

How to make your online shopping more environmentally friendly

October 17 2019, by Stuart Milligan and Baris Yalabik



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Online shopping continues to [grow at a phenomenal rate](#). In 2018, the market value of UK retail was [£381 billion](#) of which online transactions made up [almost one-fifth](#). That's £12.3 billion of grocery items and £58.8 billion of all non-food items purchased online.

As with almost any human activity, this behaviour has a significant impact on the environment. Online shopping uses tonnes of packaging (overall British retail uses [59 billion pieces](#) of plastic each year), and a vast number of [air polluting](#) daily deliveries on the roads.

Yet there are ways in which retailers and consumers can use home [delivery](#) to reduce the environmental impact of our shopping habits.

Take online grocery shopping, [currently dominated in the UK](#) by the big names of Tesco (42.8% market share), Asda (18.41%), Ocado (16.16%) and Sainsbury's (14.09%). These large organisations have sufficient resources to invest in the cleanest zero-emission (predominantly electric) vehicles for their home delivery service.

The journeys these vehicles make to customers' homes are likely to present a much smaller carbon footprint than if those customers drove to the supermarket themselves. Delivering to multiple customers over the course of a trip also significantly reduces the total number of journeys required.

So too does the wide variety of delivery slots made available by retailers, along with an increasing number of customers as the [popularity of home delivery grows](#). These factors all allow retailers to optimise delivery routes and reduce their environmental impact.

For non-food [home delivery](#) though, the final stage of delivery to the customer is often not managed directly by the retailers, but out-sourced to independent couriers. This fragmented nature of "last-mile" service provision means there is less likely to be the same investment in low-emission vehicles. Indeed, many couriers are self-employed, using their personal vehicles to deliver parcels.

Non-food online deliveries also require each item to be not only

individually packed, but also protected by additional packaging to prevent damage in transit.

Delivery without delay

Another trend having a major impact on the environment is the offer of next-day (and even same-day) deliveries. For non-[food items](#), this means always having available stock—which requires more space to keep it and more energy to store and move it. From a fresh food perspective, the offer of constant availability results in increased [levels of food waste](#).



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Also, in order to satisfy such swift delivery requirements, additional vehicles are required to ensure such speedy delivery—often in vehicles that are only partly loaded.

Another point to consider is that online deliveries do not necessarily substitute our own journeys to shops, resulting in an increased net carbon footprint. And [research indicates](#) that returns from online purchases are significantly greater than store purchases, resulting in increased levels of waste and increased transportation.

Yet there are choices that consumers can make to reduce the impact their shopping decisions have on the environment.

Greener options

When [short distances](#) (less than 3km, say) exist between shopper and retailer, it is environmentally beneficial to shop in store. It is only when longer deliveries are required that online delivery becomes a greener option.

Where possible, customers who want to benefit from an [online shopping](#) experience should opt for the click and collect option to pick up in store, reducing the logistical demands on the supplier.

Locker boxes, where you pick up your delivery from a secure locker, offer a good compromise between increasing convenience and reducing environmental impact. A further green, last-mile initiative is crowd-sourcing, where members of the public drop off packages as part of their planned journey [for a small fee](#).

From a packaging perspective, more and more retailers are now offering bag-free options or alternatives to plastic bags. Environmentally conscious consumers should seek out retailers which offer these options.

Encouragingly, retailers are well aware of all of these challenges—and many are working hard to address environmental issues. There is an increased use of biodegradable packaging throughout the supply chain, and more focus on "closing-the-loop"—where [retailers are taking responsibility](#) for reusing and recycling products.

But there are elements of the current approach to online shopping that are simply not sustainable. These need to be urgently addressed to meet global challenges regarding air quality and global warming. Overall, the environmental sustainability of the retail market is a complex conundrum. But simple consumer choices can go a long way to making the way we shop greener.

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