

Online retail trends taking root in 2022

Given the dynamic nature of technology, it follows that new trends are forever emerging in the e-commerce space. Today, people seek out platforms that not only offer ease-of-use and convenient payment options, but those that embrace the latest technologies to make the overall shopping experience more exciting.



Source: Dolgachov - [123RF](#)

In South Africa, there have been high levels of innovation and change in e-commerce in recent years, according to the [Online Retail Industry in South Africa 2021](#) report. Bigger companies are investing heavily in tech or acquiring startup online retailers as sales soar.

More than R30bn in online sales was recorded in 2020, a study by World Wide Worx found last year. This was driven in the main by Covid-19 lockdowns that moved people away from traditional in-store purchasing.

However, even with an easing of restrictions online buying remains high, and will continue to do so. Data by Statista market and consumer data projects 31.6 million South Africans could be converted to online shopping by 2024, according to *Business Report*. This means the onus is now on e-tailers and online marketplaces to ensure their platforms are front and centre when it comes to meeting consumer demand in the digital space, as competition is intensifying at a rate of knots.



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Anne-Marie Green, marketing manager of South African internet auction and online marketplace Bidorbuy, has paid close attention to emerging trends abroad, as these will invariably reach South Africa in 2022.

“The scale of some more mature e-commerce markets means they are open to experimentation by integrating other tools like social selling and chatbots to further enhance the online shopping experience,” Green says.

“Despite recent growth, South Africa remains a relatively underdeveloped e-commerce market, but studying developments overseas can help us predict and shape the future here.”

Green pinpoints the major trends that are set to feature strongly in the online shopping space this year.

Payment options

One of the bigger developments is the emergence of more payment options. This stems from the fact that consumers like to be presented with a choice.

“This extends beyond the products on sale to shipping and payment options that customers can select during checkout,” Green says.

“Payment options such as installments; buy now pay later; and interest-free credit make e-commerce more accessible, and remove barriers to purchasing bigger-ticket items. Diversified payment options also mean that the e-commerce experience is better aligned to the diverse budgets and spending habits of consumers, and help to create trust in the positioning of e-commerce brands as being there for buyers.”

Tech innovation

Something else that is taking the sector by storm is augmented reality (AR). It builds on the traditional retail idea of customers being able to examine, touch or try on an item before making a purchase.

“Technological innovations such as AR will help customers to visualise how a product will look on them or in their home, and be an important differentiator for the e-commerce companies that bring this technology to market first.

Artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML) will play an even greater role than they have already. “If you’ve noticed that the best e-commerce sites seem to know what you want to buy almost before you do, then you’ve already experienced an important trend,” Green says.

“The integration of AI and ML is allowing sites to predict the products that are most likely to appeal to a particular consumer. AI can assess datasets and is adept at detecting and mapping out patterns, trends and anomalies. Of course, AI is only as good as the data available to it, but the increasing volumes of online transactions mean that datasets are expanding all the time.”

Green credentials

Green has also noted that environmental concerns are starting to play an increasing role in shopping habits, as consumers “dig deeper into companies’ green credentials”.

That means that e-commerce platforms have to ensure every aspect of their value chain is authentically sustainable, especially when it comes to delivery and packaging.



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Voice search

Another change to look out for in 2022 is the introduction of voice search to e-commerce platforms.

“Consumers are increasingly comfortable with asking their devices for information, advice and recommendations, and this is likely to influence the products they see and buy online in 2022,” Green says.

Online retail staying power

In March, it will be exactly two years since South Africa recorded its first Covid-19 case, and with new variants predicted for some time to come, it goes without saying that e-commerce will be affected.

“The pandemic has already transformed the shopping habits of South Africans, and its future trajectory will directly impact on e-commerce sale volumes and values. Spikes and troughs in infection rates will likely be mirrored in real time or at a slight lag by similar patterns in e-commerce activity,” she says.

“But the move towards online shopping is likely to be a lasting trend, with reluctance to visit public places and mingle with crowds an ongoing factor in many people’s decision-making.”

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