

# UK Delivery Benchmark 2026

## Issue 4

Lessons from 100  
Mystery Shops  
During Peak



# Key insights



- **£36bn worth** of non-food baskets are still abandoned at the checkout due to delivery-related reasons.
- Poor delivery options caused high-value shoppers to abandon more than **one in four (29%)** of their shopping carts in 2025, **compared to 22%** abandoned by all shopper types.
- **61% of shoppers** put delivery CHOICE first over delivery cost.
- High-value shoppers expect to see 5 delivery options at checkout – **the average offered by retailers is 2.6.**
- **73% of shoppers** are less likely to buy again from a retailer that fails to meet their delivery estimate - our mystery shop found **that 29% of retailers** either missed or nearly missed their delivery promise.
- **3 in 5 (59%) of all shopper** types have abandoned a purchase or switched to a different retailer because the delivery experience did not meet their expectations.
- **76% of high-value shoppers** are willing to pay extra for premium services - however, **15% of retailers** offer neither next day nor express delivery.
- **Shoppers say £3.50** is the upper limit of acceptability when it comes to standard delivery fees; however, **77% of retailers charge more than this.**

# Introduction



Over the past several years, our reports have explored delivery's role at checkout. Far from being just an operational task, we have shown how it shapes conversion, often making or breaking the final purchase decision.

This year, we went one step further and put retailers to the test to determine the following:

- Have they closed the gap on customer delivery expectations?
- Are they using delivery strategically to boost conversion and reduce abandonment?

To answer this, **over peak trading in December 2025, we ordered 100 items from 100 retailers** to get a sense of how retailers are responding to the delivery challenge.

We found that many brands still struggle in this space. They treat delivery as a set of operational decisions made behind the scenes, while shoppers experience it as a promise in the context of busy day-to-day lives.

As a result, £36bn worth of non-food items are still being abandoned at checkout due to delivery options, highlighting the cost of getting delivery wrong.

This report asks two simple questions:

- (1) how closely does delivery performance in the market match what UK shoppers actually want; and
- (2) where are the gaps most likely to cost retailers sales, loyalty and credibility?

To explore this, we combine two complementary approaches.

- First, we asked shoppers what they want. Using a shopper survey to assess expectations, we look at what shoppers value across delivery price, speed, choice, and reliability.
- Second, during our mystery shop we placed 100 standard delivery orders with 100 UK retailers using a consistent basket value (£15–£20) going to the same delivery postcode. Retailers were selected across key retail categories, with turnover between £15m–£250m (excluding brands already working with GFS).

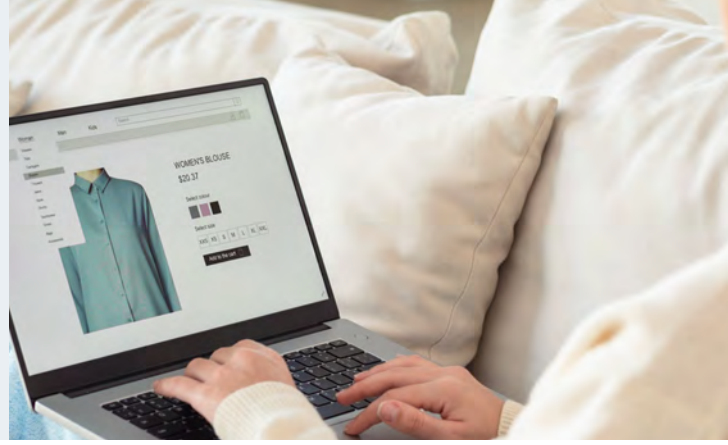
We show that key gaps remain between shoppers' expectations and retailers' reality.

Peak trading acts as a stress-test. When capacity tightens and missions become time-critical, weaknesses surface quickly. But the patterns revealed here extend beyond December. They point to structural strengths and persistent design flaws in delivery propositions – the choices that determine whether delivery feels dependable, good value and easy to integrate into everyday life.

The results highlight where performance quietly undermines growth and where the market is meeting rising expectations. In a market where shoppers are increasingly intolerant of friction, delivery can no longer be a background process. It is either a commercial asset – or a compounding liability.

# Section 1

## Basket Abandonment



### 1.1: The ongoing abandonment problem

Our Basket Abandonment report, now in its fourth year, benchmarks ecommerce delivery, and has consistently highlighted the problems caused by not using delivery as a strategic, operational, experience and revenue lever.

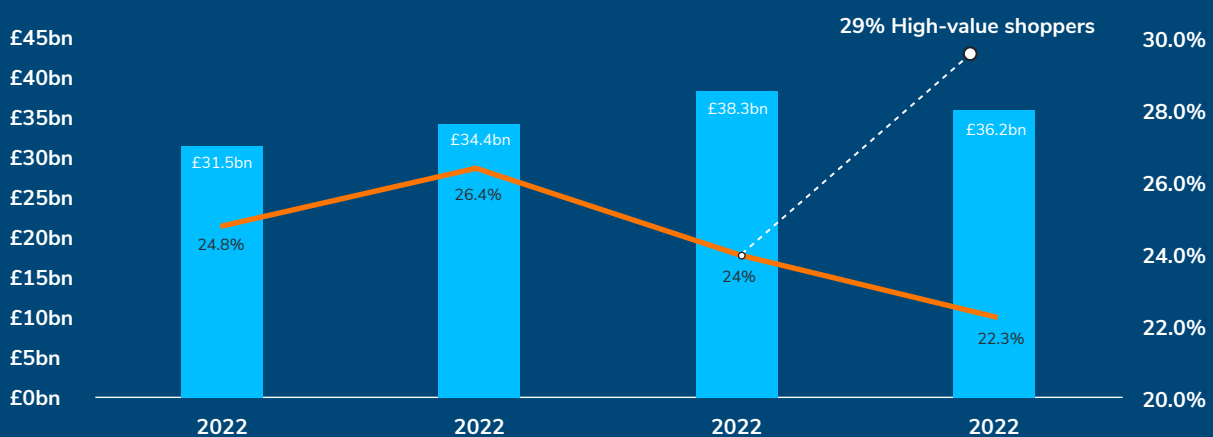
Shoppers expect delivery to be fast, affordable and reliable - especially during peak. But when retailers fall short, the result is often a lost sale. Our new mystery shop data reveals how wide the gap has become between shopper expectations and delivery execution.

#### Diagnosing the delivery challenge

As we have found in previous years, basket abandonment continues to be a significant drag on online retail. While rates have eased from their 2023 peak, £36bn of non-food online baskets are still abandoned at checkout due to delivery-related friction (Fig. 1).

Many retailers have strengthened their delivery propositions in recent years, helping to improve conversion. However, shoppers remain highly sensitive to delivery choice, speed and flexibility, and it's critical to note that as buyer choice continues to broaden, poor delivery options increasingly mean losing shoppers for the long-term – not just a single transaction.

**Figure 1: Checkout conversion improves, but £36bn still lost to basket abandonment**



Source: Retail Economics, GFS

■ Basket abandonment value (£bn)

— Average basket abandonment rate (%)

£36bn of online non-food sales abandoned at checkout: Abandonment rates have eased from their 2023 peak, but delivery-related friction continues to displace billions in online non-food spend each year. Abandonment rates also remain higher for the highest-value shoppers who retailers want to return: for higher frequency, high spending shoppers, 29% of baskets are abandoned.

Importantly, abandonment is no longer about losing a single transaction. Increasingly, retailers risk losing the customer’s lifetime value when delivery expectations aren’t met. Nearly three in five shoppers (59%) have abandoned or switched to a different retailer because delivery options were insufficient. In a highly competitive industry, the commercial consequences of disappointing shoppers at checkout have intensified.

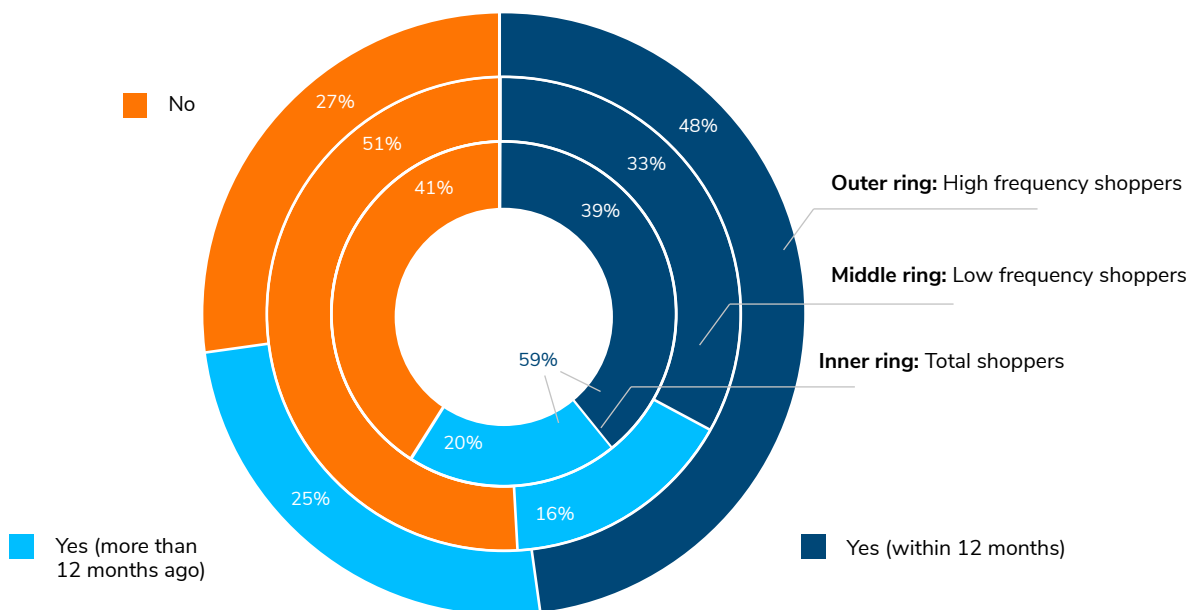
This reflects a fundamental customer mind shift where shoppers now expect checkout to adapt to their lives, not the

other way around. Clear choices around speed, location, and convenience are minimum expectations. As such, tolerance for inflexible delivery propositions is falling.

While abandonment is highest among the most valuable shoppers – those who are younger, more affluent and who shop online frequently - abandonment is not confined to a specific demographic. High abandonment rates are consistent across all shopper cohorts, with cost, choice and reliability emerging as the most common triggers. However, retailers should be particularly aware of the highest value shoppers (Fig. 2).

**Figure 2**

*Qu: Have you ever abandoned a purchase or switched to a different retailer because the delivery options did not match what you needed?*



Source: Retail Economics, GFS

# 1.2: The Five Delivery Cohorts

Basket abandonment is often treated as a single metric, but its drivers vary. While friction at checkout is widespread, the reasons differ by shopper priorities – whether price, speed or control.

Our cohort analysis shows these priorities shift between shoppers, yet abandonment remains high (Fig. 3). Understanding the differences between shoppers allows retailers to design delivery propositions that reduce friction more precisely, rather than relying on a one-size-fits-all model.

**Figure 3: Delivery cohorts**

	High-value Shoppers	Low-value Shoppers
<b>Profile</b>	Younger (under 45), more affluent, more frequent online shoppers who have high expectations and high abandonment rates	Older (over 45), less affluent and less frequent online shoppers who value low-cost, dependable delivery services
<b>Basket abandonment rate</b>	29%	16%
<b>Willing to pay extra for faster, more convenient delivery</b>	76%	41%
<b>Choice vs. Cost</b>	61% Choice 39% Cost	49% Choice 51% Cost

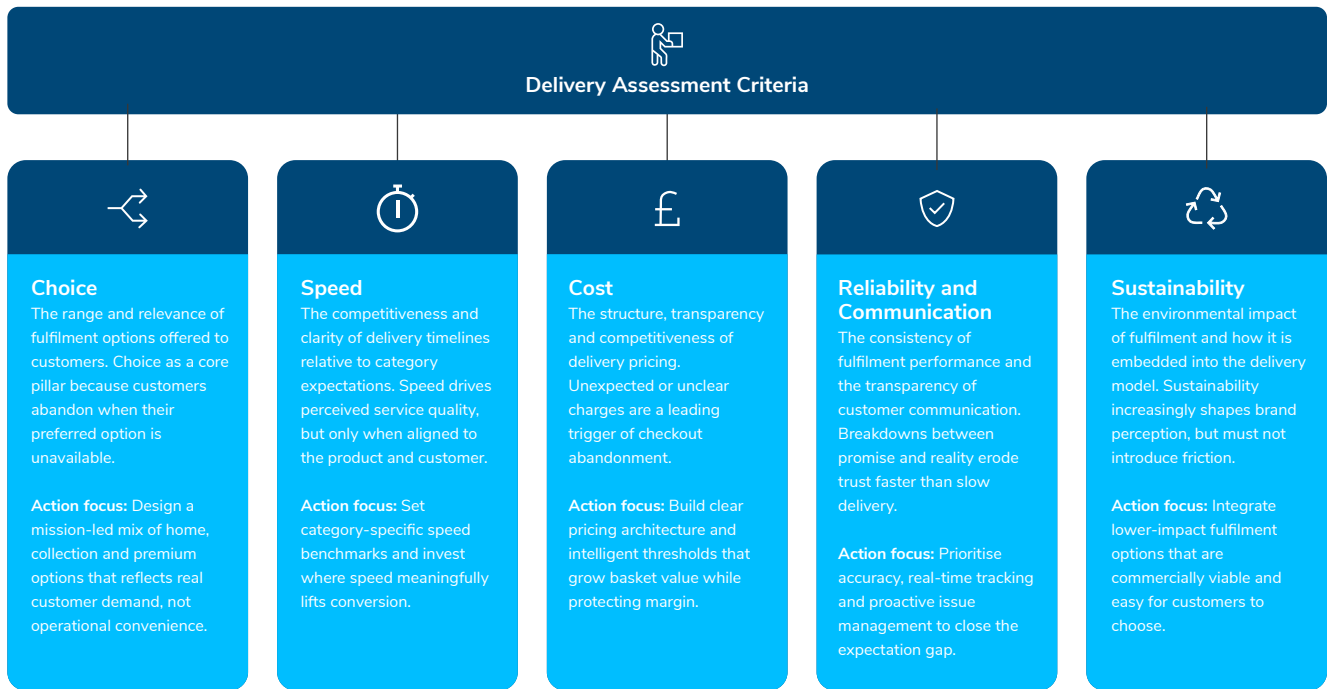
Source: Retail Economics, GFS

For the most valuable shoppers who shop often and spend more, choice and flexibility are key drivers of satisfaction. For less frequent shoppers – often those who are older and slightly less affluent – cost and reliability dominate. But retailers failing to meet expectations on any of these fronts face a common outcome: abandonment at checkout.

# How we audited 100 deliveries

During our mystery shop, each transaction was assessed against five pillars of delivery excellence: cost, speed, choice, reliability and communication, and sustainability (Fig. 4).

**Figure 4: Audit assessment pillars and action focus**



# Section 2

## What we found: Shopper expectations vs. reality



This section sets out the core benchmark findings, mapping what 2,000 UK shoppers say matters most against how 100 retailers actually performed. Across the five key assessment criteria, we expose where expectations are being met, and where performance gaps threaten conversion and trust.

## 2.1 What shoppers want

### Choice:

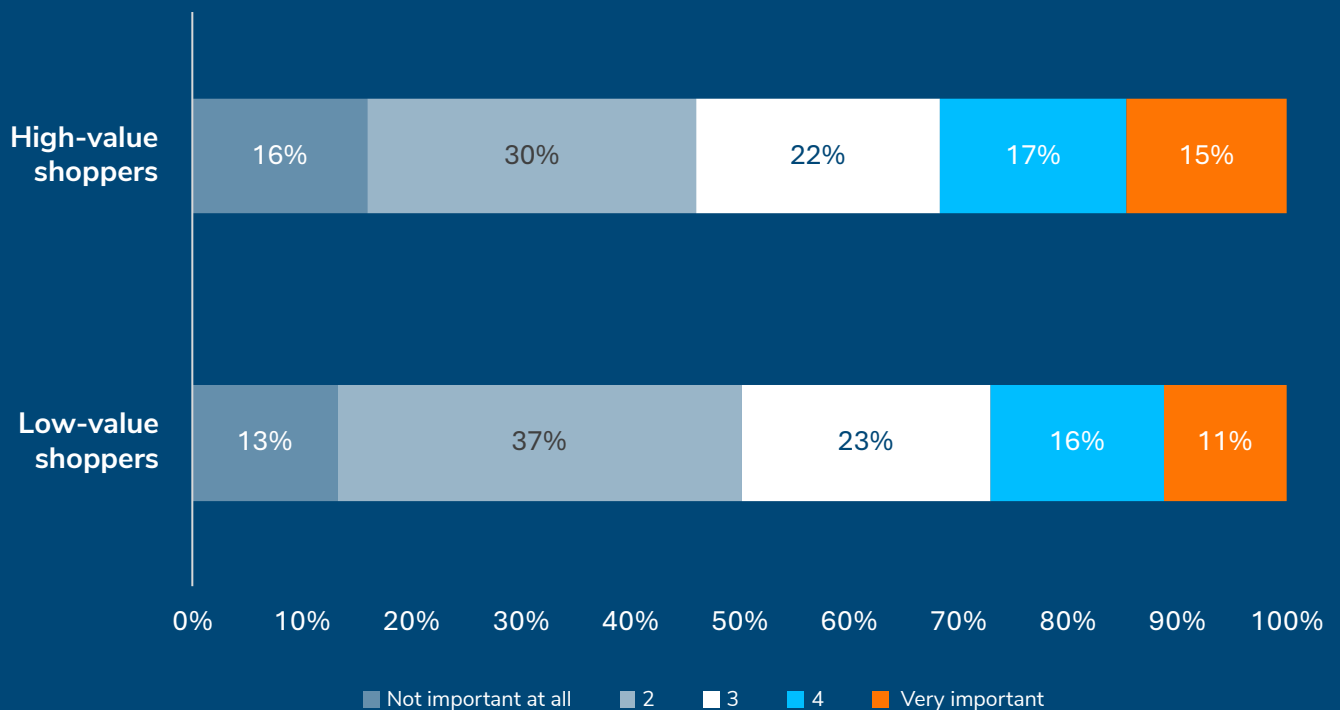
The most frequent online shoppers expect five options - spanning home and out-of-home, with a mix of speed, flexibility and control. However, for the average shopper, this is slightly lower, with four delivery options expected. They want options that allow them to pick and choose according to the nature of their purchase. In 2026, shoppers are placing increased value on same-day and precise timeslot delivery options, reflecting a clear shift toward convenience-led fulfilment for those with busy lives.

Rank	Delivery Option
1	Next-day delivery
2	Standard delivery (2-3 days)
2	Click & Collect (collect from store)
4	Same-day delivery
5	Specific time-slot delivery
6	Nominated day delivery (choose delivery date)
7	Local parcel collection (e.g. Post Office or convenience store)
8	Parcel locker collection

Delivery choice is a critical part of keeping shoppers engaged. When asked if they have ever abandoned a purchase due to poor delivery options (either in the last 12 months, or beyond that) nearly six in ten shoppers (59%) say they have done so, rising to 73% of the highest value shoppers. **Limited choice is one of the clearest drivers of basket abandonment, and the impact is sharpest among younger, higher-income and more frequent online shoppers (Fig. 5).**

**Figure 5: Delivery choice is a high priority for shoppers - especially high-value ones.**

*Importance of delivery choice when making an online purchase*

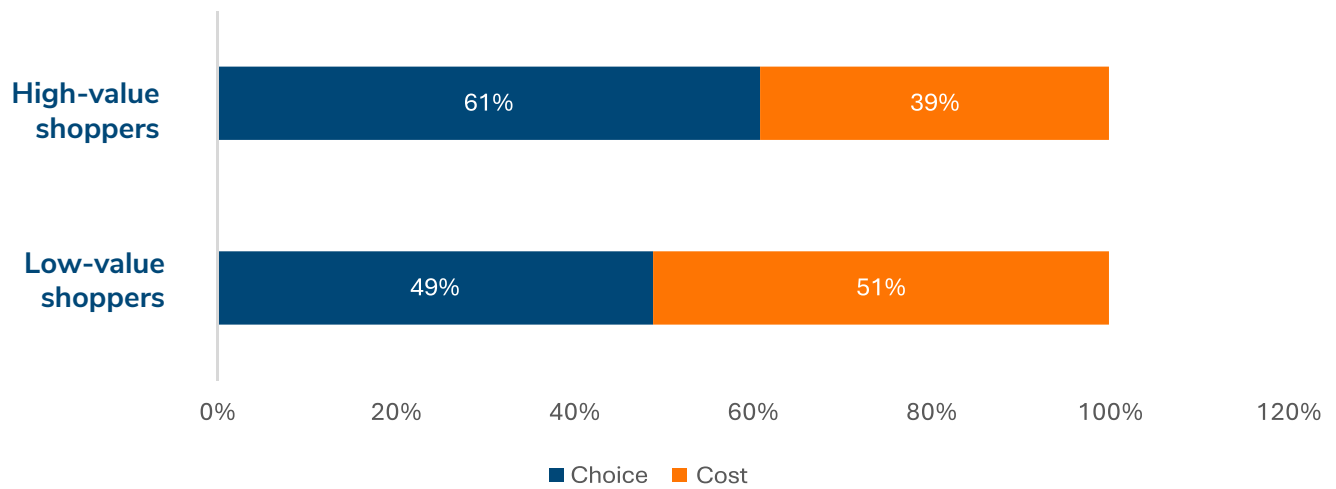


Source: Retail Economics, GFS

**While shoppers can get distracted by cost, it is actually choice - having the right option at the right time - that usually determines completing a purchase.** This is especially true for higher value shoppers – as Fig. 6 shows, the highest value shoppers (those who shop most frequently and who spend more) rate choice as more important than cost when it comes to delivery options.

## Figure 6: Choice is more important than cost for high-value shoppers

When it comes to delivery options, which of the following is more important to you?



Source: Retail Economics, GFS

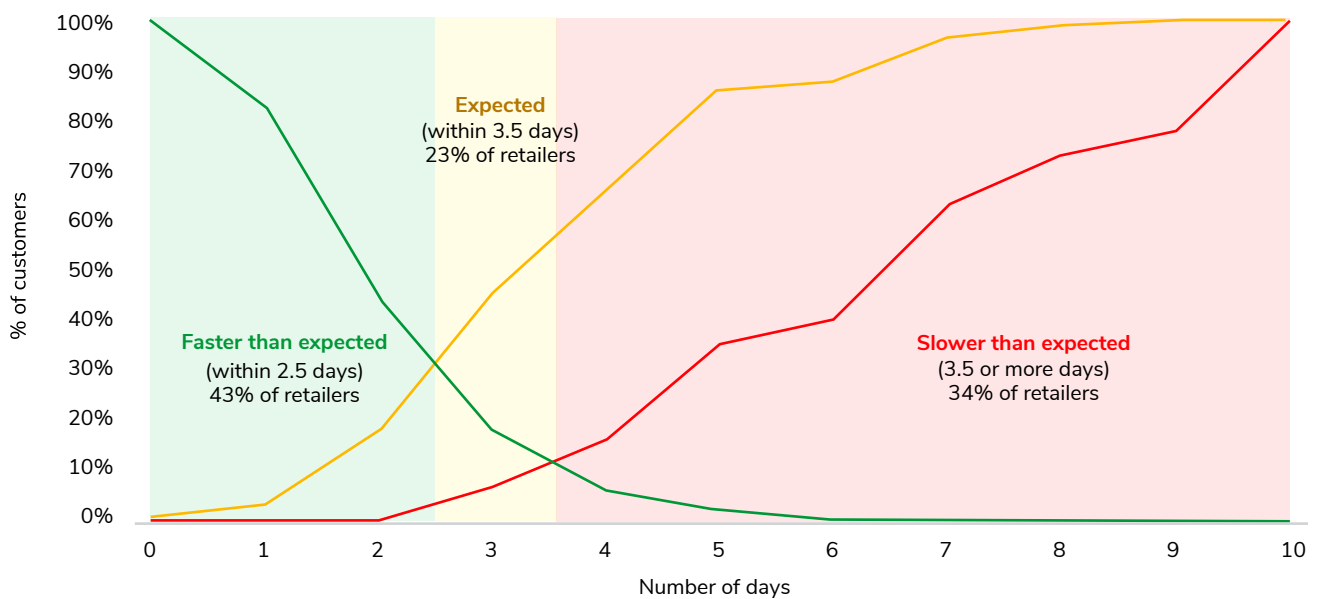


## Speed:

Getting delivery speed right is a delicate balance. When asked about standard delivery speed, shoppers expect to receive items within 3.5 days. Anything slower than this risks increasing frustration. Conversely, anything faster than 2.5 days beats expectations (Fig. 7).

**Figure 7: One in three (34%) retailers delivered slower than shoppers expect**

*When waiting for an online delivery, at what point would delivery feel...*



Source: Retail Economics, GFS

### How to read this chart

- The green zone = 2.5 days for delivery tends to exceed expectations: 43% of retailers deliver in under this time.
- Yellow zone = 2.5 - 3.5 days remains broadly acceptable: 23% of retailers surveyed are here.
- Red zone = 3.5+ days leads to disappointment which quickly grows: 34% deliver in 3.5 days or more.
- Speed matters most at the edges, where performance moves outside what shoppers are prepared to accept.
- Our analysis shows a market that is not clustering around the tolerance zone, but converging around two extremes of beating or missing expectations.
- The average speed of 3.3 days therefore hides two different delivery models: one that is likely carrying avoidable cost, and one that is creating avoidable dissatisfaction.

Expectations vary by demographic. Millennials and Gen X are the most demanding, shaped by tighter routines and time pressure. Gen Z are more tolerant, likely reflecting greater price sensitivity and lower urgency. A single-speed proposition is therefore risky, particularly at peak when variability increases.

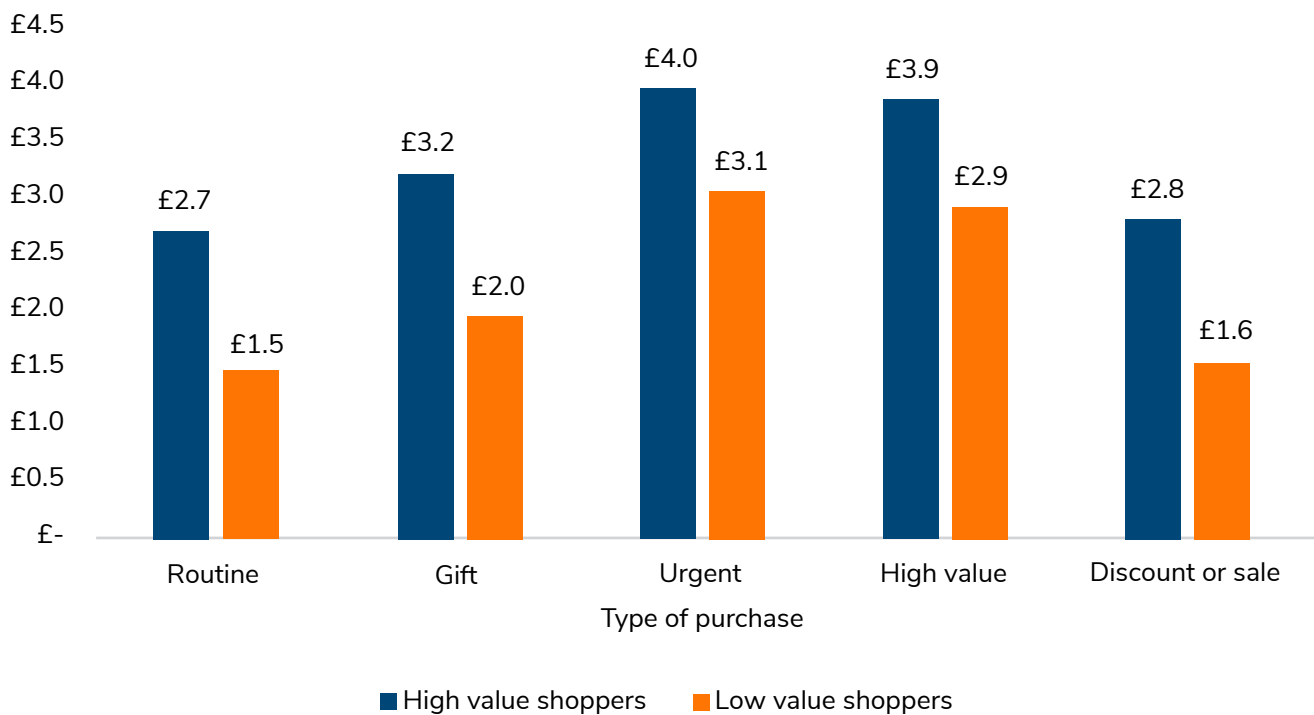
This is where premium speed has commercial value. Willingness to pay rises sharply for urgent or high-value purchases, especially among younger shoppers. For routine or discount baskets, it drops materially.

**The implication is to anchor standard delivery within the tolerance window to protect conversion, and use paid upgrades to monetise urgency without hardwiring an unsustainably fast default model.**



**Figure 8: Shoppers are willing to pay for items they need quickly**

*How much, if anything, would you be willing to pay for next-day or express delivery?*



Source: Retail Economics, GFS

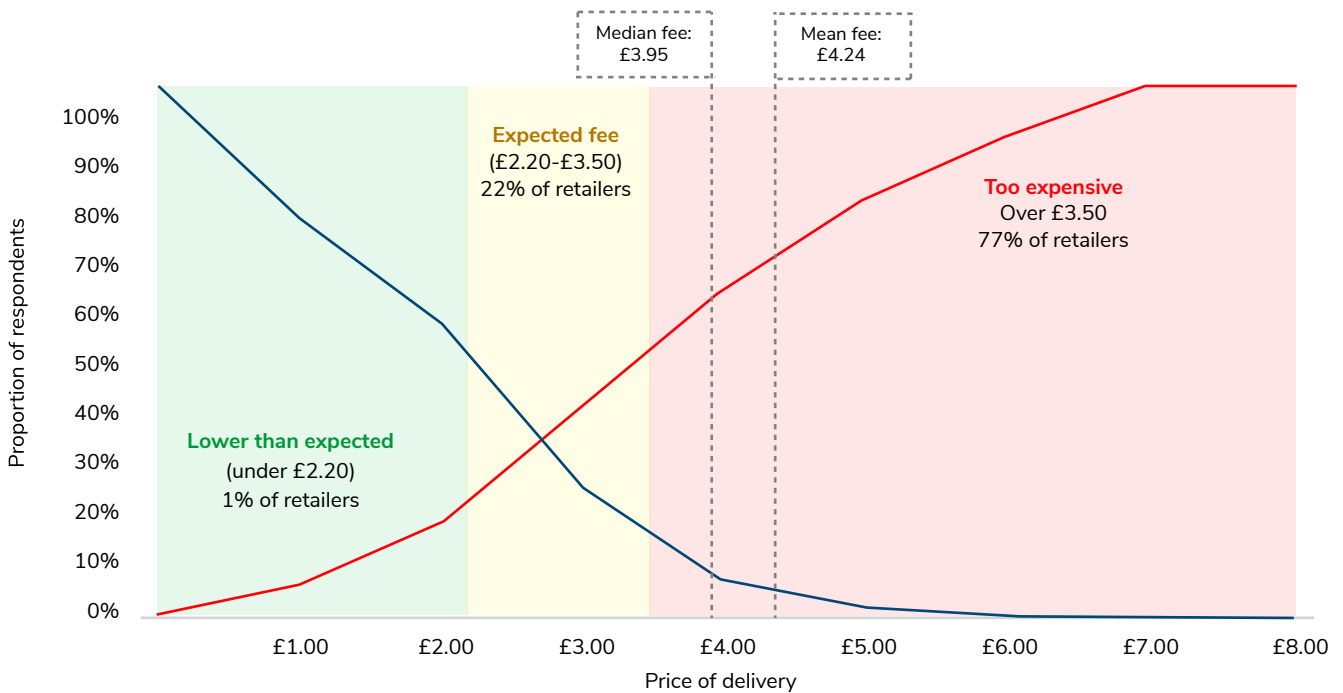
## Cost:

Cost is an area where sustainability sits at the margins of delivery decision-making, with shoppers remaining highly sensitive: our research shows that 51% of shoppers have abandoned a purchase because delivery charges did not meet expectations.

So what are shoppers comfortable paying? On the lower end, anything under £2.20 is seen as cheaper than expected. At the upper end, most shoppers view anything above £3.50 as too expensive (Fig. 9).

**Figure 9: Retailers' average delivery fee is £3.95**

*At what price would standard delivery start to feel too expensive for you?*



Source: Retail Economics, GFS

— Reasonable — Too expensive

Cost tolerance does change according to different types of purchase. As we saw in the previous section (Fig. 8), shoppers are willing to pay more when the urgency or value of a purchase increases. On average, our cohort is willing to pay as much as £4 for an urgent or high-value purchase, compared to just £2.80 for a discount purchase.

Minimum basket thresholds for free standard delivery are also widely accepted. **Only 32% expect free delivery on all orders, while 59% expect it above a basket threshold.**

Importantly, 83% of shoppers say they are likely to add an item to qualify for free delivery.

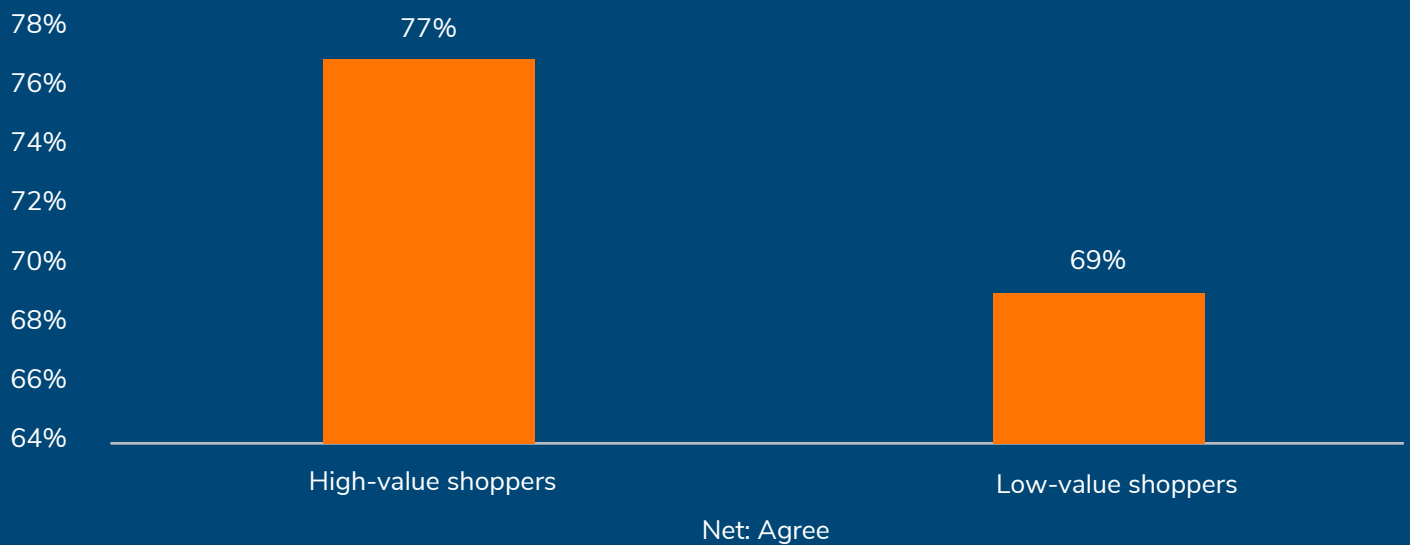
Looking beyond standard delivery, shoppers are more willing to pay for convenience than many assume. Willingness to pay rises sharply for urgent or higher-value purchases and is strongest among high-value shoppers.

### Reliability and Communication:

73% of shoppers are less likely to shop again with a retailer that misses its delivery promise. That reaction cuts across demographics – from 66% of Baby Boomers to 77% of Millennials – rising to 79% among the most affluent shoppers. As ever, the highest value shoppers are least tolerant. A retailer’s reliability directly shapes loyalty among the shoppers retailers most need to retain (Fig.10).

**Figure 10: High-value shoppers are most likely to abandon retailers who disappoint**

*"I am less likely to shop with a retailer that misses its own delivery promise"*



Source: Retail Economics, GFS

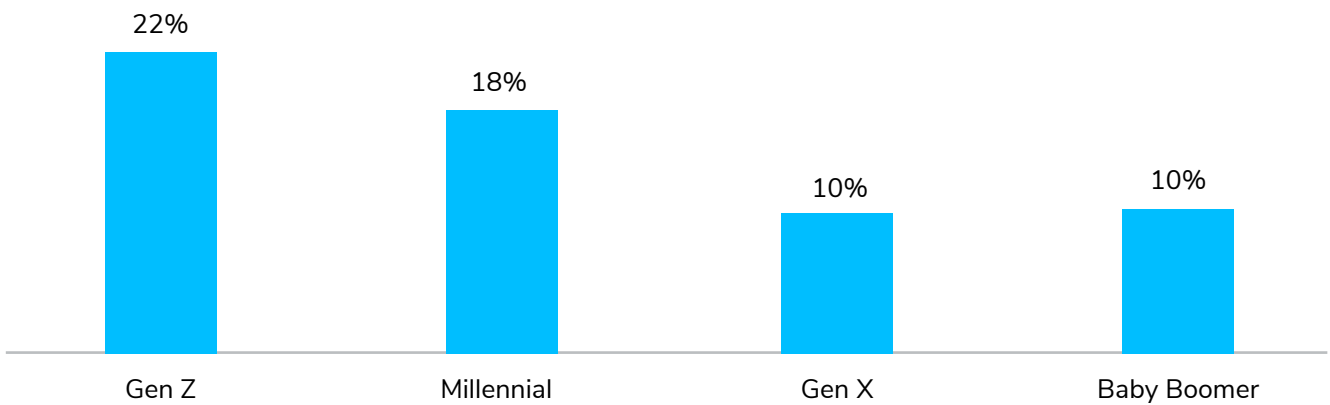
When it comes to communication, shoppers say three emails are sufficient to feel confident and reassured during delivery. This is enough for retailers to send an order confirmation email, a dispatch email and a delivery confirmed email, keeping shoppers confident their item is on its way.

## Sustainability:

Sustainability sits at the margins of delivery decision-making. In 2026, just 14% of shoppers rank eco-friendly delivery as a high priority, placing it well behind the drivers that shape conversion and repeat intent (Fig. 11). The figure rises to over a fifth among Gen Z and just under a fifth for Millennials, showing that it does hold value for some shoppers – particularly younger, urban and affluent shoppers. But as a driver of intent, it remains secondary overall.

**Figure 11: An average of 14% of shoppers rate sustainability as important, rising to over a fifth of Gen Z**

*Shoppers who rate eco-friendly delivery 'important'*



Source: Retail Economics, GFS



## 2.2 Mystery shop: What retailers are doing

To create a real-world benchmark of delivery performance, we placed 100 online orders with UK small-to-medium sized non-food retailers during peak trading in December 2025.

Orders were placed across five categories (clothing and footwear, health and beauty, general merchandise and gifting, homewares, and other – pets, lifestyle and sport). For comparability across retailers, each order was consistent at c.£20 value, delivery to the same postcode, on a standard service.

Crucially, the mystery shop was conducted during peak, the industry's most pressured trading period, allowing us to assess structural strengths and weaknesses under strain.

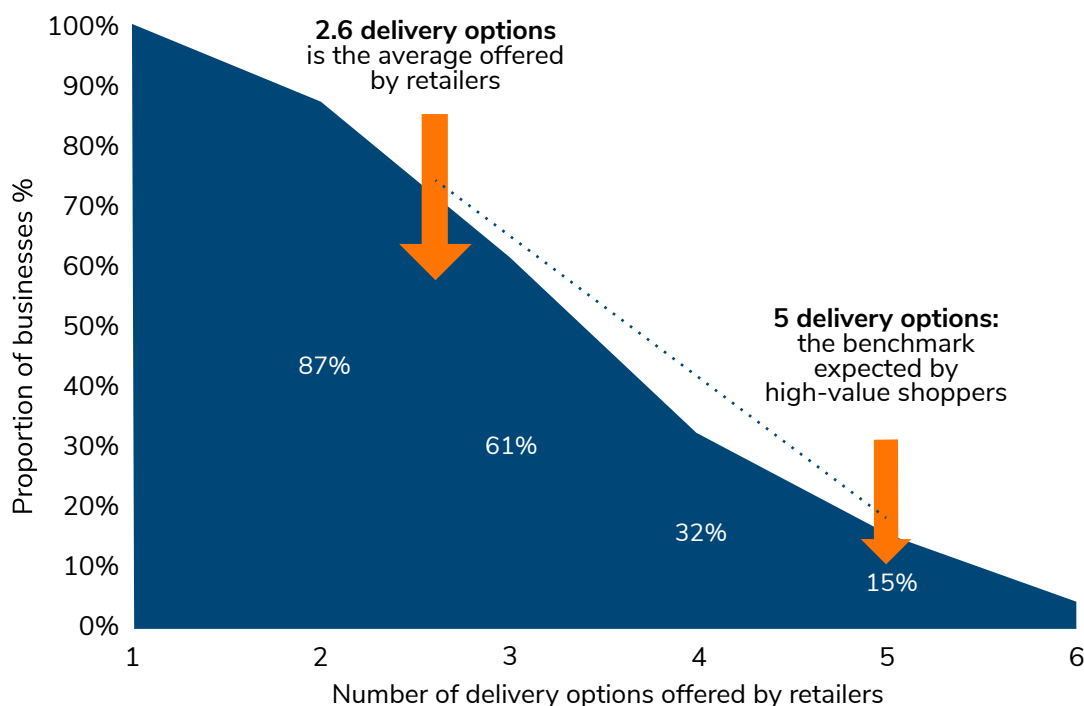
### Choice:

Our mystery shop data shows an average of less than 2.6 delivery options offered at checkout. This excludes in-store click and collect, to ensure that pureplay online retailers and bricks-and-mortar retailers were measured using comparable data. When in-store click and collect is included, the average rises to 3.5 options.

Just 15% offer five or more delivery options – the number expected by the highest value shoppers (Fig. 12).

**Figure 12: Just 15% of audited retailers offer five delivery options – the benchmark expected by high-frequency online shoppers.**

*Cumulative number of delivery options offered by retailers*

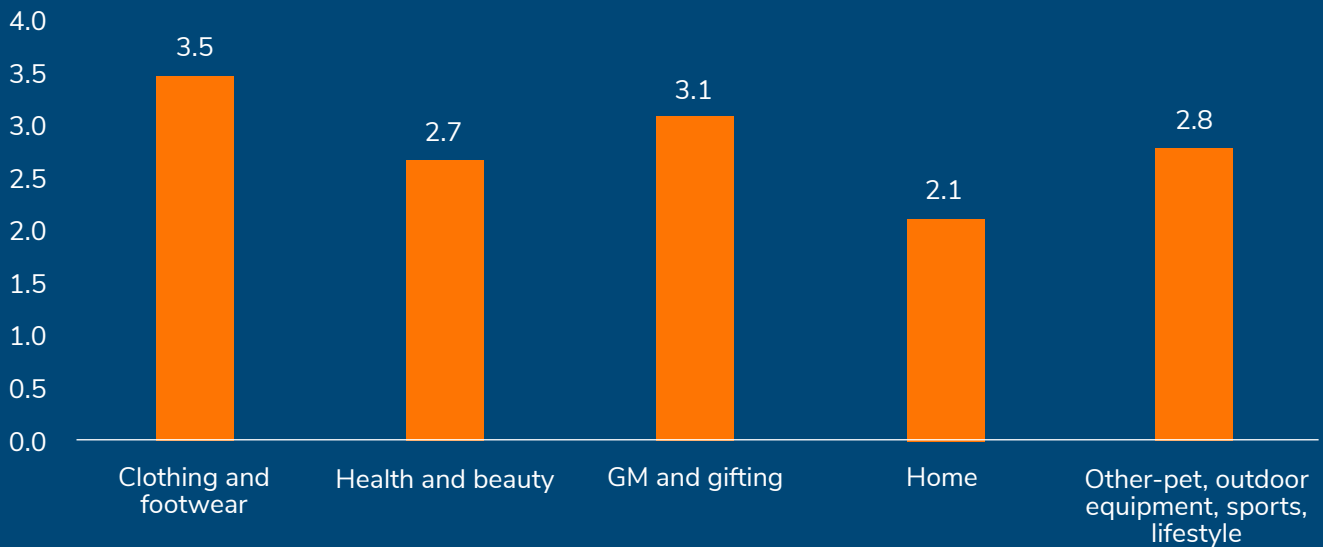


Source: Retail Economics, GFS

Larger clothing and footwear retailers performed well in this space, with brands like Nobody's Child, Seraphine and Jaded London offering a wider range of options. Home and gifting categories fell furthest below the benchmark, averaging just 2.1 (Fig. 13).

**Figure 13: Clothing and footwear retailers offer shoppers the most choice**

*Number of delivery options by category*



Source: Retail Economics, GFS

Our mystery shop showed many retailers still under-provide on premium faster options: a third do not offer next-day delivery, and 15% offer neither next day nor express.

### Speed:

Getting delivery speed right is a delicate balance. Over two-fifths (42%) of retailers exceed shopper expectations on standard delivery, which at first glance appears positive. But in reality, this may mean paying for speed many shoppers do not need – and setting a service level that is difficult to sustain.

**Retailers currently operate at two extremes: some exceed expectations, absorbing unnecessary cost, while others fall beyond the tolerance window and create dissatisfaction.**

Conversely, underperformance is clearly damaging. Slower-than-acceptable delivery erodes trust, especially when promised windows are missed. Just one in five retailers (23%) strike the middle ground – delivering at the right pace without unnecessary cost or customer frustration.

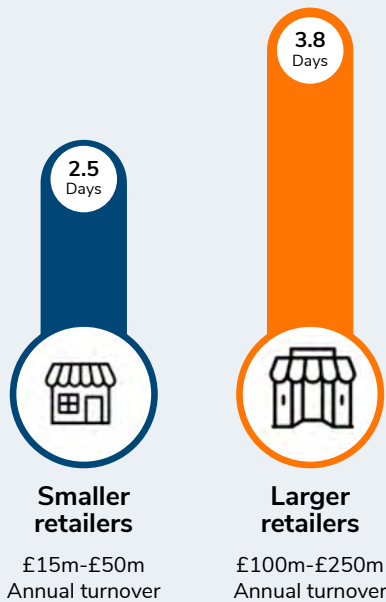
## Size and category differences

Business size and category reinforce the same tension. Smaller retailers are typically faster as they can over-invest in speed on routine, low-value baskets. Conversely, many larger operators prioritise cost efficiency, but risk drifting beyond buyer tolerance on speed, where slower delivery begins to erode experience and loyalty.

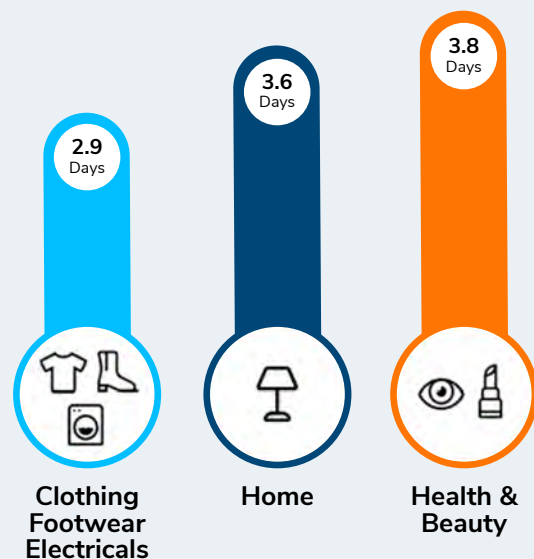
When it comes to category, certain differences reflect operational realities, but buyer tolerance does not vary. Clothing and footwear retailers are particularly strong on speed, with Hackett and Boden among the fastest.



### Average number of days for delivery by retailers surveyed by size



### Average number of days for delivery by retail category



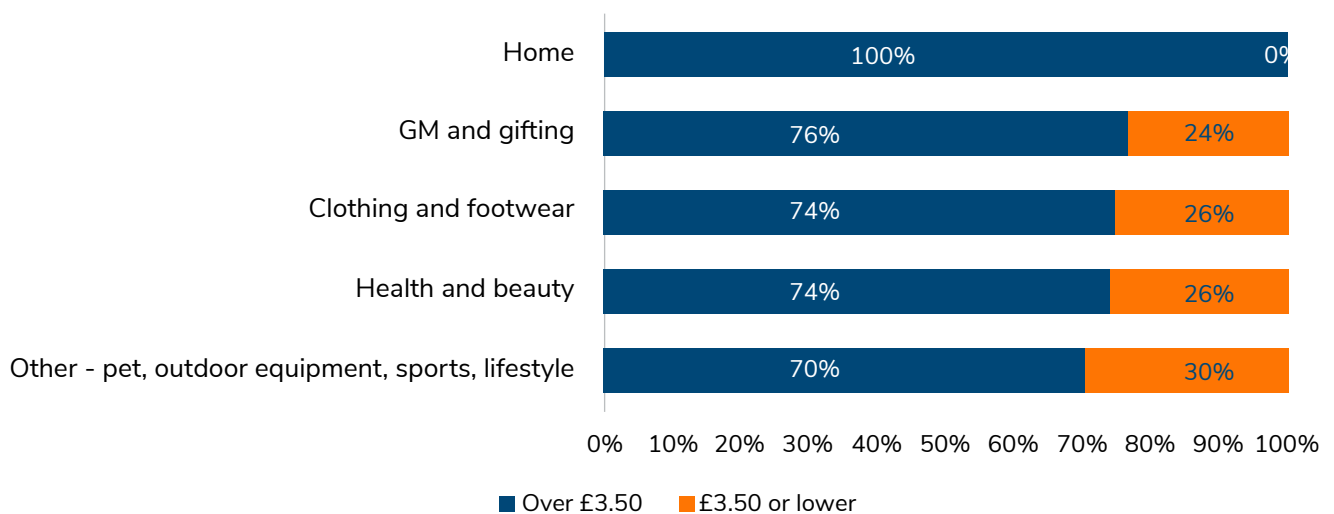
For those at the slower end of the scale, once delivery exceeds 3.5 days, expectation management and credible alternatives become critical.

## Cost:

With an average standard delivery fee of £3.95, most retailers sit beyond the buyer tolerance point of £3.50. The pressure is uneven. Smaller retailers (<£100m) charge more than larger operators (£100m–£250m), increasing conversion risk, while homewares carries the highest average fees by category (Fig. 14).

Retailers getting it right in the cost space represented a range of categories, including Hackett, Liz Earle, and Marks Electricals.

**Figure 14: 77% of all retailers charge more than £3.50 for standard delivery**



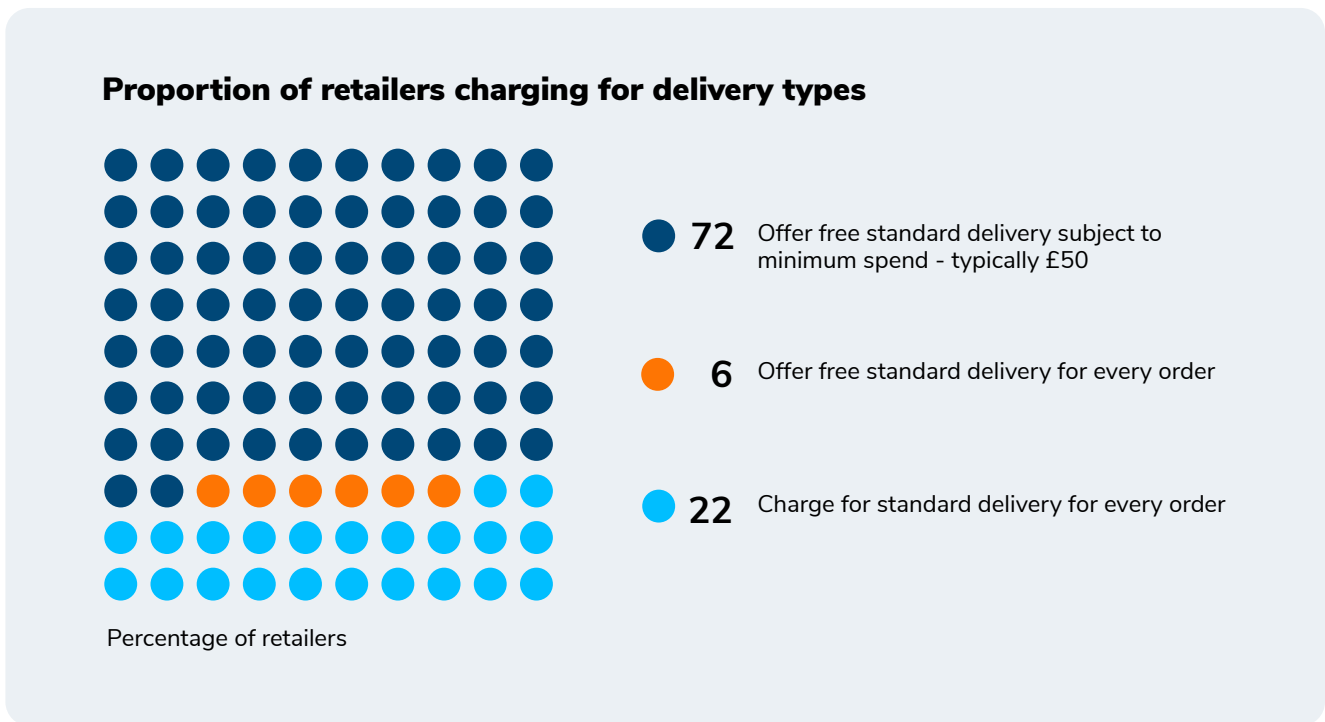
Source: Retail Economics, GFS

A third of retailers do not offer next-day delivery, and 15% offer neither next-day nor express. **Without premium options, retailers cannot segment by urgency or willingness to pay, limiting their ability to protect margin, particularly at peak when costs escalate.**

Thresholded free delivery remains a powerful lever. 72% of retailers use minimum spend thresholds, with a median of £50, yet levels vary widely and are not always aligned with typical basket values.



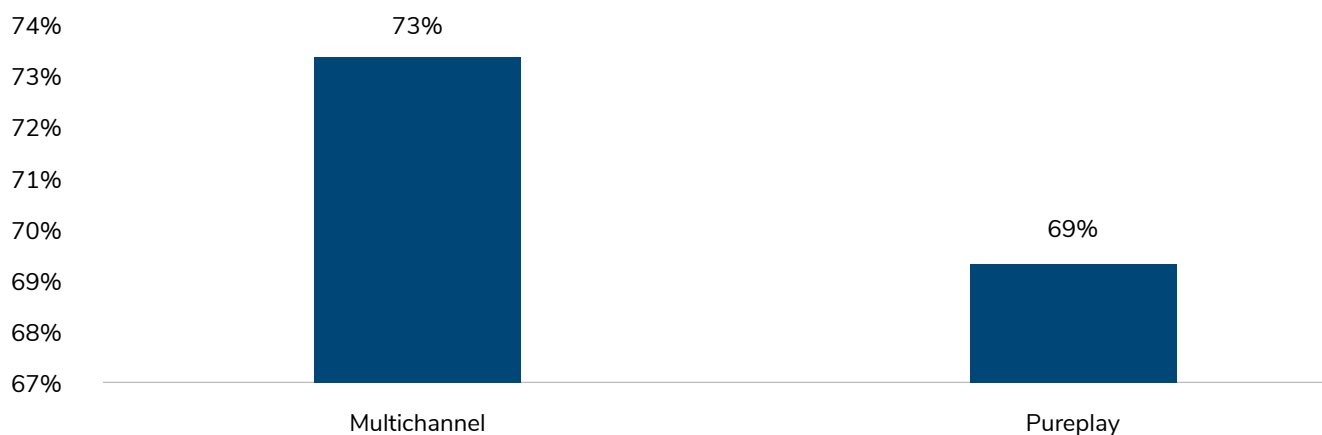
**Figure. 15: Majority of retailers offer minimum thresholds for free delivery**



Source: Retail Economics, GFS

**Figure 16: Minimum delivery thresholds can help push basket values up**

*Proportion of retailers that have a free delivery threshold, by channel*



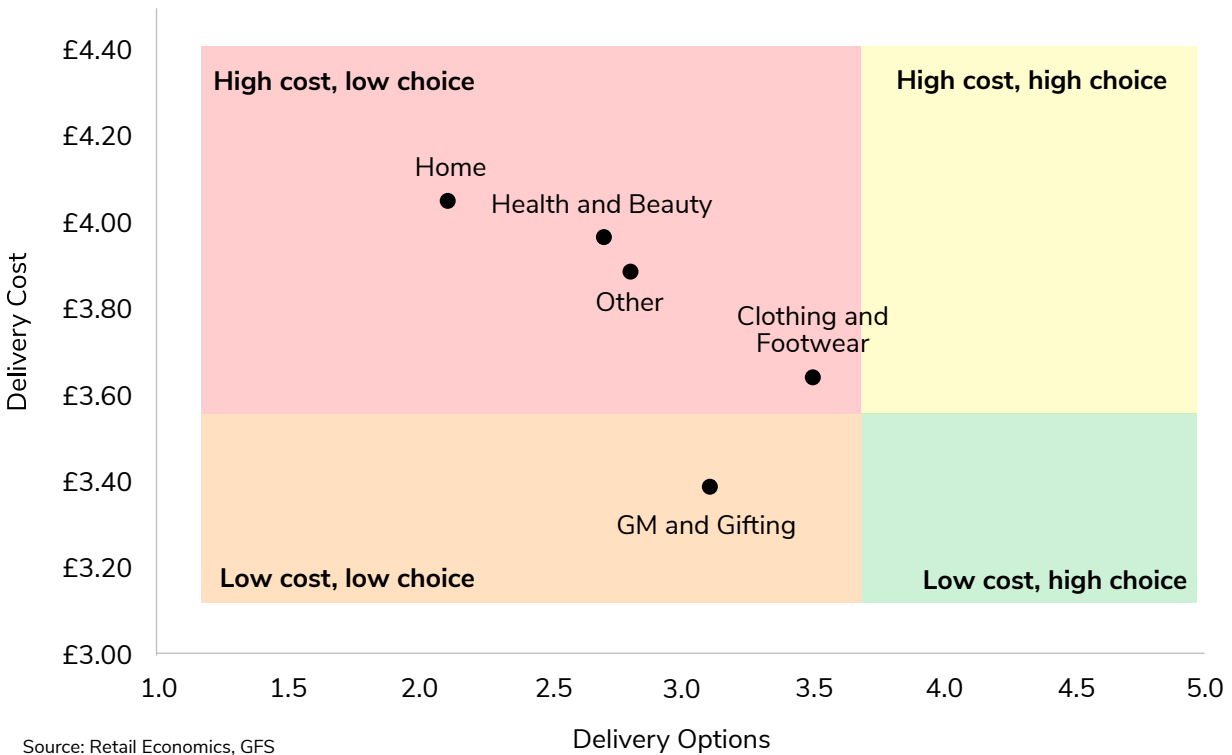
Source: Retail Economics, GFS

Pricing must also align with performance. Smaller retailers often charge more and deliver faster, giving them greater flexibility to use thresholds or paid speed tiers. Interestingly, larger retailers charge less but miss promises more frequently, limiting their credibility when introducing upgrades. Monetisation depends on meeting baseline expectations first.

**As Fig. 17 illustrates, many retailers are clustered in the high-cost, low-choice quadrant, reinforcing the structural mismatch between pricing, performance and shopper expectations.**

**Figure 17: Most retailers offer too few options at too high a cost**

*Cost vs Options*



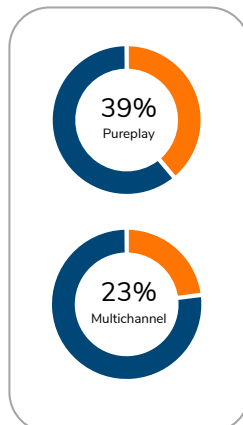
Source: Retail Economics, GFS

**Reliability of delivery:**

Our mystery shop highlights how exposed retailers are on this measure at peak. Overall, 29% either missed their own delivery promise or delivered on the final estimated day, increasing frustration. Interestingly, **multi-channel retailers with physical stores outperformed online-only retailers on delivery reliability**. 23% of orders placed with multi-channel retailers either missed or narrowly met the delivery window, compared to 39% for online-only. (Fig.18).

**Figure 18: Pureplays were more likely to miss delivery promises over peak than multi-channel retailers**

Retailers who missed, or nearly missed, their own delivery promise



Source: Retail Economics, GFS



Category performance varies. Health and beauty records the highest missed promise rate at 40%, while general merchandise and gifting performs strongest at 24%. Clothing and footwear is comparatively resilient at 26%, and our best performers reflected these two categories, with Boden, Fortnum and Mason, and Hobbs all among our top retailers in this pillar.

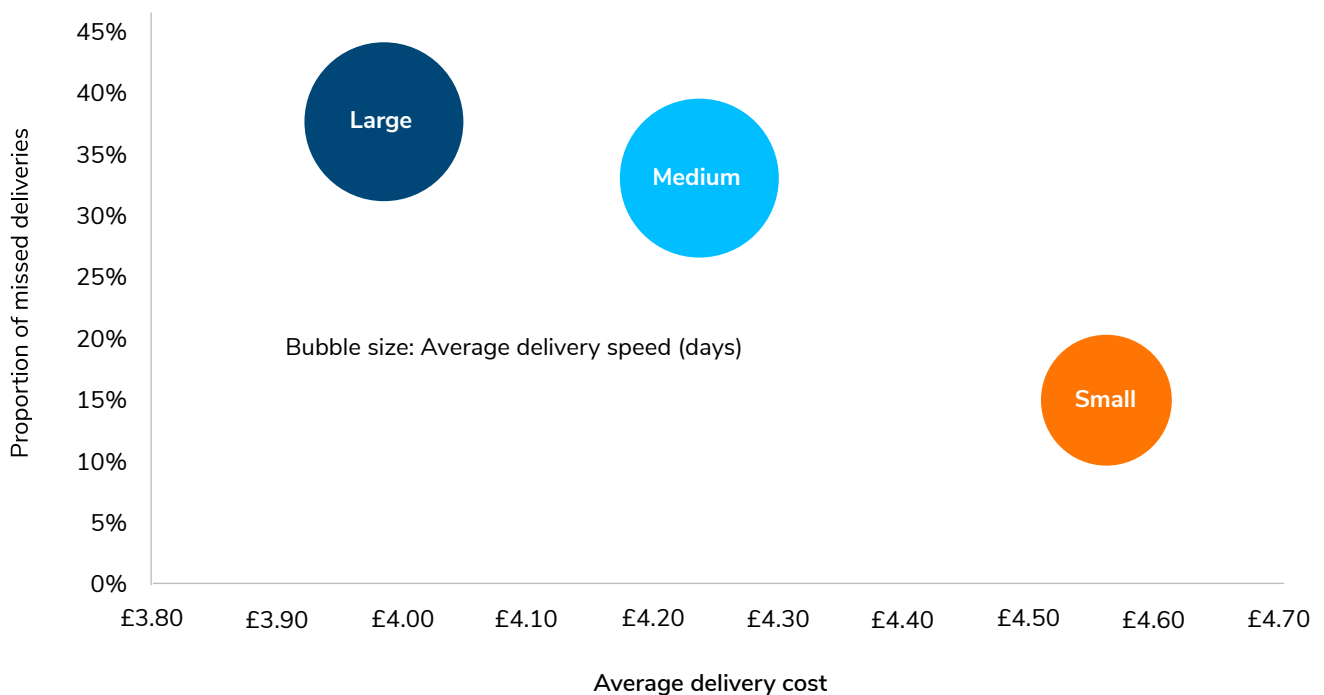
**Retailers offering the widest range of delivery options were also most likely to meet their promises.**

Broader choice reduces reliance on a single courier or channel, helping to distribute demand and strengthen overall service reliability.

Furthermore, larger SME retailers (£100m-£250m) are more likely to miss their delivery estimates, delivering more slowly and increasing the chance of disappointment (Fig.19). While they charge less than smaller retailers, the potential increased conversion due to lower fees needs to be offset against the risk of lost loyalty and sales because of unreliability.

**Figure 19: More larger retailers missed their delivery promises than smaller**

*Delivery Fee vs Missed Promise vs Delivery Speed by Business Size*



Source: Retail Economics, GFS

Strong communication is a big part of how reliable shoppers perceive a retailer to be. On this measure, retailers are over-communicating, sending an average of 5.8 emails per transaction during delivery.

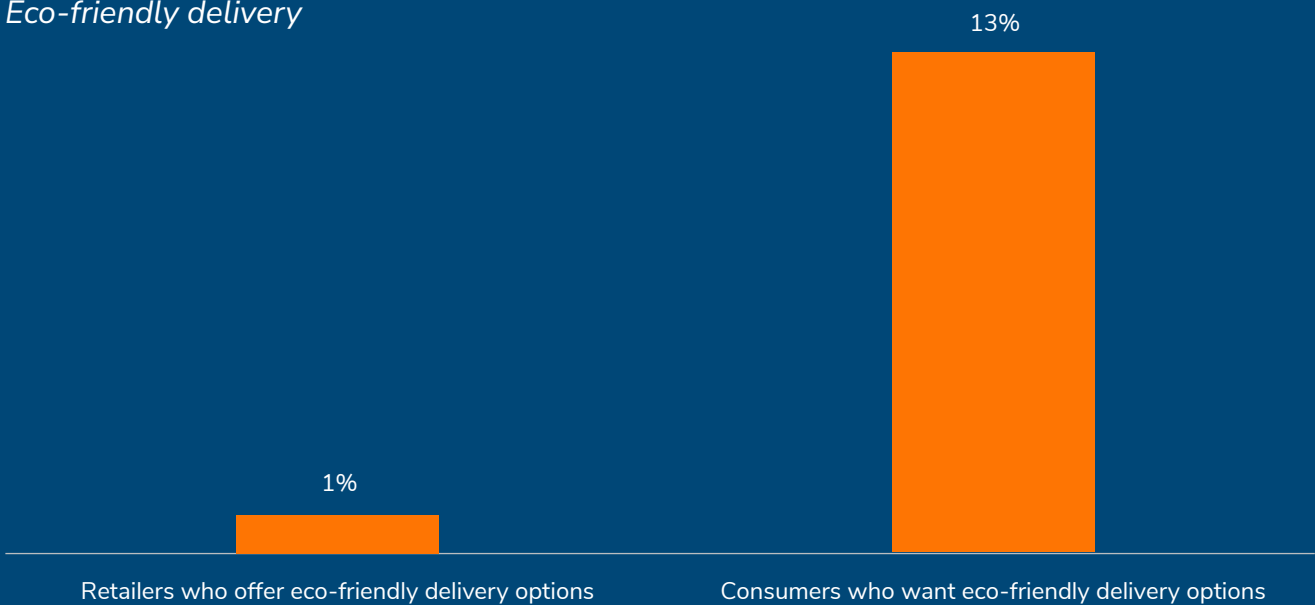
## Sustainability:

Only 1% of retailers offered a clearly labelled sustainable delivery option at checkout, signalling deprioritisation. Investment has focused on the pillars under immediate commercial pressure, leaving sustainability largely invisible within the delivery proposition.

Some retailers may use couriers that are reducing emissions through electric or hybrid fleets. However, this is rarely communicated. For shoppers who value sustainability, clearer signalling at checkout could strengthen perception without requiring structural change (Fig. 20).

**Figure 20: Just 1% of our retailer cohort offered a sustainability-related option at checkout**

*Eco-friendly delivery*



Source: Retail Economics, GFS

One area where retailers are making progress is packaging. Here, 60% reference sustainably sourced or recyclable materials, leaving two-fifths who could take this straightforward step. While most retailers used appropriately sized packaging, 14% generated unnecessary waste by using boxes or envelopes significantly larger than required for small items. Health and beauty retailers were well represented among the top performers on sustainability measures, with Beauty Bay, Beauty Pie and Revolution Beauty all high on our list.

## 2.3 Expectations vs. reality: The gaps in service

Where are retailers meeting shoppers' expectations, and where are they failing? As our analysis shows, there are several key areas for retailers and brands to focus their attention.

### Choice:

- Retailers are failing to meet the minimum level of choice, with 2.6 options offered compared to the five that the most frequent online shoppers expect; this shortfall directly suppresses conversion.
- Resilience goes beyond delivery options and is also about the ability to withstand peaks. If networks are overwhelmed, businesses need backups and options for re-routing.
- Our audit shows that many retailers still under-provide on premium speed: a third do not offer next-day delivery, and 15% offer neither next day nor express.

What shoppers want	What retailers are doing	How to close the gap
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Five delivery options to cover different types of purchase.</li> <li>• Delivery that meets their needs at different times.</li> <li>• Increasingly, shoppers are looking for hyper-convenient, premium options.</li> </ul>	<p>Offer an average of 2.6 delivery options at checkout.</p> <p>Only 15% of our retailers offer the five options high-value shoppers want to see.</p> <p>15% offer neither next-day nor premium delivery.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduce premium delivery options where they are missing</li> <li>• Use multiple carriers and fulfilment channels to strengthen resilience, particularly during peak</li> <li>• Design delivery choice around the needs of high-value, frequent shoppers</li> </ul>



## Speed:

- The “acceptable” window for standard delivery speed is narrow, but most retailers aren’t operating within it: they’re either faster than shoppers need or slow enough to trigger disappointment.
- Retailers are making different trade-offs: some are paying for speed shoppers don’t value, while others are drifting into delays that undermine satisfaction and trust.
- Over-delivering on speed adds cost and raises expectations. Under-delivering pushes performance into the disappointment zone, where trust is harder to recover. Retailers that set standard delivery within the tolerance window – and reserve paid premium options for urgent missions – are better positioned to control cost-to-serve and protect conversion.
- Those that anchor performance around choice and control, rather than speed for its own sake, can manage risk more effectively, contain cost and sustain growth.

## Key takeaways

What shoppers want	What retailers are doing	How to close the gap
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deliveries that arrive between 2.5 days and 3.5 days.</li> <li>• Options that provide different speed services according to the type of purchase, and level of urgency.</li> </ul>	<p>Some are overperforming on speed, beating expectations, while others are underperforming.</p> <p>Larger retailers are delivering in an average of 3.8 days, while smaller retailers are delivering more quickly, with an average of 2.5 days.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Anchor standard delivery within the buyer tolerance window to control cost-to-serve.</li> <li>• Introduce a range of economy-to-premium delivery services to cater to different levels of shopper urgency</li> <li>• Use paid premium services to serve urgent or high-value missions.</li> </ul>



## Cost:

- Delivery cost is one of the clearest points where the expectation–reality gap translates into lost conversion.
- Our research shows that 51% of shoppers have abandoned a purchase because delivery charges did not meet expectations – and the mismatch is stark.
- While most shoppers view anything above £3.50 as too expensive, 77% of retailers charge more than this threshold.

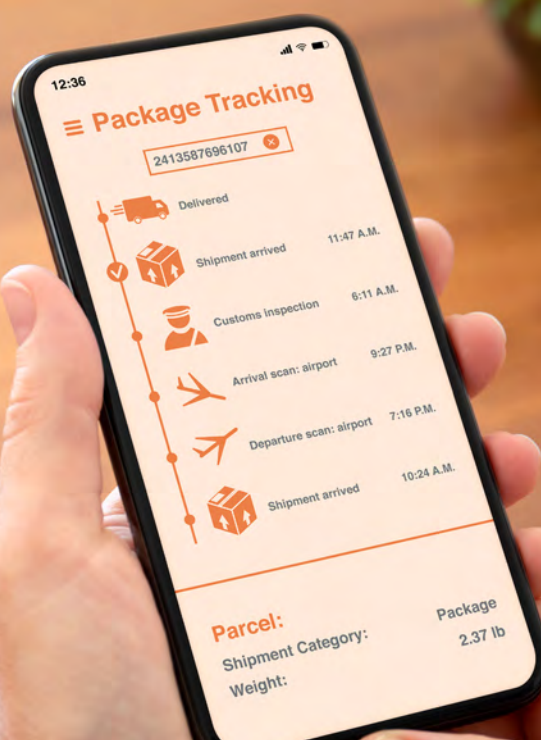
What shoppers want	What retailers are doing	How to close the gap
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A maximum standard delivery fee of £3.50.</li> <li>• Clear use of minimum thresholds for free delivery.</li> <li>• The option to pay more for premium, faster service when they want to.</li> </ul>	<p>With an average standard delivery fee of £3.95, most retailers sit beyond the buyer tolerance point of £3.50.</p> <p>72% of retailers use minimum spend thresholds, with a median of £50, yet levels vary widely and are not always aligned to typical basket values.</p> <p>A significant minority (15%) are not offering premium options such as next-day delivery.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use free delivery thresholds strategically to increase basket size while protecting margin</li> <li>• Strengthen delivery reliability before introducing paid upgrades</li> <li>• Introduce premium services to monetise urgency and convenience</li> </ul>



## Reliability and Communication:

- Offering choice is not enough: retailers need to be sure they can deliver on their promises.
- Reliability is the single most important trust signal in delivery, and too many retailers still fail to meet their own stated timelines.
- Overall, 29% either missed their own promise or delivered on the very last day of the estimate.
- When it comes to communication, shoppers say three emails are sufficient to feel confident during delivery, yet retailers send an average of 5.8 per order.

What shoppers want	What retailers are doing	How to close the gap
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Services they can trust, with deliveries that arrive well within their estimated time slots.</li> <li>• An appropriate level of communication – an average of three emails is deemed acceptable.</li> </ul>	<p>29% either missed their own delivery promise or delivered on the final estimated day.</p> <p>Many overcommunicate to make up for erratic service, sending an average of 5.8 emails per transaction.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Prioritise reliability if missed delivery estimates are common – missed promises are a key driver of retailer abandonment</li> <li>• Avoid over-communication as a substitute for dependable service</li> <li>• Build operational resilience through flexible carrier access and contingency planning.</li> </ul>



## Sustainability:

- For most retailers, near-term commercial risk is limited. Sustainability is rarely a primary trigger for checkout abandonment.
- However, the opportunity remains. Clear eco options can differentiate among segments where values and delivery behaviour align – particularly younger, urban and higher-income shoppers. The key is visibility and credibility. If offered, sustainable choices must be explicit, not implied or hidden in small print.
- The gap highlights how delivery priorities tightened around operational pressures post-pandemic, and where visible choice may return as expectations evolve.

What shoppers want	What retailers are doing	How to close the gap
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The option to use more eco-friendly options when possible.</li> <li>• Packaging that is recycled, recyclable and a suitable size for the item sent.</li> </ul>	<p>Only 1% of retailers offered a clearly labelled sustainable delivery option at checkout.</p> <p>60% reference sustainably sourced or recyclable materials on packaging</p> <p>14% generated unnecessary waste by using boxes or envelopes significantly larger than required for small items.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offer clearly labelled eco delivery options where relevant to customer segments.</li> <li>• Communicate sustainability initiatives internally and through partnerships within the delivery journey.</li> <li>• Improve packaging efficiency and reduce unnecessary waste.</li> </ul>



# Section 3

## Five key principles for designing delivery for growth



Delivery is too often treated as a controllable cost. The evidence in our benchmark suggests something more structural - delivery is a growth lever that is frequently underused. Retailers are leaving revenue on the table by failing to calibrate standard services, segment premium speed intelligently, and build the reliability required to monetise choice credibly.

Furthermore, our audit shows that performance gaps are rarely isolated. Cost, speed, reliability and choice interact. Retailers operating at the extremes – too fast, too expensive, or insufficiently dependable – struggle to convert efficiently or to protect margin. The strongest performers are not simply faster. They are engineered.

### The findings translate into five design principles:

1

#### CALIBRATE STANDARD DELIVERY TO THE TOLERANCE ZONE

The acceptable window for standard delivery is narrow. With average charges at £3.95 and buyer tolerance clustering below £3.50, many retailers sit on the wrong side of price sensitivity. At the same time, over 40% exceed expected speed, potentially inflating cost-to-serve without increasing perceived value.

Engineered delivery starts with calibration. Standard services should sit within the buyer tolerance window on both speed and cost. Premium tiers should then serve urgency and higher-value missions. Retailers that treat delivery choice as a paid convenience – rather than a default cost burden – are better positioned to monetise intelligently.

## 2

### **BUILD CHOICE AS INFRASTRUCTURE, NOT ORNAMENT**

Choice is not cosmetic. The audit shows that retailers offering the broadest range of options are also the most likely to meet their delivery promises. This is not coincidence. Broader menus reduce reliance on a single courier or channel and provide flexibility when volumes shift.

Five meaningful delivery options – spanning home, out-of-home, and speed tiers – should be a baseline. Multi-carrier capability enables access to this breadth without multiplying overhead. The objective is not complexity, but resilience, and choice strengthens both conversion and operational control.

## 3

### **TREAT RELIABILITY AS NON-NEGOTIABLE**

Reliability is the permission layer for monetisation. 73% of shoppers are less likely to shop again after a missed delivery promise – with so much choice available to the shopper, a poor delivery offer does not just mean the loss of a single transaction, but the loss of a customer's lifetime value.

At peak, 29% of retailers either missed or narrowly met their own window. Online-only retailers were particularly exposed. Engineering reliability requires built-in contingency, the ability to switch parcel volumes quickly between services, and disciplined promise-setting.

Retailers cannot charge for premium speed, thresholds or returns convenience if baseline reliability is weak. Growth depends on trust.

## 4

### **USE TECHNOLOGY TO UNIFY, NOT FRAGMENT**

Complex carrier relationships and disparate systems often create the very inflexibility that peak exposes. Technology should simplify control across the journey – from checkout promise to final-mile execution.

A single multi-carrier platform can consolidate service access, strengthen visibility and enable dynamic volume allocation. The goal is not more tools, but clearer control and faster response when performance drifts. Technology becomes an enabler when it reduces friction rather than adding layers.

## 5

**MONETISE DELIVERY AS A GROWTH LEVER**

Delivery is not just a cost to absorb. Our research shows willingness to pay exists, especially among affluent shoppers, while 'free' delivery is now largely conditional. Retailers should treat delivery as a controllable revenue lever at checkout, using minimum spend thresholds to materially lift basket size, clear paid upgrades for urgent missions, and tiered service that segments standard vs premium shoppers. Monetisation only works when reliability is strong, but done well it offsets cost-to-serve and protects margin without harming conversion.

**Conclusion**

Delivery is now experienced as a single system, not a series of operational steps. Our survey and mystery shopping exercise reach the same conclusion: **shoppers reward retailers that make delivery feel convenient, dependable and fair – and penalise friction or uncertainty at checkout. Delivery is now a key growth lever that directly impacts checkout conversion and repeat purchase.**

The strongest performers are not simply the fastest or cheapest. They operate within the tolerance zone – calibrating price and speed to expectations, protecting reliability under pressure, offering meaningful choice, and communicating clearly. Peak exposes these structural strengths and weaknesses.

The opportunities lie in the detail. Some retailers over-invest in speed shoppers do not need. Others under-monetise urgency where willingness to pay exists. Many weaken their ability to charge credibly by missing promises. Monetisation depends on operational discipline first.

Essentially, retailers that engineer delivery as a system turn it into an advantage. Those that manage it reactively risk continued leakage in conversion, trust and lifetime value.



## Methodology

This study combines primary operational benchmarking with nationally representative shopper insight.

**Shopper survey:** A nationally representative survey of 2,000 UK shoppers (January 2026) captured expectations around delivery fees, speed, channel preferences and sustainability.

**Retailer audit:** 100 online purchases were placed with 100 UK mid-market non-food retailers (annual turnover £15m–£250m) during peak trading (December 2025). Each order was c.£20 and standard delivery was used in every case to ensure comparability. Each order was sent to the same central London postcode.

**Sample structure:** Retailers spanned three turnover bands (£15m–£50m, £51m–£100m, £101m–£250m) and five categories (clothing and footwear, health and beauty, general merchandise and gifting, homewares, and other – pets, lifestyle and sport).

**Data capture:** Each delivery was tracked end-to-end, generating 3,000+ data points across five pillars: cost, speed, choice, reliability and communication, and sustainability.

**Scoring and ranking:** Retailer scores were calculated using statistical weighting informed by shopper survey findings.

Together, these datasets provide a consistent and comparable benchmark of UK mid-market delivery performance.

**Basket abandonment modelling:** Basket abandonment refers to the proportion of online purchase attempts that are not completed at the checkout stage due to delivery and fulfilment-related factors. The abandonment rate is informed by shopper survey insight and calibrated against broader market benchmarks. Retail Economics' established modelling framework, used in this fourth annual edition of the study, integrates these inputs with proprietary datasets on UK non-food online transaction volumes and average order values to estimate the scale and value of spend left at checkout.

The value of abandoned baskets is estimated using the following formula:

$$\text{Value of abandoned baskets (£)} = \text{ABR} \times \text{TA} \times \text{ATV}$$

Where:

**ABR** = basket abandonment rate derived from nationally representative shopper insight

**TA** = estimated total online purchase attempts, based on Retail Economics proprietary datasets on UK non-food online transactions

**ATV** = average transaction value for UK non-food online orders

Total online purchase attempts are derived by adjusting completed transaction volumes to account for the estimated abandonment rate.



## About GFS

GFS is the UK's first and largest provider of managed multi-carrier delivery services, technology and expertise tailored for the eCommerce industry. Trusted by a large number of brands, GFS delivers unparalleled delivery solutions that power some of the UK's fastest-growing businesses. GFS makes multi-carrier delivery simple by providing an all-inclusive solution to manage multi-carrier services and technology, backed by GFS expertise and pro-active support. With more than 30 million parcels under their care each year, GFS' influence means they can provide impartial expertise and contingency when you need it. This makes them different – but also, unique.

 [www.gfsdeliver.com](http://www.gfsdeliver.com)



## About Retail Economics

Retail Economics is an independent economics research consultancy focused on the consumer and retail industry. We analyse the complex retail economic landscape and draw out actionable insight for our clients. Leveraging our own proprietary retail data and applying rigorous economic analysis, we transform information into points of action.

Our service provides unbiased research and analysis on the key economic and social drivers behind the retail sector, helping to inform critical business decisions, giving you a competitive edge through deeper insights.

 [www.retaileconomics.co.uk](http://www.retaileconomics.co.uk)