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Retailers still not recognising consumer needs on product availability

THE ABILITY TO process orders on the spot in a store regardless of whether the product is available at the time is the foremost requirement for retailers in improving a consumers' shopping experience, according to the results of research into consumer shopping behaviour across retail channels in Britain, France and Germany by Sterling Commerce.

The research, conducted by polling organisation Ipsos MORI, found that another important factor in improving the in-store experience for consumers across all three countries was product knowledge, and that staff should always be able to locate a product at another store and reserve it for home delivery.

The survey also highlighted that retailers were missing an opportunity if they were not able to close sales when and where the customer turns up to buy, and perform a "save the sale", wherever that may be.

"Many retailers believe they are multi-channel but fail to invest in their most important channel - the store," says David Hogg, retail industry executive at Sterling Commerce.

"Lack of internal inventory visibility means they cannot easily save the sale to customers who still experience a stubborn percentage of 'out of stocks'. There is broad industry consensus that cross-channel consumers spend

more and are more profitable. However, they are used to choosing from expansive online product assortments, even if the inventory is held by drop ship suppliers. This poses a stock visibility challenge that almost no European retailer has successfully addressed to date."

If shopping online, consumers indicate "accurate product stock availability" and "easier ways of ordering and receiving items" as two of the most important features in improving their shopping experience. The study also highlighted that when purchasing via a call centre, shoppers in all three countries stated that "staff always being able to deal with enquiries about orders and purchases tracking and delivery status" was the most important to improving their overall shopping experience.

"There is scope for retailers to improve consumer experience by linking e-commerce to in-store activity," adds Mr Hogg. "IMRG [the industry body for global e-retailing] has pointed out that the weakest aspect of e-commerce is dealing with queries. Consumers often view the call centre as an order capture and issue resolution channel, rather than a sales channel, and this can be extended to stores. The survey results show the importance of the experience retailers can provide in-store and follow-up in the call centre, often after shoppers have interacted online." ■