

When we talk about how shopping has changed, the default answer often points to online shopping. With the rise of Amazon, fast delivery, and the sheer convenience of buying from your sofa, it seems obvious. But scratch beneath the surface, and a different story emerges. The bigger transformation might not be simply shopping online—it's how people research their purchases before they buy.

This shift towards **research before buying**, powered by always-on digital tools, has reshaped the **purchase journey** in profound ways. From checking a map app to confirm an address before ordering services, to using vehicle servicing comparison engines, customers are making smarter, more informed choices. That means the real revolution is in **online decision making**, which has changed the friction and timing of the whole shopping experience.



The Easy Assumption: Shopping Went Online and Changed Everything

Retailers and commentators love to talk about how the pandemic accelerated online retail. That's true to some extent. According to the UK's Office for National Statistics, online sales as a share of total retail spending hit a peak of around 36% during the worst months of lockdown. For context, that was up from roughly 20% pre-pandemic.

However, by mid-2023, the proportion had settled back somewhat—hovering around 27-28%. That's still well above pre-pandemic levels but lower than the peak panic. What this shows is that while more people certainly shop online now, most shoppers use a blend of offline and online channels. This mixing of modes is often missed in simplistic "online vs offline" debates.

To put it simply: shopping *hasn't* switched entirely online. People still visit physical stores, phone brands, and order in various ways. The change is more subtle—and more interesting—when you look at how they decide what to buy.

Always-On Access: The New Normal for Research

Here is where the real change lives. The smartphone, combined with widespread internet access, means customers can look up information about products and services at any moment—whether they are at home, in the store, or chatting with friends.



- **Comparison sites** have made it easy to check prices, features, and reviews in one place. For example, when booking a vehicle service, websites like WhoCanFixMyCar or CompareTheGarage simplify comparing cost, quality, and customer ratings. This shrinks previously tedious tasks—like phoning garages one by one—into just a few clicks.
- **Map applications** like Google Maps or Apple Maps are more than just navigation tools. They help verify addresses, check opening hours, and look for alternative locations immediately. This is crucial for services, ensuring you don't waste time or money visiting the wrong place or receiving services from poor providers.

These digital helpers mean that consumers often spend significant time researching before making any purchase. This has become the default, not the exception.

Research-First Purchase Journeys in Action

Let's consider some examples:

- **Car servicing:** Instead of picking the nearest garage or the one recommended by a friend, many now jump online first. They type in their car model, put in their postcode, and instantly get a list of suitable garages. Customers then compare prices, reviews, and special offers, maybe even check the garage location on a map app to plan their trip.
- **Major electronics:** Before buying a TV or laptop, shoppers read expert reviews, check on price comparison sites, or watch YouTube unboxings and tutorials. They might then visit a store to see it in person or confirm dimensions.
- **Insurance or utilities:** Never has the importance of online comparison engines been higher. Many consumers start by entering their details into a platform, before deciding which provider offers the best overall deal, blending cost with coverage and service quality.

What Does “Comparison Friction Collapse” Mean?

This phrase sounds complicated but really means the barriers to researching and comparing options have dropped sharply. That's a big deal.

In the past, comparing suppliers often took effort and time—calling multiple shops or providers, finding printed brochures, or navigating confusing websites. Now, with sophisticated algorithms, user-friendly interfaces, and

abundant data, it takes minutes. This collapses what we used to call “friction” in the journey, making research faster and more accessible.

Less friction leads to more confident, informed choices. Customers are less reliant on brand advertising or sales pitches and more on actual data—reviews, independent ratings, and side-by-side price comparisons.

How This Reshapes Retailers’ Strategies

Brands have to adapt to a world where customers arrive informed and with clear expectations. Instead of simply pushing products, companies focus on earning trust early, providing transparent information, and standing up well in comparison engines.

- Better online presence: Detailed product specs, user reviews, FAQs, and transparent pricing.
- Omnichannel service: Helping customers research online and then visit stores or call for personal advice.
- Partnering with comparison sites and map services to ensure accurate, compelling listings.

Is This Just Another “Pandemic Effect”?

Many reports talk about pandemic-driven acceleration of digital behaviours. Certainly, the crisis pushed many britainreviews.co “offline-first” shoppers to try online options out of necessity. However, the real story looks like more of a settling into new habits already underway.

Research-first shopping had started before COVID-19. What the pandemic did was speed up adoption, and probably made digital research tools more expected and trusted by a wider audience.

Post-pandemic, the data points to a durable pattern: people now expect to research online as a crucial first step across many purchase types, mixing both online and offline channels as it suits them best.

To Sum Up: It’s Not Just *Online Shopping*, But Smarter Shopping

Aspect	Before Digital	Research After Digital
Research	Access to Information Limited to brochures, word-of-mouth, store visits	Instant access to prices, reviews, locations via apps and websites
Comparison	Time-consuming and fragmented	Fast, side-by-side comparison via specialised sites
Purchase Journey	Linear, from in-store to buy	Non-linear, research before and during shopping
Shopping Mode	Offline or online	Hybrid, fluid moves between channels

Ultimately, the biggest change in how we shop isn’t just about clicking “buy” on a website. It’s about how digital tools have made research part and parcel of the journey, empowering customers to make better choices without hassle.

For retailers and brands, that means focusing less on just switching people online and more on supporting customers throughout their *research-first purchase journeys*. That’s where the future lies.