

# grow

## *The Future Forward Edition*



Contributors

Octane AI | Leaf | Infinity Nation | Conjura | Mapp | SparkLayer | Simply Commerce | Blink SEO

## Contributors



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## Intro/ Editor's note

# An Exploration of What's Moving the Needle for Retailers in 2026

We've brought together agency partners, tech innovators, ISVs, and consultants to tackle the topics that often go undiscussed.

Our mission is simple: provide actionable insights that brands, retailers, and merchants can actually use.

From CRO and Analytics to our most impactful volume, AI and the Human in Commerce, we challenge assumptions.

We ask why we settle for current conversion rates and how operations can evolve to honor the consumer.



John Brolly  
Athos Commerce



Andra Muntean  
Athos Commerce



## Observations in 2026:

In 2026, the direction is unmistakable: shoppers expect hyper-personalised, intelligent, instant experiences. Brands that invest in AI-driven discovery tools, self-optimising funnels, and owned data systems will differentiate themselves, while those relying solely on third-party platforms will fall behind. The next wave of eCommerce growth belongs to brands that blend creativity, customer understanding, and AI — and we're building the tools to help them lead it.

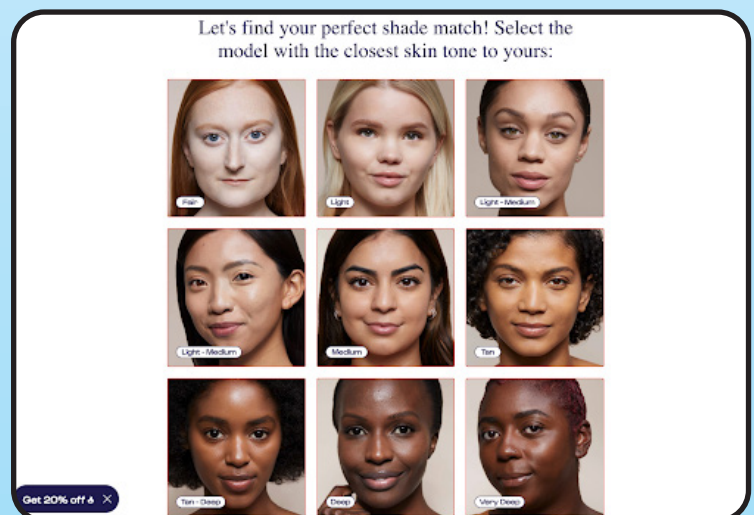
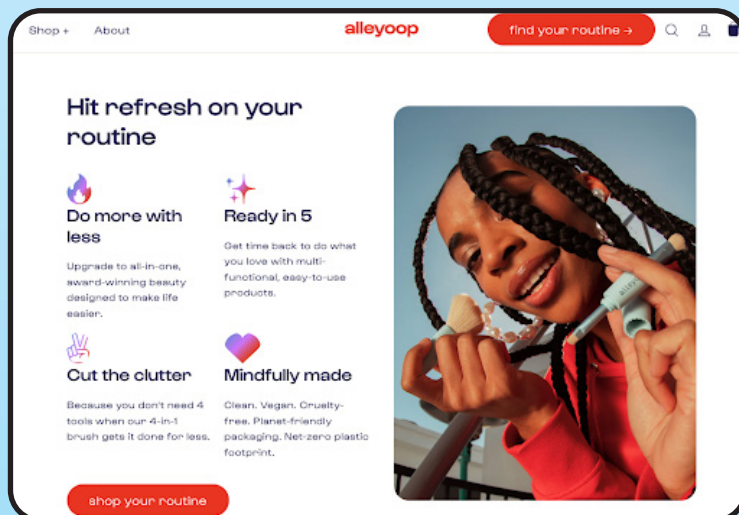


Aoife Teague  
Octane AI

# Customer journeys are anything but linear.

Shoppers are bombarded with choices, often leaving them overwhelmed or disengaged before they ever make a purchase. While many brands pour resources into driving more traffic, the real question is: What are you doing to engage the traffic you already have?

This is where gamified experiences like quizzes shine. They help brands connect meaningfully with customers, collect actionable zero-party data, and deliver personalized shopping experiences.



## Why Quizzes Work for Gamification

Quizzes turn a passive browsing experience into an interactive and personalized journey.

For instance, beauty brand Alleyoop uses its “Find Your Routine” quiz to guide customers to the perfect products by asking targeted questions about skin tone, age, and preferences.

Instead of scrolling endlessly, shoppers get tailored recommendations in minutes, simplifying their decision-making.

## Zero-Party Data: A Goldmine of Purchase Intent

Unlike first- or third-party data, zero-party data is willingly provided by customers. It’s explicit, accurate, and invaluable for crafting tailored customer experiences.

## Insights Gained Through Quizzes:

**Purchase intent drivers:** Why customers shop (e.g., wellness goals, specific challenges).

**Behavioral preferences:** Favorite flavors or lifestyle habits, used to refine product positioning.

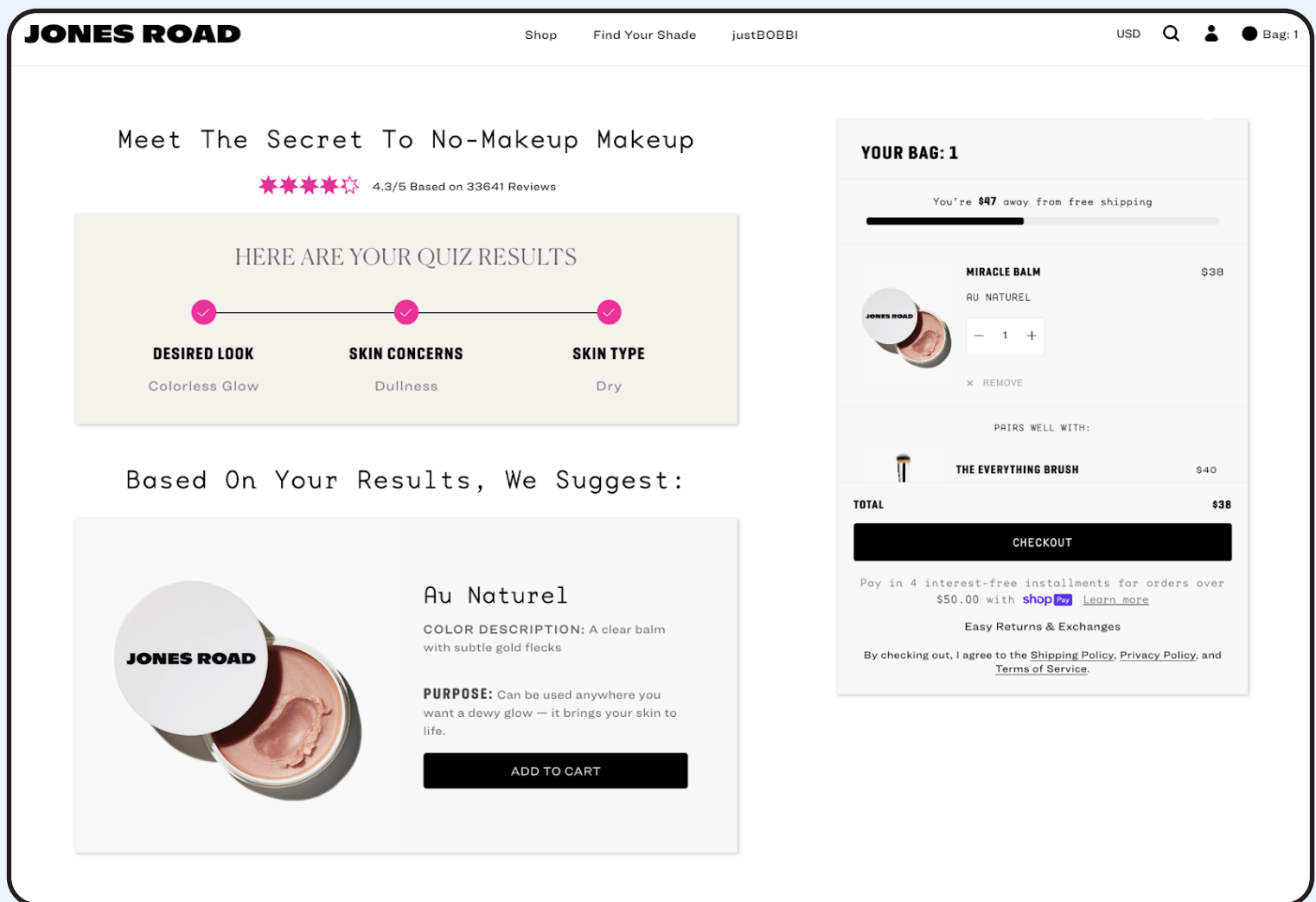
**Customer segmentation:** Grouping audiences by shared traits for targeted campaigns and product bundles.

## Tips for Using Quiz Data to Drive CRO

Quizzes require a mini strategy of their own. Here are our tips for driving quiz engagement and using the data to enhance CRO across all channels:

### 1. Place Quizzes Strategically

Visibility is everything. Alleyoop and Salud place their quizzes prominently in their navigation bars, ensuring new and returning visitors see them immediately.



## 2. Create Post-Quiz Email Flows

Follow up with personalized emails based on quiz results. We see the most success with brands prioritizing creating post-quiz flows to highlight product benefits, provide usage tips, and send friendly reminders about their recommended products.

## 3. Incentivize Quiz Completion

A well-placed incentive can significantly increase quiz participation and completion rates. Offering a reward not only encourages shoppers to start the quiz but also keeps them engaged through to the final results, driving conversions.

#### 4. Test and Optimise

A successful quiz is never a one-and-done effort—it requires continuous refinement to maximize its effectiveness. By leveraging A/B testing and data analysis, brands can identify what works, what doesn't, and where there's room for improvement.





## Observations in 2026:

In 2026, privacy is the story rewriting the rules. The EU's direction of travel on browser-led consent (where users set preferences once in the browser, not on every site) has the potential to send opt-out rates through the roof.

Essentially, that will hollow out the datasets that power optimisation and attribution for everyone, and turn server-side tracking and better consent-aware data pipelines from "nice to haves" to the bare minimum.

Brands will need to be far more intentional about the events they track, how they enrich and model that data, and how they join it up with first-party signals outside the ad platforms.

In 2026, the gap is widening between brands who treat measurement as plumbing and those who treat it as strategy. The former will see their paid media continue to degrade as privacy changes land. The latter will be ready - not because they've dodged regulation, but because they've built a measurement engine that can survive it.



Wes Hartley  
Leaf

# Terrible Traffic in the Age of Turgid Targeting

Nothing destroys your conversion rate like sh\*t quality paid media traffic. Its effects can take weeks to flush out as you retarget a bunch of XXL right-wing daily-mail-reading grandads with an extra-small “Sparkle With Starmer” t-shirt.

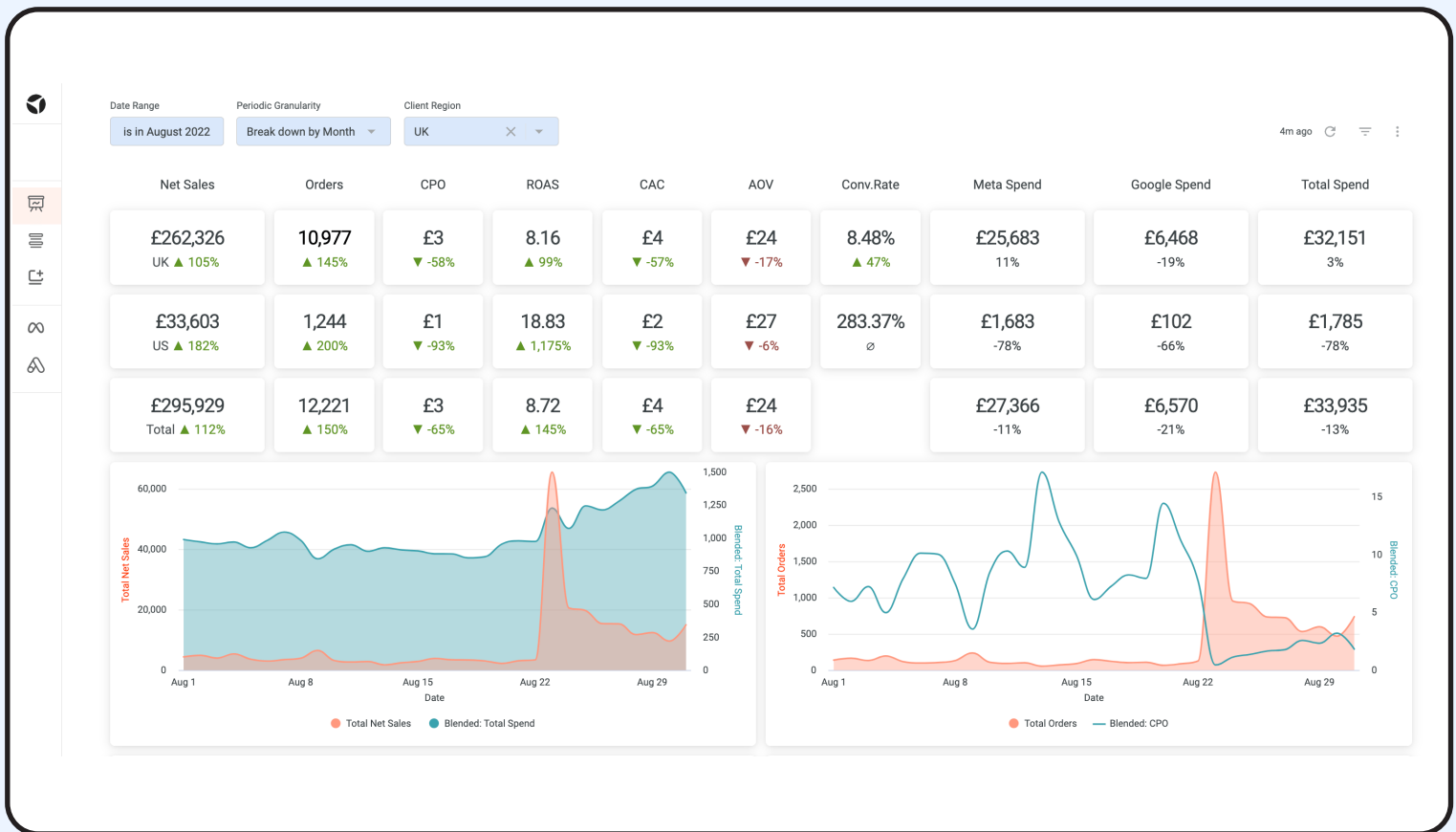
With the advent of campaign types such as PMAX on Google and Advantage+ on Meta, targeting control is being ceded to the “algorithm” and optimising data flow has become the fight you absolutely need to be in.

Solid conversion tracking and proper first-party data usage has become critical to marketing success, but these remain criminally misunderstood, underserved and undervalued by marketing agencies and eCommerce brands alike.

## Taking the ‘Algo’ by the Hand

We recently audited the tracking setup for a brand selling supplements on a subscription model, and found a key issue affecting targeting by misrepresenting the core customer profile to the ad platforms.

Tracking was implemented to capture the transaction value at checkout, which is a standard tracking setup for most online brands. However, in this case the full value of the one-time purchase was being passed correctly by the pixel, but only the value of one month’s subscription was being captured.



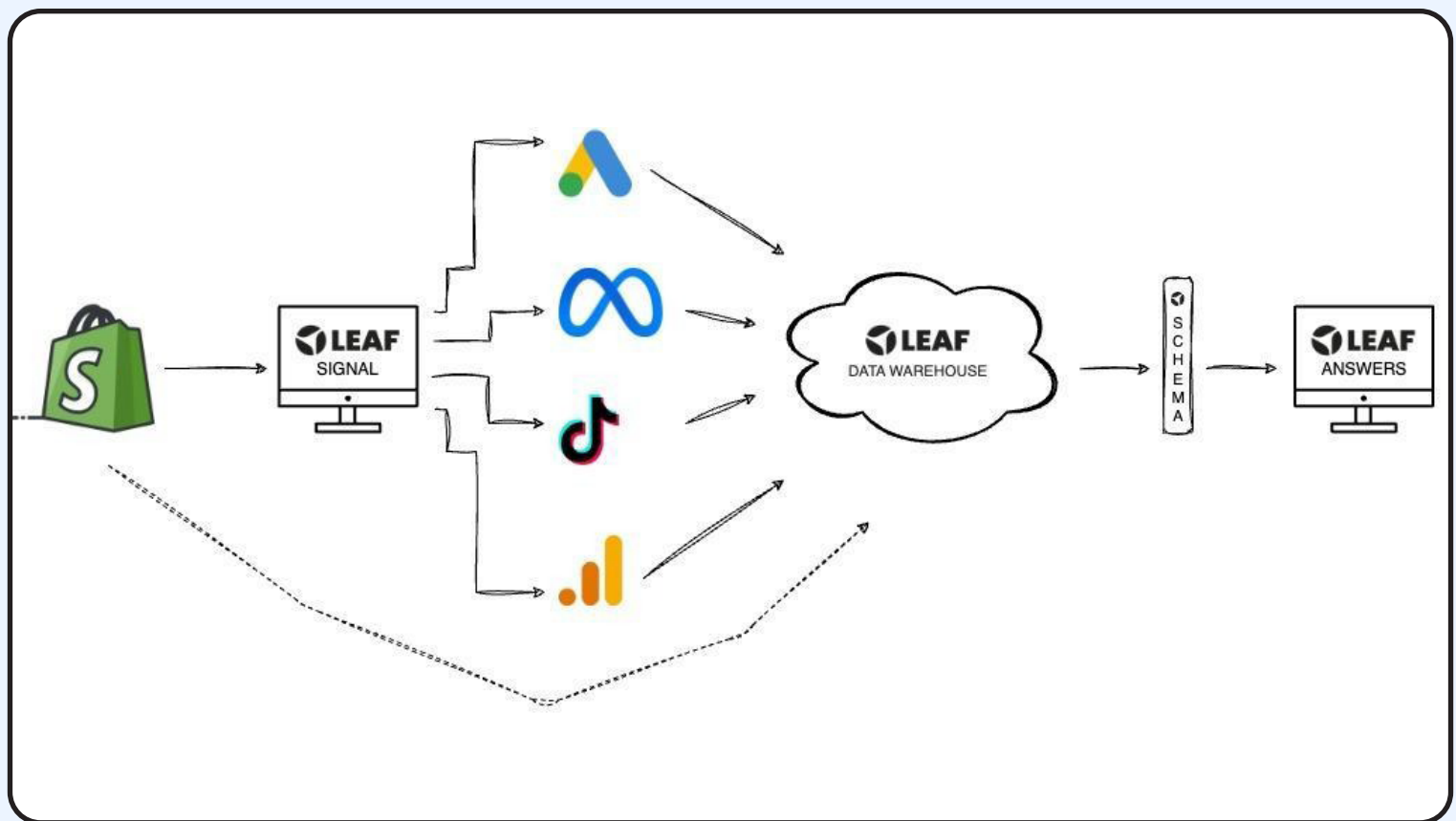
To solve this we ingested the client's data into our performance intelligence platform 'Answers', which provided us with insights on the average subscriber length and value compared to a one-time purchaser of the product.

We then configured the tracking so that the value of the subscription was hard-coded with the average lifetime value of a customer (equivalent to a four month subscription) and passed this back to the ad platforms on subscription purchase (this is monitored and calibrated quarterly).

This instantly improved ROAS - previously the ad accounts were only being attributed the value of one-month's subscription, which was four times less than the actual average value of a subscriber.

It also helped to improve targeting and traffic quality, resulting in an uptick in web conversion rate, new subscriptions and the performance of all advertising channels - CPAs within the paid media channels and email reduced significantly and blended acquisition costs more than halved (without any material difference in seasonality, promotions or creatives).

With targeting broad and getting broader, brands need to get more sophisticated and purposeful with how they collect, process and feed crucial event, product and customer data to their advertising and analytics platforms.



## Observations in 2026:

In 2026, one shift stands out: people aren't searching less; they're discovering differently. Social search, creator-led influence and AI-driven experiences are becoming core touchpoints and they're accelerating behavioural change.

This is why channel diversification is becoming essential. In our digital consultancy work with ecommerce brands, we consistently see that over-reliance on a single "hero" channel limits growth and increases vulnerability. Broadening the mix, thoughtfully, not reactively, creates more resilience and more headroom for performance.

In 2026, growth is shaped by three things:

- Intelligent experimentation
- Smarter automation
- The ability to connect insights across channels

The brands that thrive will treat AI as a collaborator, using it to improve customer experience, enhance personalisation and uncover new demand.

The pace of change isn't slowing, but clarity is within reach. If you haven't yet explored new channels or considered how AI will reshape your customer journeys, now is the right moment to start. The brands approaching this shift with curiosity and confidence are creating meaningful momentum in 2026.



Al Keck  
Infinity Nation

# SEO Meets Merchandising: The Secret to Lower CAC and Higher Sales.

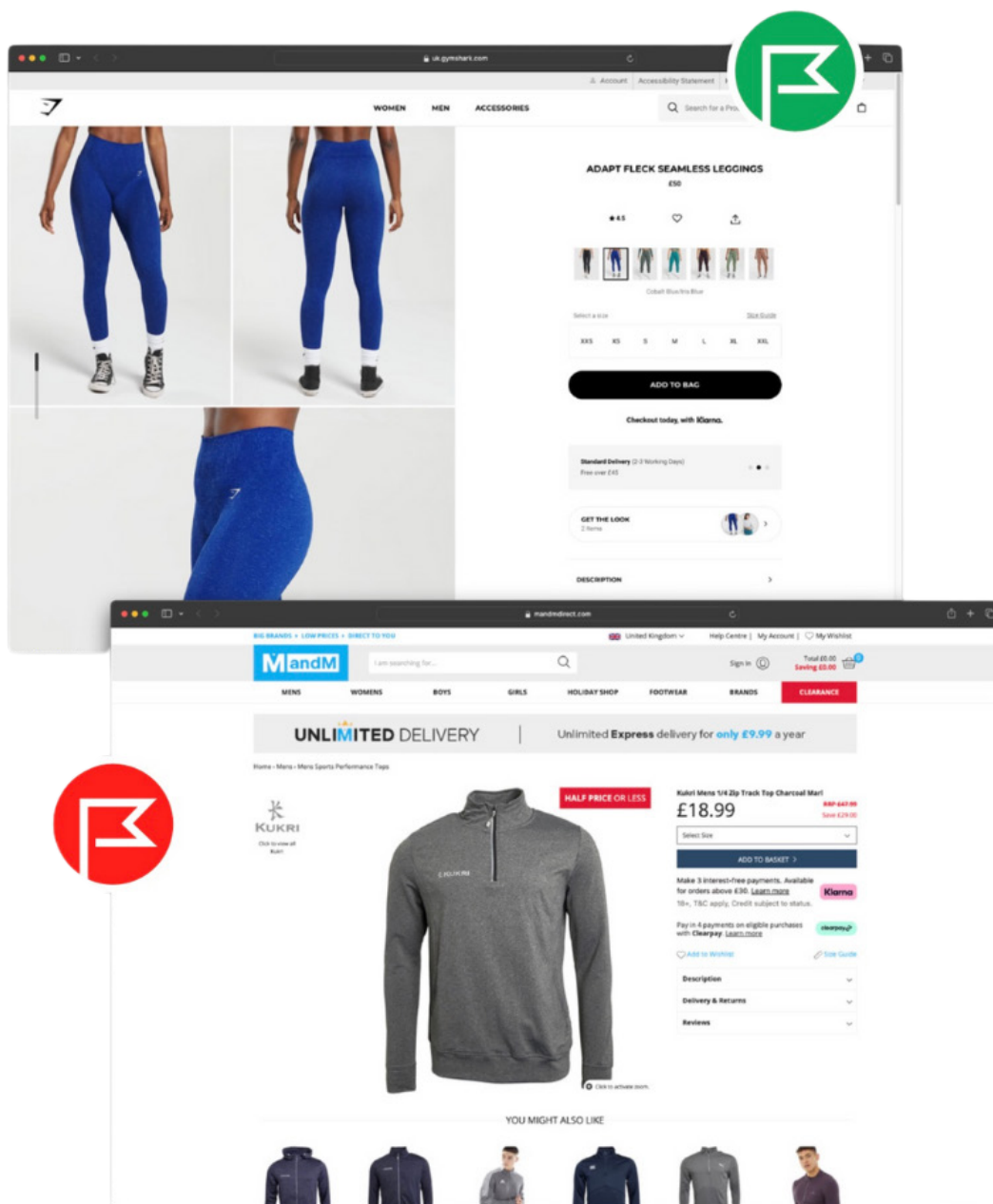
The digital marketing landscape evolved rapidly last year, with rising competition, stricter privacy regulations, and economic shifts creating a saturated paid media space. As brands battle for customers, CAC (customer acquisition cost) has surged 60% in five years, straining budgets and EBITDA.

Luckily there's a powerful way to counter rising CAC, SEO is the key to sustainable online success. A vital yet overlooked aspect of SEO is its connection with website merchandising. Optimising product listings, categories, and internal search enhances product discoverability, not just on-site but also in organic search results, helping brands maintain visibility and profitability in an increasingly challenging market.

Here's some tips to optimise your website merchandising for sustainable growth.

## Product Imagery:

High-quality product imagery isn't just essential for ensuring conversions, did you know that search engines such as Google prioritise visually rich, optimised content? This means **well-structured product images can boost your rankings and improve discoverability.**



## Best Practices for Product Images:

### 1. Use descriptive alt attributes

Ensure each image has a relevant, descriptive alt attribute based on its page context.

### 2. Choose the right image file format

- PNG – flat graphics or images with a truly transparent background.
- JPEG – Photos

### 3. Optimise loading

- Lazy load ALL images below the fold, this includes any images in navigations, pop-ups and other delayed content.
- Ensure appropriate image sizing to prevent performance issues that could impact user experience.

These tips will enhance page experience and core web vitals, driving better SEO and business results.

## Effective Use of Product Descriptions:

Product descriptions are crucial for both SEO and conversions. They serve two main purposes: informing users and signalling relevance to search engines.

- **Short descriptions** appear near product titles, acting as a hook with key features and benefits to boost conversions.
- **Long descriptions** are placed below the fold, offering details like materials and dimensions to support user intent.

Both types are valuable, so optimise them where possible and ensure they are unique for better visibility and engagement.

## Strategic Product Positioning:

When planning the placement of products on the website, it's key to ensure that the user can find them quickly without blockers to aid in improved usability and conversion rate.

Analyse inventory to understand best sellers and evergreen products and feed this into website design and merchandising decisions.

For example, make sure the homepage includes featured products, best sellers and latest offers as well as hero collections and categories.

## Seasonal Merchandising Strategies:

Aligning content with user search patterns is key. For example, a clothing brand may target gift-related searches during the holidays, and holiday outfits in summer, but the website needs to be optimised 3-6 months ahead of the peaks to capitalise on relevant seasonal traffic.

Regularly updating content for seasonal trends ensures better organic visibility, reducing dependence on paid ads while capturing high-intent shoppers.

 INFINITY NATION

CASE STUDIES

Tel. 01793 238 697

Email: [chat@infinitynation.com](mailto:chat@infinitynation.com)

Menu 

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|---------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| <b>+220%</b><br>INCREASE IN PURCHASES | <b>+251%</b><br>INCREASE IN CONVERSION VALUE | <b>+109%</b><br>INCREASE IN ROAS | <b>+98%</b><br>INCREASE IN LINK CLICKS |
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### The Challenge

Infinity Nation was tasked with transforming Lily & Me's Meta ad performance to support their ambitious growth targets. Facing fierce competition and a need to maximise return on ad spend (ROAS), Lily & Me required a customised approach. Our expertise in data-driven strategies and proven results made us the ideal partner to achieve their objectives.

**Infinity Nation's Objectives Were to:**

- Increase conversion rate through audience refinement.
- Enhance click-through rate (CTR) and ad strength.

## Observations in 2026:

2026 is all about retention. Yes, peak sales periods can make revenue numbers look healthy, but don't let that distract you. The real winners will be the brands that focus on converting first-time shoppers into loyal customers.

Retention efforts must go hand-in-hand with a razor-sharp focus on margins. With a volatile global market, cost structures are constantly shifting. Monitoring margin performance in real-time will be key to avoiding profit erosion.

And while last year saw a rush toward AI adoption, 2026 is separating the truly data-driven from the data-distracted. AI can only perform as well as the data it's fed. That means the priority this year is building a clean, consistent, and centralised data layer. In other words: if AI is the engine, your data is the fuel, make sure it's high octane!



Hannah Herlihy Lowe  
Conjura

# Operational Insights & Profitability

## From Gut Feel to Data-Driven Growth: Unlocking Profitability with Operational Insights

Profitability isn't just about selling more; it's about working smarter. Too often, brands are held back by inaccurate spreadsheets and siloed data, making it hard to see where the real opportunities (and risks) lie. This playbook flips that script.

By bringing all your data into one place and shining a light on the metrics that matter, you can transform your operations into a profit engine. From uncovering products that drain margin to identifying inventory that's gathering dust, leveraging a unified analytics platform to uncover operational opportunities will unlock data-backed, profitable decision-making.

### Conjura's playbook for success:

1. **Consolidate your data** into one single source of truth, such as Conjura, eliminating the use of manual, inaccurate spreadsheets.
2. Use a tool like Conjura to **highlight new areas of opportunity**.

Some customer examples include:

- Discounted Sunglasses achieved a **12.7% increase** in Contribution Margin efficiency due to the identification of dead stock.

- [Saint + Sofia](#) used Conjura's Product Dashboards to drive a pricing review and identify changes across their entire product range, contributing to an **average order value (AOV) increase of 20% year on year (YoY)**.

Additional areas of opportunity that Conjura has highlighted for brands:

- Identifying which products are the best and worst at converting to paying customers.
- Finding those products that are ready for a price increase.
- Discovering what products are driving the most profit across DTC & Marketplaces.

3. Act on those insights. Leverage powerful eCommerce dashboards and AI tools (such as Conjura's Owly AI) to implement strategies that streamline operations and drive profitability.

"Additionally Conjura's Product Scorecard led to a pricing review and changes across the entire product range which has contributed to **average order value (AOV) increasing by 20% year on year (YoY)**." — Henry Young, Head of Finance at Saint + Sofia.

Conjura's platform also enabled Saint + Sofia to monitor and set acquisition targets across 5 key channels and 15 sub-channels, this gave all Marketing areas visibility and accountability. Combined with granular insights into acquisition, retention and LTV by channel this helped deliver a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) over 50%.

**50%**

**CAGR Over**

Thanks to realtime accountability of KPIs across multiple teams.

**20%**

**AOV Increase YoY**

With the help of Conjura's Product Dashboards.

**SAINT + SOFIA**

**"The best investment we've made outside of our website"**

Conjura has given us real-time accountability across our teams. The Product Dashboard has really transformed our merchandising and marketing strategies."



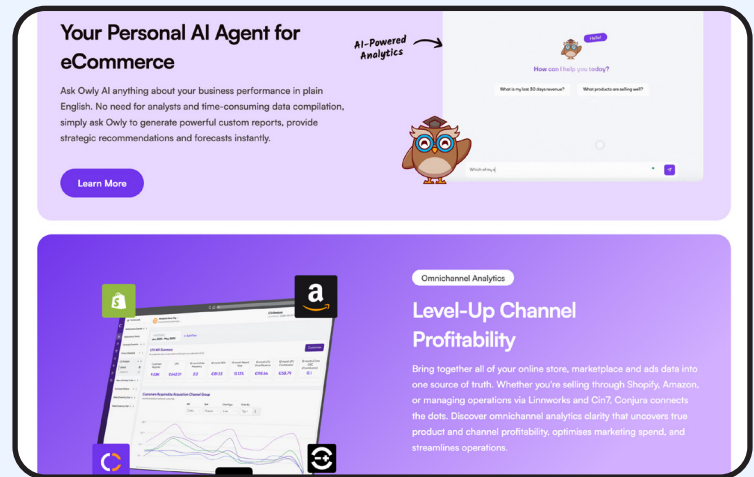
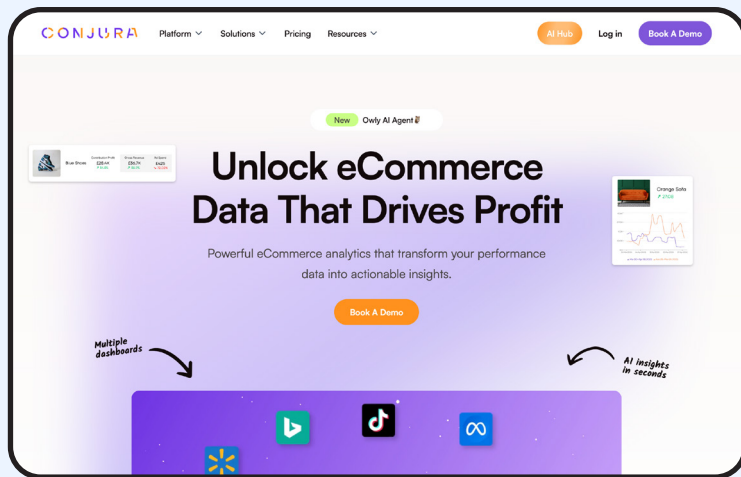
**Dessi Bell**  
CEO @ Saint + Sofia

*It's like having a sous chef for data. Conjura organises everything and tells us exactly what needs attention. It's given us an agility to make important decisions that we didn't have before.*

Joshua Paget  
Discounted Sunglasses

# About Conjura

With Conjura, you can centralize and transform your omnichannel data into actionable insights for eCommerce, Merchandising, Finance, Operations and Marketing teams. Get started with 1-click set-up and unlock 100s of KPIs, customizable dashboards, AI-powered insights and forecasting. Track product and marketing performance down to SKU, optimize channel performance and improve ROAS. The Conjura team is here to support your business growth and drive profitability.



- **Easy Integrations:** Shopify, BigCommerce, Amazon, TikTok Shop, Brightpearl, Linnworks, Cin7, Walmart, eBay and many more
- **Single Source of Truth:** Aggregate performance data into intuitive, easy-to-read dashboards
- **Performance Tracking:** Monitor CAC, LTV, ROAS, Contribution Margin and more effortlessly
- **Omnichannel Insights:** Benchmark and optimize sales channel performance
- **Conjura's AI Agent:** Powerful AI insights, reports, strategies and forecasting

Learn more about Conjura and book a demo at [www.conjura.com](https://www.conjura.com)



## Observations in 2026:

### LLM Search Converts at a New Level

In 2026 conversational discovery has become a mainstream shopping behaviour. Early signals already show that traffic originating from LLM search converts up to six times higher than traditional paid search. This is not surprising.

When a shopper describes what they want in natural language, the intent is far clearer than a short keyword. If a retailer has enriched data that matches this language, the product is surfaced quickly and conversion follows. The commercial impact is significant. Retailers that prepare their catalogues for LLMs will attract high intent visitors at a far lower cost, and those shoppers are more likely to buy at full price.

Retailers that depend on thin or inconsistent attributes will simply fall out of view, as AI systems prioritise products with clear descriptive signals. 2026 rewards clarity, breadth of data and genuine customer understanding. Those who invest will pull ahead on conversion, margin and loyalty.



Josh Beale  
Mapp

# The Why Behind The Buy: Why Agentic Search Is Changing Fashion Forever

*Fashion is not just about products, it is about people, their intent, their missions, and their moments.*

Over the past decade, fashion has reinvented itself repeatedly. Fast fashion transformed the speed of supply chains. Marketplaces reshaped consumer choice. Social commerce blurred the line between inspiration and transaction.

But the most profound change is happening right now. Consumers are no longer simply browsing or scrolling, they are directing. They are telling technology exactly what they want, in their own words, and expecting it to deliver.

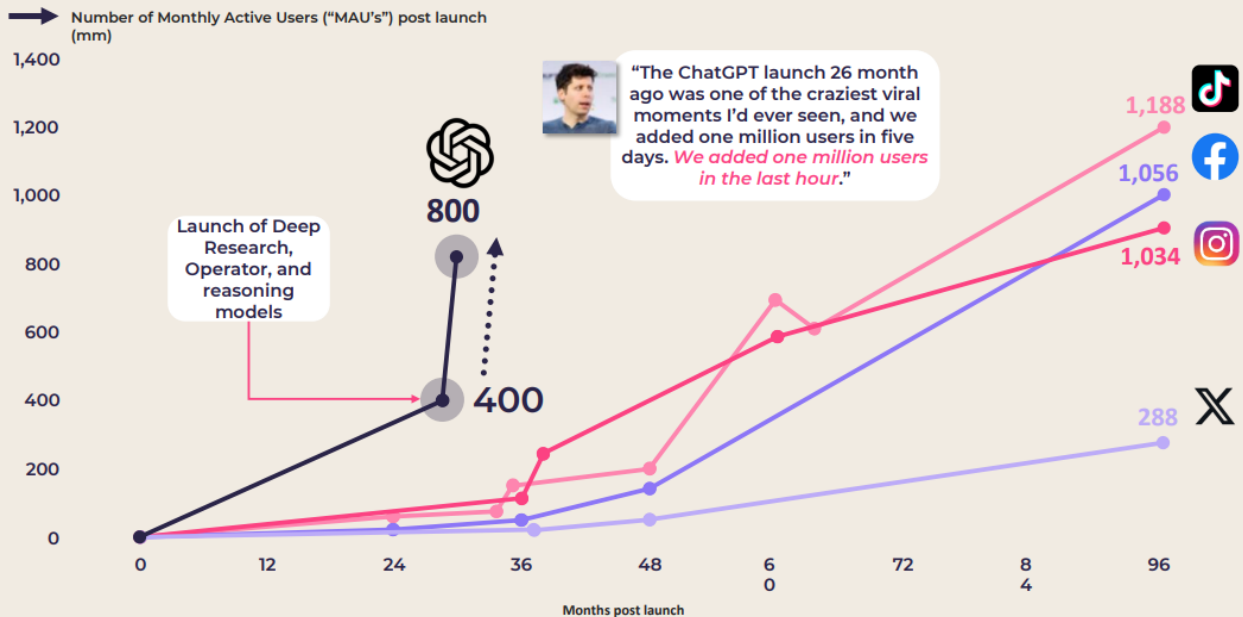
This is the phenomenal rise of agentic search. Over 800M active weekly users are now using ChatGPT. This is faster growth than user adoption on any technology phenomena over the last 20 years, including social networks.

## The Human at the Centre

Commerce has always been human. Developers, merchandisers, and marketers work tirelessly to bring products to life online. Consumers, in turn, shop with intent, emotion, and context.

Yet the balance is shifting. Look at how a shopper now engages with Zara, ASOS or Zalando. They do not want to scroll through hundreds of blazers. They want to ask: "Show me something I can wear to the office that also works for after-work drinks."

## ChatGPT is growing faster than anything we have seen before



Source: Coatue

This shift from browsing to mission-led discovery is redefining the relationship between humans and machines in fashion.

## Where Fashion Falls Short Today

The truth is most digital fashion experiences do not speak fluent customer. The disconnect is clear:

- **AI, SEO and SEM:** Shoppers are not searching "blue V-neck knit." They are asking for "something fresh for a spring wedding." Yet most search engines and ad strategies are still built around product-centric keywords.
- **Landing Experience:** Consumers arrive speaking in moods, missions, and style cues. Landing pages answer with static grids and uninspired layouts. The spark of discovery dies.
- **Search and Merch:** Even when shoppers find your site, search engines often cannot deliver. Built for SKUs and rigid categories, they miss the nuance of "I want a jacket that works for both my commute and a night out."
- **Recommendations:** Product suggestions are mechanical, based on "bought this, viewed that."

They fail to understand intent, style, or the reasons behind previous returns. The journey stalls.

- **Post-purchase and Loyalty:** Retailers still talk in RFM segments: "frequent shopper," "lapsing buyer." Consumers think in experiences: "festival season," "back-to-office wardrobe," "power dressing." No wonder emails go unopened.

These gaps show why fashion is ripe for an agentic model. Shoppers are speaking in human missions; most systems are still answering in SKU logic.

## Machines and Humans: Better Together

There is a persistent myth that artificial intelligence will replace human roles. In fashion, the opposite is true.

- Machines excel at scale: tagging millions of products, analysing purchase and return histories, and surfacing intent-driven matches instantly.
- Humans excel at creativity: building aspiration, curating looks, and telling the brand story.

Agentic tools free teams from repetitive, error-prone work such as categorising returns or tagging product features. Instead, humans can focus on brand storytelling, inspiration, and service.

*Fashion has always been about confidence, expression, and identity. Agentic search, powered by intent, history, and returns data, finally gives consumers the tools to find that faster, and gives brands the opportunity to deliver with empathy at scale.*

The “why behind the buy” has always been human. Technology is finally catching up. Brands that embrace agentic search powered by fashion-specific AI will not only drive higher conversions, but also personalise in real time to reduce returns, increase advocacy, and build lasting customer loyalty.





## Observations in 2026:

In 2026, personalised and customer-centric B2B experiences are moving from competitive advantage to baseline expectation.

As younger, digitally native generations step into wholesale buying roles, the tolerance for clunky systems and generic interactions will continue to fall.

We anticipate a major shift toward dynamic B2B journeys - pricing based on real buyer behaviour, onboarding flows informed by customer segment, and interfaces as intuitive as in B2C.

In 2026, the brands succeeding are those that recognise that, even in complex B2B transactions, it's still people making the decisions - and those people want experiences built around them.



Lucy Vinestock  
SparkLayer

# This time, it's personal: why putting people first is the future of B2B eCommerce

Most people operating within eCommerce are aware of the differences between B2C and B2B - but what about the similarities? As the line between B2C and B2B merges and expectations shift, we're sharing 5 essential learnings for all wholesalers - focusing on the person behind the purchase.

## Embrace B2C behaviours

B2B customers might not make impulse purchases like retail shoppers, but their expectations are evolving regardless. Many wholesale buyers now want the same ease, speed, and flexibility they get when shopping as consumers. No more waiting for spreadsheets to be manually processed or trying to align with a store's opening hours to place orders!

As a wholesale brand, start by understanding how buyers in your sector place orders and then add in B2C-style functionality to match the demand. B2B tends to be about steady, repeat purchasing rather than one-off splurges, so aligning with those rhythms is key.

## Market your B2B store

In B2C, branding and advertising are key drivers of impulse purchases, increasing brand awareness, and, more recently, driving all-important loyal social media followers. In B2B, decision-makers tend to be more routine-driven - they want reliability and efficiency over flashy design.

Procurement managers and wholesale buyers are often working to a deadline and will return to platforms that make ordering quick, consistent, and frustration-free. Loyalty plays a major role within wholesale, as buyers don't have the time (or incentive) to regularly search for new websites or suppliers unless they really have to.

That doesn't mean marketing doesn't matter - just that the emphasis shifts.

## Optimise onboarding

Onboarding isn't just a box-ticking exercise - it's one of the strongest drivers of long-term adoption, particularly within B2B. When customers feel supported from the first click, they're more likely to make your platform their default way of buying.

For most buyers, straightforward guides and clear instructions will work wonders - especially when paired with encouraging emails, check-ins, and how-to support. For larger, enterprise, or VIP customers, consider tailored onboarding strategies.

## Customise pricing

Pricing is where B2B really diverges from consumer retail. While B2C products often have a fixed price, wholesale pricing is fluid, shaped by order volume, customer type, and negotiated terms.

You'll likely serve a mix of smaller retailers, online resellers, and larger accounts. Each group may require different pricing to reflect their buying power and margins. Showing the right price to the right customer not only protects profitability but also builds trust and loyalty.

## Incentivise loyalty

Getting a buyer to change suppliers can be a challenge, especially in competitive markets. This is where incentives play a crucial role. As any B2C customer knows, a gentle nudge in the form of a discount or freebie can be enough to get you over the line - the same approach can be applied to B2B buyers.

Introductory discounts, loyalty programmes, or perks for first-time online orders can help lower barriers and encourage customers to take that initial leap. Remember to tailor your incentives so that each wholesale buyer is getting something that's relevant and valuable to them.

## Final thoughts

Ultimately, the future of B2B isn't just about platforms and processes: it's about people.

By borrowing from B2C behaviours, focusing on onboarding, and tailoring pricing and loyalty strategies, wholesalers can create experiences that feel personal, seamless, and built for long-term success.

[Learn more about SparkLayer and book a free, tailored demo.](#)

## Observations in 2026:

After a long period of hesitation, companies are finally accepting that standing still isn't an option.

Customer expectations keep rising, competition is now truly global, and the technology gap between the "leaders" and the "laggards" is widening at speed.

In 2026, the direction of travel becomes even clearer.

Innovation in technology is forcing investment. AI, personalisation, composable tooling, onsite search and smarter fulfilment are no longer "nice to explore when we get time." They're becoming core to how successful digital businesses operate.

Technology modernisation is front of mind. Whether it's rebuilding ageing eCommerce estates, cutting back bloated app stacks, or simplifying over-engineered headless setups, the message is the same: businesses want to become leaner, faster and far more resilient.

There is money to be spent. Budgets aren't being thrown around, but they are opening — cautiously, and with clear intent. The question in 2026 isn't if brands will invest, but where they'll place their biggest bets.

And the biggest competitive lever? Data.

Companies that can make their first-party and zero-party data clean, readable, accessible and genuinely actionable will be the ones who

move quickest. They'll adapt faster, launch new propositions with confidence, and outpace the rest of the market.

All of this feeds directly into the talent landscape. If you operate in any of the above areas, there's a high chance you'll be in demand. However, ultimately, the good news is, digital commerce recruitment is heating up again and 2026 is proving to be the strongest, most active year we've seen in a long time.



James Hodges  
Simply Commerce

# From Talent to Teams: Human- Centric Commerce in a Product-Obsessed Era

Over the past five years, we've watched the way digital commerce teams operate shift at speed. What once revolved around fixed-scope projects and neatly defined job titles now looks very different. Today, businesses want continuous value, not one-off deliverables. Teams aren't just shipping code, they're owning outcomes. And the people at the heart of it all? They've had to adapt fast.

## From Project to Product

The biggest shift in how delivery teams operate? The move from project-based working to product-led ownership.

This isn't just a buzzword switch. It's a wholesale redefinition of how businesses think about delivery. Instead of building against a fixed scope and disbanding post-launch, today's teams are set up to continuously evolve a specific product; whether that's a checkout journey, mobile app, or back-office tool.

Product-led teams are long-lived and cross-functional, typically including product owners, front-end and full-stack engineers, QA, DevOps, and platform engineers. They're empowered to act, not just implement. And they measure success not by deadlines or budget compliance, but by KPIs that matter: user adoption, NPS, and service resilience.

## Demand Shifts: Front-End and Full-Stack on the Rise

As monolithic back-end platforms give way to API-first architectures, there's been a clear and sustained shift in hiring demand: front-end and full-stack engineers are now front and centre.

Where back-end specialists once dominated the hiring landscape, today's market prioritises developers who can work across the stack, build interface-rich experiences, and integrate cleanly with modular services.

## Hybrid, Face Time and the Return-to-Office Debate

The WFH honeymoon is over, at least for some. In 2026, workplace flexibility remains a hot topic, particularly among larger retail brands and eCommerce businesses.

We've seen a notable return-to-office push from names like M&S, Boots, Morrisons, Frasers Group, and Amazon. The reasoning is typically framed around culture, collaboration, and productivity.

At the same time, many smaller vendors, agencies and mid-sized businesses are holding steady with hybrid models. There's a general recognition that for certain teams, a degree of in-person interaction adds value, whether it's onboarding, whiteboarding, or culture-building.

## What This All Means for Talent Strategy

Whether you're scaling a product team or hiring into an existing platform squad, the signals are consistent:

- **Versatility wins** – T-shaped engineers who can flex across disciplines are outpacing single-layer specialists.
- **Product thinking is essential** – Teams need people who understand user outcomes, not just tickets.
- **Front-end fluency is non-negotiable** – With more innovation happening at the interface layer, those closest to the user are in highest demand.
- **AI isn't replacing teams, but it's redefining them** – Engineers who can work alongside agents, rather than compete with them, will have the edge.
- **Leadership is evolving** – Senior engineers with soft skills and delivery ownership are increasingly valuable in flat, fast-moving orgs.



## Observations in 2026:

### The rise of agentic shopping

In 2026, AI isn't just answering questions - it's shopping. As Google's Agentic Checkout and OpenAI's research tools mature, the persona data layer is becoming the primary way products are discovered.

We predict a split. Brands with flat data will fight for scraps in the price comparison basement. Brands with persona-based data - attributes that describe the life of the product - will be the ones recommended by agents as the best choice for the user's specific context.



Sam Wright  
Blink SEO

# Engineering empathy: why persona-based data is the real moat

## The myth: AI has intuition

There is a lazy assumption doing the rounds that AI will simply understand your brand eventually. The myth is that if you plug an LLM into your store, it will magically grasp the nuance of your products without you doing much work.

It won't. AI models are statistically brilliant but emotionally blind. They default to the average, so if you feed them generic data, you are going to get generic results back.

## The problem: the curation gap

The whole point of a large catalogue store is curation. You exist to help a customer find exactly what they are looking for among thousands of options. Anything you can do to steer them to the right product is a win.

The problem is that most brands treat product data as a logistical necessity rather than a curation tool. We call this commodity data - things like size, weight, material and colour. It tells the AI what a product is, but it fails completely to explain who it is for. If your data is flat, you aren't curating; you are just listing.

When a customer searches for "pyjamas for night sweats" or "bedding for hot sleepers", standard attributes like "100% Viscose" or "200 Thread Count" are useless. They don't capture the actual human need: cooling relief for hormonal changes or temperature regulation.

If your data doesn't map to these realities, you risk being overlooked by the next generation of search.

## The strategy: mapping personas to attributes

The winning strategy we are seeing isn't just cleaning your data - it is enriching it with persona-based details. You need to engineer empathy into your taxonomy. Here is the playbook:

1. Define persona-based attributes.
2. Create a schema that captures subjective feelings.
3. Use Shopify's metafields to store these attributes as structured data.
4. Sync to the front end.

## Real-world impact

We applied this persona mapping strategy to a large catalogue retailer recently. They had thousands of SKUs that were technically accurate but emotionally hollow.

By enriching the data with use case attributes - mapping specific products to specific customer problems - we saw dormant inventory wake up. Products that had never sold began moving because they finally appeared for high intent, long tail queries.

The result was a doubling of organic revenue, driven not by more traffic, but by the right traffic finding the exact product for their specific life scenario.

## Final thoughts

# The Common Thread

Eight contributors, eight vantage points, one recurring answer. Quiz responses, consent-aware tracking, catalog attributes, margin reporting, wholesale pricing: the subjects varied widely, and nearly every contributor arrived at the same constraint. The data underneath.

It is a less exciting conclusion than a new channel or a new interface, and it is the one that keeps holding up. Agentic discovery rewards the brands whose products can be understood, both by a shopper describing a need in their own words and by the systems that increasingly do that describing on their behalf. Enrichment, consistency, and a single source of truth are unglamorous work, and everything built on top of them depends on getting it right.

So here is a practical test. If you adopted a new platform tomorrow, could your product and customer data carry it?

The conversation continues. Watch this space for the next volume of GROW, where we will keep pressing on the questions that decide where commerce goes.



John Brolly  
Athos Commerce



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