

A person wearing a dark blue, short-sleeved dress is holding a brown cardboard box. The box has several shipping labels on it, including one with a hashtag. The background is a blurred indoor setting with a yellow wall on the left. The entire image is overlaid with a purple gradient.

 stampfree.ai

the post and parcel
trend report 2026

executive summary

Our focus for the 2026 Trends report is on C2X shipments. Now accounting for an estimated 25% of total parcel volume, returns and consumer paid shipping are increasingly important and hotly contested.

1. Returns remain a defining part of the customer experience

Returns are frequent, expected, and strategically important. Most consumers return items regularly, and over 7 in 10 say that an easy returns process is extremely or very important when choosing where to shop. At the same time, shoppers feel that current systems are inconsistent, overly complex, and designed around retailer operations rather than customer needs.

2. App fatigue is accelerating

Consumers are overloaded with retailer and courier apps, yet rely on very few of them regularly. Across all age groups, people express frustration with having to download apps. Coupled with a 2.3% decrease in global app installs (across App Store & Google Play) and a 4% retention rate after 30 days - it's clear fatigue is growing.

3. Messaging platforms are becoming the new universal interface

Messaging and social platforms are now part of daily life for the majority of consumers. They are increasingly seen as native channels - not just to communicate with friends - but to interact with brands for customer service and shopping.



the rise of the modern online shopper



Online shopping continues to grow in both the UK and the USA. Most consumers say they are buying more online than they did a year ago, with under-35s driving the fastest growth.

Marketplaces still dominate ecommerce, but social commerce is rising rapidly particularly among younger shoppers. TikTok Shop, Instagram and Facebook Marketplace are now mainstream shopping destinations, not novelties.

Retailer websites remain important, but retailer apps are losing relevance as consumers gravitate toward platforms they already use daily.

96% of retail app users stop using them by day 30 of download

where are people shopping online in 2026?



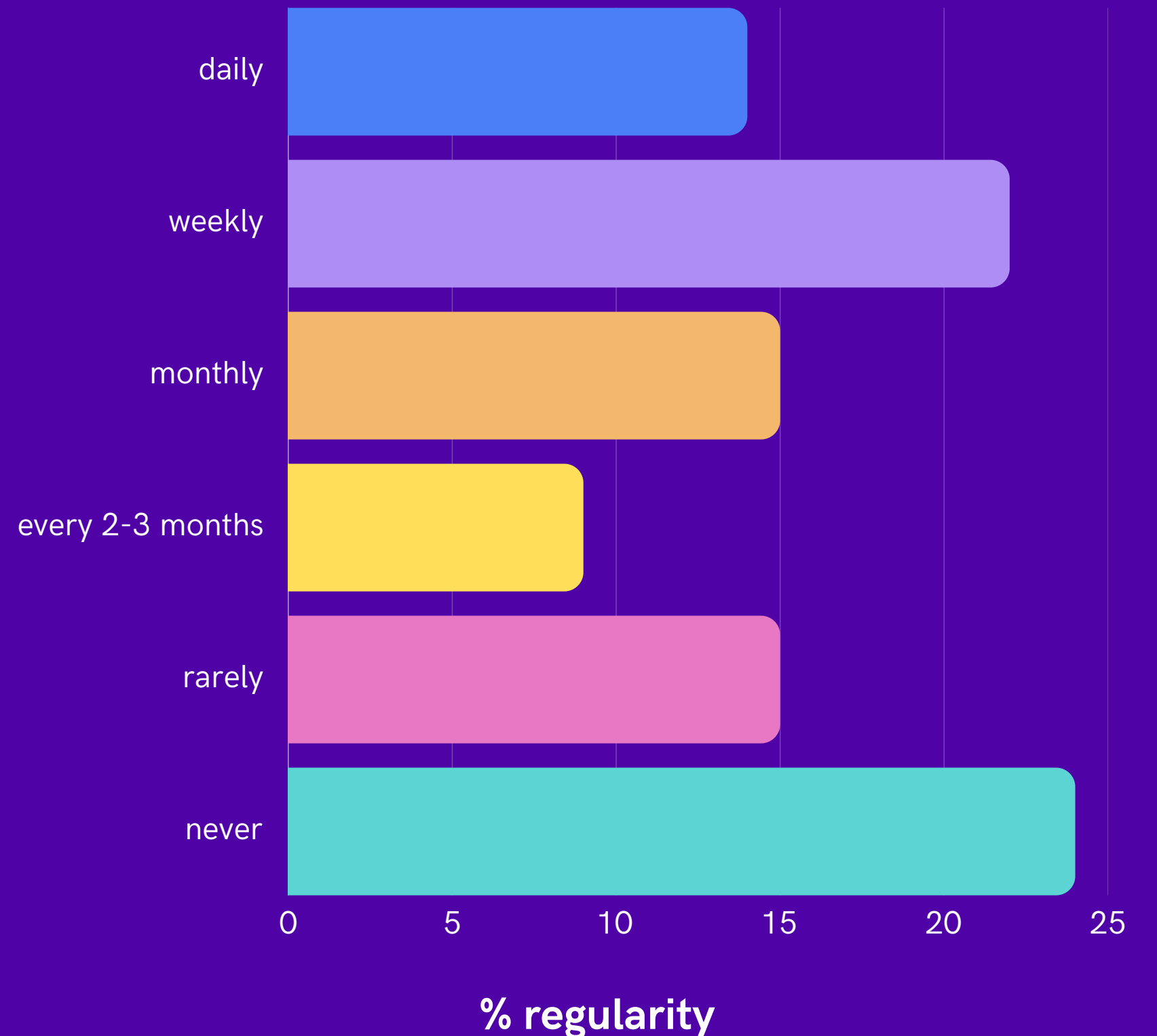
the decline of app-first commerce



Most consumers have several retail and courier apps installed - but very few are used frequently. Our research indicates that only 14% would use these apps daily - with 25% having never even used them and 24% not even touching them for the majority of a year. Clearly, they're gathering dust.

77% of consumers have 4-9 shopping apps installed - with 14% even having 10+ (Pro Carrier, 2025). There is a widening gap between the number of apps on people's phones and the number they actually rely on. The average smartphone user opens just 9-10 apps per day, despite having 80-100 installed (Appinventiv, 2025) - real excess exists on the modern consumers' smartphone.

how often do consumers use retailer apps?



a new era of returns: high volume, high expectations

Returns can't be an operational afterthought - they are central to the ecommerce journey.

According to YouGov (2025) consumers in the U.K. return items at a rate of 17.5% - a sizeable chunk of the market to process and administer correctly. For logistics professionals, this signals a shift: reverse logistics is now a customer-experience product, not just a cost centre. Last year 51% of customers surveyed by YouGov cited returns as an important factor when purchasing online - it's now up to **73%** in our research.

15%

of returns are now from ecommerce transactions - almost 3x higher than physical retail returns

73%



of consumers believe returns process is important when choosing where to shop

	extremely important	41%
	very important	32%
	somewhat important	22%
	not so important	3.7%
	not at all important	1.5%

the consumer-centricity gap



While a good returns process can encourage purchase decision, equally a negative one can hinder this and lose customers.

Externally, only 32% of consumers feel that returns processes are simple and easy to follow (ZigZag, 2025) - highlighting a need to focus around the end user instead.

Inconsistency across retailers is a major pain point. Each brand has its own system, its own steps, and its own rules forcing consumers to relearn the process every time.

Many shoppers also feel "in the dark" during returns, with little visibility on where their item or refund is in the system. ParcelLab (2025) note that 20% of retailers don't even provide any notifications to show where a parcel is in the returns process.

75%

have been put off buying from a retailer again after a poor returns process

77%

feel retailers' return processes are too inconsistent and varied

demand for simplicity and a single returns hub

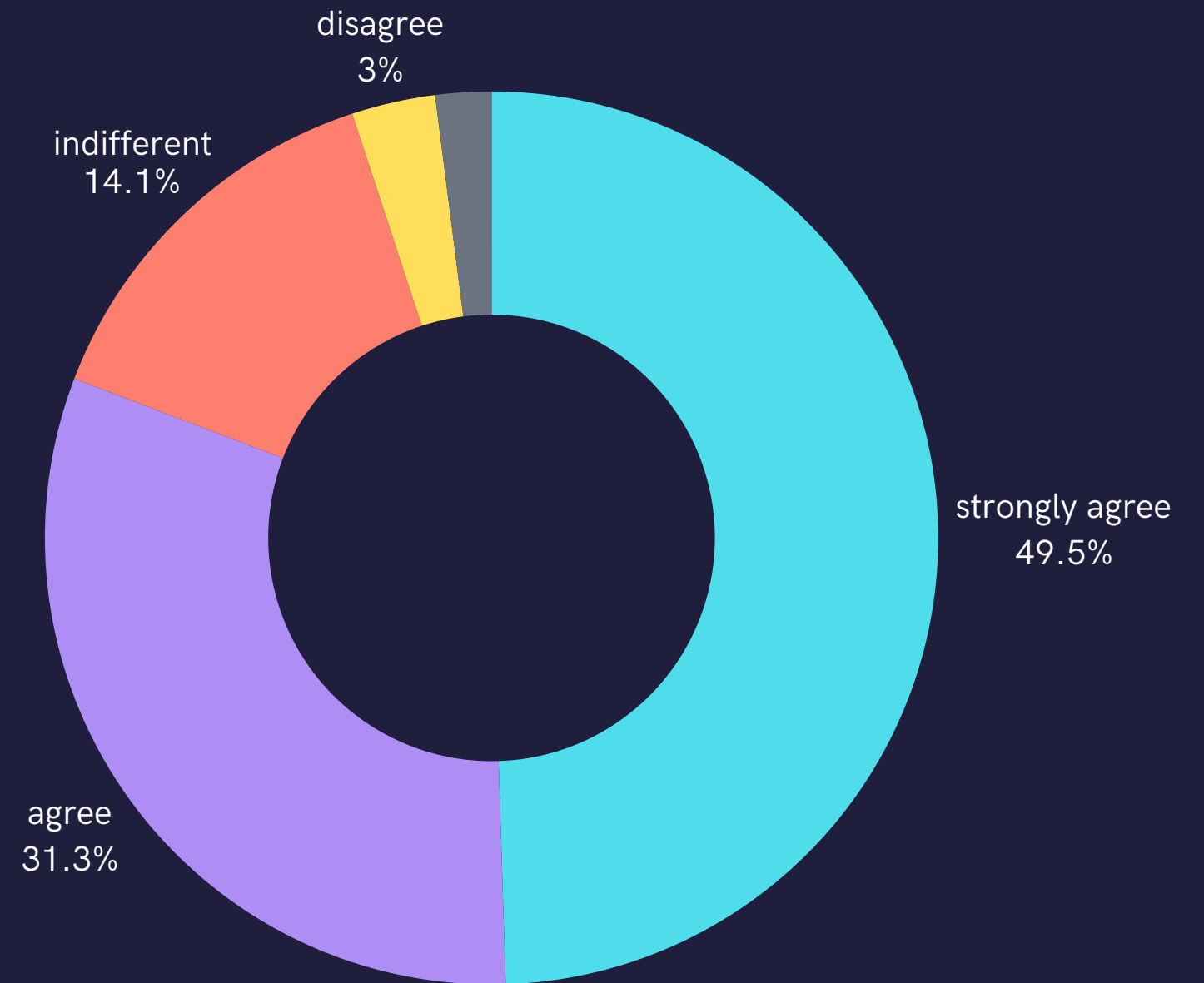
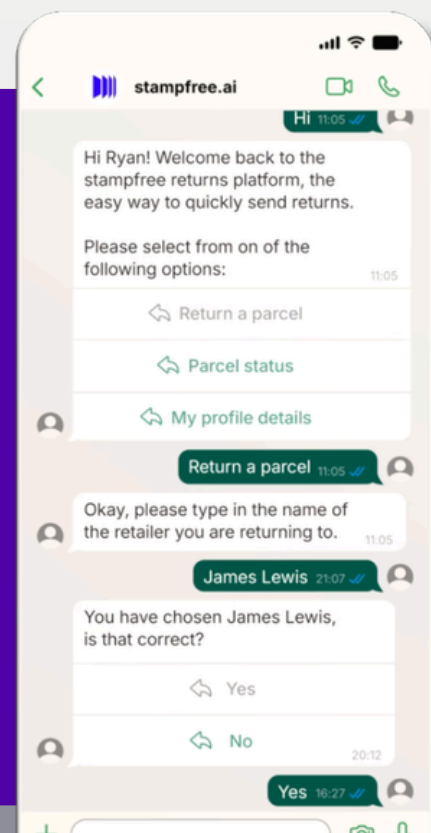
Consumers are tired of juggling different portals, apps, emails, and systems for every retailer they shop with.

The majority of consumers in both the UK and the USA from our research say they wish there were one simple place to manage all their returns - across all retailers.

App fatigue is accelerating. Our research shows consumers strongly dislike downloading new apps just to complete a one-off task like making a return.

77%

want one simple place to manage their returns from all the retailers they shop with - our appfree platform provides this through the social media platforms they use every day



consumer response to how much they agreed with the following statement;

"I dislike having to download apps for new tasks"

messaging platforms dominate the everyday

Messaging platforms are now the digital operating system for consumers.

WhatsApp, iMessage, Instagram DMs and Messenger are used multiple times per day by the majority of shoppers.

People are not just chatting - they are managing their lives through messaging: appointments, services, payments, and increasingly, shopping.

This creates a powerful opportunity for retailers and carriers to meet consumers where they already are.

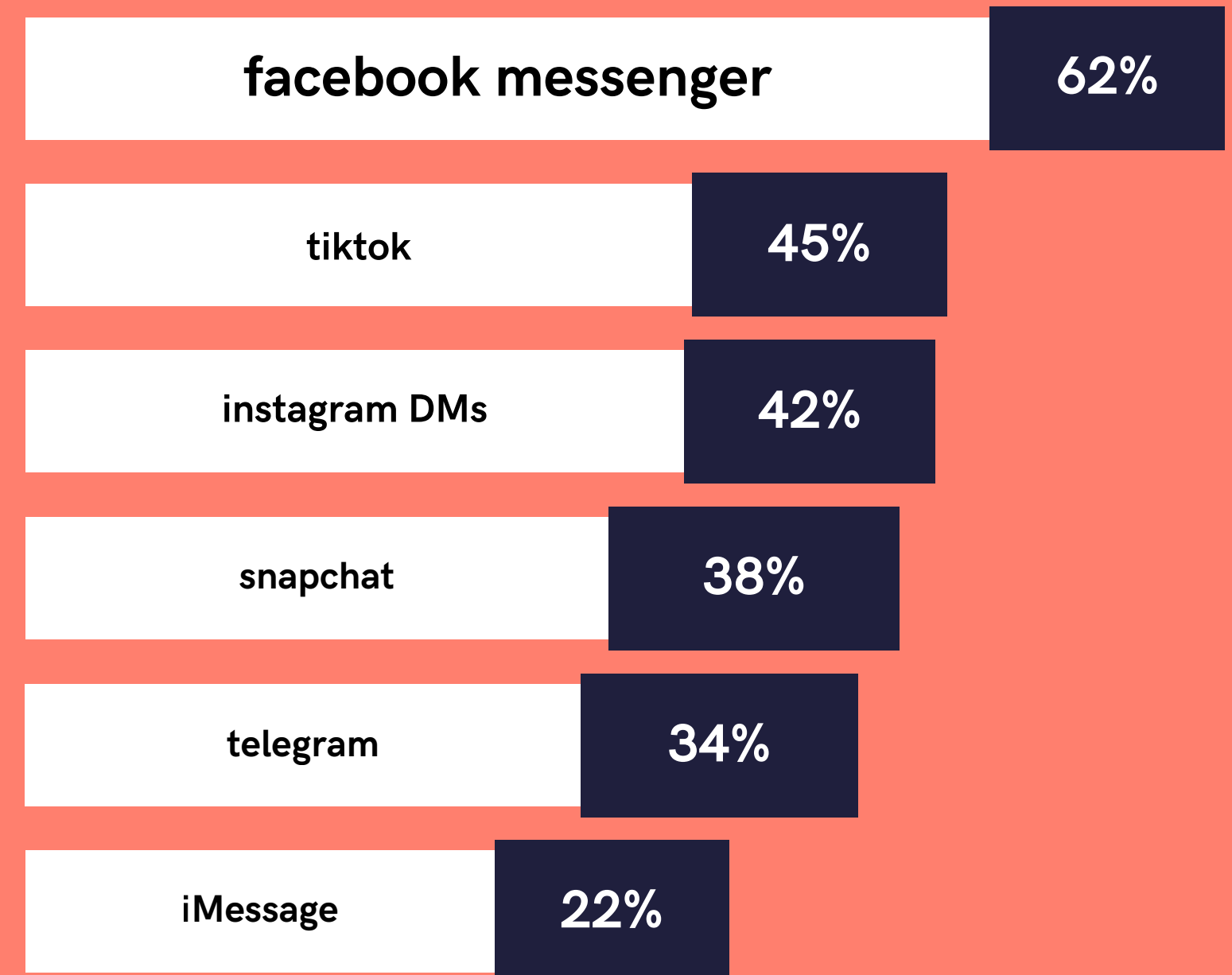
67%



use social/messaging platforms daily - with WhatsApp the most popular

83%

of consumers use WhatsApp day-to-day



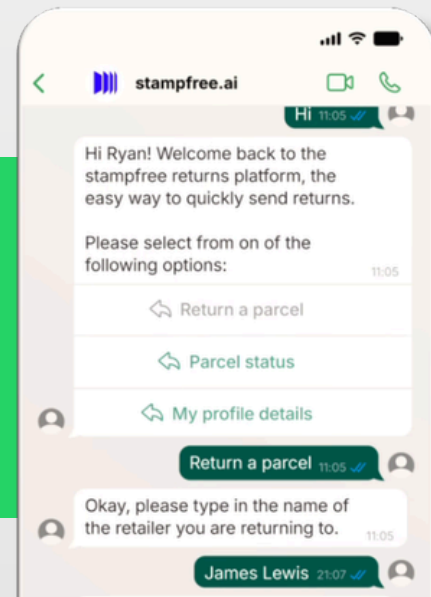
messaging is moving to shipping & returns



Our research has identified something clear - your consumers are ready to use messaging platforms not just for returns - but for sending parcels and tracking deliveries too.

Most say they would choose a courier that lets them book shipping through WhatsApp over one that doesn't. Straight away it's clear that consumers want to use platforms that are familiar to them - not just familiar to posts, carriers and retailers.

our appfree solution addresses this directly - more at the end



77%

of consumers are likely to use messaging platforms to send parcels and manage returns (if available)

83%

of consumers would use a courier that offered them secure and simple booking through WhatsApp over one that didn't

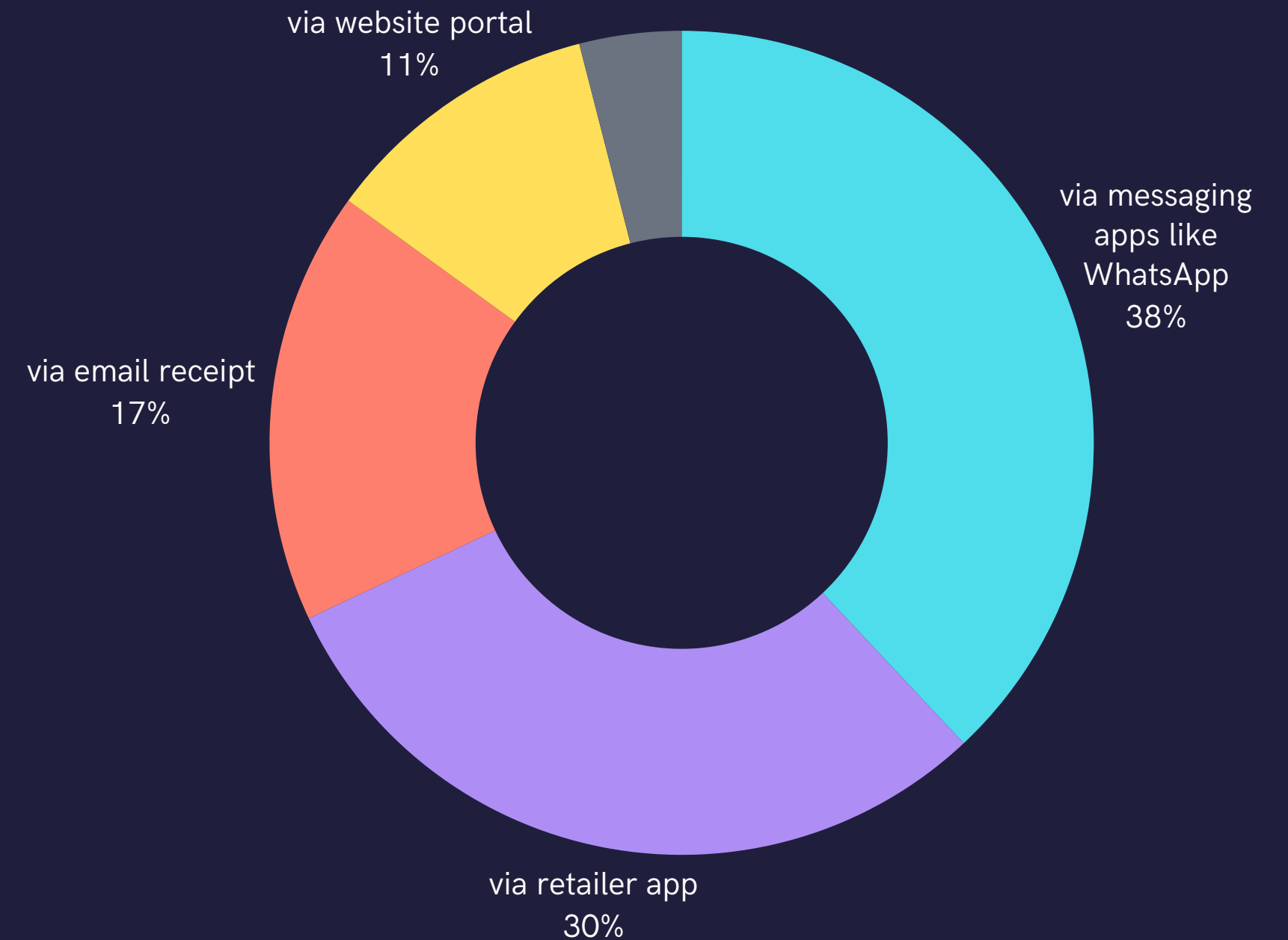
messaging is moving to shipping & returns cont..



For the first time, messaging apps have overtaken retailer apps and email as the preferred channel for managing returns. Consumers want to send a message - not log into a portal or download an app.

A large share of consumers say they would gladly manage all their returns through WhatsApp instead of websites, emails, or apps.

With our aforementioned appfree solution, they can now manage them through WhatsApp or Facebook Messenger.



how consumers would like to manage their returns

consumer first - the desire for channel selection

Consumers don't just want messaging, they want control. They want to choose how they're communicated with: WhatsApp, SMS, email, or notifications. Our research indicates that the majority don't feel they have the option to choose.

Negative returns experience could have a real impact on bottom line - 71% of consumers (UPS, 2025) would not buy again from a retailer with a poor returns process.

68%

believe that retailers do not let them manage returns in a way that they prefer

74%

believe it's important to choose the channel they're communicated with by retailers

find in social, buy in social

Younger consumers are far more likely to shop via social platforms like TikTok Shop, Instagram, and Facebook Marketplace. For under-35s, shopping and social media are already blended.

Older age groups still rely more on traditional websites and marketplaces, but social commerce is no longer niche, it's an established part of the standard shopping mix.

73%

of Gen Z discover products on social media (emarketer, 2025) - retailers must continue optimising to allow them to buy natively within these platforms

51%

of 18-29 year olds already use social platforms such as TikTok Shop, Facebook Marketplace and Instagram to shop

7 in 10

60+ year olds use retailer websites as their primary shopping channel

return in social

Comfort with messaging for customer service, shopping, and returns declines with age, but remains significant across all generations.

For Gen Z and younger Millennials, messaging isn't just comfortable, it's expected. For older shoppers, it is becoming normal.

Twilio (2025) note that 89% of consumers want to communicate with brands via messaging - and 77% are more likely to buy from brands they can communicate with directly.

While our research has examined the returns angle, it's clear both sides of the logistics/reverse logistics space need to look to messaging as a powerful tool to delight customers.



76%

of U.K. 18-29 year olds would like to return parcels through messaging apps such as WhatsApp

The background of this section is a purple-tinted photograph of the London skyline, featuring the Houses of Parliament and the Elizabeth Tower (Big Ben) on the left, and a bridge over the River Thames on the right.



62%

of USA 18-29 year olds would like to return parcels through messaging apps such as WhatsApp

The background of this section is a purple-tinted photograph of a dense city skyline, likely New York City, with numerous skyscrapers visible against a dark sky.

conclusion

Consumers are navigating a maze of portals, apps, labels, and rules and they are increasingly unwilling to tolerate that complexity.

It is clear that the way people interact with technology - and therefore retailers - is changing. Messaging has become the most natural interface for daily life. It is where people organise plans, manage services, and increasingly expect to resolve issues with brands.

The next phase of retail and logistics will have to examine the following issues:

- How do they design around how people actually interact in 2026?
- How can they simplify the returns/parcel send journey instead of overcomplicating?
- How best to consolidate journeys instead of fragmenting them?

Younger consumers already expect this - with older consumers beginning to follow suit.

The question is no longer if returns and shipping will move into conversational, messaging-based experiences - but how quickly organisations will adapt.

This report is based on a quantitative survey of 1,557 consumers conducted in Q4 2025 across the USA (n=1,055) and UK (n=502).



APPFREE

our solution

stampfree.ai's appfree returns solution enables customers to manage parcel returns through familiar messaging platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, TikTok & Instagram.

Instead of downloading retailer apps or navigating multiple systems, the entire process takes place within a simple chat conversation. Customers provide parcel details through guided prompts, after which a QR code or carrier label is generated for drop-off or collection. The same messaging channel can also be used to share updates, tracking information and support.

By using platforms customers already use daily, appfree offers a single, simple place to manage returns, reducing friction while keeping customers informed throughout the process.

Our research shows that the vast majority of customers want a single, central place to return parcels. We provide exactly that on the platforms that they use everyday.

Interested? Get in touch on hello@stampfree.ai to set up a live demo call with a member of our sales team.

