

The Cost of Convenience

How Shoppers Weigh Price, Time and Return Flexibility

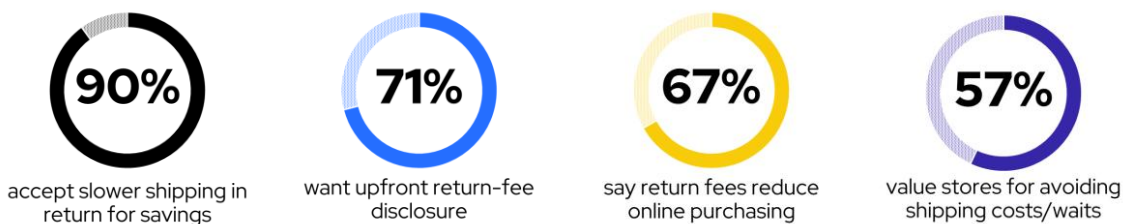
Survey conducted May 13–15, 2026

Convenience reflects a bundle of tradeoffs

Convenience is best expressed in an omnichannel environment, where consumers can choose how to purchase, receive and return products. Shoppers consider the total price at checkout, arrival time, uncertainty about fit and fulfillment, the effort involved in a return and access to a store. The ICSC Cost of Convenience Survey shows that shoppers still value convenience, but are evaluating its value more holistically – weighing the tradeoffs between cost, time, flexibility, and friction.

Ninety percent of adults say they would accept slower shipping to save money, but there are limits. The median maximum wait for standard free delivery is five days, and 80% set a maximum of seven days or fewer. Forty percent would pay nothing for faster delivery, while another 34% would pay up to \$3 more. The results point to a dependable free standard option alongside clearly priced faster delivery options rather than making speed the default for everyone.

Return terms affect the decision before a return exists. Sixty-seven percent of consumers who shop online say return fees reduce their likelihood of purchasing an item online, while 35% report \$0 as the maximum acceptable return fee. Across this group, the median maximum is \$3, compared with a mean of \$5.50. A group willing to pay more raises the average, while the typical threshold remains lower.



Selected findings from the ICSC Cost of Convenience Survey. Results are weighted; bases vary by question.

Friction changes where, when and whether people buy

Seventy percent of consumers who shop online frequently or occasionally abandon carts because of shipping costs, and 54% do so because of delivery timing. After shipping-cost abandonment, 37% point to a store, 37% to another retailer, 16% to the same retailer at a later time and 9% give up entirely. After timing-related abandonment, 40% point to a store, 37% to another retailer, 18% to the same retailer at a later time and 5% give up altogether.

Cart abandonment does not have one result. A purchase can be delayed, redirected to another channel or retailer, or lost entirely.

Returns add another cost. When a return must be shipped, 30% say they are less likely to buy, 31% are more likely to keep the item and 29% report no effect. Separately, 57% very often or sometimes keep an unwanted item because returning it is too difficult or expensive. An easy return gives shoppers a practical option when an item does not meet their needs, so return terms can influence the purchase before checkout.

Stores support purchases, pickup and returns

Stores can make shopping easier in several ways. Consumers who shop online also value stores for immediate access to products (63%), the ability to see and try products (61%), avoiding shipping fees and delivery waits (57%), browsing and discovery (50%) and easier returns (44%). Respondents could choose more than one reason, so these percentages overlap.

Among consumers who shop online, 56% say the nearest store for the retailer they shop with most often online is within 30 minutes. Forty-two percent prefer returning in a store, 37% use whichever option is most convenient and 7% typically return by mail.

A store can be both an alternative to home delivery and part of an online purchase. Shoppers use stores for pickup, product inspection, service and returns. This means a store can support an online purchase before and after checkout, not only the sale at the register.

Why this matters

Owners, developers and retailers all shape the purchase, pickup and return journey because cost, timing, clear information and access influence not only whether consumers buy, but where and when a purchase is completed. Stores are part of that journey: shoppers use them to inspect products, avoid shipping fees and waits, pick up purchases, get service and make returns.

Meeting those expectations depends on choice and clarity. A dependable lower-cost delivery option alongside faster paid choices, clear delivery and return costs before checkout and easy-to-understand pickup and return processes make the tradeoffs easier to see. Because consumers are price sensitive, added cost or inconvenience can send shoppers to another channel or retailer, delay a purchase or cause the sale to be lost.

For owners and developers, stores can serve as points for pickup, returns and service when access, clear signs and space support those uses. For retailers, consistent service and clear terms across channels influence where customers complete purchases and whether a good response to a problem keeps the customer.

Methodology

ICSC surveyed 1,000 U.S. adults from May 13–15, 2026. Results are weighted. Online-shopping questions generally use an unweighted base of 965 and a weighted base of approximately 960; routed questions use their own bases. Percentages may not total 100% because of rounding, and multi-select measures may exceed 100%. Findings are self-reported and cross-sectional; they describe stated thresholds, intended actions and reported behavior, not causal effects or observed transactions.

Source: ICSC Cost of Convenience Survey, May 13–15, 2026.