# Shopping Across Channels: A Survey of Customer Preferences

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*In both preference and practice, people have established personal hierarchies surrounding the channels through which they carry out conversations with selected vendors. An Opus Research survey of roughly 1,000 respondents shows the order in which they turn to Web sites, search engines, toll-free numbers, social networks, store visits, blogs, IM and chat to support shopping, product selection, initial set-up and ongoing support.*

The pace at which shoppers have turned to social networks and multiple modalities for everything from comparison shopping to product set-up is striking. Opus Research conducted a survey during the 2009-10 holiday shopping season to validate our fundamental belief that shoppers are growing increasingly sophisticated in how they select from a menu of options that includes search engines, company Web sites, contact center agents and many emerging modalities (like Web chat, IM, ‘bots and text messages) to construct their own customer care solutions.

The research provides empirical grounding to e-commerce merchants’ efforts to add multiple channels to support conversations with both prospects and existing customers.

## A Multi-Channel, Multimodal Holiday Season

Opus Research fielded an online survey during the recent holiday buying season (Dec. 23, 2009 to Jan. 4, 2010). Sponsored in part by Voxeo, the online instrument gave respondents an opportunity to indicate both preferences and actual practices when carrying out business with the vendors they favor. Online shopping was on an uptick in 2009 (with data from comScore showing an increase of 5% over 2008). Still, our survey shows that those purchases were, by no means, made in a cyber-vacuum.

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Roughly 1,000 respondents participated by first indicating how they felt about the various channels at their disposal, and then telling us which ones they had used in the six months prior to participating in our poll. The range of options we suggested included:

- Search engines
- Web sites
- Toll-free phone numbers to IVRs and agents
- Web chat
- Instant Messaging (including ‘bots)
- Blogs
- Microblogging (e.g. Twitter)
- SMS text messaging

Respondents provided insights into the hierarchy of approaches people take to carry out conversations with their favorite merchants or vendors. Then it provided a way for them to indicate actual use of these “channels” for pre-sale activities (like finding products, services and pricing) and for post-purchase activities like product set-up and subsequent support.

 

## Not the Conspicuous Complainers

In an age when a disgruntled customer can generate tens of millions of visitors to view a stream of complaints or even a start a viral video like, "United Breaks Guitars," we were gratified to learn that more than three-quarters (76.9%) of the participants in our survey indicated that they "agreed" (54.3%) or "strongly agreed" (22.6%) with the statement, "I am satisfied with the quality of customer care I receive from the firms with which I do business."

## Indicated Preferences for Vendor Conversations

| Communications 'Channel' | % |
|---|---|
| **Use a search engine** | 77.2 |
| **Browse company Web sites** | 61.3 |
| **Seek help in person** | 60.3 |
| **Used toll free number** | 54.6 |
| **Communicate over social networks** | 37.2 |
| **Receive SMS text as alerts** | 34.2 |
| **Used IM (including 'bots)** | 23.5 |

**Source: Opus Research Survey (2010)**

The survey participants were then presented with the channels illustrated above and asked if they prefer this option when dealing with a business. Participants were give a five-point scale ("strongly agree," "somewhat agree," "neither agree nor disagree," "somewhat disagree," "strongly disagree"). The percentages above are the sum of those who "strongly" and "somewhat agree" with the statement that they "prefer" to use that particular channel to communicate with vendors.

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As noted above, 60% said they agree with the idea that they "prefer to seek help from a person in a storefront." Also, in response to a question that invited respondents to indicate alternative modes of communication, a significant number of participants stated "email" should have been included as a possible channel.

## The Hierarchy of Choice

Responses to the introductory questions, while not literally projectable on the general population, does indicate that today's shoppers will organically merge online search and shopping with mobile alerts and social networking.

Today, the vast majority of shoppers are predisposed to employ search engines and visits to e-commerce Web sites. A significantly smaller percentage of shoppers would chat with agents through a Web site. Another "cohort" (in the one-third range) includes people who agree with the idea that they would communicate over social networks, receive text alerts or use IM (including 'bots) for shopping and customer care.

## The Path from Preference to Practice

We next asked those participating in the survey whether they had used the channels under discussion "in the past 6 months." The questions were framed to learn how the different channels and tools are used while initially searching for products and pricing, then for assistance in handling issues that occur during initial set-up and, finally, for ongoing customer care and support.

## Channels Used in the Past 6 Months

| | Pre Purchase | For Set-up | Ongoing Support |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Browsed company Web sites** | 86.7% | 81.4% | 72.8% |
| **Uses a search engine** | 85.1 | 78.5 | 70.0 |
| **Used toll free number** | 73.2 | 65.9 | 70.8 |
| **Consulted social networks** | 54.4 | 46.8 | 43.1 |
| **Chatted with agent thru Web site** | 47.2 | 43.1 | 42.1 |
| **Received SMS text** | 28.6 | 23.1 | 21.9 |
| **Used IM (including 'bots)** | 25.9 | 22.7 | 22.4 |
| **Blogged about** | 24.4 | 22.7 | 20.9 |
| **Tweeted about** | 17.2 | 16.1 | 15.4 |

**Source: Opus Research (2010)**

Once again a hierarchy was established among the online and "real world" tools available to shoppers and customers. The above table reveals a general decline in the use of all channels after a purchase is made. It also highlights how channels can be stratified by user preference.

## Roughly 85% of Shopping Starts on the Web

The survey shows that roughly 85% of respondents include the Web in their shopping efforts. Given the 5% confidence ratio, there is no significant difference between "using a search engine" and "visiting Web sites or online catalogs". Our empirical observation is that search engines are an important first step in discovering vendor Web sites and, ultimately, the products being sought.

Though the difference is small, the survey reveals that respondents then turn to vendor sites for product support more readily than going to more generic search engines. For initial set-up, use of toll-free numbers appears to take a dip, but for ongoing support, Web sites, search engines and toll-free numbers are on a par with one another.

Use of social networks appears to be in a class of its own, with 54.4% of respondents turning to friends for advice on products and vendors prior to a purchase. Yet for set-up and ongoing support, these folks are equally likely to turn chat sessions with company employees. Given the 5% margin for error, blogging, IM and text messaging are also at parity, with roughly one-fourth of respondents saying that they have used these channels in the past six months.

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## Microblogging (Twitter) and Video Appeal to over 15%

As for 'microblogging' (i.e. the use of Twitter tweets to carry out conversations with vendors), the survey indicates that something on the order of 15% of the population under study has done so in the past six months. That's quite a showing for a medium that claims only 15 million registered users.

We also asked a bonus question regarding the use of video in post purchase to support product set-up and learned that a surprising 17.3% said that they had done so. That puts it on a par with the percentage of people that say they used Twitter in the past six months to in the capacities under discussion.

## Chat is More Common Than Previously Thought

Studies by analysts that monitor "e-services" market placed the use of chat, IM and phone channels in association with contact centers in the "sub-20%" range. Some of the largest analyst firms believe that such integration occurs in less than 3% of active seats. The fact that 50% of respondents believe that they chatted through Web sites may reflect more aspiration than actual use, but it does suggest that efforts to integrate phone networks and chat will be well received.

The survey was conducted during the holiday shopping season, but we believe that the use of multiple communications channels to support commerce is a year-round phenomenon.

In the coming year it is important for merchants and their technology providers to support the many communications channels with which their customers are growing comfortable.

We plan to conduct a similar surveys in the coming year to gauge the rate of adoptions, and we believe that the behavioral hierarchy that dictates the relationship between Web search, online shopping, toll-free calling, is well established, but that comfort with and use of chat, texting and IM-ing with merchants is just starting to join the established channels.