



The Return of Touch Report

Reimagining Consumer Engagement in 2025

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The irreplaceable magic of tactile experiences



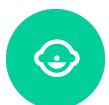
The tactile renaissance



**Meeting consumers' need for immersive retail builds
mindshare — and trust**



**Retail tourism and “wow-worthy” physical shopping are
driving foot traffic**

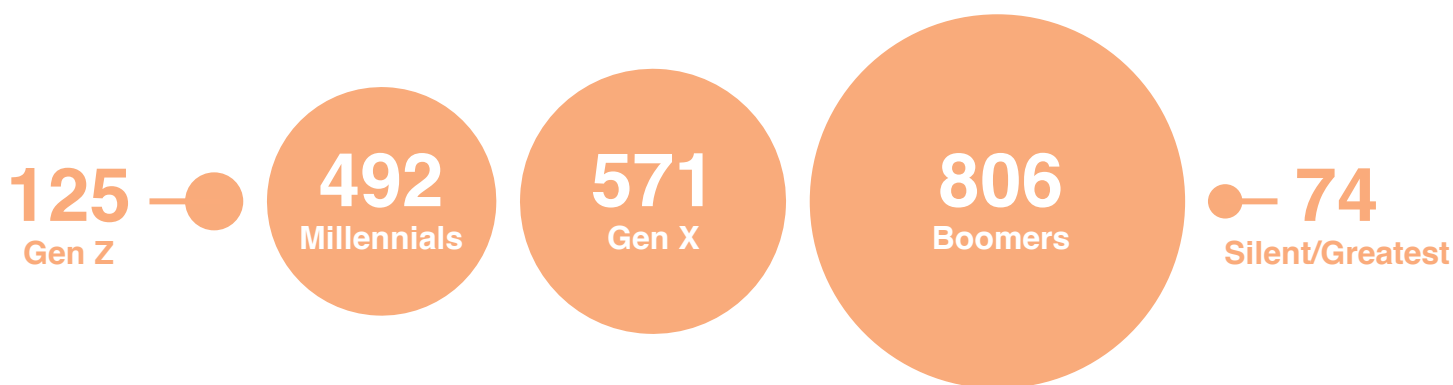


**Integrating physical touch and digital touch for the
ultimate experience**

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Methodology

- a. This survey was conducted by The Harris Poll on behalf of Quad from January 16 to February 5, 2025, among a nationally representative sample of 2,068 U.S. adults.
- b. This research is comprised of 125 Gen Z (ages 18-28), 492 Millennials (ages 29-44), 571 Gen X (ages 45-60), 806 Boomers (ages 61-79) and 74 Silent/Greatest (ages 80 and older).



- c. Respondents for this survey were selected from among those who have agreed to participate in our surveys. The sampling precision of Harris online polls is measured by using a Bayesian credible interval. For this study, the sample data is accurate to within +/- 3 percentage points using a 95% confidence interval. This credible interval will be wider among subsets of the surveyed population of interest.
 - d. Throughout the report, respondents are interchangeably called Americans / consumers, with both terms referring to the total sample from the survey.
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Overview

In 2007, the launch of the iPhone redefined what it meant to touch technology — ushering in an era where screens became our primary interface with the world. Just a few years later, smartphones had overtaken “dumb phones” globally, and by 2010, the release of the first iPad accelerated our shift to always-on, always-scrolling digital lives.

What followed was a radical overhaul in how brands and consumers perceive and discuss touch. The word quickly became synonymous with touchscreen — a swift stroke across smooth glass opening doors to portals across the e-commerce landscape. Much of retail, as a result, became largely two-dimensional in its presentation.

But today, the pendulum is swinging back toward three-dimensional touch. It's in real life — and yielding real results.

It's what we're calling **RoT: Return of Touch**.

A look at what's happening

- **Consumers are screen-fatigued.**

It's no secret that consumers — especially younger consumers — have grown screen-weary. 81% of Gen Z say, “I often wish I could disconnect from digital devices more easily.” Our lives have become so digitally entangled, “offline” has become a coveted currency of its own. In turn, IRL shopping has become a more desirable form of analog escapism.

- **Catalogs, magazines and mailers are making a comeback — and fueling perceptions of authenticity.**

71% of consumers say, “Print catalogs or magazines feel more authentic than digital campaigns,” and 65% say they look forward to receiving catalogs from brands. And print is proving impactful: The majority of consumers say they've been influenced by print media to choose a brand over competitors, and that physical mail from retailers has prompted them to visit a brand's physical store.

- **Tactile discovery feels differentiated and exciting, whereas on-screen shopping feels two-dimensional.**

From in-store, hands-on engagement to the printed pages of mailers and catalogs, touch is fulfilling an otherwise unmet desire among consumers. 66% of consumers say that touching and physically interacting with products is the most enjoyable part of in-person shopping, and 79% say that while online shopping is efficient, it lacks the magic of an in-person find.

- **78% of Americans prefer in-person social existence to digital-only.**

Consumers see their interactions with brands and retailers as parts of their social lives — engendering a sense of community and inspiration — and they value IRL experiences and touchpoints for the sense of authenticity and realness that digital alone doesn't offer.

A look at what's happening

- **The RoT is resulting in higher consumer recall and stronger loyalty.**

88% of consumers say, “It’s easy to remember physical store experiences that go out of their way to engage customers,” and 71% say, “Experiencing a brand in a physical store deepens my connection and loyalty to it.” Part of the loyalty is rooted in the sense of community that a strong retail experience can engender — consumers are looking for inspiration, not just transactions. 76% of consumers say, “Physical retail experiences help me connect more deeply with people and brands.”

- **Touch is creating a “wow factor” that’s motivating consumers to visit — and splurge.**

From retail tourism to the surprise and delight of branded mailers, packaging and catalogs, consumers are finding delight in the tactile experiences that brands are serving up — and going out of their way to encounter them: 63% of consumers say they’ve planned a trip around visiting a retail store or brand. Moreover, after having a wow-worthy experience, Gen Z and Millennials say they are likely to make a return visit (51%), talk about the brand with others (47%) and take the time to explore the brand’s online store (38%).

- **The best experiences leverage both physical touch and digital touch.**

Done right, incorporating digital elements to elevate the physical shopping experience builds credibility and adds value. 78% of Gen Z and Millennials say they appreciate when brands add digital touchpoints to enhance physical shopping — rather than replace it — and 68% also say, “I’d be excited if more brands experimented with blending augmented reality (AR) and packaging.”



RoT: The irreplaceable magic of tactile experiences

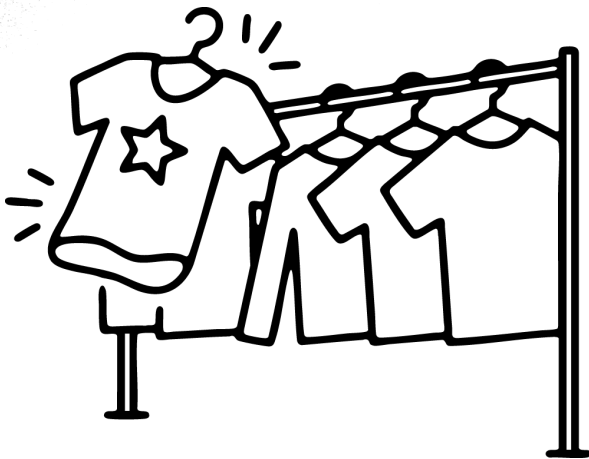
Online shopping is indisputably the leader in convenience. One-click ordering has, for many consumers, been permission to act: *It was so easy, how could I not buy it?*

But where there's ease, there's also homogeny: On the whole, online shopping experiences tend to feel redundant. Among consumers we surveyed, 79% say that online shopping lacks the “magic” of an in-person find and 71% say that online shopping experiences blur together.

79%

of consumers say online shopping lacks the magic of an in-person find.

34% strongly agree, 46% somewhat agree



Because while websites have grown increasingly sophisticated, the reality is that they are all delivered through the same vessels: rectangular screens. These smartphones, tablets, laptops and desktops are also the same places where consumers do their work, connect with friends, engage with media and more.

79%

of consumers say that in-person shopping feels like a treasure hunt.

30% strongly agree, 48% somewhat agree

For many, the nature of screentime is beginning to feel confining, and in-real-life shopping experiences offer a coveted — and differentiated — escape: 81% of consumers say they notice when a brand goes the extra mile with their physical experience, and 79% say that in-person shopping feels like a treasure hunt.



RoT: The tactile renaissance

Catalogs, magazines and mailers make a comeback

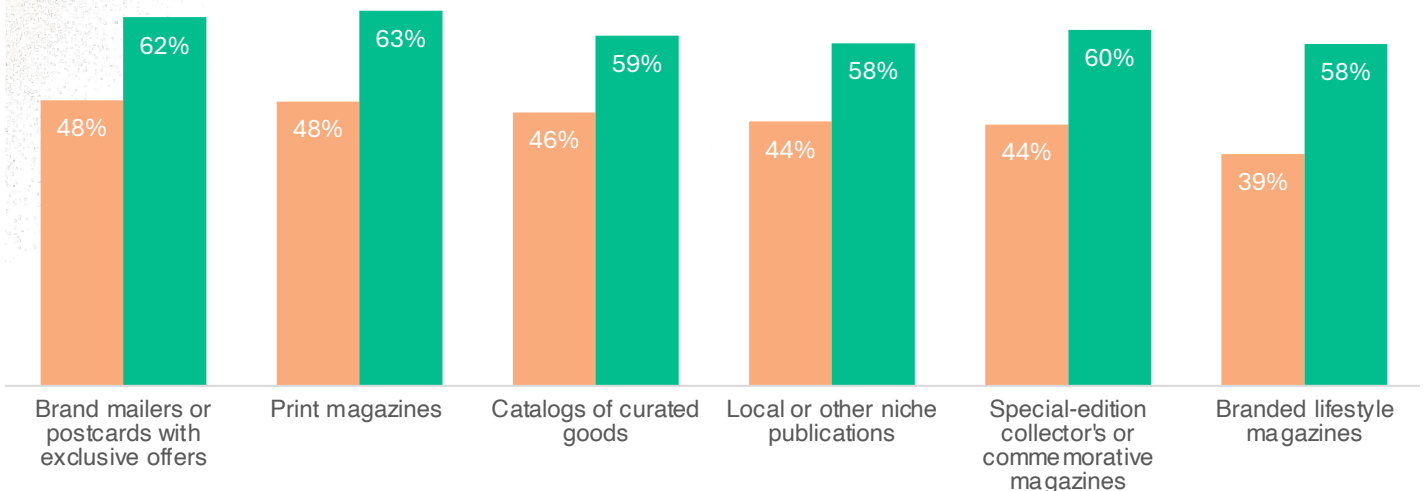
While the in-store experience is top-of-mind among physical experiences, catalogs, magazines, direct mail and packaging are having a renaissance too. 71% of shoppers say, “Print catalogs or magazines feel more authentic than digital campaigns,” and 73% of Gen Z and Millennials say they look forward to receiving catalogs from brands.

Last year, the clothier J.Crew reintroduced its print catalog after a seven-year hiatus. Outdoor retailer Patagonia has evolved its biannual catalog into what it calls a “bona fide journal” — complete with op-eds and stories from journalists and other contributors. And digital-first brands including Amazon, Parachute and UNTUCKit have all added print catalogs to their advertising arsenal. (Anyone with young kids has likely had their holiday wish lists upended by Amazon’s nostalgic holiday toy catalog.)

How interested are you in the following forms of print media and tactile experiences?

(Top 2 – Very / Moderately Interested)

■ Americans ■ Gen Z & Millennials





RoT: The tactile renaissance

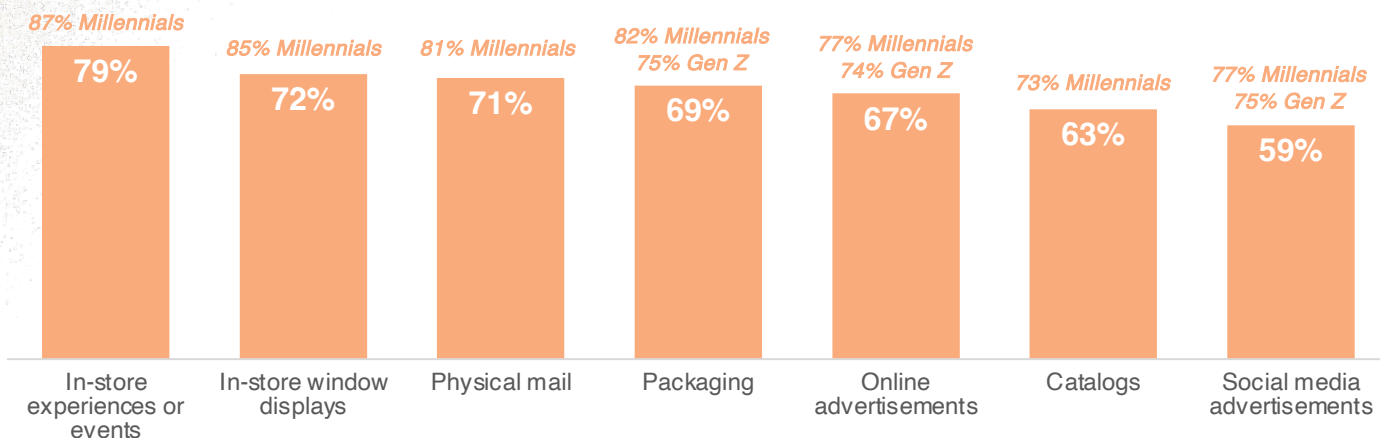
Catalogs, magazines and mailers make a comeback

This cultural phenomenon surrounding print isn't just a trend; it's a lever for business growth: 69% of overall consumers and 78% of Gen Z and Millennial consumers say that in the past year, they've been influenced by print media to choose a brand over competitors. 78% of Gen Z and Millennials say that physical mail from retailers has prompted them to visit a brand's physical store.

Part of the fun is the element of surprise — and personalization. 72% of Gen Z and Millennials say, "I wish more brands focused on surprising me through mail." And if the mail is personalized, all the better: 76% of Gen Z and Millennials say they enjoy receiving physical mail from brands when it feels personalized.

How often do you notice and remember the following types of brand experiences?

(Top 3 – Sometimes / Often / Always)



Just as physical mailers and catalogs are having an outsized impact, so too is packaging — both on-the-shelf packaging and, for online distributors, the unboxing experience. 74% of Gen Z and Millennials say they are more likely to buy from brands that create unique unboxing experiences.



RoT: The tactile renaissance

Catalogs, magazines and mailers make a comeback

With over 500,000 consumer brands in the market, packaging remains a compelling way for brands to break through, especially with younger consumers. 63% of Gen Z and Millennial consumers say they've bought a product due to its packaging, vs. 45% of consumers overall. And for 69% of younger consumers, the product packaging can make or break their decision to purchase it.

75% of Gen Z and Millennials say they expect brands to use packaging as part of their storytelling — and done right, it's a story they're happily buying into.

73%

of Gen Z and Millennials **look forward to receiving catalogs from brands.**

33% strongly agree, 40% somewhat agree

72%

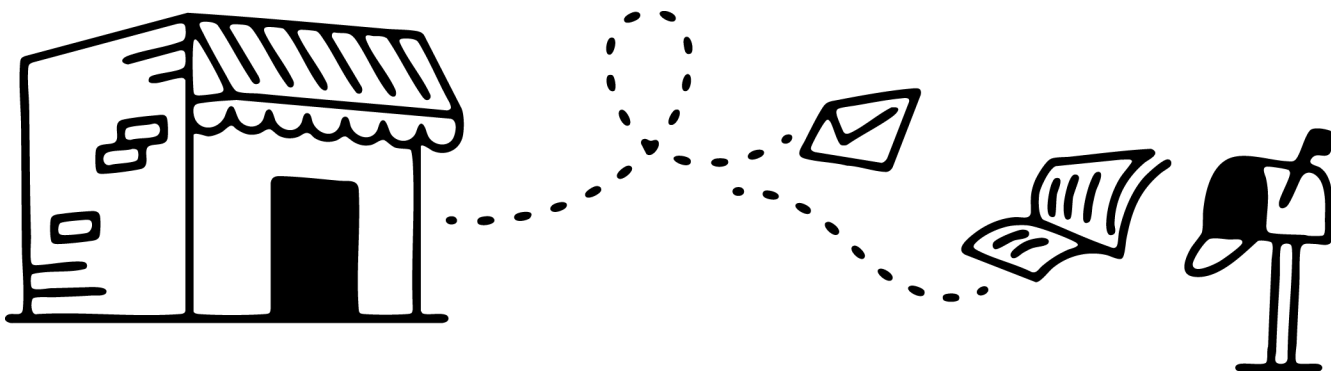
of Gen Z and Millennials **wish more brands focused on “surprising me” through mail.**

30% strongly agree, 41% somewhat agree

74%

of Gen Z and Millennials say they are **more likely to buy from brands that create unique unboxing experiences.**

30% strongly agree, 45% somewhat agree





RoT: Meeting consumers' need for immersive retail builds mindshare — and trust

Consumers not only notice brands that create strong in-person experiences — they remember them. 88% of consumers say, “It’s easy to remember physical store experiences that go out of their way to engage customers,” and 71% say, “Experiencing a brand in a physical store deepens my connection and loyalty to it.”

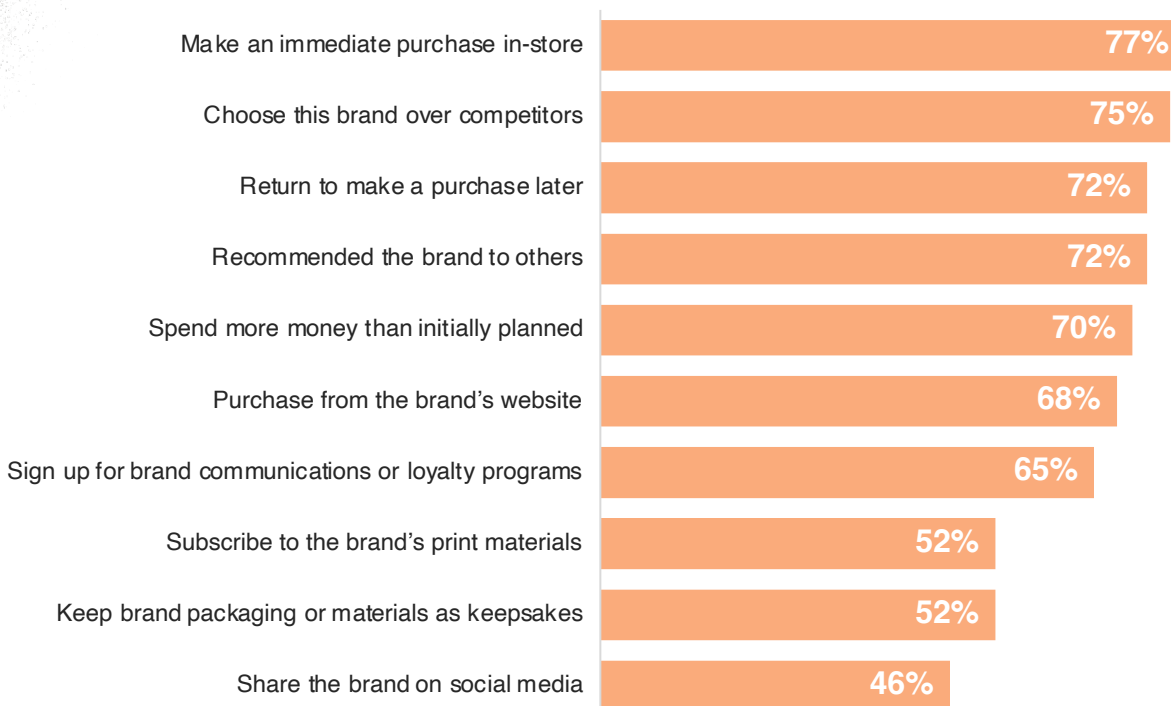
71%

of consumers say **physical store experiences deepen brand connections.**

26% strongly agree, 44% somewhat agree

In the past year, how often have physical, in-person branded store experiences directly influenced your decision to:

(Top 3 – Sometimes / Often / Always)





RoT: Meeting consumers' need for immersive retail builds mindshare — and trust

Among younger consumers, who are more likely than older consumers to feel digitally fatigued, the allure of IRL is even more compelling. 83% of Gen Z and Millennials say that physical retail experiences help them connect more deeply with people and brands.

In this way, part of the touch value equation is in creating a sense of belonging and community. 76% of consumers agree that “Retail spaces should inspire me, not just sell to me.” Consumers are genuinely — and increasingly — compelled by retail spaces that foster community.

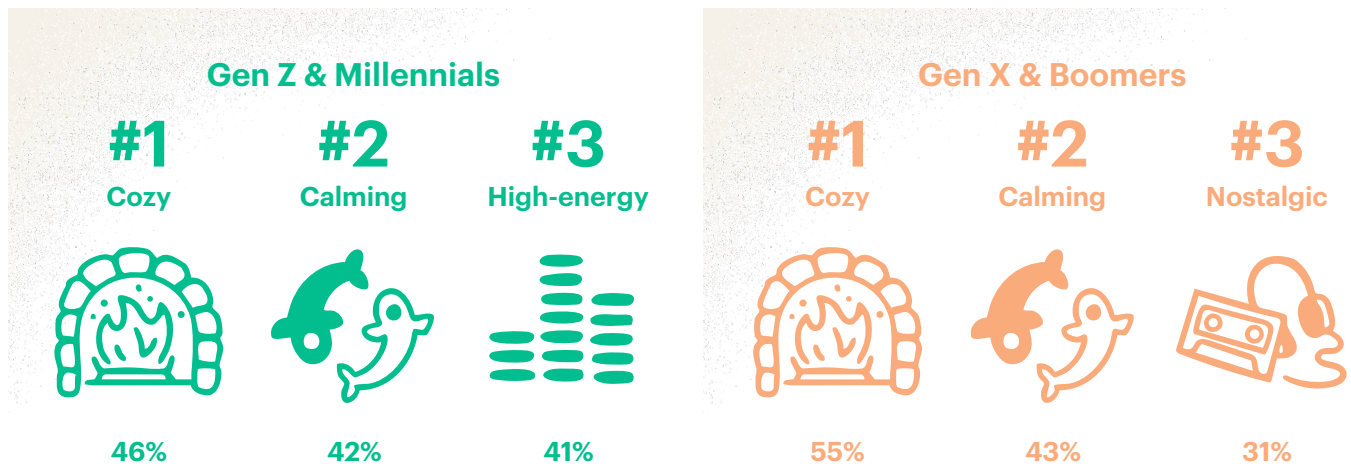
As a result, many retailers are embracing the status of “lifestyle brand” — seen in the rise of branded coffee shops popping up in clothing stores (Ralph Lauren, Uniqlo and Muji have all added baristas to their in-store experience) and in more extreme shopping endeavors, such as Dick’s Sporting Goods, which opened its “House of Sport” retail locations, complete with ice rinks and climbing walls.

Cozy and calm environments have broad appeal across generations (cue the coffee shops), though young consumers also crave high-energy vibes (e.g., Dick’s House of Sport). Providing spaces to relax or socialize is the #1 thing consumers wish brands would do more of in their retail spaces, and 78% of Gen Z and Millennials say they wish that brands had cafes in their stores so they could shop, drink and eat.



RoT: Meeting consumers' need for immersive retail builds mindshare — and trust

Top Three Desired Vibes by Generation



Yet while select brands are spicing up the retail experience, many are falling flat: 73% of consumers say they wish brands made their in-store shopping experience more immersive and engaging, and 66% of Gen Z and Millennials say that in-store shopping experiences blur together. As such, shopping is more than just spending — it's a social activity.

For brands, this is a missed opportunity, because the appetite is there, especially among younger consumers: 86% of Gen Z and Millennials say, "Touching and feeling products are essential to my purchase decisions."

For pricier purchases, the in-person experience is even more crucial: 81% of consumers say they are hesitant to splurge on high-end items without physically verifying the quality of the item.

73%

of Gen Z and Millennials say **shopping at a hyped retailer or pop-up feels like being part of a cultural moment.**

33% strongly agree, 40% somewhat agree



RoT: Retail tourism and “wow-worthy” physical shopping are driving foot traffic

particularly among Gen Z and Millennials

Young consumers are drawn to brands that make an effort to stand out. 73% of Gen Z and Millennials say, “Shopping at a hyped retailer or pop-up feels like being part of a cultural moment,” and 62% say, “Unique, Instagrammable store designs strongly influence where I shop.”

Perhaps the most compelling aspect of “wow-worthy” physical retail experiences for brands is the resulting ROI: After having a wow-worthy experience, Gen Z and Millennials say they are likely to make a return visit (51%), talk about the brand with others (47%) and take the time to explore the brand’s online store (38%).

So, what is wow-worthy? Young consumers cite unexpected giveaways, sensory engagement and unique physical design as top wow-worthy shopping elements of an in-person experience.

And in a nod to an unmet need for in-person community, waiting is part of the experience: 60% of Gen Z and Millennial consumers say that waiting in line for a hyped retailer is part of the fun.

So too is the anticipation. Young consumers are planning retail-focused trips, and 77% of Gen Z and Millennial consumers say, “I’ve planned a trip around visiting a retail store or brand that I was excited to visit in person.”

60%

of Gen Z and Millennials say **waiting in line is part of the fun.**

27% strongly agree, 33% somewhat agree



RoT: Integrating physical touch and digital touch for the ultimate experience

84% of Gen Z and Millennials say they value brands that seamlessly blend technology with physical experiences. Done right, incorporating digital elements to elevate the physical shopping experience builds credibility and adds value. 78% of Gen Z and Millennials say they appreciate when brands add digital touchpoints to enhance physical shopping — rather than replace it — and 68% also say, “I’d be excited if more brands experimented with blending AR and packaging.”

Digital also plays a key role in the loyalty experience. Consumers want the in-store wow, but they also want the ease of tracking their loyalty rewards and benefits online. 40% of consumers say digital loyalty programs are the most attractive way to encourage them to engage with brands and shop online, and Gen Z consumers are particularly drawn to personalized deals, recommendations and exclusive offers, while Millennials seek personalized mobile text offers or shopping assistants the most.

84%

of Gen Z and Millennials say **they value brands that seamlessly blend technology with physical experiences**

32% strongly agree, 52% somewhat agree

68%

of Gen Z and Millennials say **they would be excited if more brands experimented with blending AR and packaging.**

30% strongly agree, 37% somewhat agree

Conclusion

The dynamics of marketing are always in flux — and will continue to be as technology unfolds new developments, especially in AI. Yet tactile experiences will continue to inspire consumers — offering them hands-on escapism, sensory satisfaction and a sense of connection.

Print — catalogs, magazines and mailers — fuel perceptions of authenticity, with a majority of consumers saying they've been influenced by print media to choose a brand over competitors, while physical mail from retailers prompts them to visit a brand's physical store.

Consumers say that experiencing a brand in a physical store deepens their connection and loyalty to it. That loyalty is rooted in the sense of community and inspiration that a strong IRL experience can engender — transcending mere transactions.

The Return of Touch (RoT) is creating a “wow factor” that engages and motivates consumers. Print and IRL activations, though, don't replace digital messages — they complement them, giving consumers a richer, deeper omnichannel experience. The best consumer experiences leverage both physical and digital touchpoints.

Brands looking to stay ahead must continue to monitor digital advancements — but they must also remember to embrace, and evolve, the physical ones.



The Harris Poll

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