

Online Retailer Survey 2021: **Sustainability in Swiss e-commerce**

A B2B study by Swiss Post and the Institute of Communication and Marketing IKM at the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts



How sustainable is Swiss online retail from a retailer's point of view?

This question was answered by Swiss Post in cooperation with the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts (HSLU) in the 2021 online retailer survey. The data was gathered from March to June 2021 in a quantitative online survey. 248 online retailers took part in the survey.

In relation to sustainability, environmental (e.g. resource-efficient production) and social (e.g. fair working conditions) aspects at various phases along the online shop value chain were examined (e.g. selecting product ranges, during shipping or when collaborating with partners).





Study design

The purpose of the study

The aim of the study was to find out how Swiss online retailers approach the topic of sustainability, what measures they implement and what challenges they face. Sustainability data was collected and analyzed along the entire e-commerce value chain in online retail. A quantitative empirical study was chosen as the research approach. In order to reach the largest possible number of potential study participants, the survey link was distributed in a targeted manner across Swiss digital commerce networks.

The survey contained a total of 23 closed, 1 semi-open and 3 open questions relating to the following themed sections: product range, online shop operation, intralogistics & storage, shipping and packaging, returns, cooperation with partners, consumer needs, priority topics, competitive edge, communication and marketing, as well as type and size of the online shop. The data was gathered from March to June 2021 in a quantitative online survey. 248 online retailers participated in the survey.

Study design

Sample structure



Sample size

248 online retailers



Survey period

22 March to 30 June 2021



Method

Quantitative online survey



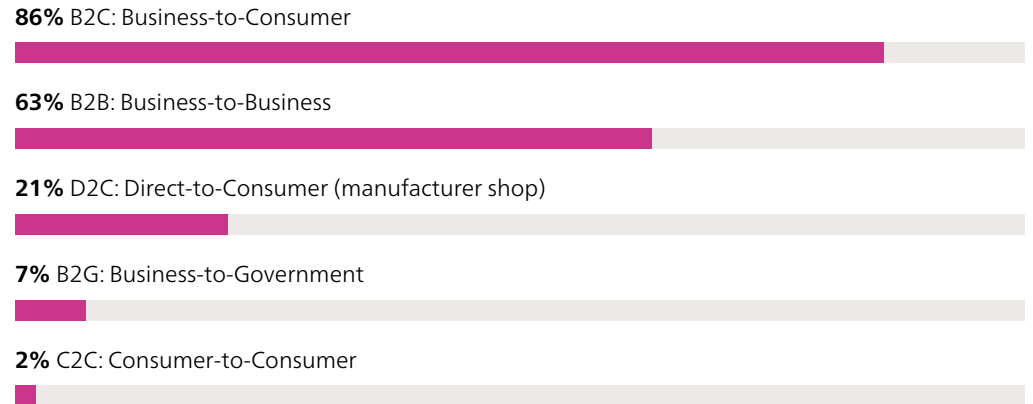
Questions

23 closed, 1 semi-open and 4 open questions

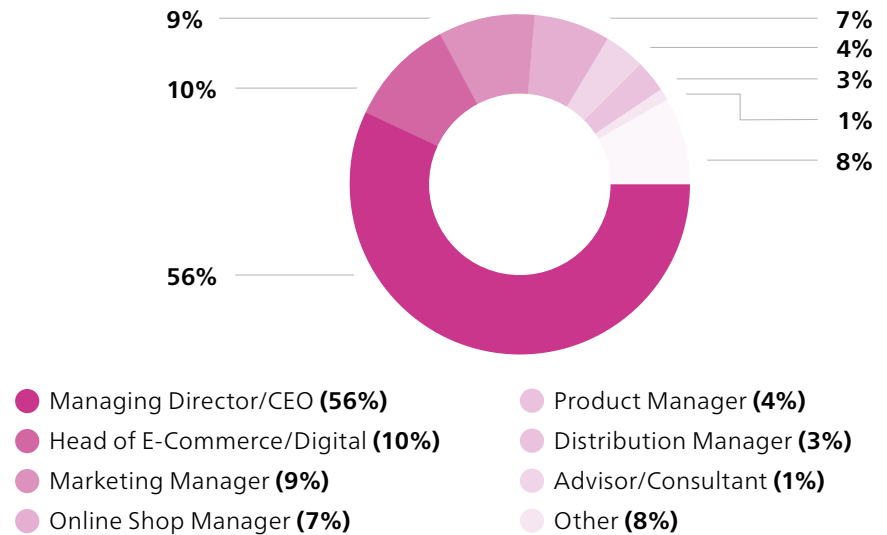
Study design

Sample structure

Business relationships of the online shop



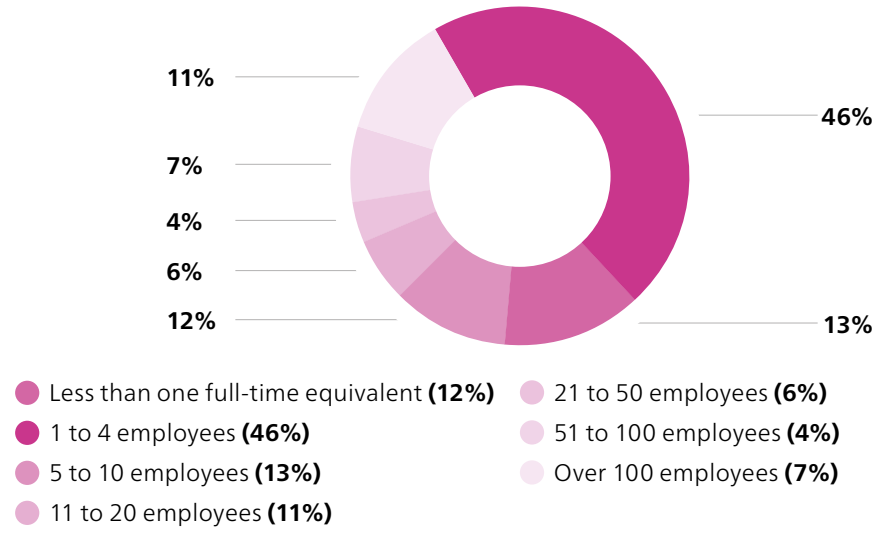
Position in company



Study design

Sample structure

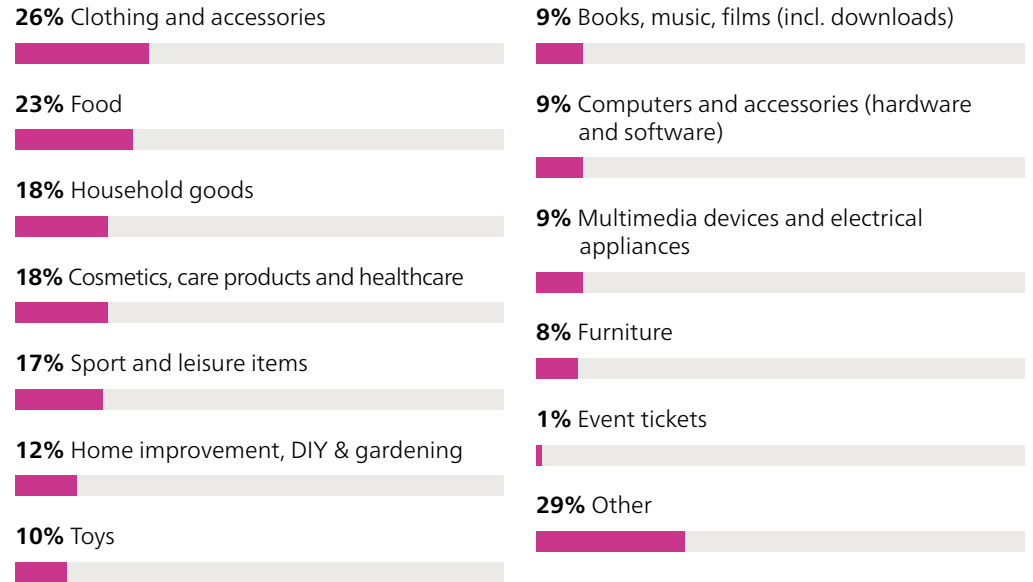
Number of employees for online shops



Study design

Sample structure

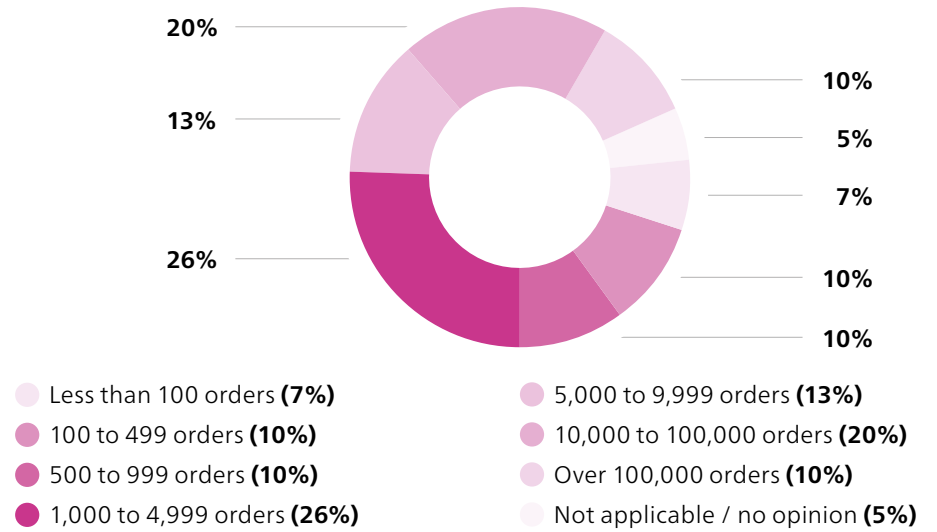
Product categories of participating online shops



Study design

Sample structure

How many orders did your online shop receive in 2020?



Overview of topics

Product range	10
Operation of the online shop	13
Intralogistics and storage	14
Shipping and packaging	15
Returns	21
Cooperation with partners	24
Customer requirements	26
Current important issues	27
Communication and marketing	30

Product range

As an estimate, how high is the percentage of products included in your range that are manufactured in an eco-friendly manner or under fair working conditions?

The social aspect is being taken into consideration more strongly than the ecological aspect.

Social aspect



Products manufactured under fair working conditions **(79%)**

Ecological aspect



Products manufactured in an eco-friendly way **(55%)**

Product range

Which of the following statements apply when it comes to selecting your product range?

When selecting product ranges, social aspects are just as important as product costs.

77% Social aspects (e.g. fair working conditions during manufacture) are just as important as product costs.

59% Environmental aspects (e.g. resource conservation or the avoidance of carbon emissions during manufacture) are just as important as product costs.

52% For products coming from abroad, we use the most sustainable transport options (e.g. train or avoidance of air transport).

37% We select regional products for our range.

26% Carbon emissions that cannot be avoided during transport are offset with corresponding certificates/projects (climate neutrality).

Product range

How is the sustainability of the products communicated within your online shop?

Sustainable products are not actively promoted or easy to find.

54% Sustainability aspects are integrated into the product descriptions.

17% Sustainable products are highlighted and marked as such.

13% When searching for products, there is a specific filter for sustainable products or sustainability aspects.

35% None of the above

Operation of the online shop

Which of the following statements applies to the operation of your online shop?

When choosing IT solutions, greater emphasis is placed on sustainability than operation of the shop.

72% We conduct our business in a way that generates as few carbon emissions as possible (e.g. video conferences instead of travelling or appropriate transport choices for business trips).

45% We use IT solutions that have minimal power requirements (incl. power for cooling).

43% We use IT solutions that leave the smallest possible carbon footprint (manufacture, operations, disposal).

33% We offset unavoidable carbon emissions (e.g. generated on business trips) in order to be as carbon-neutral as possible.

25% Our online shop is fully powered by renewable energy resources.

Intralogistics and storage

Which statements apply to intralogistics and warehousing in your company?

Eco-friendly logistics and storage solutions that conserve resources tend to lower costs and thus lead to wider distribution.

78% We ensure transportation is as environmentally friendly as possible (e.g. by avoiding empty journeys through improved route planning).

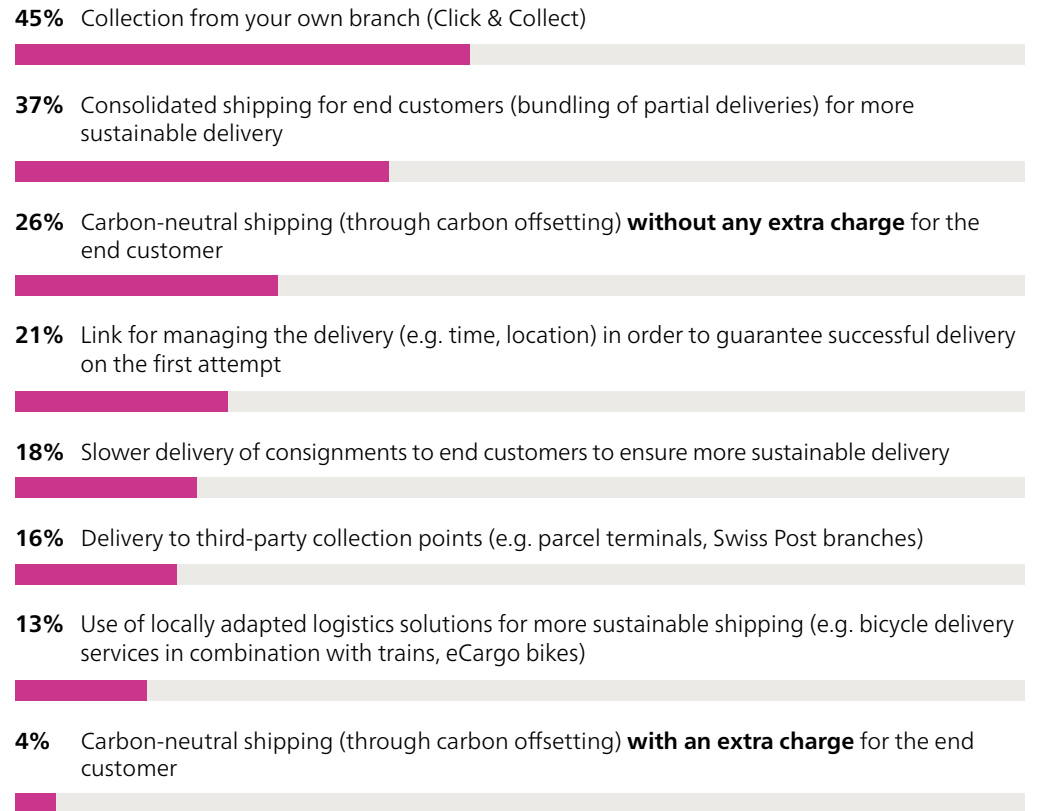
58% Our warehouse is operated in a resource-friendly manner (e.g. low energy consumption thanks to the sustainable design of the building).

35% Our warehouse is fully powered by renewable energy resources.

Shipping and packaging

Which of the following environmental shipping options do you offer your customers?

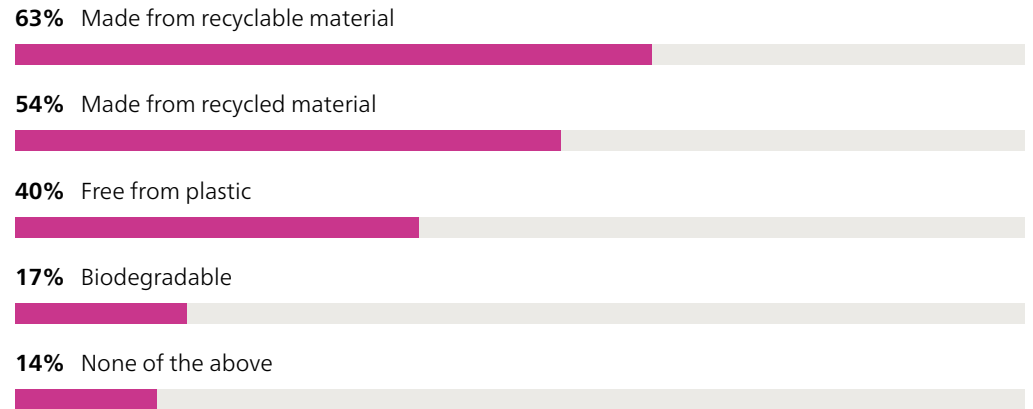
Click & Collect and bundled deliveries are the options most frequently available. Every fourth online shop offers carbon neutral shipping at no surcharge.



Shipping and packaging

Which of the following criteria are met by the packaging material for the products ordered?

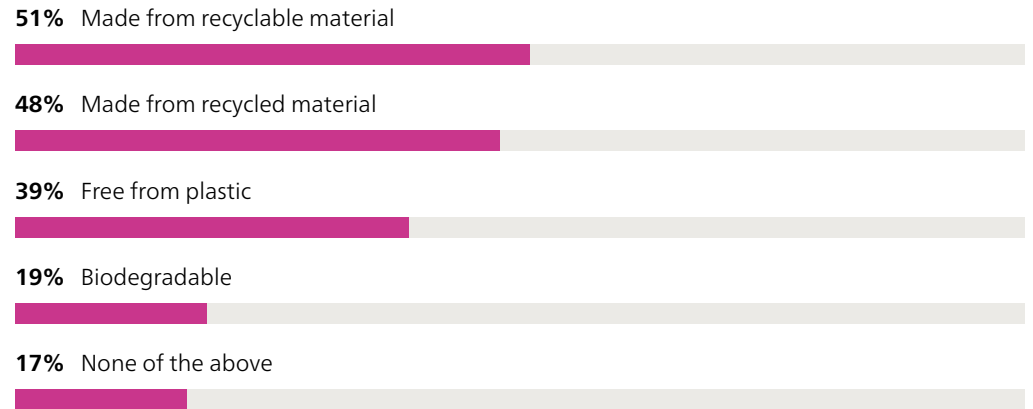
The majority of the online shops use recycled material for their packaging.



Shipping and packaging

Which of the following criteria are met by the filler material for the products ordered?

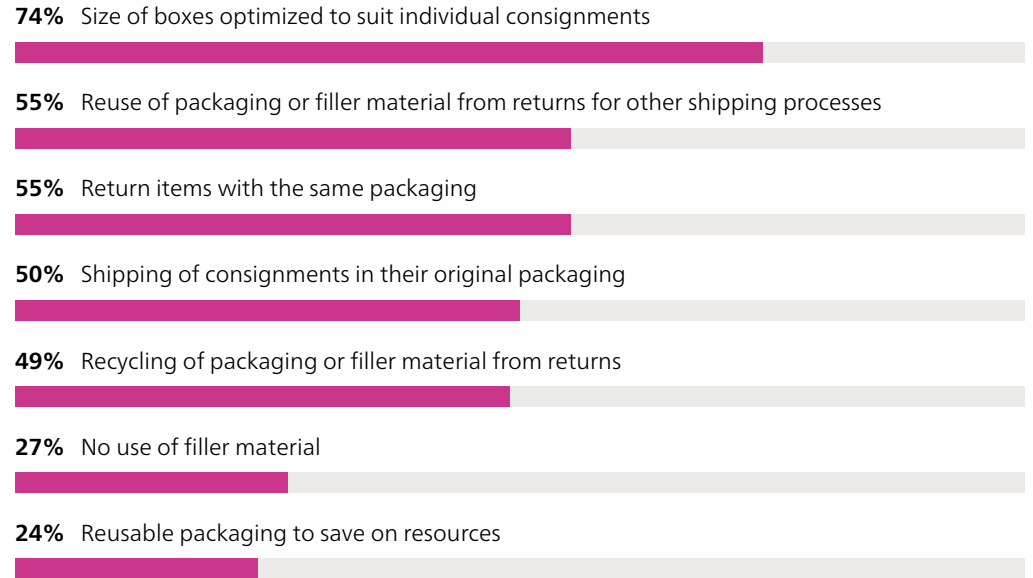
Approximately four out of ten online shops use filler material without plastic.



Shipping and packaging

Which of the following aspects are already implemented by your company when it comes to your packaging system?

Over half of online shops allow returns in the same packaging and also reuse packaging/filler material from returns.



Shipping and packaging

To what extent do the following statements apply to the shipping logistics at your company?

There is a high to very high level of willingness to introduce logistics solutions that are more sustainable.

76% We are open to sustainable logistics solutions, e.g. over the last mile.

64% We are open to the use of sustainable logistics solutions jointly with other online shops.

35% We consider sustainable shipping just as important as other strategic approaches.

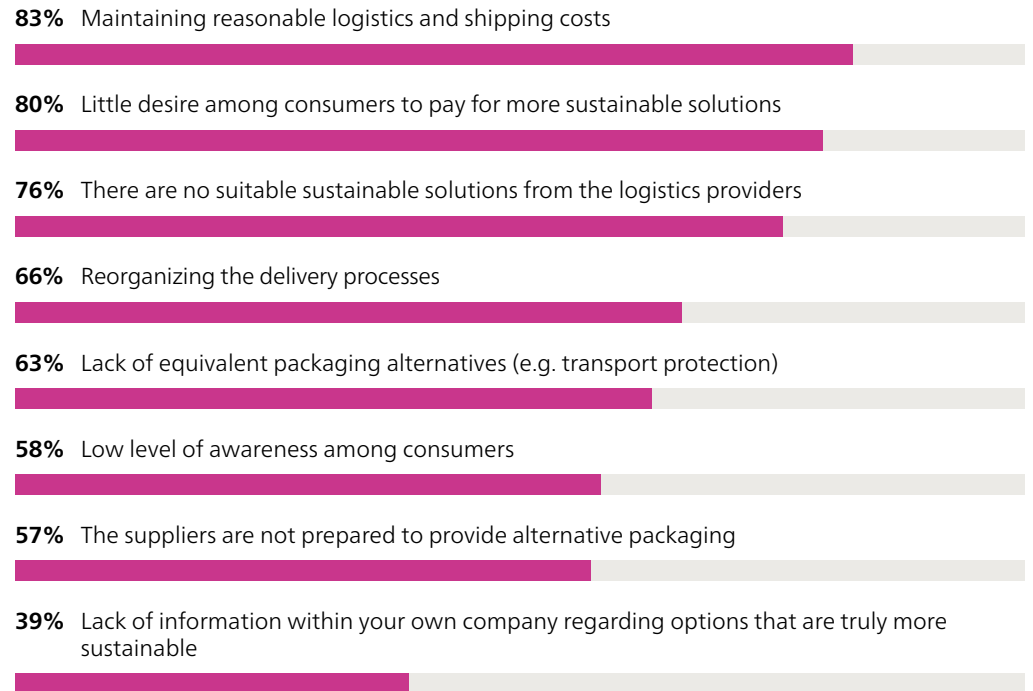
21% We inform our customers about sustainable delivery options.

20% We try to positively influence our customers to choose sustainable delivery options.

Shipping and packaging

What do you consider to be the biggest challenges when it comes to sustainable logistics/sustainable shipping?

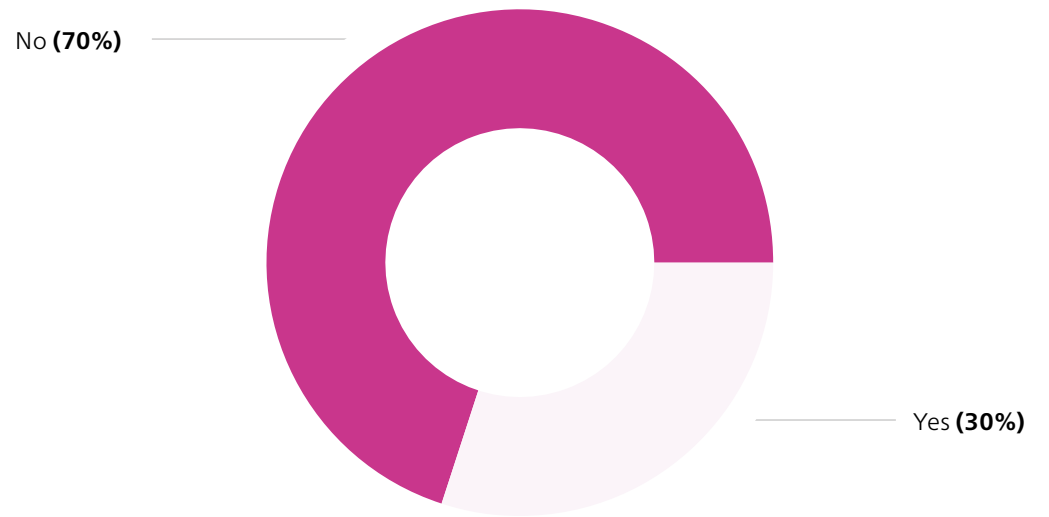
Maintaining reasonable costs and the reluctance of customers to pay are perceived as posing the greatest challenges.



Returns

Do you offer a free returns service?

Three out of ten Swiss online shops surveyed offer free returns.



Returns

How high is the percentage of returns in your online shop?

The rate of returns for online shops offering free returns was 11%, and 6% for online shops not offering free returns.

11% Share of returns for online shops that offer free returns



7% Proportion of returns across all online shops



6% Proportion of returns for online shops without free returns



Returns

Which of the following statements applies to the returns policy at your company?

Returns are more likely to be sold as new goods than resold at reduced prices.

48% Returns are sold again as new items.



41% Returns that cannot be resold are donated.



23% Returns are sold as clearance items at a reduced price.



8% Returns are passed on to specialized retailers.



7% Returns are destroyed.



Cooperation with partners

To what extent do sustainability aspects determine collaboration with partners (e.g. suppliers or shipping service providers) in your company?

When it comes to choosing partners, social aspects are more important than environmental ones. Suggestions for a more sustainable retail approach are rarely made.

72% When choosing possible partners, we consider social aspects (e.g. fair working conditions).

62% When deciding on whether or not to work with a partner, social aspects (e.g. fair working conditions) are given just as much weight as economic criteria (e.g. costs).

60% When choosing possible partners, we consider certification of compliance with environmental or social standards.

57% When choosing possible partners, we consider environmental aspects (e.g. resource conservation, avoidance of carbon emissions).

49% When deciding on whether or not to work with a partner, environmental aspects (e.g. resource conservation, avoidance of carbon emissions) are given just as much weight as economic criteria (e.g. costs).

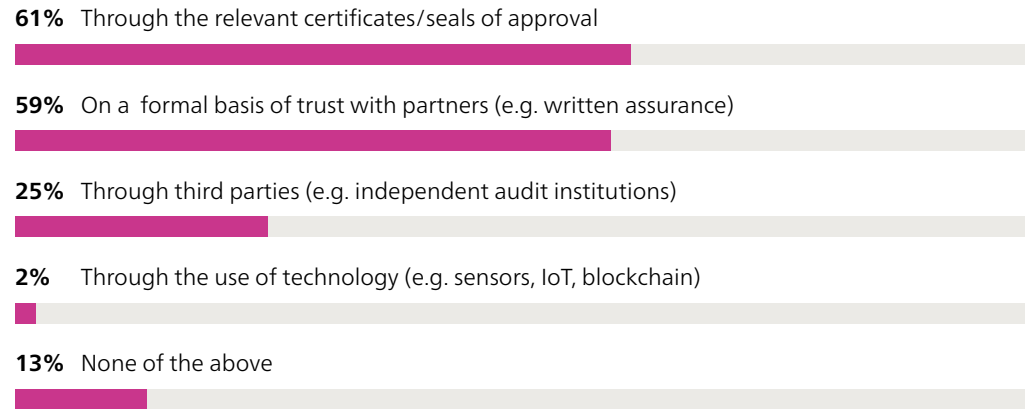
37% We verify our partners' compliance with environmental and social standards.

20% We actively provide our partners with suggestions as to how they can operate with greater environmental and social awareness.

Cooperation with partners

How do you verify your partners' compliance with environmental and social standards?

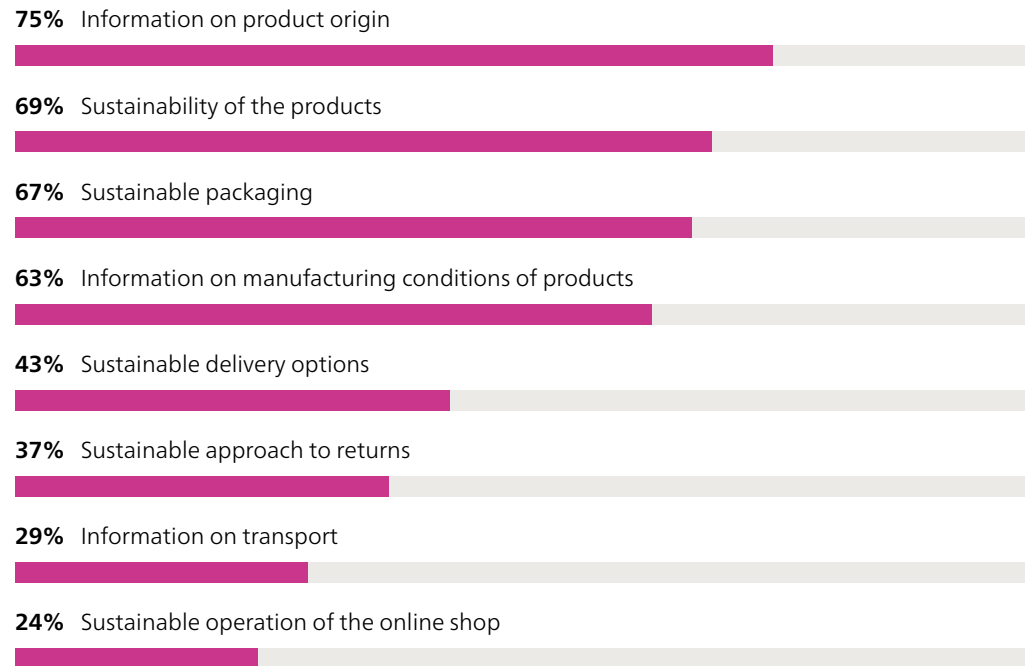
Verifying partner compliance with requirements is primarily based on trust.



Consumer requirements

How important do you think your customers consider the following sustainability aspects to be?

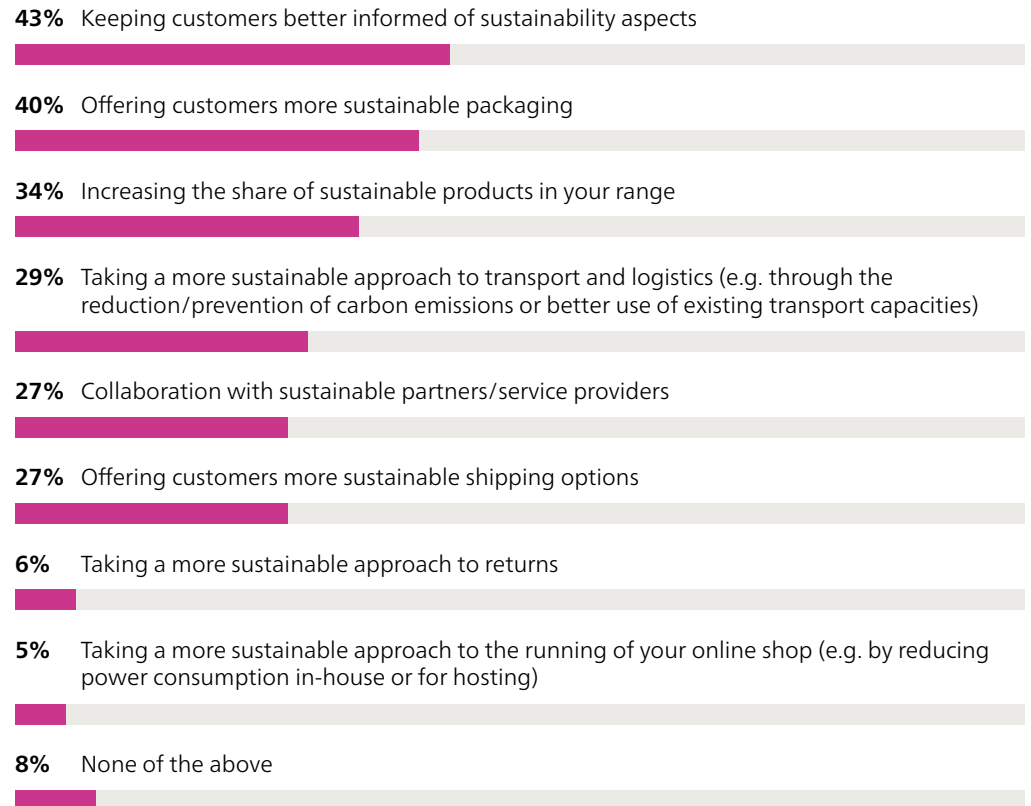
Online retailers assume that products and packaging are what matter the most to customers when it comes to sustainability.



Current important issues

Which of the following sustainability issues will be most important to your company over the next 12 months?

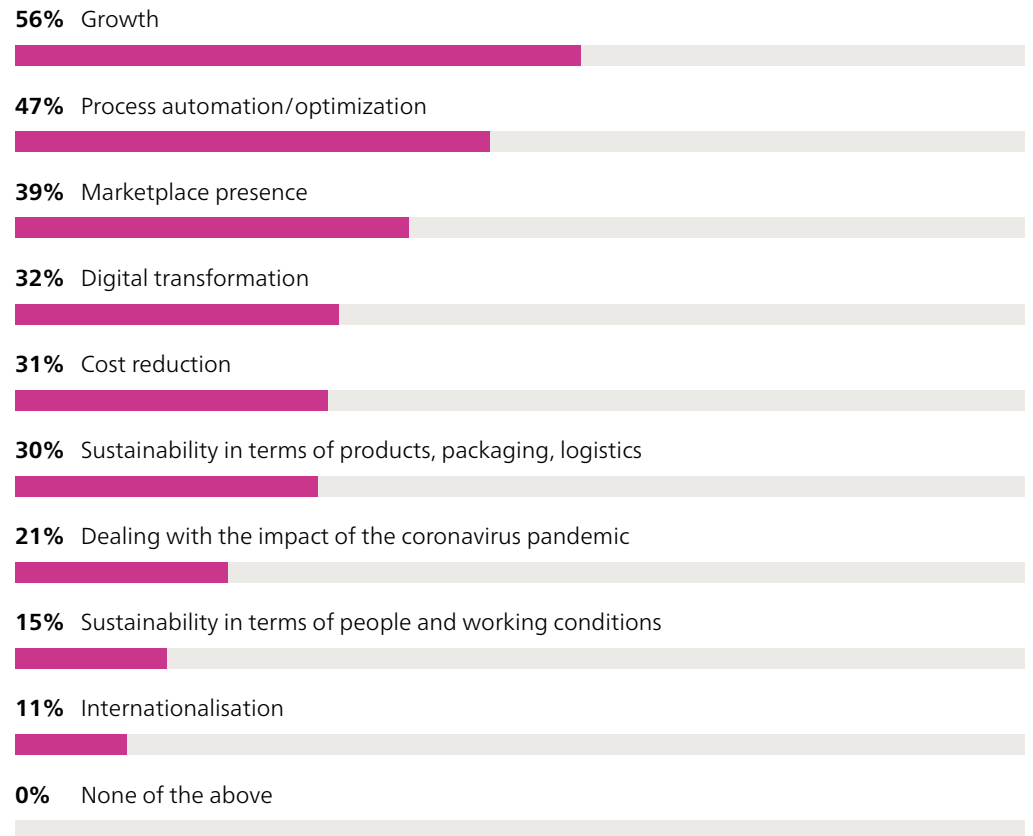
Providing better information to customers about sustainability aspects and more sustainable packaging will be the most important topics over the course of the next year.



Current important issues

Which of the following issues are most important to your company at present?

Growth and more efficient processes are the most important issues at present.



Current important issues

How do you assess sustainability with respect to your competitive edge?

Two thirds of online retailers see sustainability as an opportunity to be competitive.

83% Sustainability for us means taking corporate responsibility.

67% Sustainability is an opportunity for us to gain a competitive edge.

61% Society expects us to be sustainable.

60% Sustainability is one of the key values for our company.

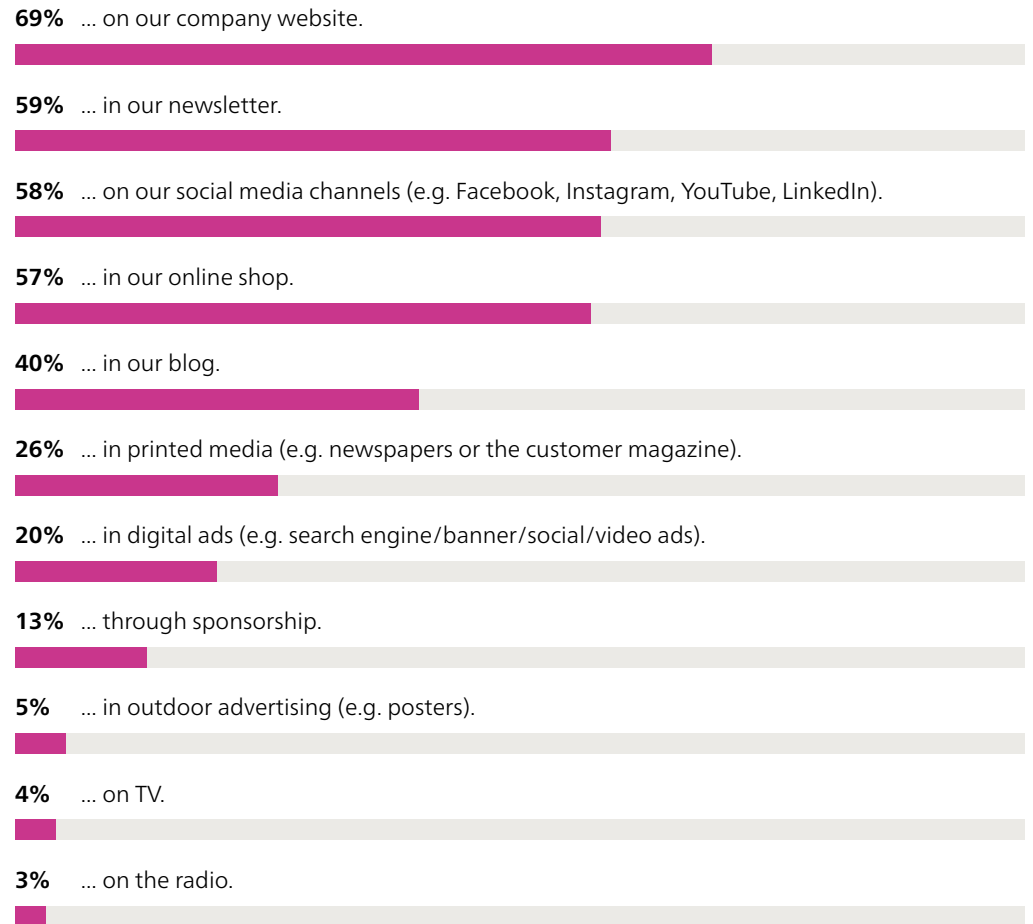
59% Sustainability is a requirement for our customers.

23% Legal provisions and regulations require us to be sustainable.

Communication and marketing

We communicate our sustainability activities...

Sustainability aspects are primarily communicated through the company's own website, social media and online shop.





Institute of Communication and Marketing IKM

Lucerne School of Business

The IKM represents the competence fields of communication and marketing at the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts and continually works to advance these spheres. Special attention is given to the requirements brought about by digitization.

As a competent partner for lifelong learning (LLL), IKM offers training courses in the fields of communication and marketing at Bachelor's and Master's level, as well as continuing education courses at CAS and MAS level.

In the application-oriented world of research and development, the IKM is a dedicated partner to companies and other universities in jointly developing science-based innovations, conducting scientific studies and enabling the use of scientific knowledge for business and society.

More information at: www.hslu.ch/en/ikm

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Swiss Post

Swiss Post guides companies through digital retail. As a partner of the Institute of Communication and Marketing IKM at the Lucerne University of Applied Sciences and Arts, Swiss Post actively supports change in digital business, as well as knowledge transfer and generation.

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