

Find the Perfect Fit: Shoppers' Online Search for Apparel in 2022



Lucidworks

“Out-of-stock” keeps popping up in online apparel.

Brand loyalty only stretches so far when shoppers are trying to wrap their expectations around weeks-long shipping delays and “out-of-stock” messages. Combine that with tough-to-pin-down consumer preferences and online apparel is up against some serious challenges in 2022. But there’s hope. Proactive communication about product availability and relevant recommendations that match shoppers’ taste can keep customers from heading elsewhere.

Lucidworks surveyed consumers across the U.S. and U.K. who shop for apparel online at least once a month. The survey revealed that more than half of shoppers experience a preferred item frequently or always being out-of-stock online. While customers are mostly open to purchasing recommended items as an alternative, more than 85% of respondents have at least one apparel item that they’ll never substitute.

Apparel retailers have to connect the dots between fluctuating inventory and ever-shifting fashion taste to alert shoppers when their favorite items are low-in-stock or back-in-stock, and push relevant recommendations in the meantime. And then scale that across their entire shopper base. Easy, right?

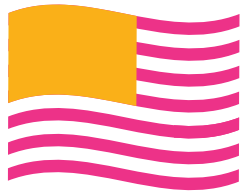
This survey report focuses on three solutions to keep shoppers well-dressed (and loyal):

- 1 Understand shoppers’ unique tastes to make more relevant recommendations. There’s (almost) always a substitute that shoppers are open to buying.
- 2 Alert shoppers when their preferred items are low-in-stock and back-in-stock. They don’t want to miss out.
- 3 Ensure shoppers can find the items you do have. Smart search and filtering boosts average order value.

The Shopper Profile

100% OF RESPONDENTS SHOP ONLINE FOR APPAREL A MINIMUM OF ONCE A MONTH

800 SHOPPERS



400

male-identifying



400

female-identifying

50%



12%

shop directly from a brand's website



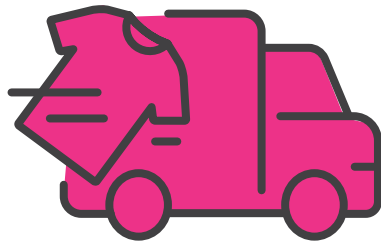
22%

shop from retailers that sell multiple brands



66%

shop from a combination of the two



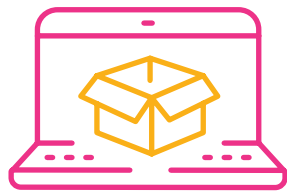
86%

of shoppers prefer to have online purchases delivered to their home (versus picking up in-store)

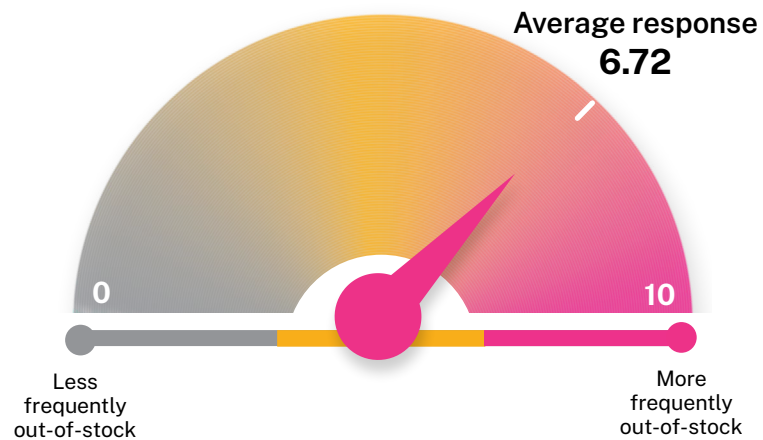


SHOPPERS SEE “OUT-OF-STOCK” APPAREL INCREASE DURING THE PANDEMIC

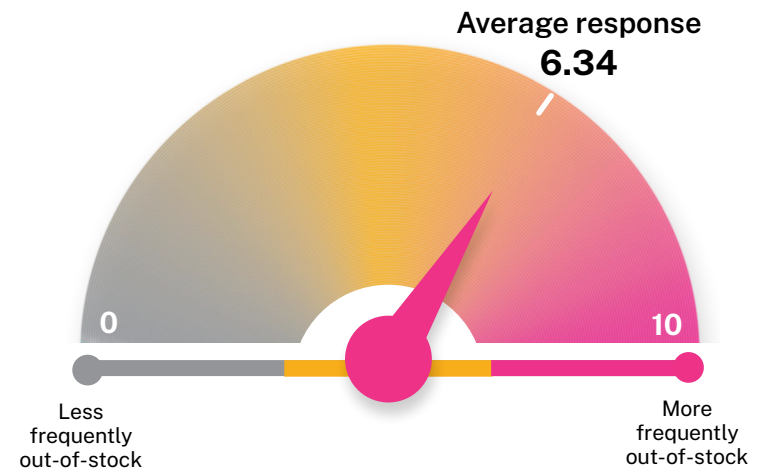
During the pandemic, shoppers opened up apparel apps and websites only to find that their favorite products were increasingly unavailable. 57% of respondents say that they frequently or at every visit experience unavailable products online.



Has the frequency of apparel being out-of-stock ONLINE changed during the pandemic?



Has the frequency of apparel being out-of-stock IN-STORE changed during the pandemic?



69%

of shoppers

will go elsewhere if an apparel retailer doesn't have what they want.

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1

Apparel Shoppers Welcome Substitutions (Sometimes)

The survey revealed that nearly seven in ten shoppers will go to another site if a retailer doesn't have an apparel item they're looking for. The other 31% of shoppers will either look for substitutes on the same site or they just won't buy anything at all.

Men are more than 3x as likely to buy a substitute anytime as compared to women. And U.S. shoppers overall are more than 3x as likely to buy an alternative apparel product anytime as compared to U.K. consumers.

The majority of apparel websites recommend alternatives when a shopper's preferred item is unavailable. But there are still 15% of shoppers who rarely receive any recommendations when the item they're looking for is out-of-stock. And the majority of respondents, nearly 70%, say that apparel sites recommend substitutes sometimes, but not always. There's definitely room for improvement.

Shoppers say that, for the most part, they're open to buying substitutes if their preferred item is out-of-stock or unavailable. When consumers were asked if there was an apparel item they'd never substitute they expressed preferences based on brands, styles, and fits that are just non-negotiable.



"Nike shoes is something I would never substitute because it's the best brand and I have to have them."

"Most products I spend a lot of time researching first so I know what I want."

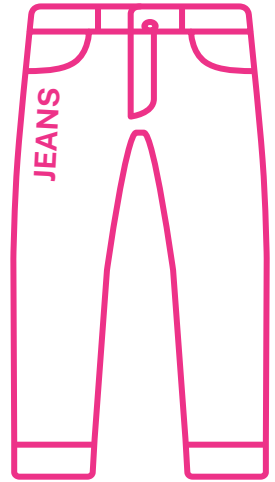
"I find Zara often has specific styles/designs out of stock and that item is the only reason I am purchasing, so a substitute won't cut it."

"I would never buy a substitute for my bras. I have to wear a specific brand and type of bra or I am not comfortable."



"Underwear. I normally have to shop at a certain label."

Is there any apparel item that you would NEVER buy a substitute for?



"Jeans. I'm short and it's hard to find the right length on me."

"It's taken me ages to find jeans that don't fade, shrink or stretch after washes... I'll always stick to the same brand and style of jeans. If they're out of stock I'd rather wait until they're back in."

"If I'm looking at something that is on sale, discounted, works with a coupon, clearance etc., I would usually not buy a substitute recommendation that isn't also discounted."



"Specific shoes as I usually only buy particular brands and research them in advance and know I want that exact style."

"Shoes. If I am looking for a specific pair, I will not compromise on a substitute."

57%

of shoppers say that they find the specific apparel item they're looking for online is out-of-stock frequently or every time they shop.

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2

Push More Products with Inventory-Based Notifications

Apparel had one of the highest out-of-stock rates in 2021¹. The pandemic has shown consumers what a struggling supply chain can do to product availability. Nearly a quarter of shoppers say they rarely buy a substitute because they know what they want, and they're willing to wait for their beloved trainers, jeans, and undergarments to come back in stock. Keep those loyal shoppers engaged by sending out alerts when favorite items are low-in-stock or back-in-stock.

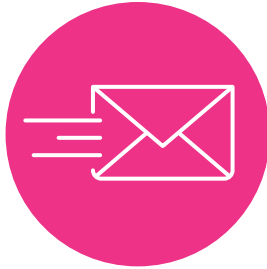
61% of shoppers say they're more likely to buy an item in their size if they know it's low-in-stock.

The majority of shoppers are browsing for apparel at least twice a month, and 25% are looking through the digital racks once a week or more. One of the ways to keep customers' wallets on your website or app is to get preferred products into their carts before inventory hits the red. Avoid frustrating shoppers by connecting inventory and consumer communication. Nothing stings more than figuring out the perfect summer swim suit a shopper's been eyeing is suddenly unavailable when they're ready to buy.



RETAILER BEWARE Shoppers can sniff out false scarcity messages². Make sure that you keep the sacred trust with your shopper by only flagging low-in-stock items when they're *actually* low-in-stock.

WHICH WAYS DO YOU PREFER TO BE NOTIFIED WHEN AN ITEM IS BACK IN STOCK?



75%
prefer via email



38%
prefer via text



13%
prefer via auto-added to cart

91% of shoppers want to be notified when an item they like is back in stock.

Supply chain issues are expected to continue to plague shoppers for the foreseeable future. Intelligent push-based notifications will continue to serve as a powerful tool to keep shoppers loyal and coming back for more. These generally would be in the form of proactive (i.e., low-in-stock), reactive (ie, back-in-stock), or even passive notifications such as those communicating the status of an order.

Proactive alerts via email, text message, or app notification are a great way to make sure shoppers get what they need.

These alerts are also a great way to share recommendations (which we'll dive into next) for shoppers who have opted-in. Don't waste this opportunity by pushing a generic text message to shoppers' phones with an irrelevant recommendation. You want to deliver that personal touch.

Smart ecommerce search applications that use machine learning and AI make the difference between a recommendation that leaves a shopper scratching their head in confusion and instead serves a recommendation that leaves them wondering how you read their mind.

76%
of shoppers
say that they'll
sometimes or
always buy a
substitute, even if
they're shopping
with a specific
apparel item
in mind.

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3 Work with the Apparel You've Got

Taste is a tricky thing. Nearly 60% of shoppers say that the biggest reason they don't buy substitutes is because it doesn't match their taste. Shoppers expect the search bar and filtering to understand what it is they're actually after. Retailers must combine the capabilities of technology with the knowledge of their human merchandisers to create relevant recommendations when the supply chain keeps preferred items from hitting the virtual shelves.







Consumers are keen to add-to-cart when they see relevant recommendations for products they didn't know they needed. A previous survey found that 62% of shoppers say that on every visit or at least often they buy recommended items they didn't initially plan on purchasing³.

Shoppers in the U.S. are 2x as likely to find that recommendations from apparel websites are relevant and spot-on with their personal taste as compared to consumers in the U.K..

Mismatched recommendations aren't the only reason your shoppers are leaving empty-handed. 15% of respondents said they usually end up on a "no results" page when an item they're looking for is out-of-stock. If your shoppers are navigating to a "No Results" page, you're burning money. When items are in-stock make sure online shoppers can find what they're looking for.

SOLVING NULL-RESULTS QUERIES WITH SEMANTIC SEARCH

Query types that frequently end in “no results”

-  **Brands/Items not carried**
Specific name brands or products that are not carried by the retailer.
-  **Items in high demand whose availability fluctuates frequently**
Products were flagged not to appear in search results when they were out of stock.
-  **Items available in store only**
Only items available in the customer's local (or selected) store would appear in search results.
-  **Mismatched vocabulary**
Search terms that did not appear in product names or descriptions.
-  **Misspellings**
All misspelling variations had to be added to a spelling correction rule to produce results.
-  **Exact Queries**
Such as product model numbers.

To reduce null-results queries, retailers and brands should invest in semantic vector search technology that learns from customer behavior to associate shoppers' queries with products that have a similar purpose. By using shoppers' behavior to train search models, results are continually tuned and improved.

A Fortune 100 company reduced null results by 91% and increased AOV by 28% using Never Null, Lucidworks semantic vector search solution⁴.

Using deep learning, semantic search is able to yield results to queries based on semantic meaning rather than simply matching products via keywords. So if your shopper types in “silvr hi heels” they won't end up with a blank screen, but instead will see an assortment of silver pumps and even an outfit that matches perfectly with the shoes. Not only does this alleviate the back-end efforts to manually optimize results, it increases average order value and long-term loyalty when customers find exactly what they're looking for.

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Make Online Browsing the New Window Shopping

The supply chain is long, winding, and sometimes unpredictable. Unfortunately, it can have major consequences for customer loyalty and trust. By understanding customer taste, making relevant recommendations and proactively pushing inventory notifications, you can keep your customers clicking into your store.

Lucidworks can help you create these connections in the moment. We bring an AI-driven ecommerce search solution that powers some of the world's largest brands. Lucidworks combines domain knowledge with machine learning and AI-powered search capabilities to offer real-time, hyper-personalized digital shopping experiences, simplify shopper engagement and purchase paths, and increase customer loyalty and conversions.

Get Started >

Learn how Lucidworks can power connected shopping experiences for your brand and meet every customer's need in the moment.

¹ <https://blog.adobe.com/en/publish/2021/11/09/adobe-shoppers-have-seen-over-2-billion-out-of-stock-messages-online-october-2021>

² <https://www.wsj.com/articles/only-2-left-in-stock-order-now-but-does-that-really-work-11585339621>

³ <https://lucidworks.com/ebooks/us-uk-retail-survey/>

⁴ <https://lucidworks.com/ebooks/case-study-no-results-query/>