Business magazine

Environmental impact of online shopping

Online shopping may not be as green as you think. Here's how shopping online can have a surprisingly large carbon footprint.

Before reading

Do the preparation task first. Then read the article and do the exercises.

Preparation task

Match the definitions (a–h) with the vocabulary (1–8).

Vocabulary

1. …… an impact
2. …… ecological
3. …… landfill
4. …… retail
5. …… a retailer
6. …… carbon footprint
7. …… a campaign group
8. …… to purchase

Definition

a. the activity of selling goods to the public
b. the powerful effect that something has on something else
c. to buy something
d. the calculation of how much CO_2 a person, company, organisation, etc. produces, which is used to measure the environmental damage they cause
e. a place where large amounts of rubbish are buried in the ground
f. a person or shop that sells goods to the public
g. a group of people that organises actions or protests to achieve a particular aim
h. relating to the relationship between plants, animals, people, water, land, air, etc.

Environmental impact of online shopping

In the past few decades, the way we shop has changed dramatically. We used to buy our goods in traditional shops, on the high street or in department stores. Now, customers are increasingly buying online, where they can order whatever they want directly to their door with the click of a mouse. One in seven sales are now made online and studies suggest that by 2021, global online retail will reach an enormous US$4.8 trillion. As companies race to improve their internet shopping experience, the trend towards shopping online is predicted to continue.

But what is the impact of all this online shopping on the environment? You might think that online shopping is greener than in-store shopping. After all, an online store does not use the electricity that a traditional store might use and it doesn't require the customer to drive anywhere. Items are often delivered to several homes at once, so you would think the carbon savings must be significant. Take the typical home delivery round in the UK, for

example. Supermarket drivers often do 120 deliveries on an 80-kilometre round, producing 20 kilograms of CO_2 in total. In contrast, a 21-kilometre drive to the store and back for one household would generate 24 times more CO_2!

However, the reality is slightly more complex than that. Many home deliveries fail the first time and the driver has to make a second or third attempt to deliver the purchase. Customers who choose speedy delivery or those who buy single items from different places also contribute towards increasing the carbon footprint.

The carbon footprint also goes up if the customer chooses to return the item. A study in Germany showed that as many as one in three online purchases are returned. According to another study, merchandise worth nearly US$326 million is returned each year in the USA. Two billion kilograms of this ends up in landfill, leading to 13 tonnes of CO_2 being released.

Clothing is one product that has high return rates. Unlike in a walk-in store, the online shopper can't try things on before buying. So, companies offer free returns to make it easier for shoppers to purchase the same item of clothing in different sizes and colours. Customers try them at home, keep one and return the rest of them. However, when clothes are returned, they are not always cleaned and put back for sale. This is because many companies have found it cheaper to simply throw away the returned items than to pay someone to sort the damaged goods from the unwanted ones. In these cases, the returned clothes, which might be in perfect condition, end up in landfills or burnt.

When we take all these factors into consideration, we realise that online shopping isn't necessarily as green as people might think. That last kilometre to your door is costly, for companies and for the environment. There is some positive news, as various online retailers are starting to lower their carbon footprint by investing in electric delivery vehicles. However, the question of how to deal with returns efficiently and without waste is a challenge that many companies have not wanted to face. As online shoppers become aware of what companies are doing, and campaign groups demand urgent action in the face of the climate and ecological emergency, there is increasing pressure for companies to take responsibility for the environmental impact of their activities.

Sources:

- https://www.forbes.com/sites/heatherfarmbrough/2019/10/14/why-internet-shopping-isnt-always-better-for-the-environment/
- https://ensia.com/features/environmental-cost-online-shopping-delivery/
- https://www.oberlo.co.uk/blog/online-shopping-statistics
- https://www.alumniportal-deutschland.org/en/global-goals/sdg-12-consumption/online-shopping-or-local-shopping-whats-better-for-the-environment/
- https://www.euronews.com/living/2019/11/13/is-our-obsession-with-online-returns-damaging-the-environment

Tasks

Task 1

Are the sentences true or false?

		Answer	
1.	More sales are now made online than in shops.	True	False
2.	It is predicted that more and more shopping will be done online in the future.	True	False
3.	Online shopping uses less electricity than in-store shopping.	True	False
4.	The carbon footprint of online shopping is made worse by failed deliveries, speedy delivery and returns.	True	False
5.	Companies encourage customers to try clothes on at home.	True	False
6.	Companies make sure returned clothes are repackaged and resold.	True	False
7.	Most companies now use electric delivery vans.	True	False
8.	Most companies have found environmentally-friendly solutions for the problem of returned goods.	True	False

Task 2

Write the word to fill the gaps.

1. In the past few decades, the way we shop ..... changed dramatically.
2. We used ..... buy our goods in traditional shops.
3. Now, customers ..... increasingly buying online.
4. The trend towards shopping online is predicted ..... continue.
5. You might think that online shopping is greener ..... in-store shopping.
6. Customers ..... choose speedy delivery or buy single items from different places also contribute towards increasing the carbon footprint.
7. The carbon footprint also goes ..... if the customer chooses to return the item.
8. Many companies have found it cheaper to simply throw ..... the returned items.

Discussion

Do you shop online? How can online shopping's environmental impact be lessened?

Answers

Preparation task

1. b
2. h
3. e
4. a
5. f
6. d
7. g
8. c

Task 1

1. False
2. True
3. True
4. True
5. True
6. False
7. False
8. False

Task 2

1. has
2. to
3. are
4. to
5. than
6. who / that
7. up
8. away / out