### **CUSTOMER LOYALTY AND PERSONALIZATION:** INFLATION HINDERS ACQUISITION AND RETENTION EFFORTS

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### **5 KEY TAKEAWAYS**

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**Inflation** is taking its toll on customer loyalty efforts: more than one-third (**37%**) of retailers say losing customers due to price hikes is a significant customer loyalty challenge.

Two COVID "hangovers" also are making customer loyalty more elusive: **43%** of retailers identified **out-of-stocks caused by supply chain woes and labor shortages** as top challenges.

Nearly one in five (**18%**) of retailers are using metaverse stores as a customer acquisition tool.

Among retailers that **showcase their ESC commitments** to promote customer loyalty, more than half (**53%**) tout the recycled or recyclable nature of their products and **52%** trumpet their environmental sustainability.

More than one in four (**27%**) of retailers are using **generative AI** solutions in their customer loyalty toolkit, with another **13%** planning to adopt them in the next year.



### INFLATION ADDS TO STAFFING AND SUPPLY CHAIN LOYALTY CHALLENGES

Over the last **three** years, retailers' efforts to acquire and retain loyal (and hopefully high-spending) customers have been hampered by **two** major effects of COVID: **out-of-stocks** caused by slow and uncertain supply chains and **labor shortages** that have stretched in-store staffs thin. Like a persistent hangover, these pandemic-induced problems remain the top loyalty challenges for respondents to the 2023 *Retail TouchPoints Customer Loyalty and Personalization Benchmark Report*, at **43%** each.

This year, **inflation** has intensified retailers' headaches. Even though it's retreated from the highs of 2022, the damage has been done: **37%** of retailers cited losing customers due to product price increases as a significant customer loyalty challenge, while **25%** identified higher customer charges for formerly free or low-cost services such as shipping and return fees.

However, the U.S. labor market remains strong, and while that makes recruiting and retaining top-performing employees more difficult, it also bodes well for healthy consumer spending, which is a major economic driver. And if the U.S. Federal Reserve and other central banks can engineer a hopedfor "soft landing" — taming inflation without pushing the economy into recession — these particular customer loyalty challenges are likely to diminish later in 2023 and into 2024.

Retailers are making progress in addressing other key loyalty issues. For this sixth annual Benchmark Report, based on a survey of **103** retail executives conducted in May and June 2023, just **18%** said the lack of an optimized mobile site or app was an issue, down from **24%** in the 2022 survey. Retailers also are adapting to looming restrictions on tracking "cookies" and other consumer privacy regulations: **15%** said these presented a challenge in 2022, but that number dropped to **12%** this year.

### During the past year, what have been your most significant customer loyalty challenges?

Insufficient staffing negatively affected in-store customer experience

43%

Losing customers due to out-of-stocks caused by supply chain challenges

43%

Losing customers due to product price increases

**37%** 

Ecommerce site not optimized for personalization

33%

Inability to align ecommerce and in-store touch points

**31%** 

Higher customer charges for formerly free/low-cost services, e.g. shipping or returns

25%

Lack of optimized mobile site/app eliminated key customer touch point

18%

"Cookie" restrictions and privacy regulations hampered retargeting/retention efforts

More troubling for customer loyalty efforts are retailers' challenges related to online retail: **one in three** said their ecommerce sites were not optimized for personalization, and nearly as many (**31%**) reported they are unable to align ecommerce and in-store touch points — the latter figure up from **23%** in 2022. As consumer choices continue multiplying and expectations for personalized offers and recommendations keep rising, brands will need to step up their efforts to master these customer loyalty basics.

For the most part, retailers are relying on proven tools for customer acquisition. As it has for several years, email outreach tops the list at **65%**. Use of traditional media, while down from the **51%** it garnered in 2022, remains strong at **46%** this year.

But it's not all same-old, same-old: **18%** of retailers used metaverse stores and offerings as customer acquisition tools in 2023. (This was a new response option in this year's survey.) While Web3 activations have lost a bit of their luster compared to this year's shiny new object, generative AI, leading retailers like **Coach** are taking advantage of the metaverse's creative possibilities and learning valuable lessons about these platforms in the process.

While some industry observers have noted a decline in the use of influencers and affiliate marketing, they remain a popular choice among survey respondents, chosen by **41%** this year. This may be an additive effect, since influencers and affiliate marketing were separate choices in 2022, with each being chosen by **17%** of that year's respondents.

Connected TV (CTV), which allows for more precise ad targeting and campaign effectiveness measurement, is on the rise: it increased to **16%** in 2023 from just **9%** in 2022.



## In-store interactions with associates 39% In-person events 37% Paid social advertising Associated advertising Associated advertising Crganic search 30%

What are your top tools for acquiring customers?

Traditional media (TV, direct mail, radio, outdoor advertising)

41%

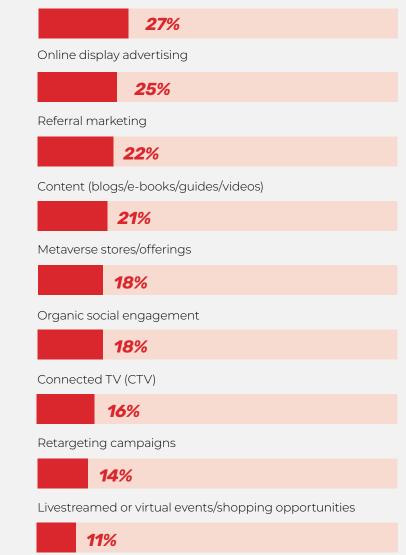
46%

**65**%

Email outreach

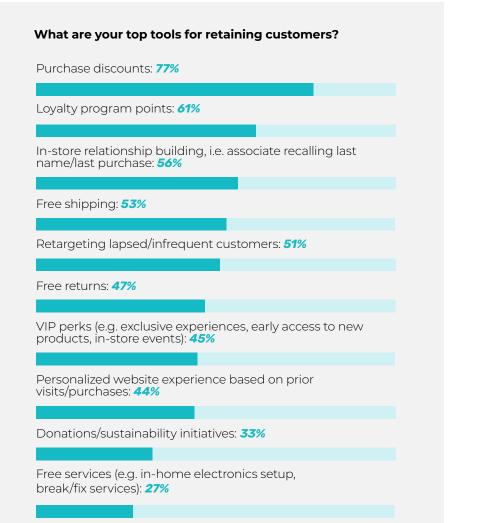
Influencers/affiliate marketing

#### Text/messenger program outreach



As with acquisition, retailers relied on familiar tools to accomplish the critical task of retaining customers. The top **four** responses remain the same as in 2022: purchase discounts (**77%**), loyalty program points (**61%**), in-store relationship-building (**56%**) and free shipping (**53%**).

Free returns, while still a popular choice at **47%**, was down from **54%** in 2022. Retailers are becoming more aware of the costs (in both time and money) that returns incur, so some are likely making the tough decision to impose or raise return fees as a way to protect their margins.



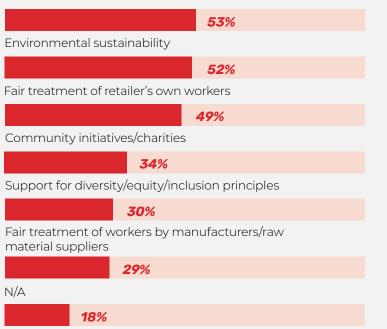
A growing number of retailers are making better use of customer data as part of their retention strategies: In 2022, just **32%** provided personalized website experiences based on shoppers' prior visits and purchases, but that figure rose to **44%** in 2023.

Retailers also are tapping into growing consumer support for their charitable and earth-friendly actions: donations/sustainability initiatives were used as a customer retention tool by **33%** of 2023 respondents, up from **24%** last year.

Responses to a new question this year digging further into the role of ESG (environmental, social and governance) commitments reveal consumers' increasing desire to see their own principles reflected by the brands they purchase. More than half (**53%**) of retailers now showcase the recycled or recyclable nature of their products, with **52%** trumpeting their environmental sustainability and **49%** talking about fair treatment of their workers.

### Do you encourage loyalty by showcasing your company's commitment to these ESG principles?

Recycled/recyclable nature of products/services

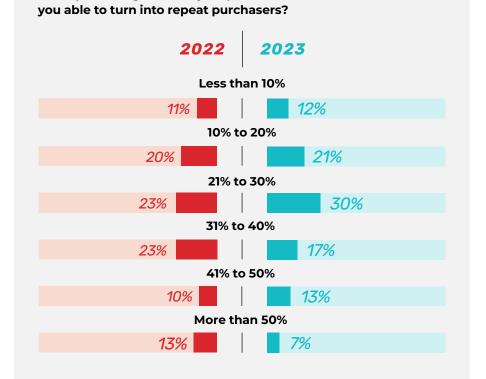


### ARE LOYALTY PROGRAMS LOSING THEIR LUSTER?

Experienced retailers know that making the first sale to a new customer, while important, is not the real test of their abilities: it's making that second, third and fourth sale that indicates they have hooked a repeat purchaser. Unfortunately, retailers are having mixed results in this area compared to 2022.

Last year, among respondents offering a loyalty program, **13%** were able to turn *more than half* their new shoppers into repeat buyers, but this year only **7%** accomplished this feat. In fact, only the *21% to 30%* range saw a significant increase between 2022 and 2023, rising from **23%** to **30%.** The other ranges were essentially flat.

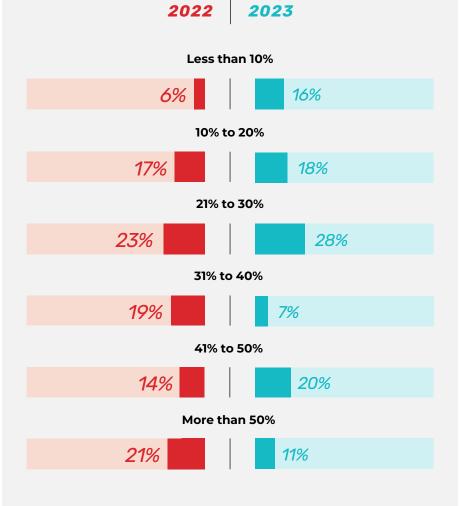
What percentage of newly acquired customers are



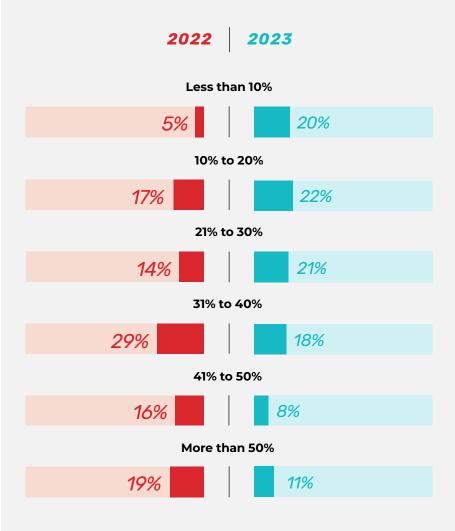
As they have in previous years, poor data management and subpar use of analytics insights remain major stumbling blocks: **38%** of retailers cited noncentralized customer data, **33%** said customer data was not easily available to those needing it, and **32%** reported that a lack of/incorrect customer data complicated their retargeting efforts (the last figure up from **25%** in 2022).







What percentage of your revenue comes from loyalty program members?



Loyalty programs remain effective tools for promoting customer retention, but this year's survey indicated that their power may be diminishing. The percentage of retailers with *less than 10%* of their customer base in their loyalty program rose from **6%** in 2022 to **16%** in 2023, while those with *more than 50%* of shoppers enrolled declined from **21%** to **11%**.

And while loyalty program members are typically among a retailer's topspending customers, their contributions to revenue also softened this year. Retailers garnering *less than 10%* of their revenues from loyalty program members rose from **5%** in 2022 to **20%** in 2023. At the other end of the spectrum, **19%** of retailers reaped *more than 50%* of their revenue from loyalty program members in 2022, but that figure dropped to **11%** in 2023.

Paid loyalty programs such as **Amazon** Prime remain exceptions to the norm: among brands offering loyalty programs, just **25%** charge for membership (with another **7%** planning to begin charging within the next **12** months). Popular benefits of these programs include exclusive access to events/ experiences; exclusive access to new products/merchandise; and increasingly valuable free return privileges, at **58%** each. The perk of free shipping with no order minimums is the next most popular, at **50%**. **One in three brands** offer premium loyalty program members referral/advocacy bonuses, and **one in four** provide entertainment subscriptions.

## What benefits do you offer as part of your paid/premium loyalty program?

Exclusive access to events/experiences

	<b>58%</b>
Free returns	
	<b>58%</b>
Free shipping	with no order minimums
	<b>50%</b>
Free gifts with	purchases
	33%
Referral/advoc	cacy bonuses
	33%
Entertainmen	t subscription (e.g. Amazon Prime Video)
	25%
Free services ( break/fix servi	e.g. in-home electronics setup, ces)
8%	



### **Retail TouchPoints (RTP):** How does Mastercard play in the loyalty space?

**Stephanie Meltzer-Paul:** Mastercard is one of the largest loyalty providers in the world, offering loyalty services including benefits, rewards and platforms for financial institutions, retailers, restaurants, travel organizations and more. We're developing modern solutions that help consumers love their favorite brands even more. Mastercard manages more than 1.3 trillion points, 1,000+ loyalty programs, over 650 million customer profiles and more than 43 million offer redemptions that help brands across industries and continents build long-term organic relationships with their consumers.

We are laser-focused on consumer experience and are constantly thinking of ways to create better, stickier engagement. Over the past decade, Mastercard has evolved its suite of services to do just that — from personalization to measurement and more, our mission is to help customers make smarter decisions with better outcomes

## **RTP:** How has the loyalty landscape changed over the past year? What do you see as a top challenge retailers are facing today when it comes to loyalty?

Meltzer-Paul: Consumer demands are shifting and not every retailer has shifted with them. Today, people want the companies they support to recognize them as individuals and deliver relevant content and recommendations that add real value to their experience. And on top of that, there is an abundance of formal loyalty programs in the market, so consumers get bogged down by a sea of sameness and inability to reasonably keep track of the different offerings.

Broadly, the industry is starting to move away from a model where you rely on a points program. Instead we're seeing a shift toward more unique types of programs, or, in some cases, no formal program at all — and that's good. Loyalty takes many forms, and we work with retailers to think through different solutions that drive consumer engagement.

To do this, a robust personalization strategy is especially important. With the right behavior-based personalization, brands can be more effective in how they engage consumers, serving tailored offers and promotions that help consumers unlock more benefits and improve their overall experience. Tailored, predictive solutions that show a user how they're tracking against specific rewards deepens engagement and adds a layer of transparency that's vital to long-lasting relationships. And with personalization comes measurement and optimization — being able to test and learn quickly at scale helps you identify what works for the consumer and for the bottom line. With that understanding, you're in a good place to analyze the right data and decide if a formal program is the right next step for the brand.

## **RTP:** What role does data analysis play in retailers' ability to grow and sustain customer loyalty? What are some missteps or best practices retailers should be aware of?

**Meltzer-Paul:** Many organizations lack a 360-degree view of a consumer, but clean, zero-party and first-party data is critical to fueling effective loyalty programs. If you capture second- and third-party data that is even better, but we know many brands are not there yet in bridging all the elements. A consumer's data should be used to improve and add value to their experience, yet without a strong foundation to collect and manage data, many retailers don't live up to that expectation and instead rely heavily on being *reactive* instead of *proactive*. Further, many organizations don't properly track consumer interactions that would be incredibly useful. For example, **personalizing recommendations and offers around behaviors like abandoned carts, page views, customer service interactions or specific products can be a very powerful strategy.** 

When a retailer is successfully analyzing and activating data, the customer relationship is mutually beneficial. The retailer has a better understanding of their consumers and is better positioned to properly optimize for the business and consumer experiences, while consumers will receive more unique and individualized offers, content and engagement. Maintaining an agile culture of data-informed experimentation over time builds a knowledge base that should inform effective tactics, sustaining stronger customer loyalty over time and encouraging greater innovation.

And of course, it's important for retailers to define how they measure success and balance engagement with profitability. There may be opportunities in the highest tiers of a program, but those aren't always the most profitable avenue due to the level of benefits provided. Avoiding stagnation and diversifying your loyalty offering is crucial, and it's equally important to ruthlessly evaluate the impact of changes across the key metrics identified.

#### **RTP:** What are some loyalty trends you're seeing for retailers?

**Meltzer-Paul:** We know that consumers expect more from brands, and that includes aligning to their own personal beliefs. To that end, we're working with brands to understand if ESG benefits fit into their programs and how to implement them if so — whether that looks like baking in sustainable actions (i.e. carbon-zero emissions) or offering sustainable redemption offers (i.e. redeeming loyalty points for a planted tree). But with ESG and similar

convictions, it has to feel genuine to the brand or you risk disengaging consumers with inauthenticity.

Another trend that's still in its early stage is Web3, and we're researching and exploring how that technology fits into loyalty programs and solutions. Retailers have already begun to establish presences in virtual worlds, but how those experiences extend to loyalty hasn't fully been baked. And beyond upfront consumer engagement, Web3 activations will provide brands valuable data that will help guide how retailers show up for consumers long-term in those worlds.

Finally, subscriptions are a form of loyalty programs, and the economics can be favorable if done right. A subscription shouldn't automatically replace a free program or any other promotions, but it can provide rich value to your most engaged consumers while bringing the retailer a steady revenue stream.

#### RTP: What's your outlook on loyalty for the holiday season?

**Meltzer-Paul:** Resilient consumers are continuing to spend amidst a changing economic landscape but have been prioritizing experiences over things – it'll be interesting to see how spending behaviors shift as we get closer to the holidays.

When it comes to the holiday season, many brands and retailers make the mistake of focusing on the immediate sale and can be cavalier about the long-term relationships they could build. For example, getting the Black Friday revenue is great, but the retailers that prioritize continued engagement are more likely to convert first-time buyers to loyal consumers. Loyalty should be at the center of any retailer's holiday strategy – leveraging holiday engagement to engender beneficial loyal relationships ensures continued success.



CASE STUDY: AN APPAREL RETAILER EXPANDED FROM A SIMPLE TIER-BASED PROGRAM TO A STATE-OF-THE-ART LOYALTY PROGRAM WITH MASTERCARD SESSIONM

A large North American apparel retailer had a customer relationship management (CRM) system that delivered tier-based offers but lacked a point system or rewards. The retailer wanted to create a more engaging loyalty program that would integrate with its existing CRM system.

With Mastercard SessionM, the retailer launched an expanded loyalty program integrated into its CRM system that drove higher customer engagement and improved email campaign performance.

SessionM integrated directly with the retailer's CRM system, giving the retailer a 360-degree view of customer profiles across all of the retailer's channels, including transactions, engagement and marketing activity.

Advanced campaign management through a marketer-friendly interface powered scheduled and triggered email campaigns with more advanced segmentation, leading to more relevant communications and improved campaign profitability. The expanded loyalty program allowed customers to earn spend-based points online and at the point of sale. Customers could redeem points through a reward store for discounts. A tiering system provided top customers with exclusive offers and experiences. Flexible offer management allowed the retailer to run bonus-point promotions for individual product categories.

The expanded program led to higher engagement, with a 15% year-over-year growth in loyalty program membership, as well as improved program performance, with a 40% year-over-year increase in average transaction value.

### AWAITING AI'S IMPACT ON PERSONALIZATION CAPABILITIES

Many industry observers are predicting that generative AI tools such as ChatGPT will move personalization efforts to new levels of efficiency and effectiveness. In fact, more than one-quarter (**27%**) of retailers already use generative AI/machine learning to support their personalization efforts, with another **13%** saying they plan to implement these solutions within the next **12** months. Interactive chatbots, which often are powered by AI, are another popular personalization tool, used by just under half (**49%**) of respondents.

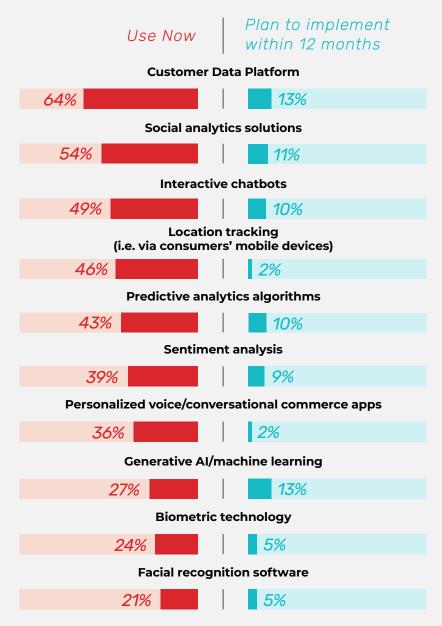
For the moment, however, retailers are relying primarily on familiar solutions to manage their personalization efforts. As in 2022, customer data platforms are the most commonly used technology, at **64%**, followed by social analytics solutions at **54%**. Location tracking, which adds geographic contextualization to a brand's personalization toolkit, was used by **46%** of 2023 respondents.

There's also been little change in retailers' adoption of personalization tools used in brick-and-mortar retailing: use of both biometric technology, at **24%**, and facial recognition software, at **21%**, remains virtually unchanged since 2022.

Retailers' choice of customer data platforms tracks with their biggest personalization challenges, a list topped by the task of maintaining a database of comprehensive, real-time information on customers (82%, up from 71% in 2022). Two different factors are ratcheting up the pressure in this area. The first is the multiplication of consumer touch points and potential sales channels, which can now encompass social commerce, livestream shopping and sales made through CTV, among others.

The second is the long-term trend toward greater consumer privacy, which affects not just what types of data can be collected but how that data can be used internally: **62%** of respondents identified consumer privacy concerns as a key challenge, up slightly from the **58%** that did so last year. However, just **41%** said complying with privacy regulations that are already on the books, such as CCPA and GDPR, was a challenge, down from **51%** in 2022. Retailers also seem slightly less concerned about the deprecation of cookies and related consumer tracking restrictions, which dropped from **32%** in 2022 to **27%** in 2023.

### Which technologies do you use to support personalization efforts?

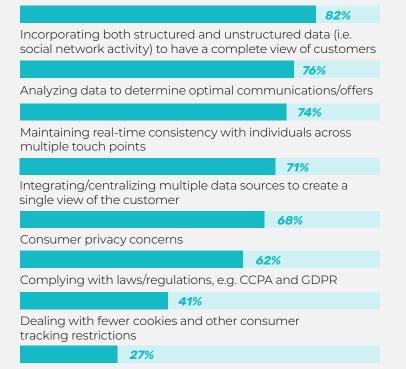


While more customer touch points add to the complexity of collecting, managing, analyzing and using customer data, retailers also recognize that understanding more about their shoppers behaviors, attitudes and interests is crucial to successful personalization efforts.

For practical reasons, detailed purchase histories remain the top type of data retailers collect, at **67%**. But 2023 saw increases in the percentage of respondents collecting data on customer service history (including complaints, problems and positive reviews), which rose from **45%** in 2022 to **50%** in 2023. More retailers are collecting demographic data as well: **36%** last year compared to **46%** this year. Retailers tracking new customer referrals (referrers are generally valuable customers and potential brand ambassadors) also rose, from **23%** in 2022 to **33%** in 2023.

#### What are your biggest personalization challenges?

Maintaining a database of comprehensive, real-time information on customers



Respondents reported a range of measurable, and important, benefits from their personalization initiatives, although 2023 has seen a fall-off from last year in terms of retailer enthusiasm. As in 2022, increased loyalty/retention topped the list of benefits, but it dropped from **69%** to **53%** of respondents in 2023. And while nearly two-thirds (**65%**) of retailers cited personalization's role in increasing sales in 2022, just **47%** credited it with doing so in 2023.

Personalization's ability to increase customer traffic also appears to be less potent this year: while **55%** said it had increased in-store traffic in 2022, that number dropped to **30%** in 2023. Personalization boosted online traffic for **52%** of respondents last year but just **36%** this year.

#### In addition to basic identifying information, what customer data do you collect for use in marketing and personalization initiatives?

Purchase history broken down by items/basket contents

Customer service history (i.e. complaints, returns, positive reviews)

**50%** 

67%

Demographic data (e.g. age, gender, marital status, household size, household income, zip code)

46%

Customer Lifetime Value (current or projected)

36%

Social media activity related to your company

34%

Referral/advocacy bonuses

**33%** 

Typical purchasing cycle

Metaverse activity, e.g. at a Web3 store

28%

14%

Hobbies/interests

#### What impact have personalization strategies had on your business?



Digging deeper into the personalization tools used in different channels, email and online commerce show a distinct edge over retailers' mobile and in-store capabilities. More than half (**53%**) of retailers can show personalized product recommendations/offers based on customer preferences, purchase history and/or liked products in their email campaigns; **41%** can send retargeted abandoned cart emails that include personalized messaging around discounts/offers; and **37%** can curate/tailor content based on customer insights and past behaviors (this last figure was up from **31%** in 2022). Online, **54%** of 2023 respondents are able to show recommendations based on similar customers' activity, up from just **36%** that reported this capability in 2022. A new response option this year, use of quizzes/gamification, has been adopted by **19%** of retailers — perhaps the influence of the gaming-heavy metaverse at work.

#### Which email personalization capabilities have you implemented?

Use customer's name (or preferred username) in email messaging

Show customers personalized product recommendations/ offers based on their preferences, purchase history and/or liked products

**53%** 

**56**%

Send retargeted abandoned cart emails that include personalized messaging around discounts/offers

Use customer's demographic or profile data to personalize email messaging

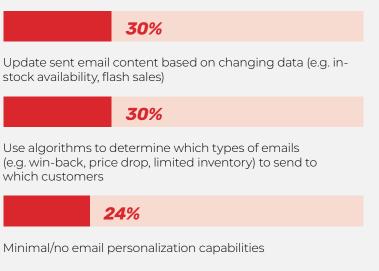
41%

**38**%

Curate and tailor content based on customer insights and past behaviors

37%

Scale email message volume/cadence of email contact based on individual customer engagement levels



### Which online/ecommerce personalization capabilities have you implemented?

Customers shown recommendations based on similar customers' activity

#### **54%**

Customers can specify the types or categories of products they want to view

#### **50%**

Customers can create product wish lists

43%

Curate and tailor content based on customer insights and past behaviors



Minimal/no online personalization capabilities



Quizzes and other forms of gamification



N/A: We're brick-and-mortar only



Mobile-specific personalization capability adoption appears to be slipping: with the exception of mobile apps sending push notifications triggered by customer behaviors, which rose from **25%** in 2022 to **31%** in 2023, all other responses declined this year compared to last. It's quite possible that the ubiquity of mobile, particularly among younger consumers, means that retail marketers don't separate out their mobile capabilities from their broader personalization efforts.

It's also an indication that this could be a channel with a lot of "white space," one where personalization techniques would serve as powerful differentiators for those brands that invest in them. For example, just **27%** of retailers send location-based communications/offers, so leveraging geolocation to alert consumers about a promotion at a nearby store — particularly one for a product they have browsed for or placed on a wish list — could create the winwin of increasing store traffic and improving customer satisfaction.

### Which mobile personalization capabilities have you implemented?

App sends push notifications triggered by customer behaviors



App displays personalized product recommendations/ offers based on customer's preferences, purchase history or liked products

**29**%

Send location-based communications/offers (e.g. based on proximity to a store)

**27%** 

Adjust timing of mobile offers/push notifications based on customer's stated preferences

**27%** 

Curate and tailor content based on customer insights and past purchases



Minimal/no mobile personalization capabilities





This year's survey indicates a similar fall-off — and a similar opportunity to stand out from the crowd — in the area of in-store personalization. Perhaps because of privacy concerns, use of facial recognition technology as a means to tailor in-store digital display content to specific customers dropped significantly, from **27%** in 2022 to just **16%** in 2023.

The ability to tailor such content based on less intrusive opt-in methods, such as via a retailer's mobile app or scanning a QR code, dropped as well, but only by a few percentage points, from **33%** in 2022 to **29%** in 2023. As retailers seek to make their in-store shopper journeys more experiential as well as more personal, such technology could be a useful tool — particularly for brick-andmortar stores that are still struggling to return to pre-pandemic staffing levels.

### Which in-store personalization capabilities have you implemented?

Store associates use a clienteling solution to provide personalized service/product recommendations

**32%** 

Minimal/no in-store personalization capabilities

**31%** 

Tailoring digital display content to individual customers that opt in to mobile app or scan a QR code

**29%** 

Send notifications/communications to mobile devices based on shopper's proximity to a brick-and-mortar store

**28%** 

Send offers to mobile devices based on shopper's location inside a brick-and-mortar store

**22%** 

Facial recognition technology tailors digital display content based on customer characteristics

16%

N/A: We don't operate brick-and-mortar stores

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