WHITEPAPER

UNIFIED COMMERCE: THE NEXT EVOLUTION OF RETAIL

Aligning systems, data and experiences for a connected future

Rethinking Retail Architecture

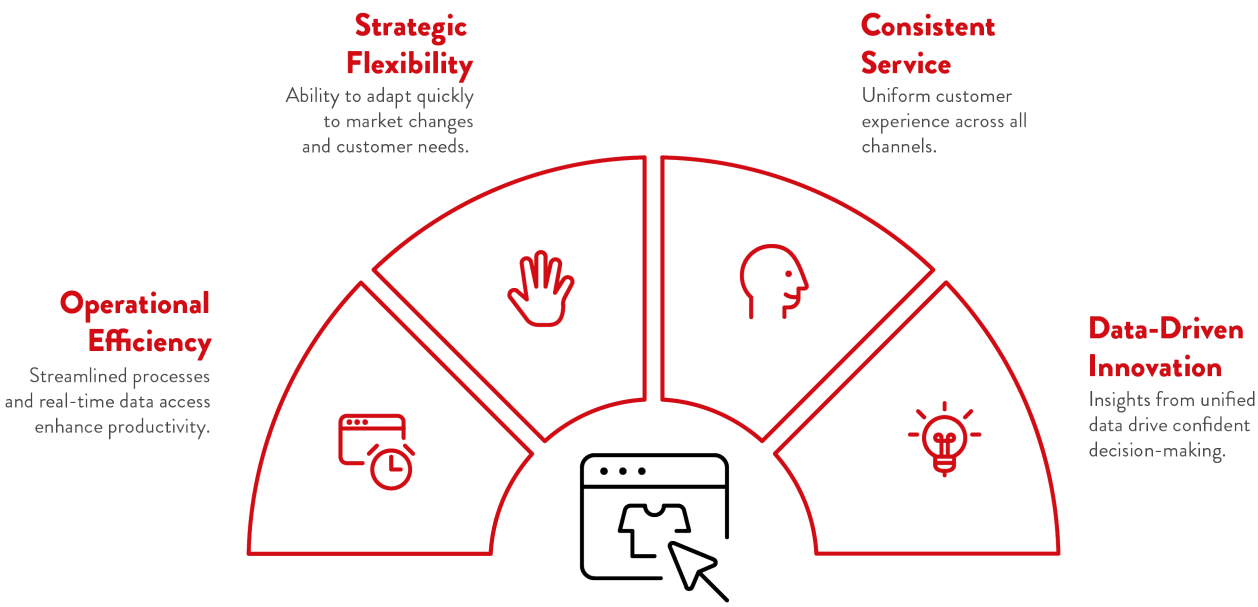
Retailers have long sought to connect channels in pursuit of seamless customer experiences. While this has led to significant progress, many organisations still operate with fragmented systems, duplicated data and limited visibility across their operations.

As commerce becomes more complex, incremental integration is no longer enough. What is needed is a single, unified foundation that connects every channel, process and dataset in real time.

Unified commerce provides that foundation. By consolidating sales, inventory, fulfilment and customer data into one platform, it enables both operational efficiency and strategic flexibility. Retailers can respond faster to demand, deliver more consistent service, and gain the insights required to innovate confidently across digital and physical environments.

The shift toward unified commerce marks a structural evolution in retail – one that aligns technology, people and processes around a single source of truth, setting the stage for future growth and resilience.

Unified Commerce Foundation



CONTENT

CHAPTER 1

Beyond Omnichannel: The Case for Unified Commerce

Unified commerce is a modern retail strategy that integrates all sales channels and back-end systems into a single, cohesive platform.[1] In practice, this means combining everything from online storefronts and mobile apps to physical-store point-of-sale (POS) systems, inventory management and customer relationship management (CRM) tools under one roof. All customer, product and inventory data is stored in one system and updated in real time, giving businesses a 360° view of operations without juggling multiple disconnected applications. By eliminating siloed systems, companies create a single source of truth for transactions and customer interactions. The result is smoother operations and faster decision-making, since every team, from sales to marketing, works from the same live dataset.[2]

Omnichannel commerce, by contrast, is an earlier approach focused on providing a consistent and seamless customer experience across multiple channels. Its goal is for shoppers to encounter the same products, prices, promotions and brand experience, no matter whether they are browsing in store, on a website or via a mobile app.[3] It ensures continuity as customers switch between channels, such as researching a product on an app, buying it online and then returning it in store.

Omnichannel improved on multichannel retail, where each channel operated independently, by connecting them into a more cohesive journey. However, it usually achieves this by linking separate systems such as an e-commerce platform, in-store POS or social storefront through integrations. While the front end appears unified, the back end often remains fragmented, with data spread across silos. This can create inconsistencies, delays in syncing inventory or customer information, and higher maintenance overhead. [4]

Unified commerce addresses these issues by centralising the entire ecosystem. The differences between the two models can be summarised as follows:

Technology architecture

Omnichannel relies on multiple platforms connected through APIs or middleware. Unified commerce, in contrast, runs on a single integrated platform that natively manages all channels and core business functions.[5] This eliminates the need to patch together software and ensures every sales channel and system, including inventory, order management, CRM and POS, is inherently connected.[6]

Data and visibility

In an omnichannel approach, data is often spread across separate databases or modules – for example, each channel may store its own customer records, orders and inventory counts. Businesses must perform data syncing and reconciliation to get a full picture, and inconsistencies can arise when systems don't communicate perfectly in real time.[7] Unified commerce, on the other hand, consolidates all channels' data into a central repository, giving a real-time single source of truth for customer information, inventory levels and sales analytics.[8] For example, if a product sells in store, stock levels update instantly across all channels. If a customer calls support, staff can view their entire history across every channel in one place.

Customer experience

Both strategies aim to create a seamless customer experience, but they approach it differently. Omnichannel commerce puts heavy emphasis on front-end consistency – making sure the customer's journey feels uniform as they move between channels.[9] Unified commerce also delivers a seamless experience, but does so by connecting the front end to a unified back end. Because employees have a complete, real-time view of the customer and other aspects such as inventory and orders, they can provide higher-quality service and personalisation at every touchpoint.[10] In other words, omnichannel tries to appear unified to the shopper, whereas unified commerce is unified at the core.[11] This distinction means a shop assistant using a unified system can instantly access online purchase history or loyalty status for a customer in store – something not always possible in a basic omnichannel set-up. The end result is truly frictionless experiences: customers can start, pause or resume shopping on any channel without disruption, while the business recognises and serves them consistently everywhere.

Efficiency and cost

Maintaining multiple systems under an omnichannel model increases IT complexity, subscriptions and integration costs. Unified commerce simplifies the tech stack to one platform, reducing total cost of ownership and streamlining maintenance. Research shows companies can lower upfront costs by up to 7% and operational costs by 16% compared to traditional systems.[12] Moreover, unified commerce improves internal efficiency: updating product information, fulfilling orders or reconciling data is faster and less error-prone when handled in one system.

In summary, omnichannel improved customer experience by aligning front-end channels, but unified commerce goes further by unifying the back end. It resolves the pain points of siloed data and integration complexity, offering a holistic view of the business. This evolution empowers retailers to respond quickly to customer needs, personalise experiences with accurate data, and maintain real-time visibility across all channels. It's therefore no surprise that adopting a unified commerce strategy has become a top priority for many retailers and CIOs looking to futureproof their operations.[13]

Unified Commerce

Pros

- Seamless experience
- Real-time data
- Cost savings
- Improved efficiency
- Personalisation

Cons

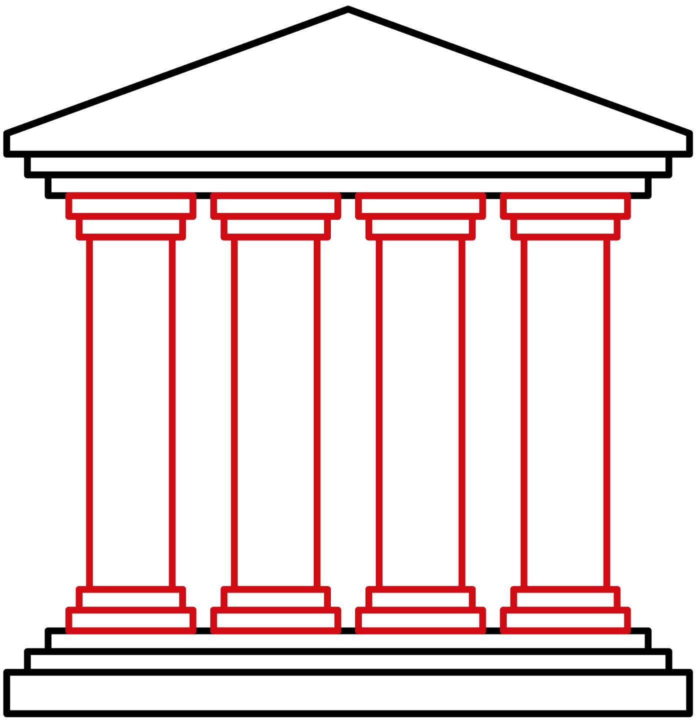
- High initial investment
- Complex integration
- Vendor dependency

CHAPTER 2

Essential Systems and Capabilities

The effectiveness of unified commerce depends on its foundation: a fully integrated technology stack that consolidates every core function into a single platform. Unlike omnichannel models, where systems are connected through ad hoc integrations, unified commerce demands native interconnectivity. Four elements form the backbone of any successful implementation:[14]

Unified Commerce Foundation



Centralised Inventory Management

Real-time stock visibility across all channels

Unified CRM

Consolidated customer data for personalised service

Point of Sale (POS)

In-store interface for unified operations

Consolidated Order Management

Single workflow for all order channels

CENTRALISED INVENTORY MANAGEMENT

A unified commerce platform must provide a single, real-time view of stock across all stores, warehouses and online channels. Centralised inventory management prevents overselling and stockouts by ensuring that the second a product is purchased in one channel, availability updates across all others. This capability supports modern fulfilment options such as buy online, pick up in store (BOPIS), ship from store and same-day delivery.[15] For fashion retailers in particular, where product assortments and seasonality move quickly, accurate inventory visibility enables responsive supply chain decisions and maximises sell-through.

UNIFIED CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT (CRM)

A unified CRM consolidates customer interactions, purchase history and overall engagement into a single profile.[16] For fashion retailers, this enables real-time insights into buying patterns and service needs, supporting personalisation, loyalty programmes and consistent communication across all channels. Embedded within a unified commerce platform, CRM becomes both a marketing and operational tool, helping brands strengthen relationships while improving responsiveness.

POINT OF SALE (POS)

Modern POS is the in-store edge of a unified stack. It should read and write the same inventory, orders and customer records as e-commerce, so store staff can access enterprise-wide availability, place endless-aisle orders or process cross-channel returns in one workflow.[17]

CONSOLIDATED ORDER MANAGEMENT

A unified order management system (OMS) brings together orders from every channel, such as online, mobile, social and in store, into a single workflow.[18] This ensures consistency in processing, real-time inventory alignment and accurate customer updates. For fashion retailers, a consolidated OMS enables flexible fulfilment such as routing an online order from the nearest store and supports seamless returns across channels, helping to cut delivery times and improve customer satisfaction.

CHAPTER 3

Business KPIs Improved under Unified Commerce

Implementing unified commerce does more than streamline technology. It directly influences measurable performance indicators, improving both growth and efficiency.

REVENUE GROWTH

Retailers adopting unified commerce strategies can see revenue increases of three to six times higher than traditional omnichannel models.[19] In addition, specialist retailers stand to gain as much as USD 40 million in additional revenue per USD 1 billion by advancing their unified commerce maturity.[20] By consolidating customer data, inventory and orders into one system, businesses can improve conversion rates, reduce lost sales from stockouts and unlock new cross-channel selling opportunities. The result is higher average order values and stronger overall sales performance.

OPERATIONAL EFFICIENCY

Companies using unified commerce platforms can achieve implementation speeds up to 20% faster and a 22% improvement in cost of ownership compared with fragmented omnichannel systems.[21] Operating on a single platform eliminates duplicated effort, lowers integration costs and reduces manual reconciliation across departments. Staff can complete tasks more quickly and accurately, with updates reflected everywhere in real time.

CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

Shoppers increasingly expect smooth, flexible journeys and unified commerce delivers. Around 60% of shopping journeys now start on one device and finish on another,[22] highlighting the need for seamless integration. Unified platforms provide accurate stock visibility, flexible fulfilment options such as BOPIS or ship from store, and frictionless returns. With a complete view of each customer's history, staff can deliver personalised recommendations and support that strengthen satisfaction and repeat purchases.[23]

BRAND LOYALTY

Retailers adopting unified commerce strategies often report stronger customer loyalty and engagement, driven by consistent experiences across channels.[24] Loyalty programmes become more effective when powered by complete purchase histories, enabling retailers to understand customers holistically and personalise rewards accordingly.[25]

Personalisation also becomes more impactful when grounded in multichannel data, allowing retailers to infer behavioural traits and deliver tailored experiences across the journey.[26] Delivering personalised experiences and recognising customers consistently across touchpoints helps build trust, emotional connection and long-term loyalty.[27]

Enhancing Business Performance with Unified Commerce

Revenue Growth

Increased sales and higher order values

Operational Efficiency

Faster implementation and reduced costs

Customer Experience

Smooth journeys and personalized support

Brand Loyalty

Stronger customer engagement and trust

CHAPTER 4

Challenges of Transitioning to Unified Commerce

While unified commerce offers clear benefits, the transition is rarely straightforward. Many fashion retailers face significant challenges when moving from siloed or omnichannel systems to a fully unified model.

Integration hurdles

One of the biggest barriers is integrating existing systems into a single platform. Many retailers still rely on separate POS, e-commerce and ERP tools that were not designed to interoperate. Migrating data and processes into a unified solution requires extensive planning, testing and investment. In fact, 95% of organisations report struggling with system integration, highlighting how widespread the issue is.[28]

Legacy system constraints

Traditional in-store POS and ERP systems are often heavily customised and tightly woven into daily operations. While these legacy platforms have served businesses well, they can limit flexibility and may not easily integrate with modern unified commerce architectures, making the journey to a fully connected environment more challenging.[29] For fashion retailers, where product cycles are short, delays in system integration can directly affect sales and margin. Failed technology transformations cost organisations around 12% of annual revenue, underlining the financial risks if migration projects are not properly managed.[30]

Internal alignment

Adopting unified commerce requires more than technology change; it demands cultural and operational alignment. Marketing, logistics, IT and store operations must all work from the same data and processes. Without strong coordination, retailers risk failing to realise the benefits of unified commerce. In fact, research shows that more than 80% of digital transformation initiatives fail, often due to lack of alignment, leadership issues or unrealistic expectations.[31]

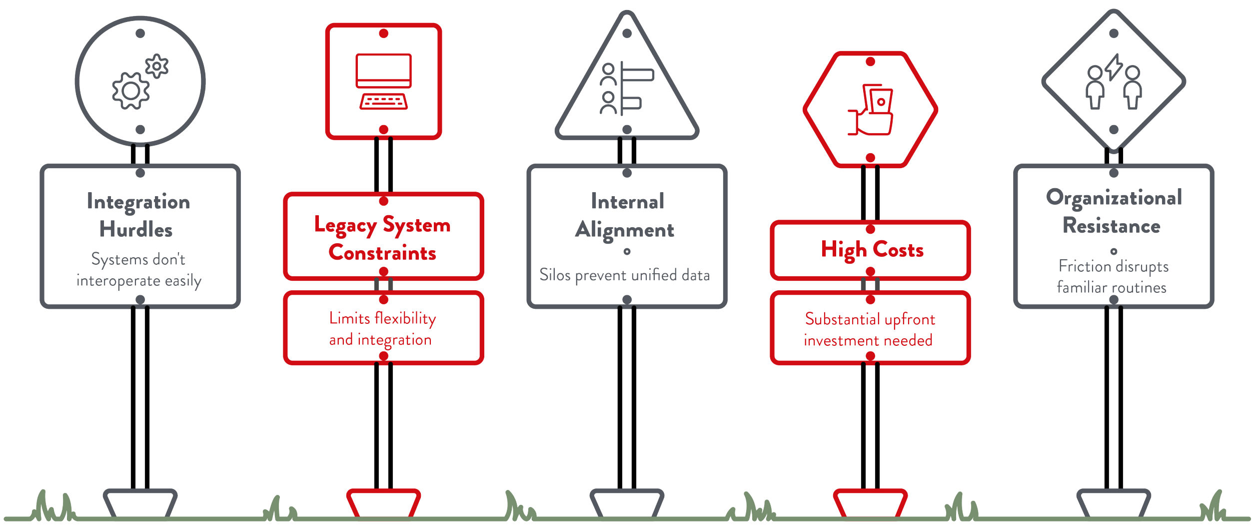
Costs

The upfront costs of replacing or reconfiguring systems can be substantial. Investment is needed not only in the unified commerce platform itself but also in staff training, process redesign and data migration. While long-term savings are achievable, the short-term outlay is a barrier for many mid-sized fashion retailers. In the retail sector, digital transformation projects typically cost between USD 100 thousand and USD 1 million, with much of this investment directed at improving customer experience through initiatives such as personalised marketing and mobile payment solutions.[32]

Organisational resistance

Implementing unified commerce also requires effective change management. Migrating data, training staff on new workflows, and establishing consistent processes can create friction, particularly when familiar routines are disrupted. To ease adoption, leaders should communicate the long-term value of unified commerce and provide the support and training employees need to succeed.[33] Ultimately, the success of the transition depends as much on people embracing new ways of working as it does on the technology itself.

Transitioning to Unified Commerce: A Challenging Shift



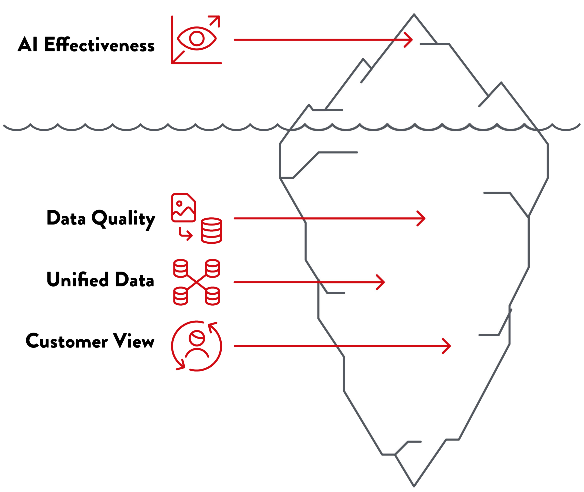
CHAPTER 5

Emerging Trends and the Role of Unified Commerce

Modern retail is being transformed by several converging trends, including **artificial intelligence (AI), social and live commerce, sustainability and returns optimisation.** Each of these trends intensifies the need for a unified platform – not just for operational efficiency but also to enable new business models and customer experiences that would be impractical on fragmented systems.

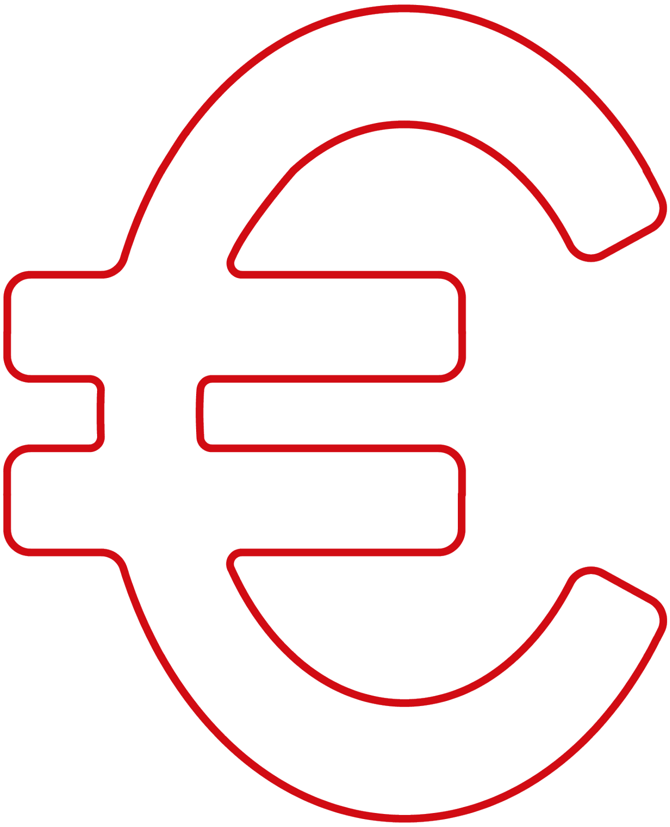
AI and machine learning are now pivotal to personalisation, demand forecasting and next-best-offer engines. But their effectiveness depends on high-quality, unified data across customer behaviour, product attributes and inventory. As Databricks notes, successful retail media networks (RMNs) require 'high-quality, unified consumer data that paints a 360° view of each shopper – what they buy, how they browse, what promotions they respond to, and how they interact across channels'.[34] Without unified commerce, AI tools operate on disjointed inputs, leading to degraded recommendations, lag or misalignment between channels. Fashion buyers themselves are signalling an openness to AI for assortment planning and trend prediction, underlining the commercial importance of clean, connected data environments.[35]

Unified Commerce Underpins AI Effectiveness in Retail



Meanwhile, the rise of social commerce, livestream shopping and augmented-reality-driven product interactions demands seamless orchestration across front ends and back ends. In the 2024 holiday season, Salesforce reported that AI- and agent-driven tools influenced USD 229 billion of global online sales (19% of total) via product recommendations, targeted offers and conversational support, and that usage of AI chatbots rose 42% year-over-year.[36] Industry leaders also stress that the future of shopping is hybrid everything,[37] with customers expecting a single continuous journey whether they start on social media, in store or on a livestream. Only a unified commerce architecture can ensure that inventory, pricing, customer context and fulfilment are synchronised across such fluid journeys.

The Future of Shopping



Social Commerce

Shopping through social media platforms

Livestream Shopping

Real-time shopping events with live interaction

Augmented Reality

Enhancing shopping with AR technology

AI-Driven Tools

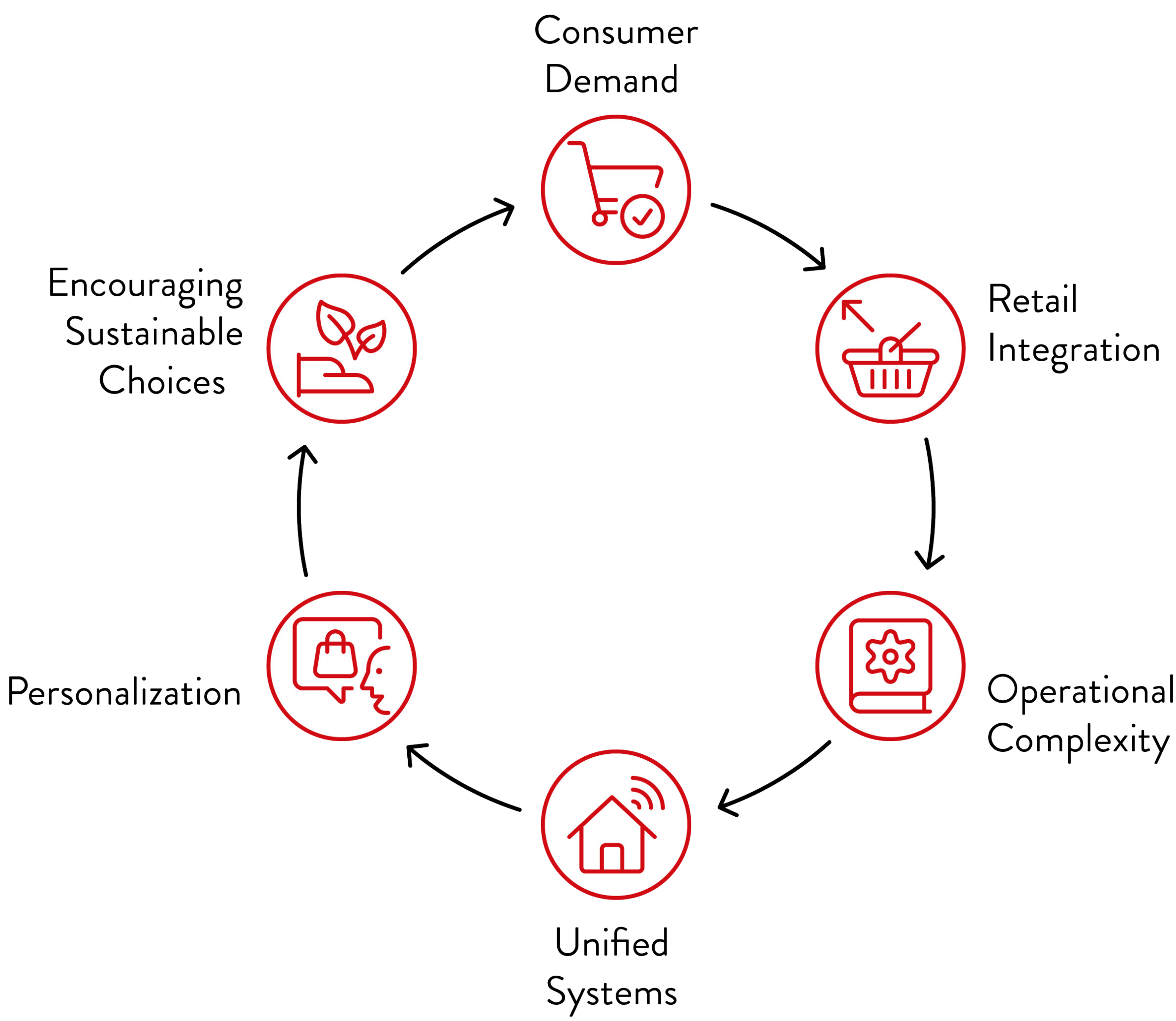
AI influencing sales through recommendations

Hybrid Shopping

Combining online and offline shopping experiences

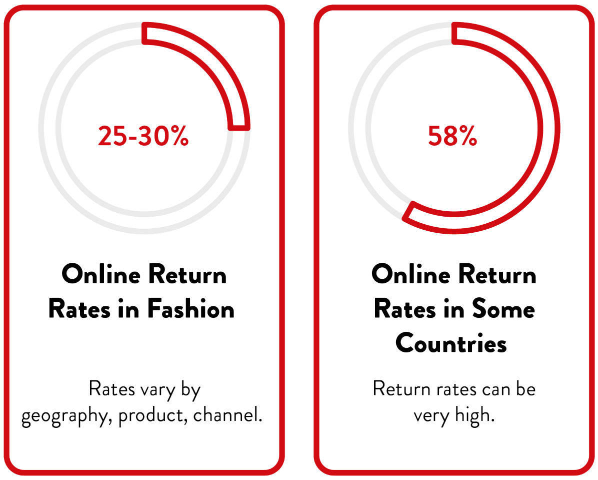
At the same time, sustainability and circular commerce models are no longer niche experiments – they are becoming central to retail strategies under consumer and regulatory pressure. One in two global shoppers are already buying preowned or refurbished items online,[38] and the regenerative market, encompassing resale, rental and repair, is expected to be worth EUR 900 billion by 2030.[39] Integrating these circular models introduces new operational complexity: items may exist in multiple states – new, used, refurbished or rented – each with its own logistics, pricing and accounting requirements. While few studies have quantified this directly, it follows that scaling such models effectively will require systems capable of unifying inventory management, reverse logistics and customer data within one coherent environment. In this sense, unified commerce provides the structural foundation that allows recommerce to move from experimental to mainstream. Personalisation combined with innovative payment options can further encourage sustainable choices, such as resale or repair, by making them as convenient and rewarding as buying new.[40]

Cycle of Sustainable Commerce



Returns are another pressure point, especially in fashion, where online return rates often hover around 25% to 30% depending on geography, product type and channel but can even be as high as 58% in some countries.[41] Because AI-based sizing tools, virtual try-on features and behaviour-based return policies aim to reduce returns by improving fit accuracy and forecasting customer intent, their success depends on the quality and completeness of underlying data. It is therefore reasonable to infer that these technologies perform best when built on unified systems that consolidate purchase histories, product information and return behaviour across all channels. Studies on predictive fit models, such as SizeFlags, show that combining historical customer and product data can significantly reduce return rates,[42] while unified platforms are shown to enhance returns management by providing a single view of orders, inventory and customer interactions.[43]

Online Return Rates in Fashion



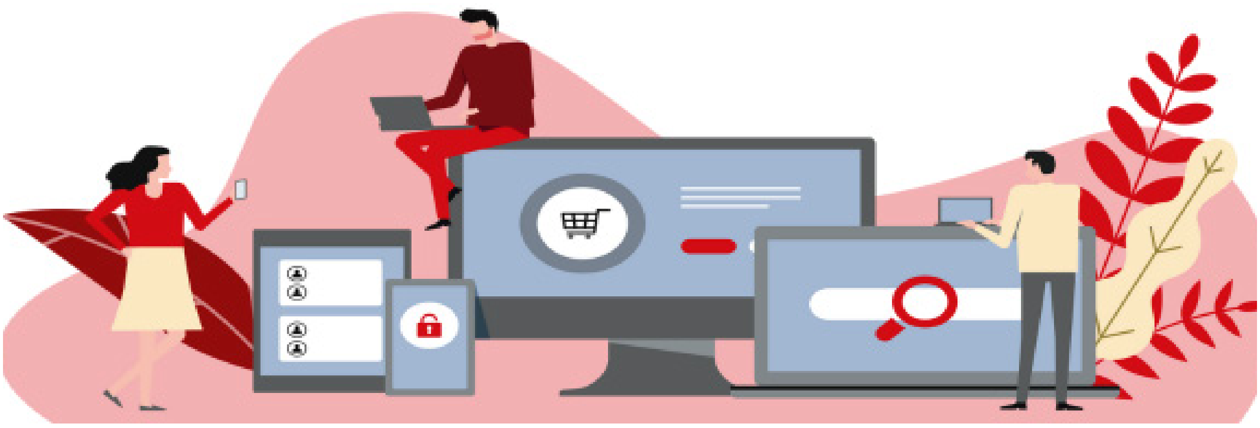
High return rates in fashion necessitate unified systems for effective AI-driven solutions.

Together, these trends form a reinforcing feedback loop: as retailers invest in AI-driven personalisation, social commerce, sustainability and smarter returns, they increase their dependence on a unified architecture. Unified commerce is not merely an upgrade to reduce complexity – it's the platform upon which the next decade of retail innovation must be built.

CHAPTER 6

Is Unified Commerce the Future?

Unified commerce represents more than a technological shift – it is the logical next stage in retail's digital evolution. As channels multiply and customer expectations rise, retailers can no longer rely on connected but separate systems to deliver consistent experiences. The move towards a single, integrated platform that unifies data, operations and customer interactions is increasingly viewed by experts as the natural progression beyond omnichannel models.



Industry leaders and analysts alike point to unified commerce as the foundation for the hybrid, personalised shopping journeys now defining consumer behaviour. At forums such as the Vogue Business Future of Shopping Summit, executives emphasise that customers no longer differentiate between online and offline touchpoints; they expect brands to recognise them, respond to them and serve them seamlessly wherever they choose to engage. Achieving this level of fluidity is only possible when all channels and data operate within one coherent system.[44]

The commercial case is equally strong. Unified commerce improves operational visibility, accelerates fulfilment, supports new business models such as recommerce and rental, and enables the real-time personalisation that drives loyalty and growth. Its impact extends beyond efficiency to strategic agility, allowing retailers to adapt quickly to shifts in demand, regulation and technology. In a sector where margins are tight and competition is global, the ability to act on a single source of truth has become a defining advantage.

For most retailers, the transition will be gradual and complex, requiring investment, alignment and sustained change management. Yet the direction of travel is clear. **Unified commerce is not a passing trend but the architecture on which the next generation of retail will be built – a model that connects systems, people and experiences into one dynamic, intelligent ecosystem.**

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