

# AlixPartners

## Great Expectations: 2026 Home Delivery Survey

E-commerce mobilizes  
as consumers ratchet  
up their demands



# By the numbers

## Faster, faster

2.6 days

The maximum delivery time consumers are willing to accept to receive free shipping, down from

~3.5 days

since 2021

## Free shipping drives purchase decisions

94%

of consumers say free shipping impacts their purchase decisions

## The penalty for late deliveries

88%

of consumers say a late delivery from a retailer affects the likelihood they will buy from that retailer again

## Cost crunch

83%

of executives say their per-package costs have increased year over year;

38%

say tariffs are a structural cost issue impacting their sourcing decisions

## Clear communications are a must

90%

of consumers say updated delivery dates and clear explanations are important when a delivery runs late

## Focus on the last mile

>90%

of retailers say they use a mix of last-miles carriers;

>33%

say they've shifted volume away from FedEx and UPS



“

The hurrier I go,  
the behinder I get.

— Author unknown

Supply chain, logistics and transportation executives can be forgiven if they sometimes feel moved to quote the old saying above.

**Their business grows more demanding by the day:** disruptions throw markets and trade routes into turmoil, costs press upward, and customers will take their business elsewhere if their orders don't arrive on time.

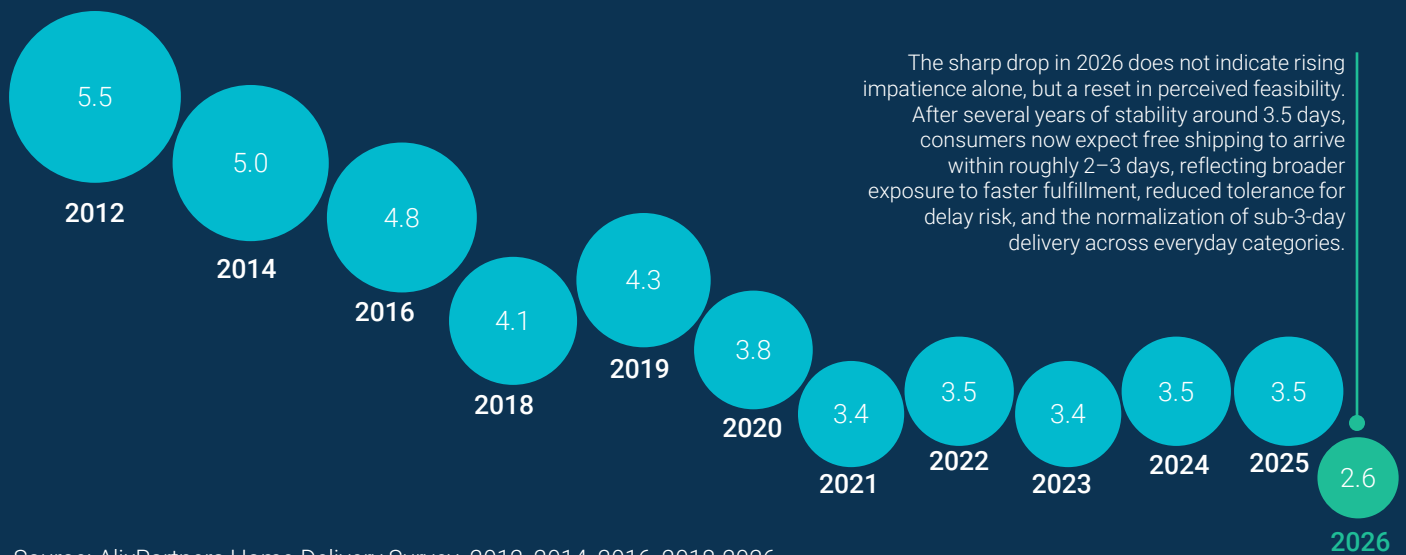
**And “on time” doesn't mean what it used to:** consumers now expect their (free) deliveries to arrive within 2.6 days, down notably from the 3.4 days that had been the norm for several years.

Those stubborn realities make for a lot of managerial headaches—and all for the sake of a service that most executives say doesn't improve their profitability.

# Free shipping expectations reset in 2026: sub-3-day delivery becomes the new baseline

Q: [Consumer] when buying an item for delivery, what is the maximum delivery time you are willing to accept in order to receive free shipping?

## Consumer expectations in days



Source: AlixPartners Home Delivery Survey, 2012, 2014, 2016, 2018-2026

Such is the state of e-commerce as revealed in AlixPartners' 14th Annual Home Delivery Survey, an online survey of 1,000 U.S. consumers and 100 North American executives in transportation, logistics and supply chain functions at companies with sales of \$100 million or more.

The consumer half of the survey gathers the opinions of consumers to determine the shifts in their behaviors that will drive home delivery operations and supply chains for e-commerce players; the executive half solicits the views of executives to understand their companies' home delivery offerings and preferences, the challenges they are facing, and the actions taken to improve operations.

The survey reveals that for relief from their logistical headaches, carriers and shippers are turning to AI, which is fast becoming a core component of delivery operations and customer experience. E-commerce players are enlisting it for address validation, forecasting, routing, ETA prediction and customer service. Most consumers don't seem to mind. They tolerate or even prefer AI to recommend products, answer questions, manage updates and even resolve delivery problems, as long as it is fast and effective.

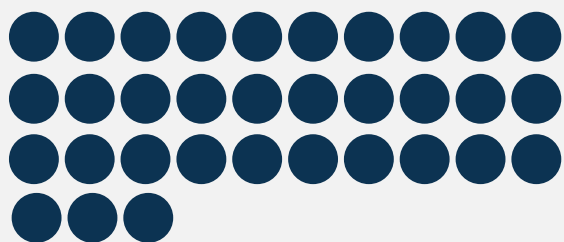
# Quick to punish, slow to forgive

But even with a powerful technological boost, e-commerce players are still walking a tightrope. Late deliveries can put 20% of their business at risk, with consumers reporting that one or two late or otherwise flawed deliveries from a retailer are enough to drive them to pick another retailer the next time they order—even though consumers are more likely to blame the carrier rather than the retailer when an order is botched.

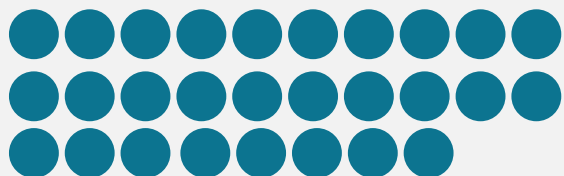
What's more, they expect retailers to offer more than merely an apology when a delivery is late or inaccurate. Absent any such compensation, shoppers' willingness to buy again from that shipper is eroded if not eliminated altogether.

## Apology alone isn't enough: over 88% of shoppers say a late delivery at least weakens or ends their willingness to buy from a retailer again

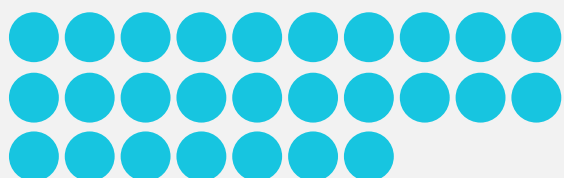
Q: [Consumer] If a retailer only offers an apology (and no other compensation) for a late delivery, how does that affect your likelihood to buy from them again?



33% It may affect my decision, depending on the situation



28% I will be less likely to buy from them



27% I will definitely stop buying from them



9% It does not change my future buying behavior



3% I do not expect compensation for late deliveries

Further evidence of escalating shopper expectations can be found in the survey's finding that more affluent shoppers prefer deliveries by uniformed drivers working for premium carriers—rather than, say, a gig economy worker in civilian clothes driving a used Prius.

Higher-end retailers take note: carrier choice has taken on strategic significance.

### Return policies are another strong influence on consumer shopping decisions:

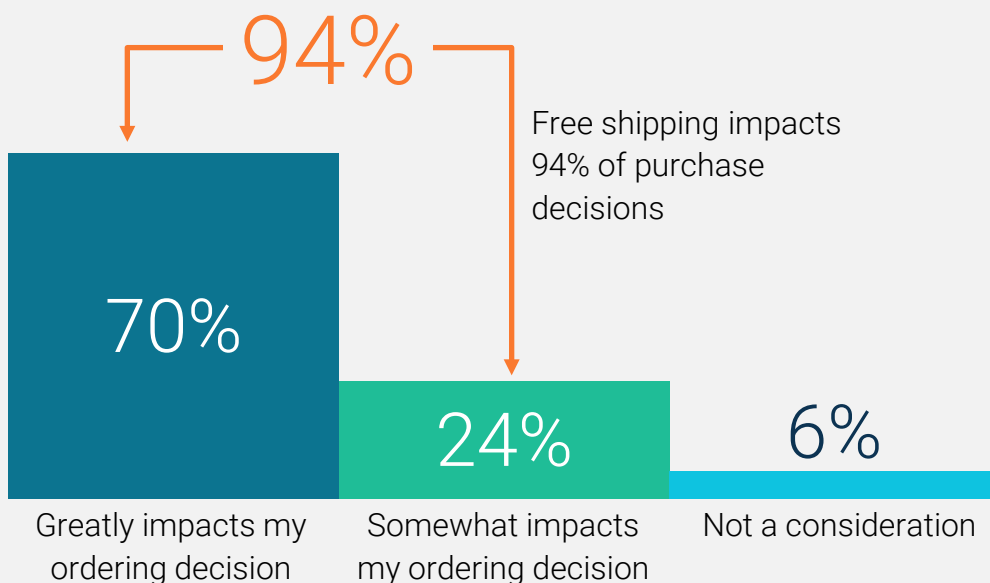
**92%** of consumers say they usually or sometimes review a retailer's return policy before ordering, and only a third say their return behavior would not change if they were charged for shipping returned items.

Along with free, consumers want returns to be easy. Shippers and consumers (in a rare moment of alignment) both prefer to handle their returns free in-store (when the store is a half-hour drive away or less) or to drop off their returns at a nearby carrier location.

The offer of free shipping is critical with 94% saying it impacts their purchase decision; over 70% say it has great impact

Q: [Consumer] When ordering an item for delivery, how does the choice of free shipping impact your ordering decision?

#### 2026 impact of free shipping



# Not by speed alone

The most salient takeaway from these findings is that consumers have reset their expectations. They no longer judge carrier and shipper performance only by speed.

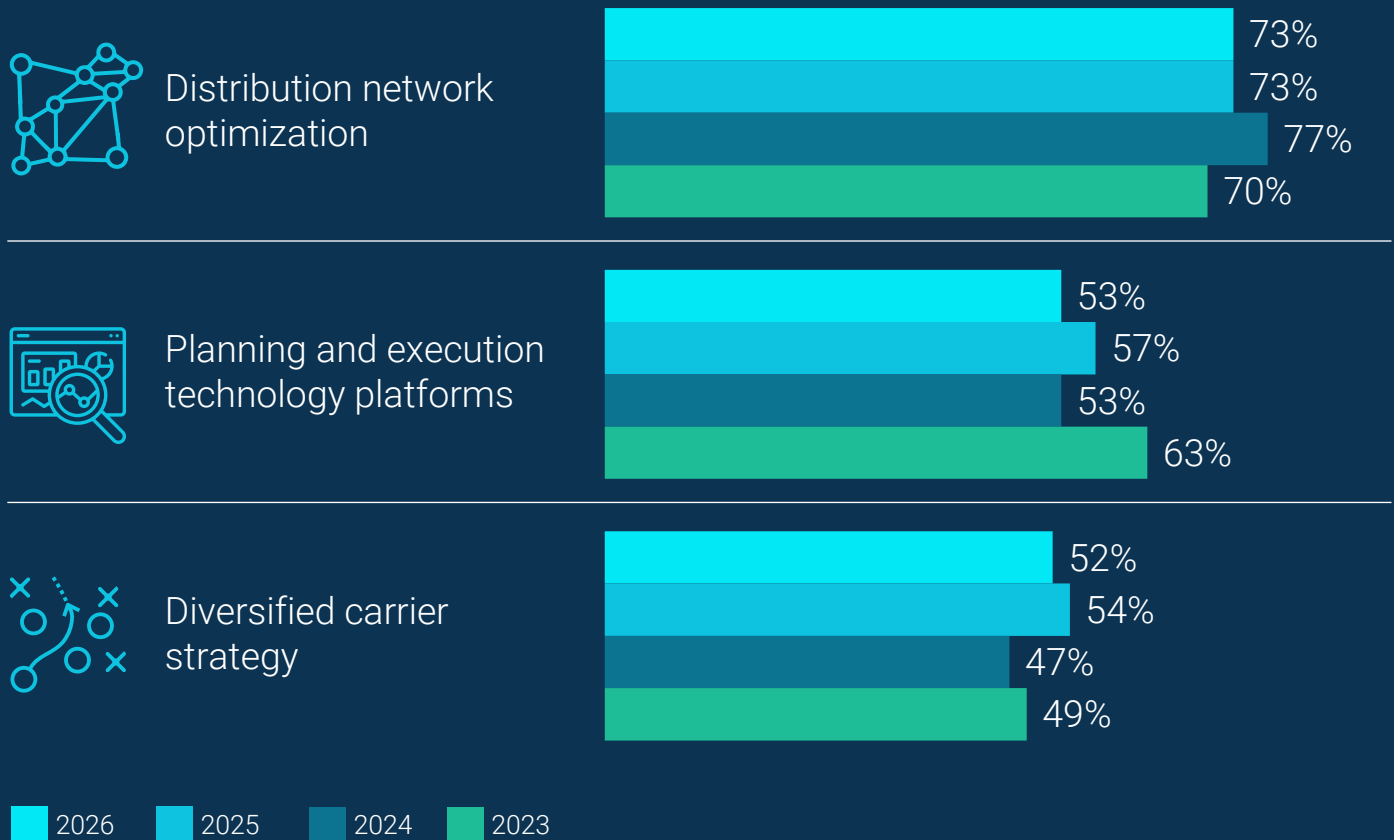
Yes, they want speedier, more accurate deliveries. But they also judge their e-commerce service providers by their communications: consumers expect advance warning of late deliveries and a clear

explanation and an apology when delivery times slip. And consumers judge shippers by their returns policies—the simpler and cheaper the better. The consumer reset, in turn, challenges e-commerce players to raise their operational game or risk undermining their business. To meet consumers' expectations, nearly three-quarters of executives surveyed say they are investing in optimizing their distribution networks. More than half are investing in planning and execution technology platforms, and about half are pursuing diversified carrier strategies.

## Distribution network optimization & planning/execution tech platforms are top initiatives to improve home delivery operations from a service & cost perspective

Q: [Executive] What initiatives are you pursuing to improve your home delivery operations from a service and cost perspective?

### Initiatives to improve home delivery operations



The reset in expectations that are driving shipper actions is especially noticeable among consumers in the 18-34 age cohort. Approximately 31% of these consumers place online orders on a daily basis, their service expectations shaped by repeated exposure to Amazon's premium fulfillment tier.

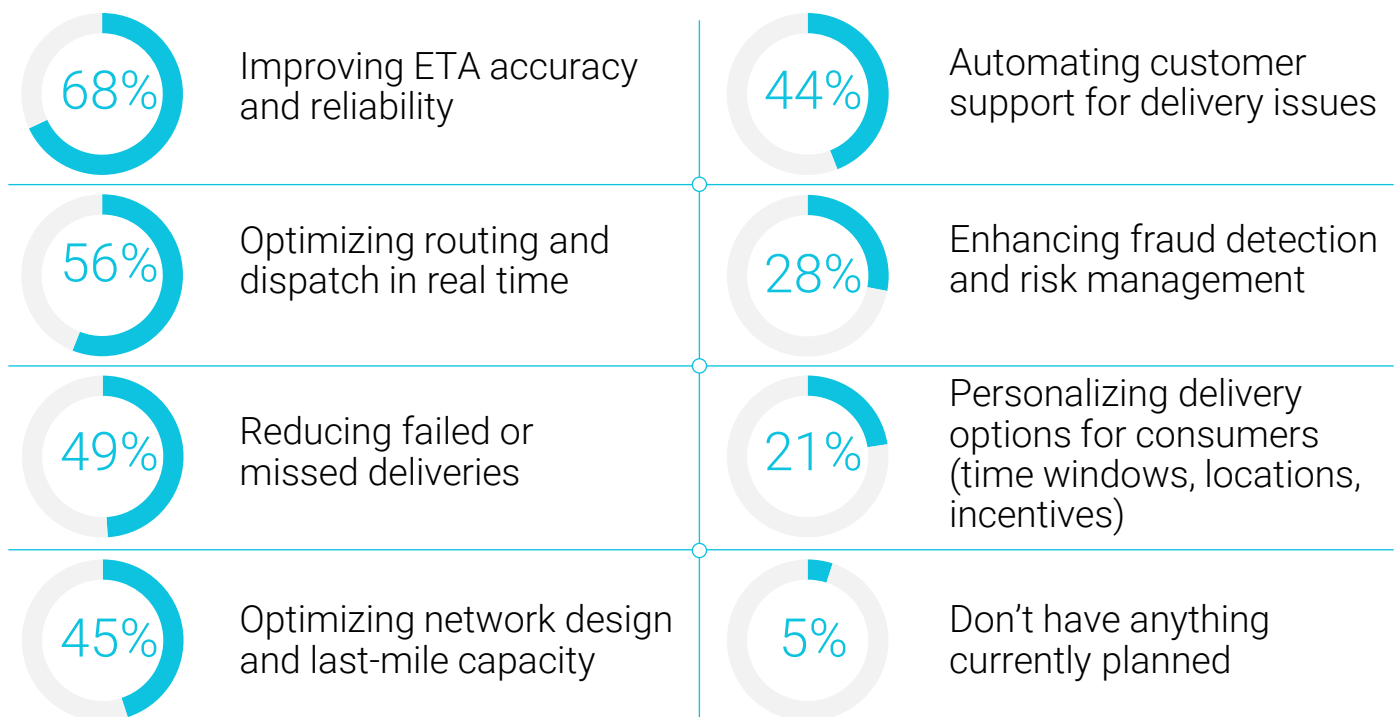
Other retailers and platforms, lacking Amazon's financial stamina, data resources, and fulfillment and delivery networks, are finding it hard to keep up, with 41% of executive respondents reporting that, despite improvements in recent years, their free shipping service level goals fall short of customer expectations. Lurking in the survey findings is another warning to carriers and shippers. A full 90% of consumers surveyed say it is important to be notified when an order is expected to be late and to be informed what the updated ETA is.

And they want to be alerted at the first sign of impending trouble, whereas 50% of executives wait to notify customers of a possible delay until the delay is certain to affect the delivery date. By no coincidence, 68% of executives say that improving ETA accuracy and reliability is their No.1 AI use-case priority over the next two to three years, suggesting that timely ETA updates could well become the next differentiator among delivery providers.

Executives' other AI priorities—reducing failed deliveries and optimizing real-time routing and network capacity—match up neatly against the improvements consumers say they'd like to see. That suggests that executives can be confident that they're putting their investment dollars where they will have the greatest impact on consumer satisfaction.

## AI priorities are clear: retailers are focused on making ETAs more reliable, cutting failed deliveries, and optimizing real-time routing and network capacity

Q: [Executive] Over the next 2 to 3 years, which AI use cases in home delivery are your highest priorities?



# Fine-tuning the delivery machine

But there's more to operational improvement than AI. Shippers are focused closely on last-mile reliability.

**90%** More than 90% of executives surveyed say they use a mix of last-mile carriers;

**32%** nearly a third (32%) use four or more.

**55%** More than half (55%) report using last-mile carriers other than the big three (FedEx, UPS and USPS); more than a third report shifting last-mile volume away from FedEx and UPS.

Reliability has edged past cost as executives' principal reason for choosing their primary last-mile carrier, and a growing number of executives say they're diversifying their carrier base to minimize risks.







All the same, costs remain a major concern for shippers. More than eight in 10 retailers say their delivery costs per package have risen year over year, prompting retailers to prioritize reducing last-mile costs per order.

And a sizable minority of retailers say tariffs have impacted their cost base, with 38% saying tariffs have become a structural cost issue that influences their supplier decisions.

## Cost reduction dominates executive focus, but 2025 showed a meaningful shift toward speed of fulfillment and delivery

Q: [Executive] on which facets of your last mile delivery are you currently focused?

### Facets of last mile delivery currently focused

	2023	2024	2025	2026
 Reducing total cost per order	83%	85%	71%	76%
 Increasing the speed of fulfillment (Click to ship)	45%	42%	31%	52%
 Increasing the speed of delivery (Ship to porch)	46%	47%	26%	52%
 Reducing returns	33%	31%	23%	40%
 Improving accuracy	44%	47%	27%	39%
 Reducing split shipments	50%	47%	22%	32%

Note: allow to check up to three options in 2023/2024/2026; allow to check up to two options in 2025



## Let's make a deal

Retailers are also expanding their cost-saving repertoires in several different directions. Most now require shoppers to reach minimum order amounts to earn free shipping, while many are also requiring membership. A plus for retailers is the finding that most consumers will add to their orders to hit the free shipping minimum.

Other cost-control tactics include offering trade-offs to customers in exchange for free shipping. More than 80% of consumers say the idea of “no rush” delivery in exchange for free shipping is appealing, and nearly nine in 10 say they’ll at least sometimes choose slower delivery times if they’re offered meaningful discounts or rewards. “Meaningful” in this case most often means “immediate”—when trading speed for incentives, nearly half of consumers want a discount on the order they’re placing at the time.

At the other end of the time scale, some retailers are offering same-day delivery in response to the steady growth in demand for the service. Such service is seldom free; most consumers say they’re willing to pay up to \$10 to \$15 for same-day delivery. It’s also category-dependent. Half of consumers want same-day delivery for food and perishable groceries, while they’re willing to wait two to three days for non-perishables such as clothing, home furnishings, and general merchandise.

Many retailers see additional value in offering custom delivery options, such as BOPIS (buy online, pick up in store), curbside pickup, or delivery to a locker or other designated pickup point. At present, BOPIS is the service most frequently offered. Custom options—scheduled delivery windows, curbside pickup, in-home assembly and installation—are poised to become more prevalent in coming years.



The results of the 2026 Home Delivery Survey drive home the message that consumers are growing more demanding, more accustomed to specifying different service tiers for different categories of goods, and more willing to trade speed for free shipping in certain circumstances.



But it also makes clear that shippers and carriers have responded to consumers' escalating demands by improving their service levels.



Almost two-thirds (62%) of executives say their delivery performance has improved year over year as fulfillment networks and carrier service levels have stabilized. Which is to say that while life for e-commerce players is hurrier than ever, most are managing not to fall behind.

# AlixPartners

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## About us

For more than forty years, AlixPartners has helped businesses around the world respond quickly and decisively to their most critical challenges—circumstances as diverse as urgent performance improvement, accelerated transformation, complex restructuring and risk mitigation.

These are the moments when everything is on the line—a sudden shift in the market, an unexpected performance decline, a time-sensitive deal, a fork-in-the-road decision. But it's not what we do that makes a difference, it's how we do it.

Tackling situations when time is of the essence is part of our DNA—so we adopt an action-oriented approach at all times. We work in small, highly qualified teams with specific industry and functional expertise, and we operate at pace, moving quickly from analysis to implementation. We stand shoulder to shoulder with our clients until the job is done and only measure our success in terms of the results we deliver.

Our approach enables us to help our clients confront and overcome truly future-defining challenges. We partner with you to make the right decisions and take the right actions. And we are right by your side. When it really matters.

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