



Why retail strategies are failing



I'm not sure if you've heard, but people keep talking about how we're in the midst of a retail apocalypse.

It's this thing where lots of brick-and-mortar locations close down, and even entire companies go out of business. There's quite a bit of blame to go around: The Great Recession, and Amazon, and [private equity](#), and shifting consumer spending behaviors. In spite of the doomsday headlines, some brands continue to succeed, and a lot of those brands seem to be focusing on one thing: the customer experience.

A good retail experience for a customer can be as complicated as incorporating innovative technology like 3D printing to [create a clothing item on-demand](#), or as simple as [focusing on the store employees](#).

Unfortunately, a lot of brands and retailers overlook the latter. In fact, according to [this](#) recent panel surveying retail employees, only 35% of retail employees feel as though training is effective.

That's a scary number for both retailers and brands, because without a well trained retail sales force, consumers are left to their own devices.

They're left to Google searches and Amazon reviews, which usually only leads to more confusion. Whether shopping in a brick-and-mortar location or online, consumers seek out advice on what to buy from those employed within.

We wanted to know: Do consumers have strong feelings about in-store retail experiences, and do those experiences influence their shopping behavior? If they do shop in a traditional brick-and-mortar location, why?

What we found surprised us. Consumers have strong feelings about retail, indeed. Consumers want help when they go into a store, and they want retail associates who know what they're talking about. But consumers are frustrated with retail sales associates. In fact, only 32% of consumers find retail associates to be helpful when assisting with a product purchase.

If you're in the business of selling a product to a consumer either directly or through a retailer, this stat should give you pause. But it isn't all bleak. Let's dig into how consumers feel about the current state of retail.



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Why your retail strategy is failing

The ideal experience



Why your retail strategy is failing

As a brand, it can be easy to feel removed from the process a consumer goes through to find the right item. From initial awareness, to the active consideration process, leading through to conversion, consumers need the right balance of assistance and advice — yes, even in the age of online shopping (you’ll see why in a minute).

In this panel, consumers provided different ideas on what makes an ideal in-store shopping experience. One consumer said the ideal is, “having well-trained people who know the products in the area in which they work. Having friendly, accommodating associates who want to help you, and if they can’t, finding someone who can. And being able to actually find someone to help when I have a question.”

Another consumer stated their ideal as, “having a sales associate make multiple suggestions based on my initial request...like Nordstrom does for shoes.”

Many of the respondents sang variations of the same theme: a helpful sales associate is one who knows their stuff and is able to make recommendations. And this translates to an experience worth the trip into the store (and more sales).

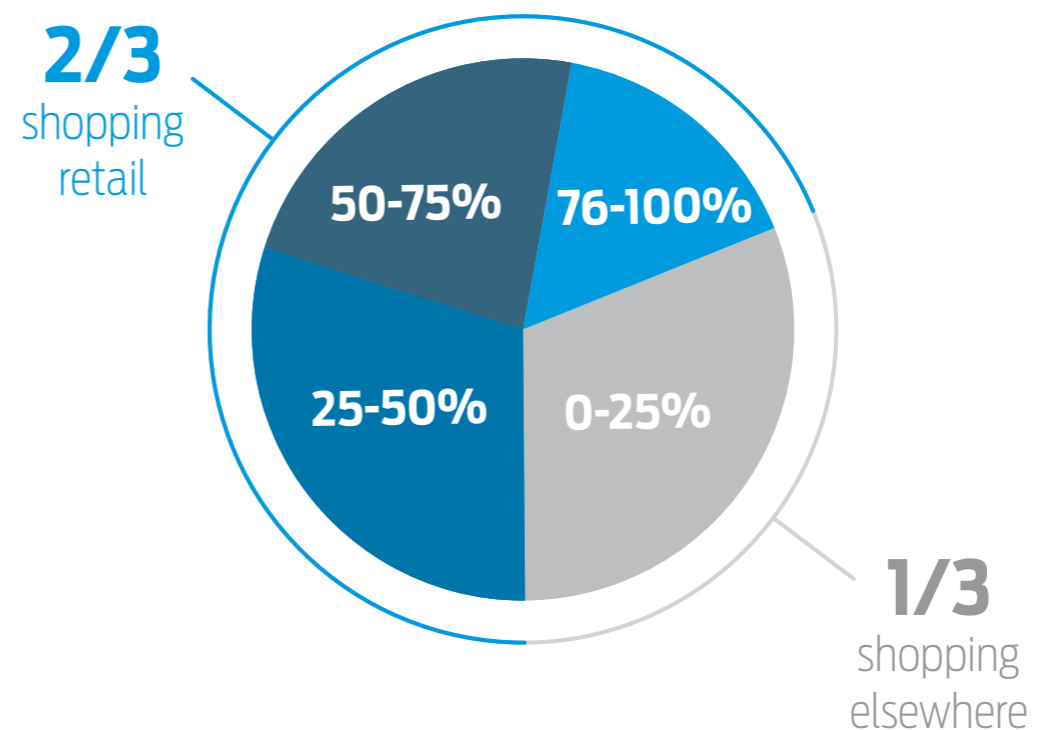
Why your retail strategy is failing

“The ideal experience: Having well-trained people who know the products in the area in which they work.”

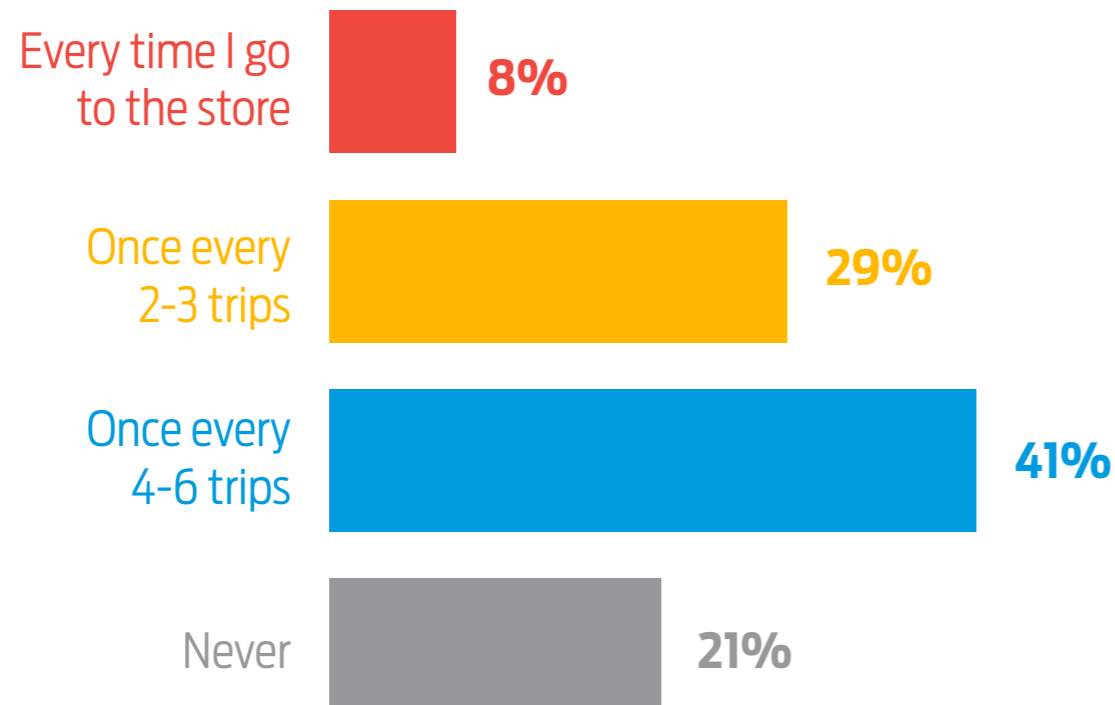
-Survey Respondent

Why is a good shopping experience so important? Not only do 69% of respondents shop in a retail location at least 26% of the time, but 79% of respondents purchase products in-store because of a helpful sales associate at least once every 4-6 trips.

In the previous year, how much of your shopping did you do in a retail location, excluding grocery?

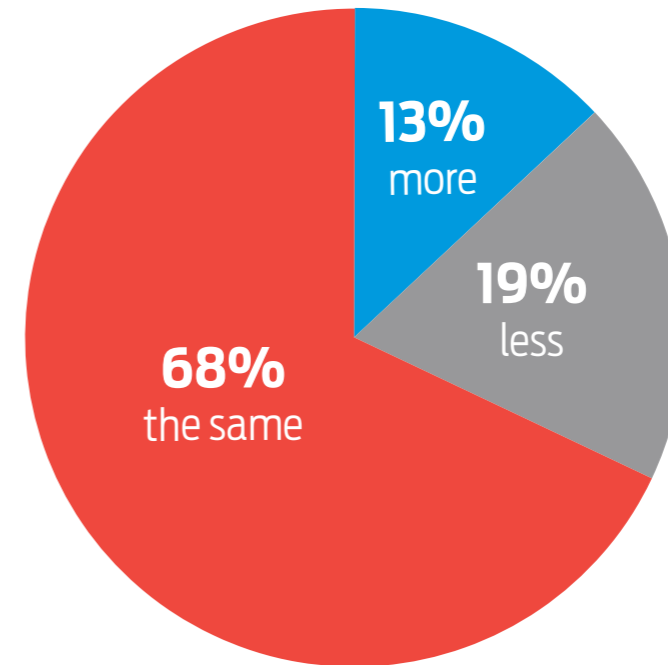


How often do you purchase a product in-store because of a helpful sales associate?



And 81% of respondents state they plan to do at least the same amount of shopping in retail stores next year (with 13% stating they actually plan to do more in-store shopping next year).

Do you plan on doing more or less of your shopping at physical retail stores next year?



Retail apocalypse or not, a significant number of your consumers still prefer to shop in a physical retail location, and want a great experience with a salesperson.

The value of in-store

Why your retail strategy is failing



Few things top the convenience of buying your next television while in your pajamas. Online shopping also comes with a myriad of choices many people find appealing, but for the consumers surveyed in this panel, there's still overwhelming value to shopping in an actual retail location.

Why do they see an in-store experience as valuable? 79% state that the opportunity to experience and see products is a typical reason to visit the store.

Why your retail strategy is failing

Why do you typically shop in-store? Select all that apply.

To experience and see products

79%

Instant gratification of purchasing in real time

49%

To avoid shipping fees

44%

To ask retail assoc. for product advice or recommendations

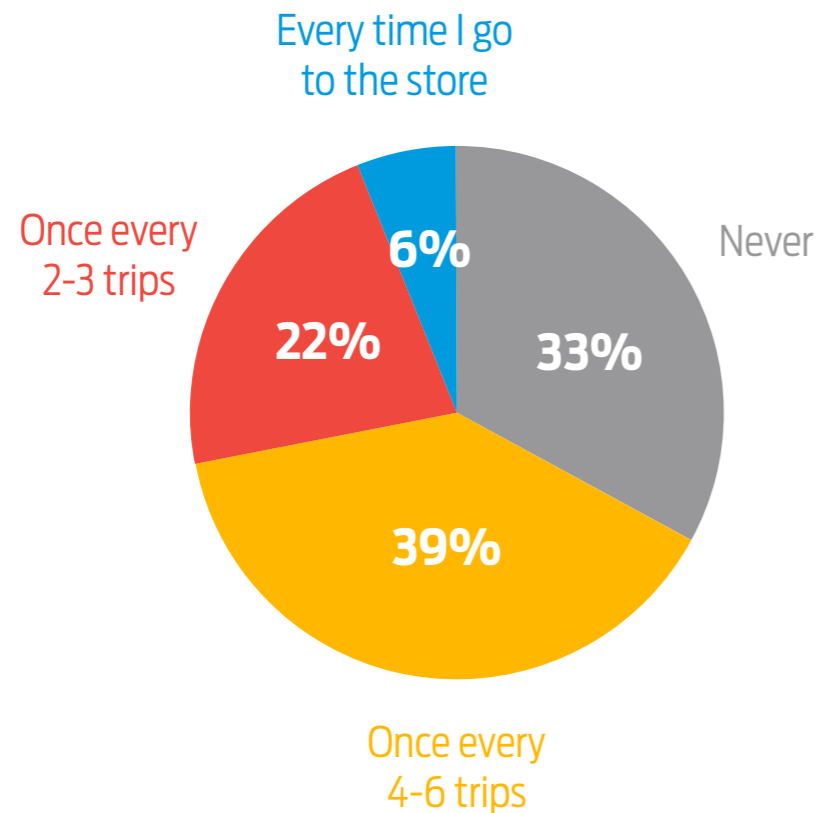
20%

Other

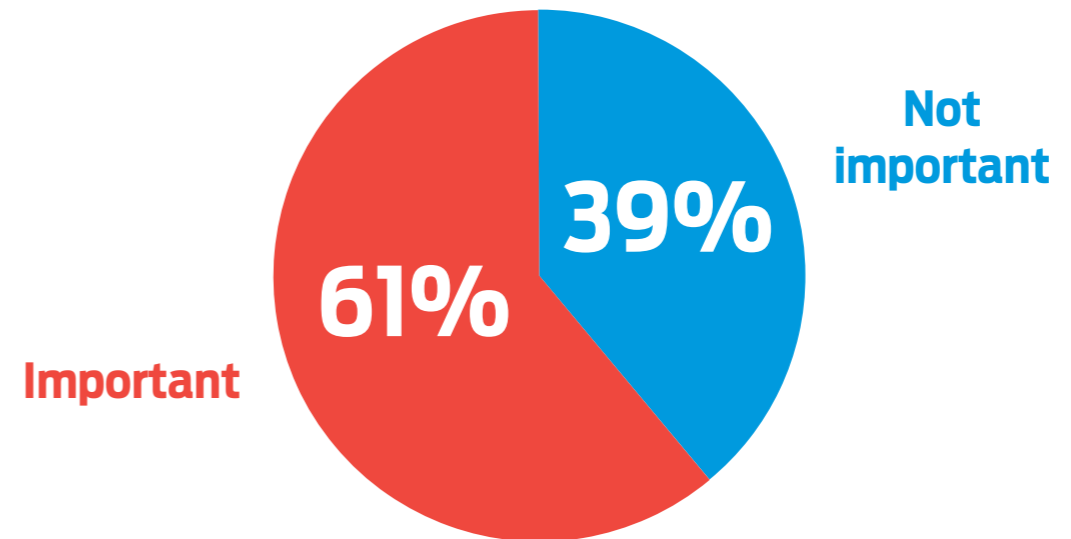
16%

For many considered purchases, tangibly understanding what makes a certain product a better fit for their needs trumps the convenience of ordering it online. Whether it's testing running shoes prior to purchase or asking questions about the merits of new pet food, doing so in person gives you two luxuries online shopping usually can't offer: in-person product comparisons and a personalized recommendation.

When in-store, how often do you ask for product advice from a retail associate?



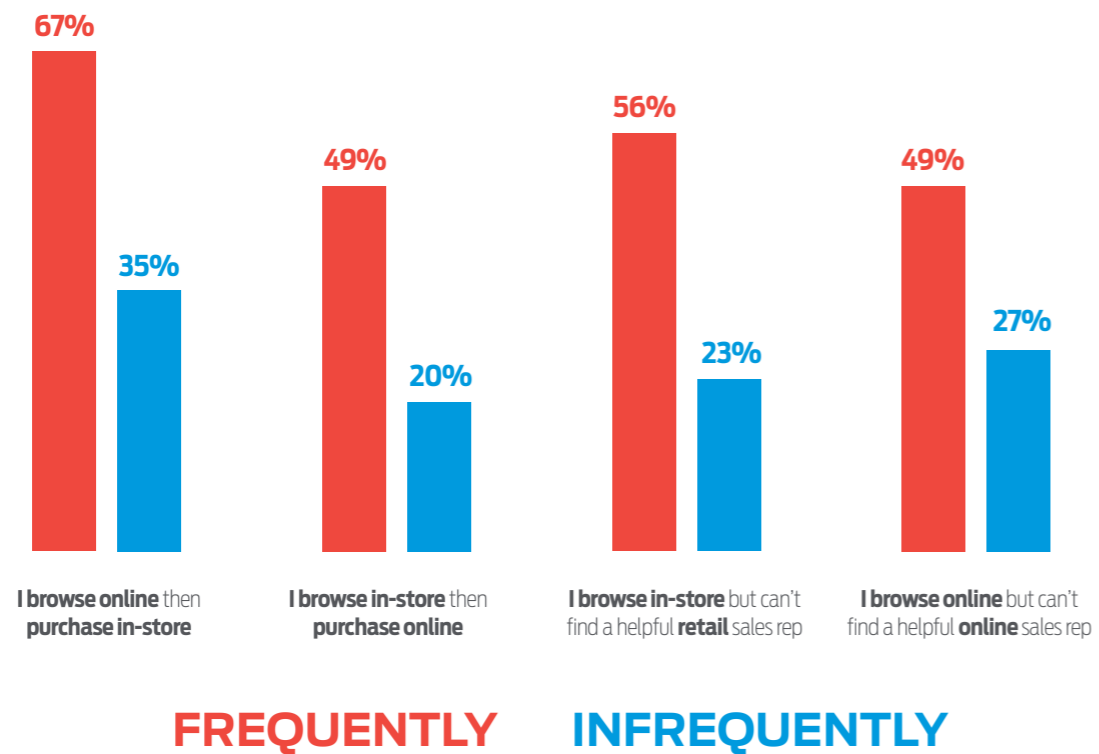
How important is it that the retail sales associate provides you with personalized product recommendations?



67% of survey respondents ask for advice from retail associates, and 61% believe that a personalized product recommendation is important.

Because most consumers shop through various channels, we were curious to see if there was a difference in behavior. What we found is that consumers generally are open to discovering and purchasing products both online and in-store, and as such, brands and retailers need to better equip their associates to be prepared to assist both groups of consumers. There's a gap, however. The majority of consumers feel that helpful associates are difficult to find both in-store *and* online.

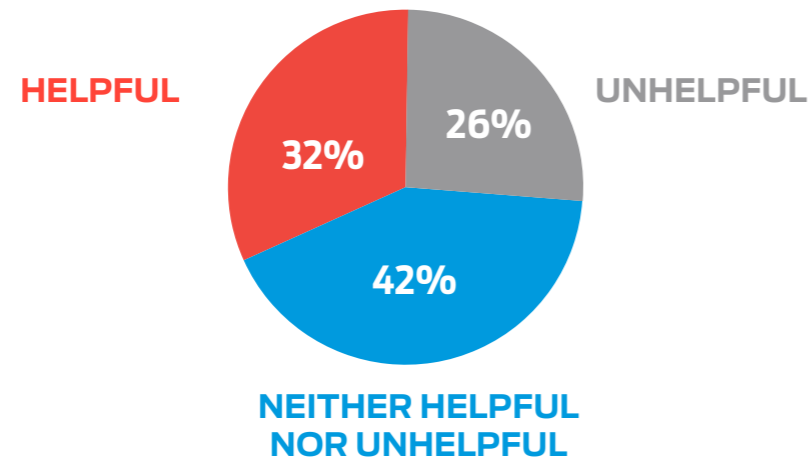
How frequently do you do the following?



Helpful or not

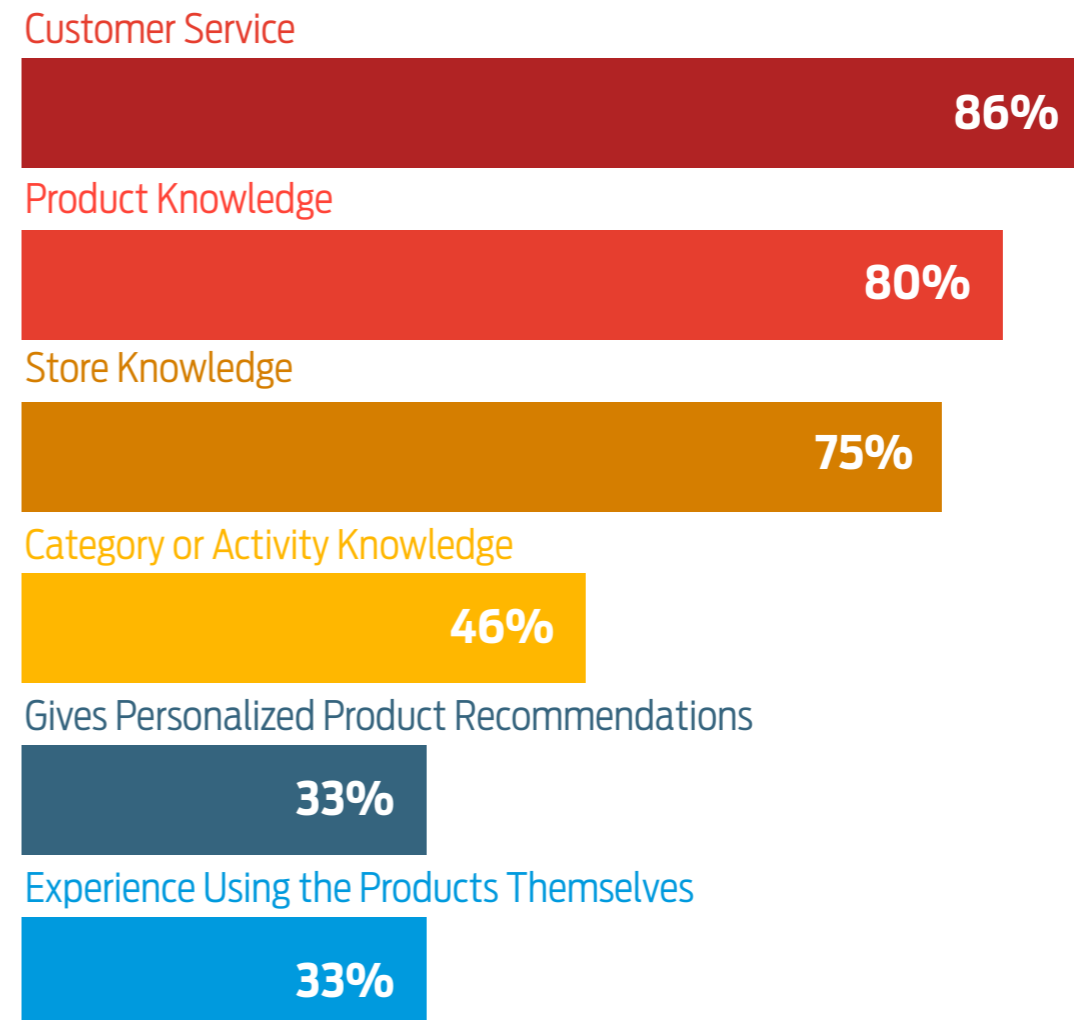
When asked how helpful store associates are in assisting with a product purchase while visiting a retail store, only 32% of respondents state that these associates are helpful.

Have you purchased a product that was recommended to you in the last 6 months?



This is extremely concerning for any brand or retailer with a physical location. What qualities do they consider helpful? Customer service, knowledge about products, the store, and a category are top of the list, but being able to offer a personalized product recommendation, and personal product experience are also listed as important.

Which qualities are important for a retail associate to have? Select all that apply.

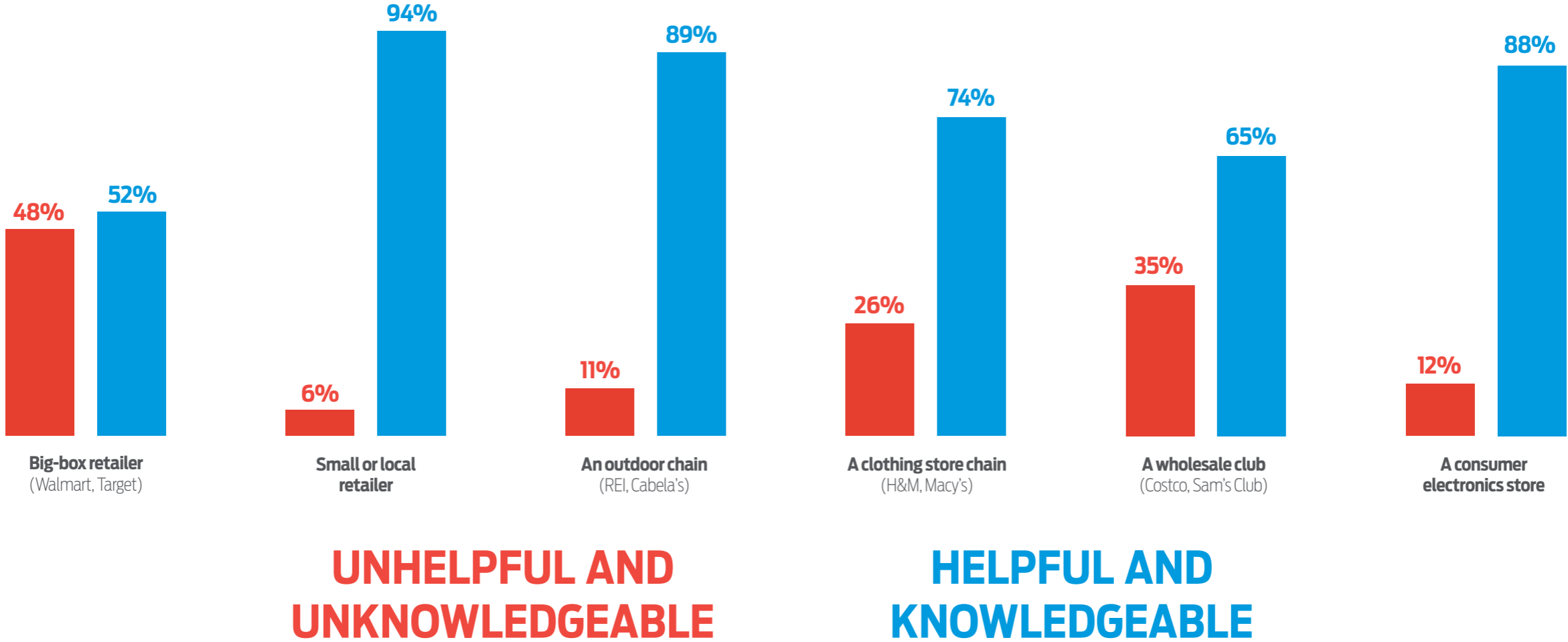


Before you panic over the current state of your retail associates, consider this next question survey respondents answered. Nearly 95% of respondents state that small or local retailers have sales associates who are helpful and knowledgeable, with outdoor chains like REI or Cabela's and consumer electronics

stores coming in at 89% and 88% respectively.

What do these store types have in common? They focus on the customer experience, and it all starts with their associates being passionate, experienced, and knowledgeable.

How helpful and knowledgeable are retail sales associates at each of the following store types?



Turning the tide



Why your retail strategy is failing

For brands and retailers who wish to keep consumers engaged for the long-term, there is a solution to ending the behavior that frustrates consumers, and investing in retail sales associates is the first step. Hiring passionate people is important, but supporting that passion with continued education and training, as well

as opportunities to experience products firsthand, will translate to consumers. That is then realized in conversion at the point of sale, resulting in customers who have the right products for their needs — the genesis for a loyal customer.





ExpertVoice

ExpertVoice is the world's largest community of trusted retail sales associates and category pros — experts — whose passion, experience, and knowledge make them powerful brand advocates. Join the 500+ brands who already use ExpertVoice to connect with the experts whose authentic recommendations help you sell more.

Contact us to learn more about how ExpertVoice can help you sell more product with better buying experiences.

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About the author

Jen Robinson is the Content Strategist at ExpertVoice. Jen enjoys traveling the world, cooking with her husband, and getting as much sleep as one can with a young infant.