

# Back to the future Digital Commerce in 2026

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# Setting Our Sights on Commerce in 2026

With a greater share of commerce moving online with each passing year, there is a golden opportunity for brands and retailers who delight their customers by investing in the right channels, platforms, and technologies. However, the future is anything but clear and the key challenge is understanding which trends are nothing but buzz and which have real potential. Through conversations with top global retailers and brands, I had a view of what commerce will look like in 2026 as well as actionable steps your organization can take to reach this future state. The only question is: are you ready?

Join me in this time machine ride, and let's visit the world of commerce in 2026!

# Marketplace dominance continues (with a twist!)

## What 2022 looks like

We're in the midst of channel explosion - a proliferation of retail sites, digital marketplaces, and apps where commerce happens. Before placing a purchase, a customer typically visits four different channels on average, compared to just two channels a decade ago. In 2020, digital marketplaces accounted for over 60% of all online commerce worldwide. This means that the marketplaces have a large impact on customer journeys. Brands and retailers are developing comprehensive marketplace strategies to win in this environment.

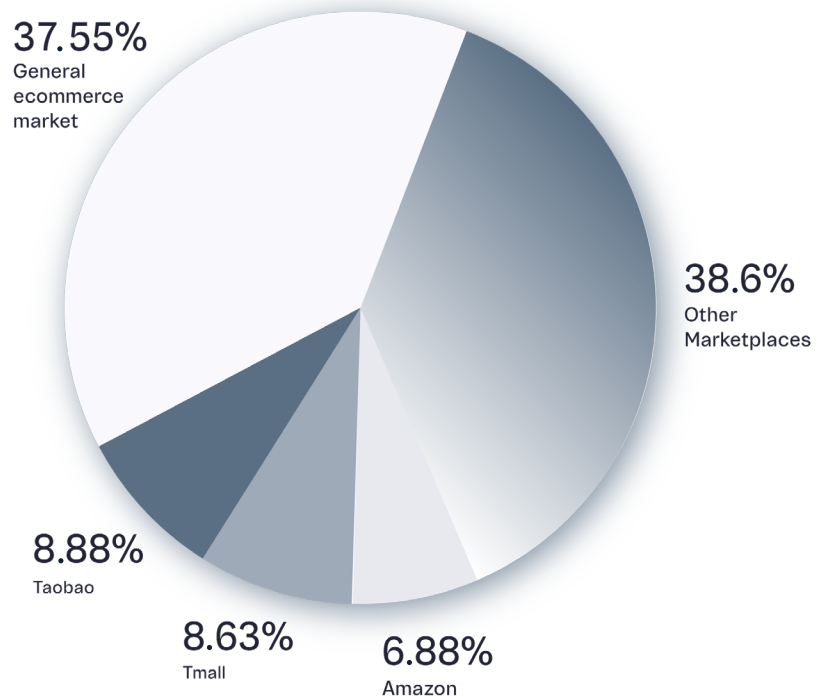
## What's changing

The rise of marketplaces is only accelerating. In addition to consolidating where transactions take place, B2B and B2C customers leverage marketplaces for product discovery, research, and comparison. When they shop, buyers look for marketplaces that offer broad product selection, competitive prices, and streamlined checkout and fulfillment. At VTEX we're witnessing an all-time high level of marketplace inquiries, as brands and retailers consider offering their own marketplaces to increase product assortment, drive stronger demand and – why not? – become a one-stop shop.

## What 2026 will look like

By 2026, the share of ecommerce transactions occurring on digital marketplaces will grow from 60% to 70%, thanks to an explosion of niche marketplaces in industries such as health, services, and manufacturing.

In the future, having an “ecommerce strategy” will be synonymous with having a “marketplace strategy”. No matter their size or industry, merchants must leverage digital marketplaces to grow their audience and become more profitable. I recommend that brands list products on niche marketplaces, expanding their reach. Retailers should consider investing in their own marketplaces or selling across peer online stores.



Source: 2021 Digital Commerce 360 Global Ecommerce Sales Report

# Retail becomes digital-first

## What 2022 looks like

Undoubtedly, the biggest change to retail over the past decades has been ecommerce and efforts to create “omnichannel” experiences that unify online and offline purchasing. However, the in-store experience at most retail locations doesn’t look all that different. Retailers might have figured out smarter business models and incorporated technology in a few areas, like the point of sale system, but overall in-store commerce lacks the sophistication of digital experiences. B2B and B2C customers - who have become accustomed to the ease of digital shopping - are demanding more engaging, personalized, and frictionless buying journeys in-store.

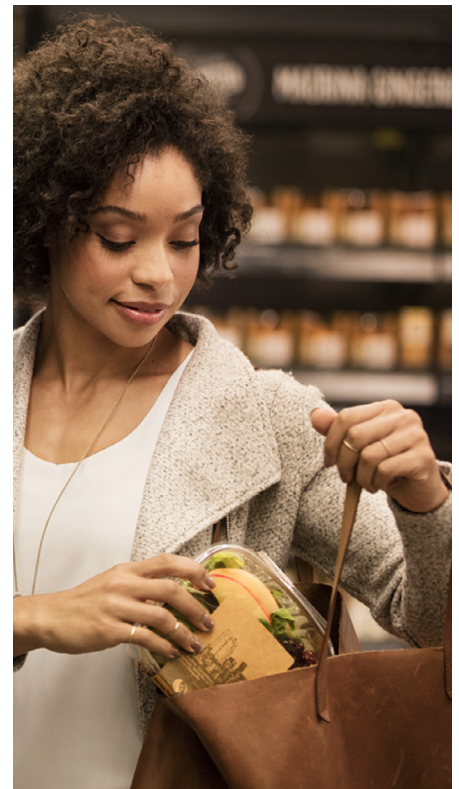
## What’s changing

As brands and retailers push to have ecommerce better emulate in-store commerce (product visualizations, bet-

ter content, live shopping, etc.), they are also working to make in-store commerce leverage some of the best practices from ecommerce. For instance, a 2021 PYMNTS survey showed that 80% of consumers prefer having the option to check out at kiosks in a self-service fashion.

One example is retailers experimenting with interactive devices in their stores such as kiosks or dynamic screens that show product information, such as those offered by Cooler Screens.

Similarly, retailers on the bleeding edge are experimenting with digital price tags, where companies can add previews of reviews and ratings – one of the main benefits of ecommerce – to the good old price tag.



## What 2026 will look like

After being implemented by major retailers, over 20% of consumers worldwide will experience “*just walk out*” retail in the year 2026.

Just walk out buying experiences are ones where a retailer leverages technology like sensors, cameras, and RFID to track the items a consumer places in their shopping cart and bag. As a result, the retailer is able to completely remove the point of sale and automate the checkout experience, removing friction from the shopping experience.

Amazon has made this tactic famous with its Amazon Go stores, in the United States and Europe. These type

of just walk out store concepts are even more common in Asia. As we approach 2026, retailers will be clamoring to just walk out technology to automate point of sale tasks, remove friction from the buying experience, and gain access to more data about how consumers shop in store (thanks to all those cameras and sensors!)

For merchants with physical retail locations, it is recommended that merchants take immediate steps to embed value adding digital experiences in non-digital settings. Embark one project in the next 12 months to bring a digitally enabled experience (endless aisle, kiosks, interactive screens, digital price tags, foot traffic tracking, just walk out, etc.) into your stores.

# Consumers spend more with brands they trust

## What 2022 looks like

It has become apparent that transparency is key among customers. Consumers and business buyers expect more information from brands and retailers, such as how their data is being used, which materials go into product manufacturing, whether they follow fair labor practices, and the carbon emissions of operations. Most merchants are just beginning to get a handle on tracking these metrics and how to report on them to customers.

## What's changing

Broadly, we are seeing a move from price and price and product-driven commerce to experience-driven commerce. Customers will buy from brands that they believe in, that they identify with, that are ethical, sustainable and so forth. Consumers are rewarding transparency with their wallets: a survey conducted by Salsify in 2021 showed that 90% of consumers will pay more from brands that they trust.

## What 2026 will look like

Driven by consumer demands, over 20% of all commerce experiences will proactively display sustainability information for products, services and delivery options.

Brands and retailers will invest in providing customers with more transparency to build trust and boost customer loyalty. The leading brands will align people, processes, and technology to proactively provide customers with more information about their brand and products pre- and post-purchase.

We recommend that merchants pinpoint where they can be more transparent with customers pre-purchase and add additional information to the website, product pages, and at checkout. Suggestions include product manufacturing information, materials and origins, carbon footprint of delivery options and other ESG guidelines.





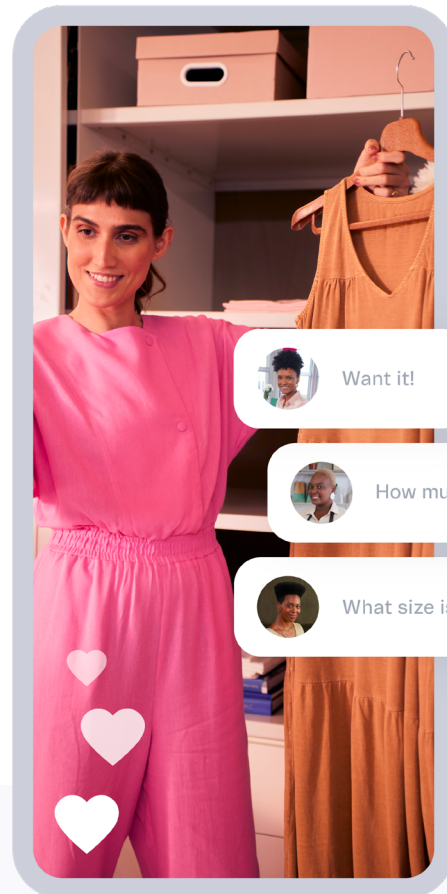
# Video becomes the default shopping experience

## What 2022 looks like

While online stores, apps, and marketplaces have made a lot of progress over the past couple decades, online stores still resemble the early days of ecommerce (before the turn of the century). Home pages with search bars, product listing pages with grids, and product detail pages - we can all picture them in our heads because they are ubiquitous. The plus side is that consumers instantly know how to shop on these types of online stores; the downside is that it's hard to differentiate from the competition.

## What's changing

Customer expectations are constantly evolving. Modern B2B and B2C customers now engage with video content more than any other format when browsing online. In fact, 86% of consumers said they would like to see more video content from brands online. Whether it's offering a 360° view of products, online fitting rooms, VR experiences, or interactive (live) shopping, today's customers are more receptive to video. Additionally, branded content and influencer marketing are new ways to propose products and services as you would if you were face-to-face with the end customer.



## What 2026 will look like

By 2026, over 20% of ecommerce will take place over live shopping experiences worldwide.

Live shopping - a video stream where brands can directly interact with customers in a one-to-many or one-to-one fashion have taken the Asian ecommerce markets by storm. By 2026, this trend will be a major revenue driver in the Americas and EMEA. The bigger picture is that video will dominate the world of ecommerce in 2026 and merchants who adopt video sooner will come out ahead.

We recommend that merchants offer more engaging commerce experiences with live shopping events and experiment with one-on-one live shopping. This empowers salespeople and influencers to boost products. It also enables brands to collect 1st party data about their customers - a gold mine to improve the products and experiences. Moreover, we recommend that merchants bolster their top 20 selling products with interactive video, 360-view, video reviews, short video descriptions and product overviews.

# Autonomous delivery and AI functionalities

## What 2022 looks like

One of the main innovations that has occurred in the ecommerce industry in recent years is the growth of the subscription economy. Brands like Netflix, Stitch Fix, and Dollar Shave Club popularized recurring business models, setting the stage for a whole host of subscription services in retail. However, the vast majority of orders today still occur on an order-by-order basis.

## What's changing

Recurring business models are taking off. Subscription ecommerce are taking off. Subscription ecommerce is expected to account for just \$120 Billion worldwide in 2022; this number is expected to rapidly grow to \$904 Billion in 2026, representing a compound annual growth rate of 65.7%.

More broadly, brands and retailers are experimenting with other business models and technologies to remove friction from the purchasing process. Technologies like artificial intelligence, sensors, and even autonomous vehicles are being experimented with to continue removing friction from commerce.

## What 2026 will look like

By 2026, over 10% of ecommerce transactions worldwide will be fulfilled via autonomous commerce methods with no human involvement.

In a sense, the future is already here. Autonomous vehicles are already delivering products and food: college universities have deployed food delivery robots by the company Starship for 3 years. In China, autonomous Fedex vehicles are being experimented with to deliver products to peoples' homes. As we set our sights on 2026, these sort of human-less commerce experiences will become more regular.

We recommend that merchants experiment with an autonomous commerce proof of concept to test the waters. Evaluate whether your business can make use of sensors or IoT; a subscription or consumption based business model; artificial intelligence to predict customer orders; or autonomous vehicles for delivery. These decisions should be centered around improving the customer experience with your brand.







# Jordan Jewell

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## About the author

With many years of experience as an industry analyst at IDC, Jordan is now the Analyst in Residence and Director of Merchant Growth Strategy at VTEX.

Jordan Jewell is one of the many ecommerce experts that assemble our VTEX ecosystem. With an extensive knowledge-sharing culture, VTEXers will help your brand get where it needs to go.

Get in touch today and run your world of commerce on VTEX!