to terms with COVID-19, many brands are **even extending their return windows**, to both encourage new sales and assure customers that refunds are still available.

So how reassuring are today's ecommerce experiences when it comes to flexibility of returns?

### What we found

Ecommerce shoppers have a degree of legal protection when it comes to returns in the UK and the US. Falling into the legal categorization of "distance selling", online sellers have to honor a cooling off period of **14 days**.

As you probably know, most retailers offer longer than this (some considerably more). Why? Competitive advantage. And there's a staggering range of return times available online in 2021 — from **14 days** in High-End Fashion to **180 days** in Beauty and **365 days** in Sporting Goods, Pet Supplies and Home/Furniture! The average across all sectors? **67 days**.

Per industry, the numbers breakdown like this:



Heading into 2021, flexible returns will continue to be an important competitive advantage. And if your company can manage it financially: the longer you can offer, the better.



## Chapter 4: Key insights (and provocations) for ecommerce in 2021 and beyond

Whichever sector you're in, we hope these insights have proved useful (and maybe challenging) for your ecommerce plans today and in the future. What will be the focus of your website innovations in 2021?

By way of summary, let's recap the most important findings and what we think they could mean for businesses like yours in the next 12 months.



### Chatbots: AI vs humans and a widespread roll out?

In 2021, we were surprised to see how few ecommerce sites were using AI-powered chatbots to perform in-the-moment customer service.

Sure, there are benefits of having a human team: empathetic, natural language, being just one. Plus the AI chatbots of today aren't all that effective for genuine troubleshooting. But with 20 seconds or less being a truly ambitious target response time, will businesses end up doing more harm than good relying on human agents?

#### **Does it need to be AI or humans powering these bots? *Can't it be both/and?***

This is what Amazon does. Their chatbots switch between AI and human involvement, sometimes without the even customer knowing! And that's certainly food for thought for ecommerce brands struggling to find a sweet spot between customer satisfaction in response time, and customer satisfaction in query resolution, too.

In 2021, we're certainly expecting to see far more chatbots — both AI and human — across all sectors. How you choose to apply them will depend on the level of consideration your products require. Should you follow in Louis Vuitton's footsteps and have a virtual shopping assistant available 24/7? Or is it more fitting to take the Vitamin World approach, with a live chat option during office hours?

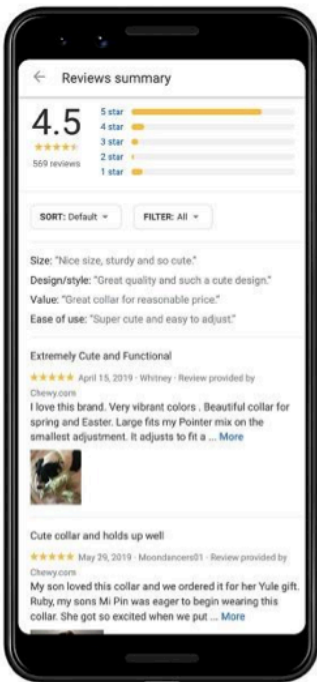
## Next generation social proof: what happens when user reviews become mandatory, rather than a competitive advantage?

We weren't surprised to see so many sites using user generated content, in the form of reviews, to help sell more products. Social proof is, after all, one of the most compelling and convincing sales strategies available.

But let's look into the future for a moment. If **85%** of all websites tested are using customer reviews on product pages today, what happens next? Chances are, there'll be a time soon when this content becomes less of a competitive advantage. When user reviews become the status quo, what other levers will brands need to pull to stand out from the crowd?

We think the answer lies in multimedia reviews. Rather than simple text boxes, we'll see more and more user generated images being used (as Google's experimenting with right now).

And while we may have to wait some time to see user generated video being hosted in product reviews, we're predicting seeing a lot more video elsewhere on sites...

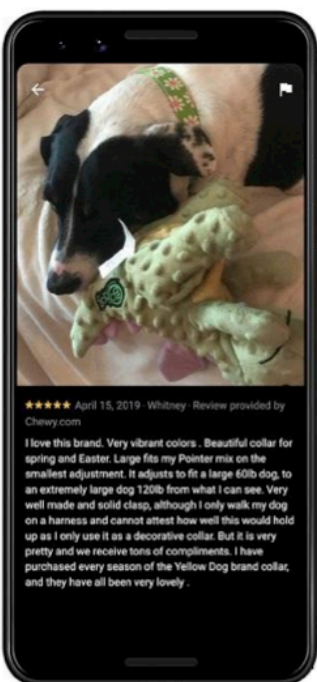


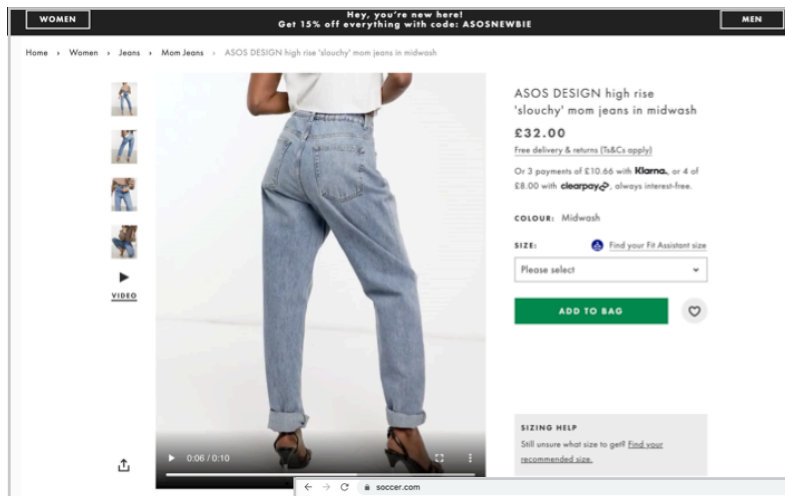
## Video content in 2021: making the investment count

It isn't cheap to host video content on your website and, if you're not careful, it can slow your page load speed right down. That said, there's much to be gained from on-site video content and you can apply it in many useful and engaging ways — you just need to find what works for you.

To build the best business case for video, ask yourself: how can we use video to deliver new value to our customers?

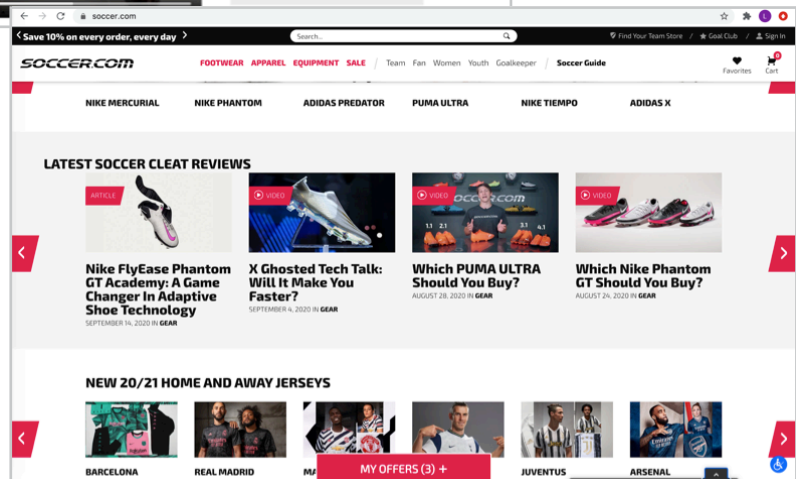
ASOS is a great example of video done well. In their catwalk clips, shoppers can see the clothes on models, in motion. Not only does this encourage a more immediate, emotional connection to the product, it also creates a multi-sensorial on-site experience, too. Overall, it's the sort of feature that pulls shoppers away from other fast fashion retail sites, and towards theirs.





ASOS

SOCCER.COM



Soccer.com is another ecommerce site using video to its advantage, this time more in the consideration and browsing phase. Here, product comparisons and reviews take centre stage, and the value added is two-fold: building credibility in the Soccer.com brand, while creating demand for the products.

## What do we expect to see in the future?

We're predicting greater collaboration between independent content creators and ecommerce sites. We're already seeing this on social media, and to great effect. Why not bring it into the on-site experience next?

For mid size brands, or those just entering the market, working with micro influencers on product-specific video content could be an authentic way to drive traffic, engage your audience, and convert more sales as well.



## Upselling and cross-selling: maximizing on the opportunity

The truth is, there are numerous opportunities to increase a customer’s cart size during their on-site journey. Why are so few businesses (less than 50% of our sample) seizing the chance at checkout?

When purchasing decisions are based on product spec (like in the Automotive and Electronics sectors, for example) upselling and cross-selling is harder to get right. But it’s not impossible.

When combined with genuinely useful chatbot support, brands can help their customers to try new things, choose bolt-ons, create custom packages, and more.

This can happen after checkout, too. Once a customer is enrolled on your mailing list, you can use the data captured from their on-site journey to recommend “new in” items and follow up on anything they clicked, but didn’t convert on.

Delivering a customized set of product links, straight to your customer’s inbox, is a great way to secure Lifetime Value and keep your brand way ahead of the competition.



**< 50%**  
OF SITES  
UPSELLING  
DURING  
CHECKOUT



## Do you know about how your ecommerce site is performing today?

As important as it is to keep one eye on the competition, that insight means nothing if you don't know how you compare.

Built to monitor, test, and improve ecommerce experiences, SimplicityDX provides a level of data and analysis that's deeper and more immediate than any other tool can provide.

Running in real-time, and recording 24 hours a day, our platform captures all the successes and struggles your customers face while using your site. If something flags up, you are notified immediately and you can revisit that particular user session to uncover what went wrong — fixing emerging issues as they arise.

And wherever or however you work, you'll never miss an opportunity to improve. SimplicityDX connects to thousands of third-party integrations, such as JIRA issue tracking, Slack, Microsoft Teams, and even CRM or marketing automation tools. If an alert flags in our system, that triggers an action in the relevant third-party app. The result? Seamless conversion optimization and issue resolution, every time.

Our dynamic dashboards are totally customizable, too. So you can drill down into the insights that make sense for your role and your business, without being clouded by anything else.

If you're gearing up to advance your ecommerce efforts in 2021, you need to know where you're starting from. With SimplicityDX, you can get a true read on what's working for customers today. And you can track the impact of the changes you make tomorrow.

Sign up for your SimplicityDX demo today.



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