

# Bridging the Digital / Physical Divide

## Customer Expectations Across Retail Channels



### The Omnichannel Conundrum

Shoppers expect to move frictionlessly between digital and physical shopping experiences. However, a significant challenge has emerged: we have found **a growing divide between customer expectations (and experiences) in online versus in-store environments**. This digital / physical gap presents both a challenge and an opportunity for brands to create truly seamless shopping journeys.

Brands and retailers struggle to deliver consistent experiences across channels. While they may have a clear picture of their target audiences, meeting customer expectations in both digital and physical spaces can be surprisingly complex. We at KNow Research know this well, especially after mining our 2021-2024 retail projects in aggregate. We found **4 themes and insights across our work** that can help brands bridge the gap to deliver a more seamless customer experience across shopping channels.

## 1. Ensure a Smooth Multi-Channel Purchase Journey

For a beauty retailer struggling with cart abandonment, we implemented a series of digital Booth® Insights shopper intercepts ([case study available here](#)). Our research revealed that customers use multiple touchpoints for a single purchase, but the retailer's systems didn't support this behavior.

Online browsers expected to easily find and purchase their selected items in-store, while in-store shoppers wanted a simple way to "save" their basket for later online purchase.

In another case, a home goods retailer sought to understand customers' complex paths to purchase. Through omnichannel journey mapping exercises, we saw that these customers use digital channels for initial research and price comparison, but many still want to see and touch big-ticket items in person before purchasing. However, the in-store experience often fell short of the rich information provided online, leading to purchase hesitation and confusion.

Omnichannel Insight#1: Design experiences for seamless transitions between online and offline shopping, supporting customers' non-linear purchase journeys.

## 2. Keep Personalization Paramount

In our work with a fashion retailer, we discovered a disconnect in how personalization was perceived and delivered across channels. Online, customers enjoyed highly tailored product recommendations and personalized content. In-store, however, they often felt anonymous and missed the customized experience they had come to expect.

In a recent study for an athleisure brand, we tracked customer expectations from website browsing to in-store visits, discovering a significant mismatch between the digital promise and the physical reality. The brand's website featured a state-of-the-art virtual try-on tool, complete with personalized fit recommendations. However, when customers visited physical stores, they were disappointed to find traditional fitting rooms without high-tech features like the ones they experienced online.

Omnichannel Insight #2: Align digital innovations with in-store capabilities, and develop strategies to translate digital personalization into meaningful in-store experiences, possibly through clienteling apps or customer recognition technology.

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### 3. Meet Fulfillment Expectations with Inventory Visibility

An electronics retailer struggled with customer frustration around product availability. Our research revealed that customers checking inventory online expected 100% accuracy when they visited the store. However, due to factors like shrinkage and update delays, this was often not the case.

Omnichannel Insight #3: Improve inventory systems to provide real-time updates or set realistic expectations about potential discrepancies between online and in-store availability.

### 4. Bridge the Service Expectation Gap

A department store needed to know why their customer service satisfaction scores varied widely between online and in-store interactions. We found that the efficiency of online chat support was setting unrealistic expectations for in-person service, where complex inquiries often took longer to resolve.

Omnichannel Insight #4: Train in-store staff on digital service standards and equip them with tools to match the efficiency of online support where possible.

## Conclusion: Craft a Seamless Omnichannel Future

Illuminating digital-physical expectation gaps helps brands create more cohesive, satisfying customer experiences across all touchpoints. The key to success in today's retail landscape lies in understanding these cross-channel challenges and addressing them in on-brand, customer-centric ways.

### Ready to Bridge Your Digital-Physical Divide?

KNow Research is here to help you uncover and address the unique expectations your customers have across digital and physical channels. Our expertise can provide full-service research—from methodology design to actionable insights. For more information, visit [knowresearch.com](https://knowresearch.com) or email [admin@knowresearch.com](mailto:admin@knowresearch.com).