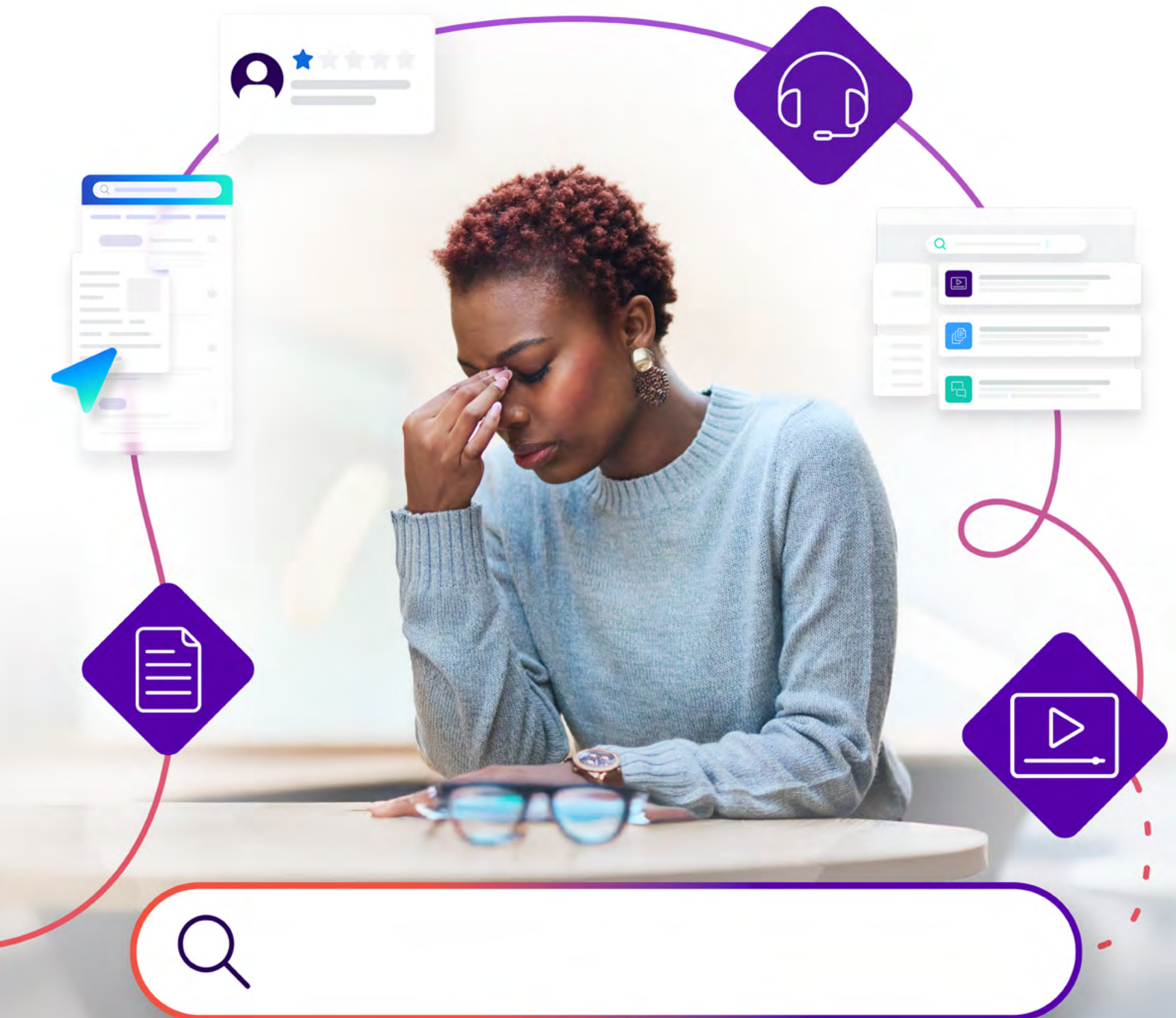


CX Relevance Report 2025:

Customer Effort Is at an All-Time High — **Is Generative Search the Key?**



Navigating the Crossroads of CX, AI, and Customer Expectations

As businesses grapple with a cost-of-living crisis that reshapes consumer priorities, digital experiences are facing unprecedented scrutiny. Thus, customers demand more value and relevance from every interaction while abiding zero friction. These pressures coincide with the transformative rise of generative AI and upcoming agentic AI, technologies already revolutionizing digital engagement — but also bring their own set of challenges.

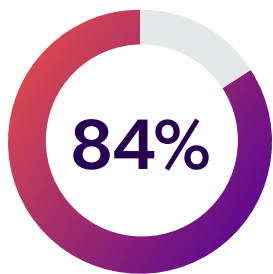
The fifth iteration of the **CX Relevance** Report explores critical trends shaping the customer experience landscape:

- ▶ **Rising Cost of Effort:** With customer loyalty more fragile than ever, the effort required to find help or make decisions is a key determinant of brand perception. The trend? A clear preference for self-service solutions that deliver answers instantly and intuitively.
- ▶ **Generative AI Paradox:** While tools like ChatGPT and AI-driven assistants are already delivering amazing outcomes, their success depends on reliable data, contextual accuracy, and their ability to integrate seamlessly into customer journeys. Businesses that prioritize relevance and coherence over novelty are gaining an edge.

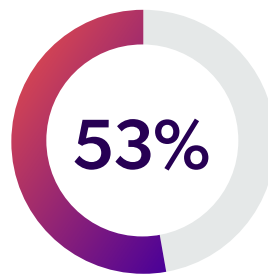
- ▶ **Search as the Strategic Differentiator:** The silent workhorse of the digital ecosystem, generative search is evolving into a central driver of connected experiences, reducing frustration and enabling customers to find what they need — before they even realize they need it.

These trends reveal a critical inflection point: success in 2025 will depend on balancing innovation with usability, personalization with privacy, and ambition with precision. Our report sheds light on these dynamics and offers a roadmap for businesses to thrive in this transformative era.

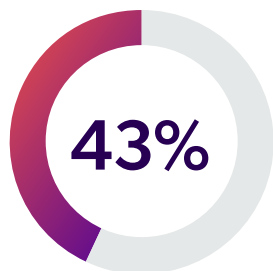
Takeaways from This Year's Report



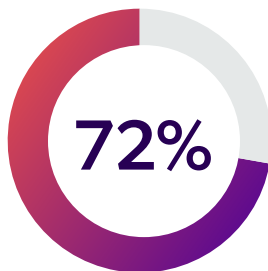
felt they had to put in a moderate amount or a lot of effort to find information or get help



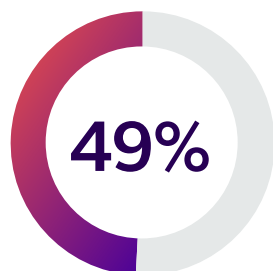
cited 'not being able to easily search for and find the information I'm looking for on my own' as the biggest problem they encounter in a self-service experience



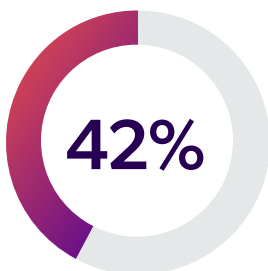
go straight to the search bar when they land on a website with a specific intent in mind



said they will abandon a brand's website when they encounter a negative self-service experience, choosing instead to go to Google or a competitor website



of respondents have experienced a hallucination while using a generative AI tool



of respondents say they always fact check a generated answer (+6 point YoY)

While access to a human remains the preferred choice for what would make a self-service experience better, **this year we saw a shift: a decrease in having access to a live human agent and an increase in expectations for better information and self-assistance online.**

Companies Falling Behind in Reducing Customer Effort

84% of respondents felt they had to put in a moderate amount or a lot of effort to find information or get help.

What contributes to this effort? Two-thirds said that inconsistent communication with different departments (43%) and completing complex case forms to talk to a person (50%) were two of three situations having the biggest impact on brand perception — **the top being 'not being able to easily search for and find the information I'm looking for on my own' (53%)**.

Another change in the challenges respondents are facing include a growth in experiencing hallucinations, increasing seven points YoY (21% to 28%), which we'll delve into more in a few pages.

Generally, how much effort do you feel you have to put into getting a support issue resolved or finding information with any company?

22% A lot of effort



62% A moderate amount of effort



14% A small amount of effort



1% No effort at all



Takeaway:

- Search is a natural throughline across the digital experience — when that search is unified. Even though individual software is packaged with an incumbent search offering, these capabilities can be cul-de-sacs that prevent site visitors and customers from searching freely across touchpoints. Cheap search can be costly — and losing customers isn't worth the price.
- Invest in a robust, unified index and advanced generative AI search to connect all of your customer journey touchpoints; this creates a convenient network that answers questions and delivers information wherever a user interacts with a business.

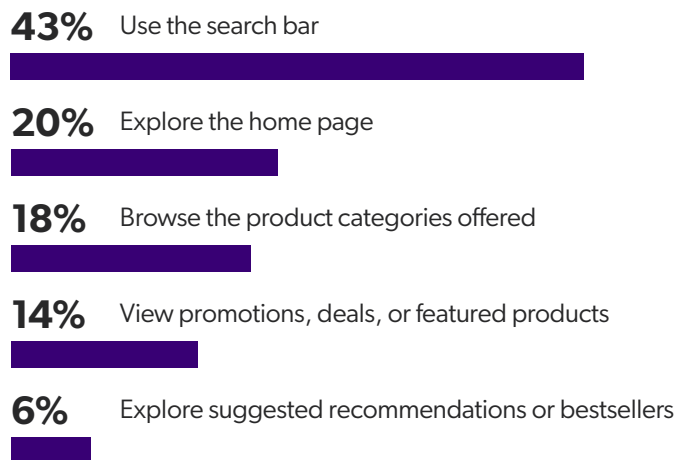
Search Is the Ubiquitous Default Across Generations

It's the norm to go online for answers when people need help or have questions. Almost half go to a company's website or help center (48%, up 4 points YoY) — **and when they land on a website with a specific intent in mind, two-fifths use the search bar (43% for both US and UK).** And this is not just digital natives like Gen Z and Millennials — almost half of Baby Boomers and Silent Gen (47%) also stated that they go to a company website when they need information.

Only 7% said they would search for help within a product itself (this is specific to SaaS-based products) — this could be lack of function or lack of awareness about the capability.

44% would go to another online source, including Google (33%), ChatGPT or other GenAI-based tools (7%, 2 points up YoY), or go to an online community (5%).

When you visit a website with a specific goal in mind (whether to find a product, a service, or an answer), what's the first thing you do?



Takeaway:

- ▶ Almost half of website visitors (prospects, customers, etc.) heading to the search bar strongly indicates that search is the doorway to your digital experience. And when you have the opportunity to connect disparate channels and make one cohesive journey, well, why not?
- ▶ Don't leave customers to get lost in a labyrinth — invest in this seemingly simple box to educate, engage, and, eventually, convert them into long-time advocates.

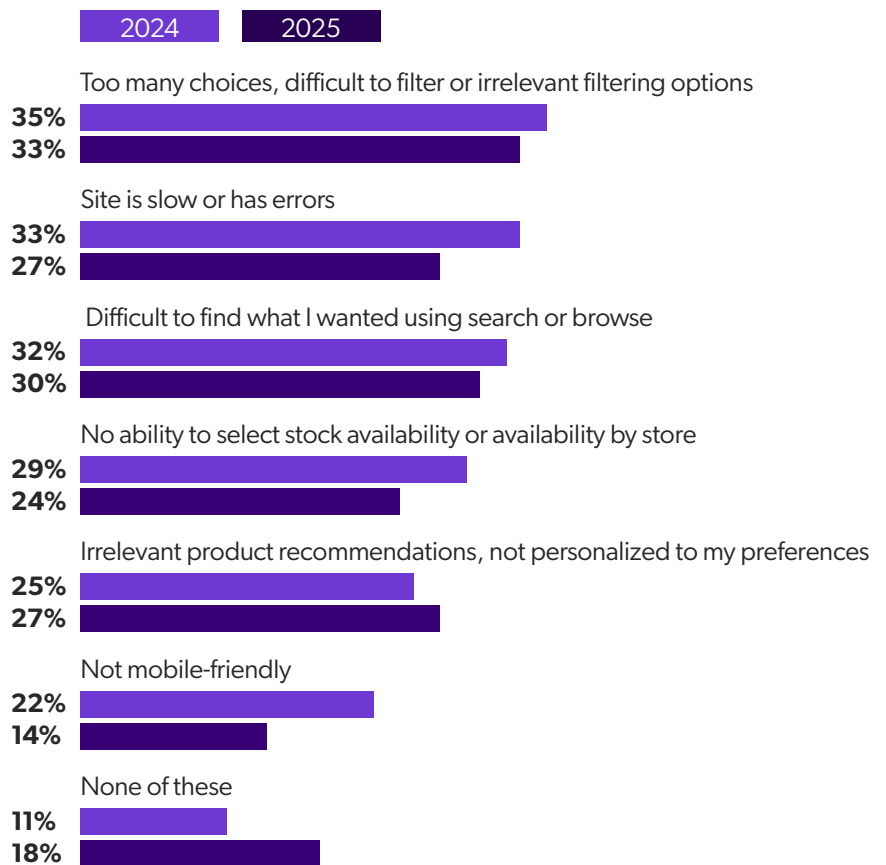
43%
Use the search bar

Are Irrelevant Recommendations On the Rise?

When asked about the problems most frequently experienced when online, website search was an issue for 29%, with complex and slow navigation coming in next at 25%.

Although an 'overwhelming number of results' remains the topmost complaint when asked about problems in digital experiences, we saw an uptick in irrelevant recommendations (2 points up YoY). As you'll see later in this report, we've also noted a hesitancy in sharing information to receive personalized experiences — which may be a contributing factor.

Which are the most frequent problems you have encountered when buying online?



Takeaway:

- ▶ Personalized, relevant recommendations need not rely on site users or customers handing over their personal information. Using data like on-site behavior (past searches or browsing patterns) can help businesses anticipate what users want. In addition, companies can also use behavioral signals like clicks and time spent on page to fine-tune results — getting users to what they're looking for faster.
- ▶ After all, year over year the response said to have the biggest impact on brand perception has been 'finding what I'm looking for in just a few clicks' (45%, static YoY).

'Ghosting' Trends Downward for Second Year

When customers endure these unsatisfying digital experiences, almost three-quarters will go elsewhere (72%). These alternative options include Google (53%) or visiting another website or app (36%).

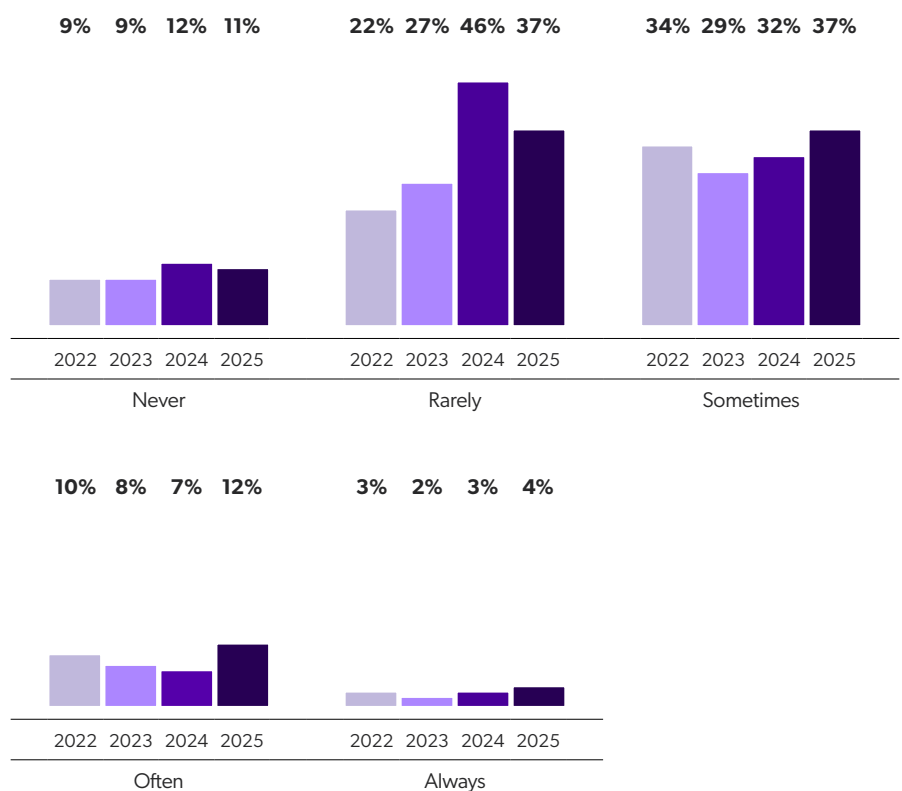
But there's a growing cohort willing to give brands another chance (62%).

These respondents said they would refine or adjust their search terms (36%), use filters to narrow their options (30%), or browse the site's categories or sections (26%). These responses were predominantly seen from Gen Z and Millennials. **However, these chances remain limited** — after two or three negative experiences, two-thirds (66%) say they will abandon a website.

Another positive finding is that the ghosting trend might be dissipating as the likelihood of complaining after a negative digital experience increases.

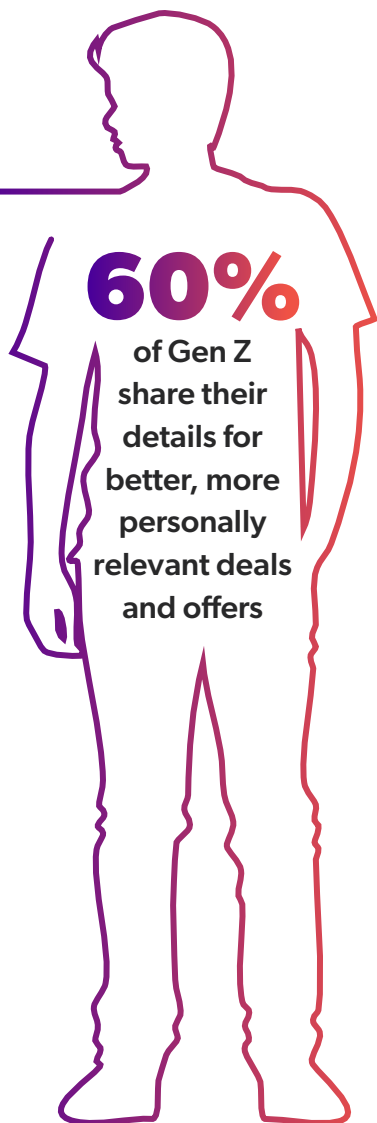
Over half of respondents (52%) complain sometimes/often/always, a 10 point increase YoY.

How often do you complain to a company when you have a negative digital [customer service] self-service experience?

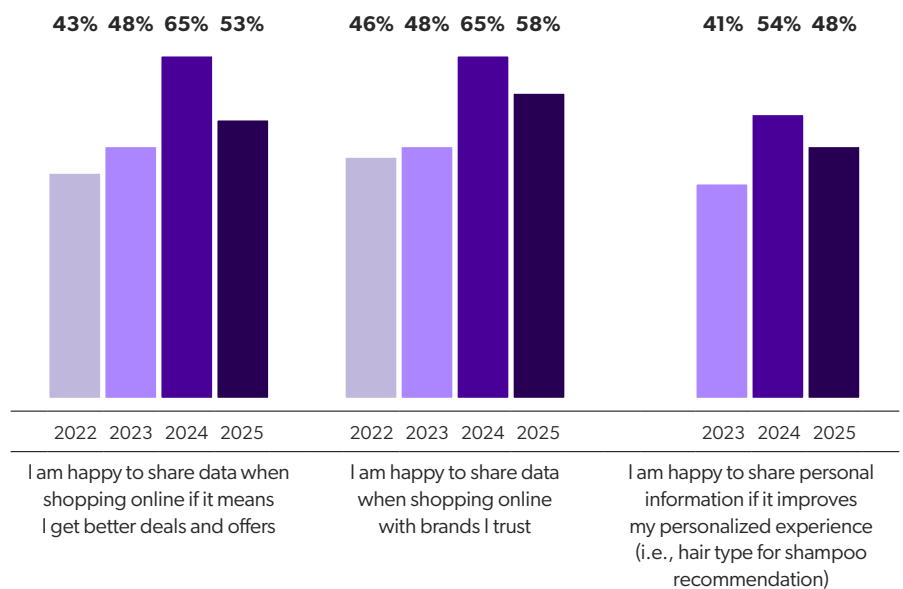


Happiness to Share Data Falls for First Time in Three Years

One of the biggest hurdles with digital experiences is feeling impersonal. The rise of personalization enabled the ability to balance both customer and business needs. Yet traditional methods only go so far, using data like location or, if the user is authenticated, conversion history.



Thinking about sharing data when shopping online, to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?



Offering deeper personalization requires more details that, in previous years, users were happy to provide if it meant they received a better experience. The biggest imperative was for companies to be transparent about how said user data was used — and then protect that data from bad actors.

Sharing details for better, more personally relevant deals and offers is still the predominant preference (US and UK 53%; Gen Z 60%, Millennials 62%, Gen X 54%, Baby Boomers 42%, Silent Gen 37%).

This year we've seen a dip in overall happiness to share data for any reason

(with at least a 6 point decrease YoY).

Is this due to a growing dissatisfaction with mindless consumerism, or something else?

**54% to
48%**
a decrease in personalized
data sharing in 2025

Takeaway:

- ▶ Whether third-party cookies stay or go, your business doesn't have to rely on them. Search can offer personalization for authenticated and unauthenticated users, tapping into the wealth of information available within individual sessions. These can be used to tailor individual experiences — and this can be done at scale when leveraging AI.
- ▶ In addition, this personalization can help your business build trust with your audiences, leading to direct sharing of information with a specific source, and, eventually, authentication.

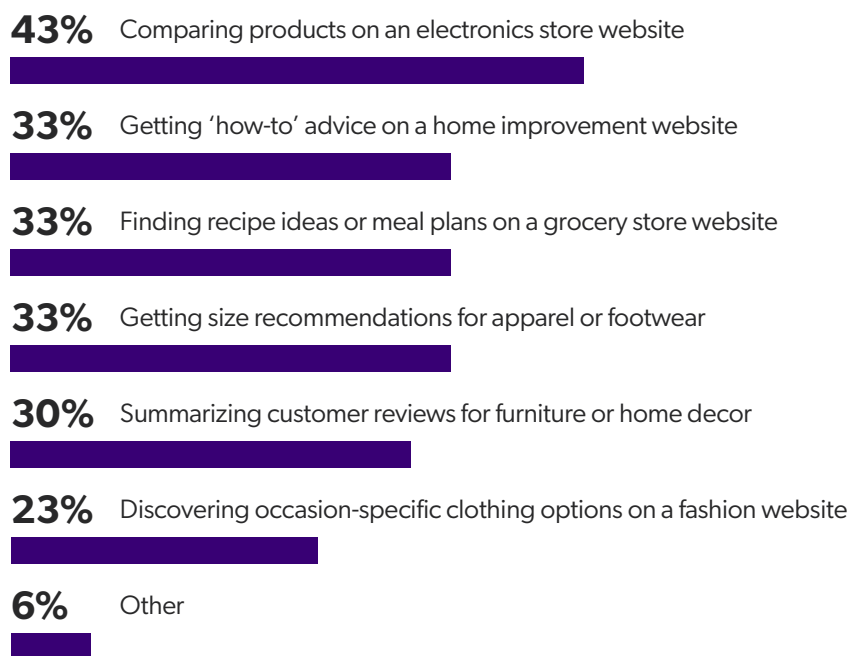
Users Want Generative Experiences for Complex Issues

Speaking of generative AI, last year we found that 72% of respondents expected their online experiences to evolve with this technology. While this holistic belief has waned to 69%, concrete generative AI examples help solidify this expectation into specifics: 48% want educational tools or guides and 44% seek virtual assistants.

And through examples of generative AI usage, it's clear that the public is beginning to recognize how helpful this technology can be in breaking down complex tasks where pieces of answers can be scattered across multiple sites and repositories.

Scattered content underscores the need for connectors to pull disparate information together into a centralized location that a large language model (LLM) can make sense of. And the presence of an LLM also necessitates a functionality to ground responses in source content, which search can also help with — specifically to reduce or eliminate hallucinations.

In what specific situations would generative AI make online shopping easier or more helpful for you?



Takeaway:

- ▶ Hallucinations come from unfettered access to information, where concepts can collide without curation. Organizations are being held responsible for the information their chatbots are providing to their customers too (see Air Canada court ruling). Hallucinations or wrongful access can open up organizations to significant risk and cost.
- ▶ Advanced search engines coupled with robust content indexing don't just help LLMs access the information that it can then use to generate a response; engines that use techniques like **retrieval augmented generation**, also known as RAG, can safeguard businesses from an LLM's more playful side, or the ill intent of a user's query. When a search platform provides an LLM with solely the information relevant not only to the question at hand, but also from sources a searcher has permissions to access, it generates accurate and secure answers.

GenAI Hallucinations Remain a Stubborn Problem

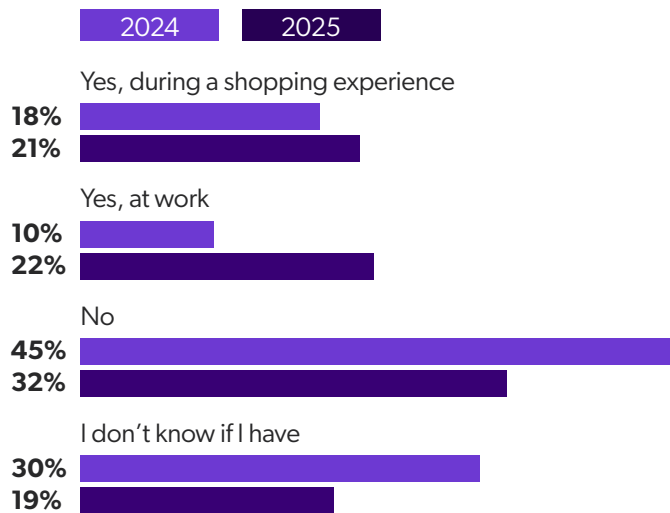
Just under half (49%) have experienced a hallucination while using a generative AI tool, with a breakdown between at work (22%), shopping (21%), or in other personal activities (24%). We saw corresponding decreases in “no” (from 45% to 32%) and “I don’t know if I have” (from 30% to 19%). More exposure allows for more opportunities for confidently incorrect information.

Half of these respondents said they experience hallucinations on a weekly basis, while the other half say it occurs monthly or less frequently. US respondents reported more weekly experiences than UK respondents (52% vs 49% respectively).

49%

have experienced a hallucination while using a generative AI tool

Have you ever experienced a hallucination (fake answer) using a generative AI tool?



Takeaway:

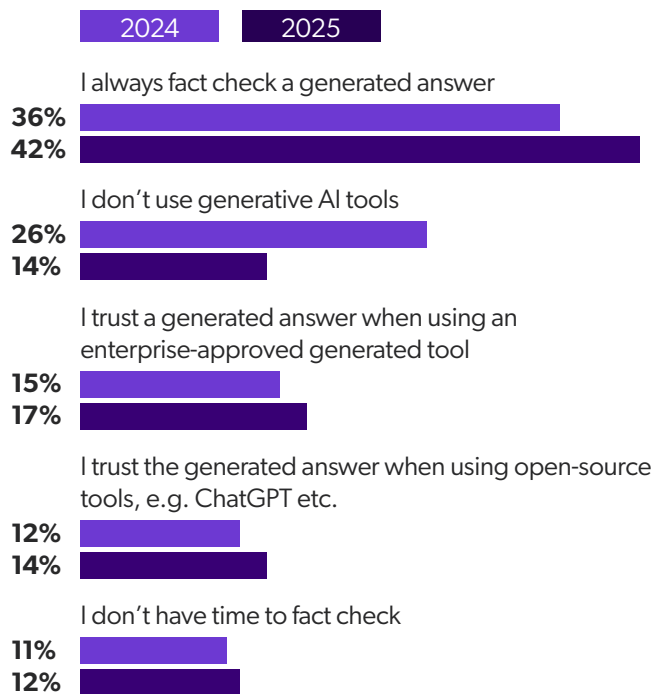
- ▶ LLMs struggle to admit when they don't know something, which can lead to hallucinations. In some cases — especially with bad actors — it's better for businesses to avoid answering altogether. A smart fallback, like prompting users to rephrase their question, helps prevent reputational risks. Plus, guiding users to verified, related content keeps their journey on track.

Users Remain Skeptical of Generative Answers

Forty-two percent say they always fact check a generated answer (US 43%, UK 41%; Generation Z 47%, Millennials 44%, Gen X 40%, Baby Boomers/Silent Gen 36%), which further points to the need for RAG to craft trustworthy customer experiences.

When it came to trust in enterprise-approved tools vs open source, enterprise-approved tools narrowly won by three points. Trust in both increased year over year, with the difference between trusting enterprise approved and open source remaining the same.

Do you fact check or check the source of a generated answer for work or do you trust the answer?



42%
of users say they always fact check an answer

Takeaway:

- It's quickly becoming a best practice to offer citations along with a generated answer. This not only allows users to fact-check the answer, which can lead to increasing trust in the generative tool, but also allows the user to dig deeper into a topic or subject.

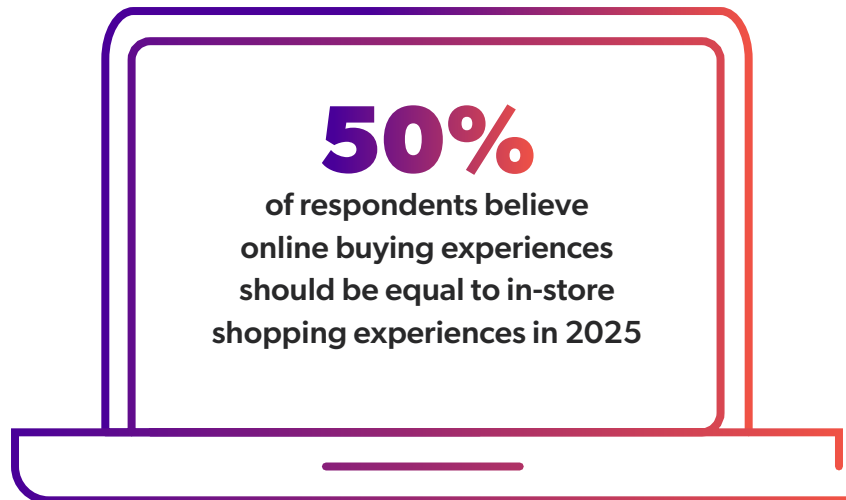
Are Expectations Around Digital Experiences Waning?

To the question of whether digital experiences can surpass what an in-person experience can offer, beliefs seem to be on a downward trend.

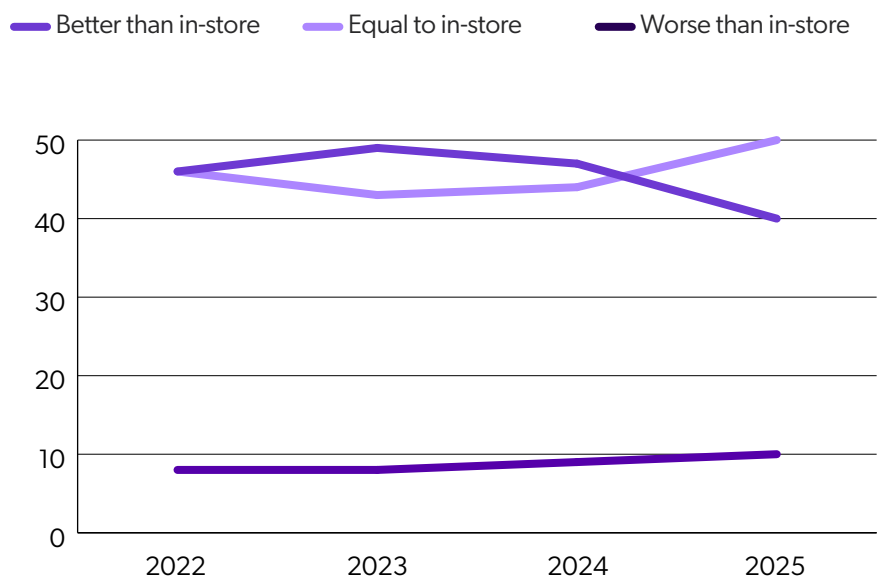
Where previously expectations were high that an online experience should be better than in-person, **this year the expectation that an online experience should be equal to in-person came out on top.** This was especially true for UK respondents (52% vs US 48%) and was cross-generational (Gen Z 48%, Millennials 48%, Gen X 52%, Baby Boomers 52%, Silent Gen 42%).

With all the buzz around generative AI compounded with no tangible results, prospects and customers may be beginning to expect companies to put their money where their mouths are. With information and access available online, if those customers/prospects can't at least find what they're looking for, they're moving on.

Will this change as agentic AI begins to pervade digital experiences, and users gain a better understanding of its potential? Only time will tell.



Do you expect online buying experiences to be better, equal to, or worse than traditional in-store shopping experiences?



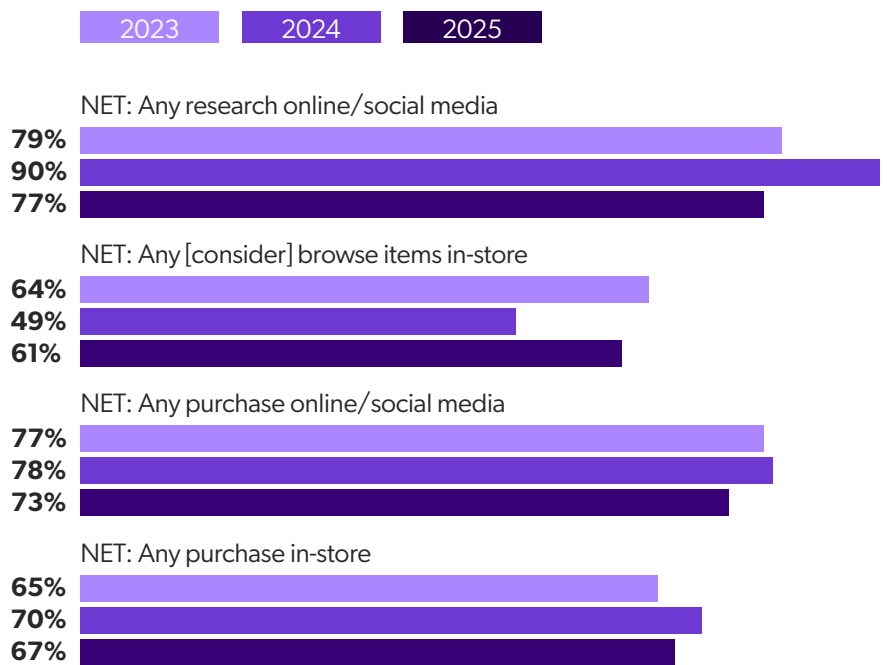
In-Person Shopping Preference Rises

Just over three-quarters (77%) prefer to research online/via social media, with 73% converting online/via social media. Two-thirds (67%) mention purchasing in-store, with 61% mentioning browsing items in-store.

This year we've seen a huge increase in browse and purchase items in-store (from 26% to 40%). We've also seen a dip in researching and purchasing on social media (from 23% to 17%). The predominant preference, researching via web search and purchasing from a retailer website, dropped from 59% in 2023 to 48% in 2024.

Still, it's clear that consumers see online information sources as an important tool across both digital and in-person experiences; a resource that drives even offline conversion. The ability to not just offer educational content but also specific, local details like 'is this in stock at my hardware store' can be the moment that nets a conversion or purchase — or lose a customer permanently.

When shopping, which of the following do you prefer to do?



Takeaway:

- ▶ Location-aware search isn't just for those interested in 'buy online, pick up in store' (BOPIS); it's also for connecting people with expertise. Whether a user needs legal advice or a healthcare checkup, understanding the options immediately available to them in a geographical sense is a huge boost to quickly finding an answer. And this capability can be further enhanced by filtering for language, preferences, and more.
- ▶ Location-aware search can also be "smart" enough to provide relevant results a user may not have directly searched for. For example, if searching for pharmacies in a specific area came up with unsatisfying results, the search platform could also pull in locations from a nearby zip code that has a good chance of being relevant for the searcher.

Consistency Across Touchpoints Remains an Issue

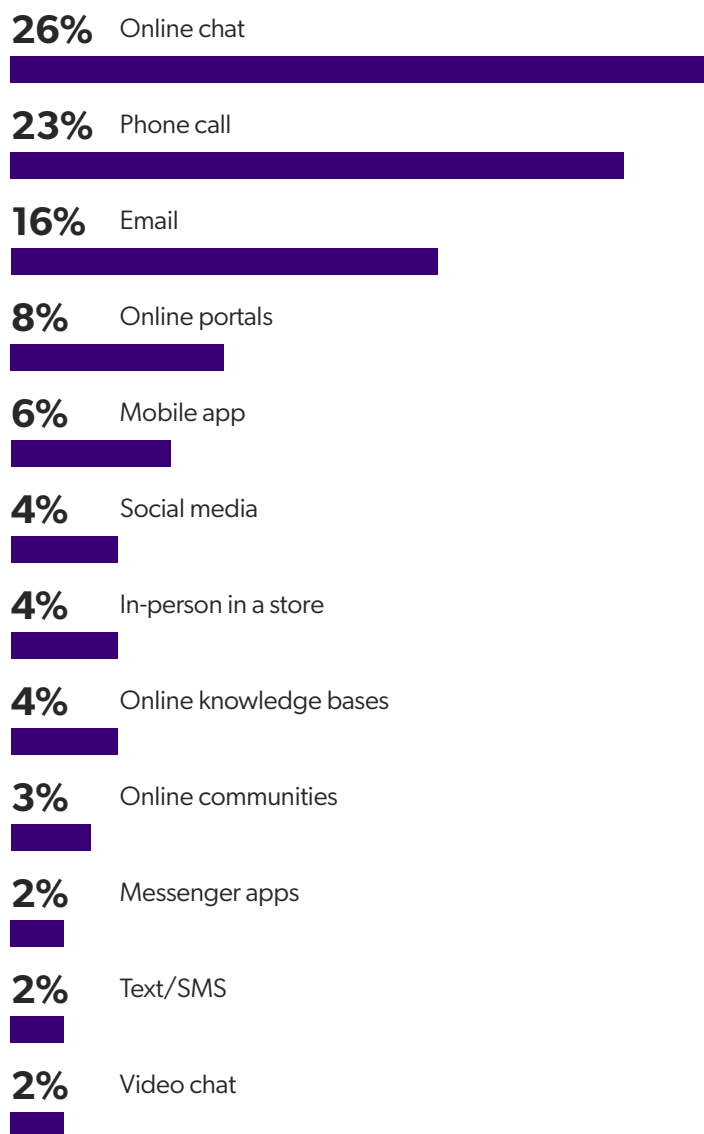
On average, customers use three channels to engage with a company for support or information — and when paired with ‘communicating with different departments rather than one company’ as the second biggest problem in a negative self-service experience, the challenge of providing great multi-channel customer service is exasperated.

Imagine providing your introductory details, re-summarizing the problem, re-iterating solutions tried, and other information three times or more; it’s exhausting and frustrating.

This decreases to one channel for Baby Boomers and Silent Gen (35% of whom chose phone call as their preferred channel), while Gen Z and Millennials use four on average (30% of Millennials cited online chat as a preferred engagement point).

71% said they will use an online channel to engage with a company, which increases to 78% in the UK. Use of offline channels (phone call, in-person at a store) is higher in the US and for older generations.

Which channel do you use most often to engage with a company when you have a customer support or information need?



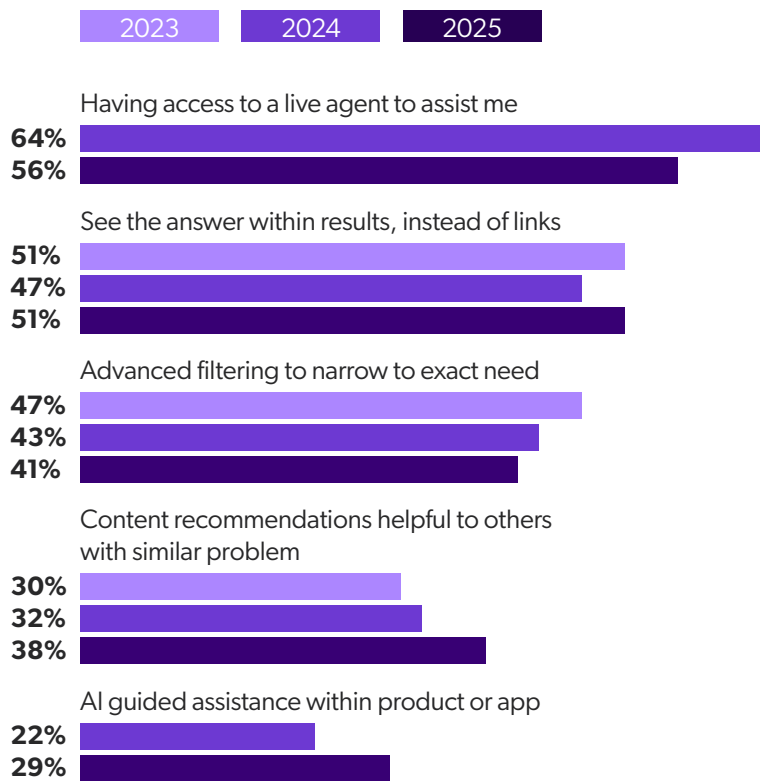
Self-Service Makes Gains on Assisted Support as Preferred Channel

In previous relevance reports, access to a live agent was traditionally the top-cited response for what would improve a self-service experience. **While access to a human remains the preferred choice, this year we saw a decrease in having access to a live agent and an increase in expectations for better information and assistance online.**

These included a four point increase YoY (47% to 51%) in seeing answers in search results; a six point increase YoY (32% to 38%) in seeing content recommendations that have been helpful to others with a similar problem; and an eight point increase YoY (22% to 29%) in receiving AI guided assistance/troubleshooting within the product or application.

Whether this trend remains and grows depends on businesses adopting better practices and technology that can help them serve their customers. Not only does digital provide a potentially elevated customer experience, but it's a goldmine of cost-savings and customer intelligence for businesses who wield search wisely.

If you were trying to resolve an issue yourself online, which of the following would improve your self-service experience?



Takeaway:

- ▶ Customer service and support is not a one-size fits all. But balancing multiple channels with human support is a delicate art; businesses can make both work for them when those channels and agents are connected, creating a feedback loop.
- ▶ Answers that are documented can be sourced by customers online, getting them back to their original goal. Agents can then direct their focus and talents toward more complicated problems — buttressed by information from the searches done by prospects and customers on the self-service side.

Customers Expect More: 'You Know Me — Now Deliver the Personalization I Deserve'

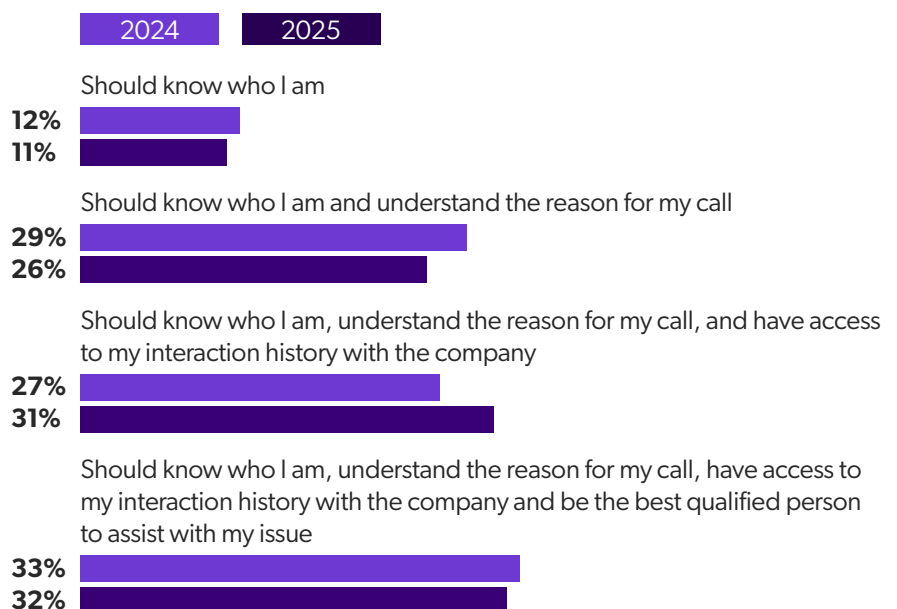
Even though preference for human assistance is waning, expectations on assisted support remain high (which makes sense given the data about inconsistent communication across departments).

Thirty-two percent of respondents said the customer service representative should know who they are, understand the reason for the call, and have access to their interaction history with the company, and be the best qualified person to assist with the issue.

Search histories and interactions can be piped into the user interfaces and workflows that agents use on a daily basis — this not only provides a positive customer experience, but also lets agents do what they do best: offer 1-on-1, personalized human support.



How personalized do you feel an interaction with a customer service representative should be?



The Path Forward for Easing Customer Effort

This year's findings make one truth clear: effort is the defining factor in customer loyalty. In an era where customers expect instant, intuitive, and personalized experiences, every interaction must minimize friction and maximize relevance. Organizations that fail to prioritize ease risk eroding trust, while those that do will turn everyday engagements into lasting relationships.

Fortunately, the challenges outlined in this report are solvable. AI-powered search and discovery — especially with the precision of generative AI — can bridge the gap between intent and resolution, ensuring customers find the right information effortlessly. A connected, intelligent search experience doesn't just reduce frustration; it fosters confidence, increases self-service adoption, and enhances operational efficiency.

The future of knowledge experiences is search-first, AI-powered, and effort-free.

Research Methodology

Arlington Research conducted two online surveys

4,000 adults across the U.S. and UK aged 18+. Quotas were set for gender, age and region at a country-level. Responses were captured between Nov. 21 to Nov 27, 2024.

4,000 adults across the U.S. and UK aged 18+ who use a computer as part of their work in companies with 5,000+ employees. Responses were captured between Nov. 21 to Dec 9, 2024.

Due to rounding, not all percentage totals in this report equal 100%. All comparison calculations are made from total numbers (not rounded numbers).

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