September 2026

WILL THE 2026 SHOPPING SEASON GO AGENTIC?



PYMNTS INTELLIGENCE

WILL THE 2026 SHOPPING SEASON GO AGENTIC?

The Question

Consumers are already using AI to find products, compare prices and narrow choices. The unresolved question is how far the consumer will let it go, and who gets to make the decisions once money, identity and credit enter the transaction. So, will the 2026 shopping season go agentic?

Our hypothesis is that the answer is yes, but not in the way most people think. This report lays out the question, the hypothesis and the PYMNTS Intelligence data we're compiling to help answer it.

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THE CONVERSATION: CONSUMERS IN MOTION

The big change has already happened at the top of the funnel. Half of American adults—about 132 million people—have bought something at retail with AI help, and 22% now begin online retail research in an AI tool. Consumers use it as a better way to compare, check reviews, locate a product and, above all, find a better price.

The change stops as the agent gets closer to the money. Only 24% say they would let an agent both shop and buy, 52% prefer a payment experience that keeps the card outside the AI app, and only 14% would let the AI app hold their card. The consumer seems comfortable delegating research, but much less comfortable delegating identity, payment choice or an irreversible decision.

50%

of American adults have bought something at **retail with AI help.**

That doesn’t mean agentic commerce is a false start. It means the market is building toward a more controlled form of delegation. One where the agent does the work, the consumer sets the rules, a familiar payment provider protects the credential, and the transaction pauses when the choice becomes consequential. The open question is whether that controlled model is a bridge to full autonomy or the end state itself.

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OUR WORKING HYPOTHESIS

The 2026 shopping season will go agentic. It just won't happen the way most people expect. Merchants will try to steer shoppers to their own agents inside their own closed ecosystems, each with its own assortment, its own terms and its own checkout. Consumers will send agents out to find the best price, the fastest delivery and the easiest returns. Amazon already has all three, plus the saved credential, the loyalty identity and 59% of AI-assisted purchases. The walled-garden agent strategy loses to the one merchant that already owns the whole transaction.

Discovery goes agentic before checkout does. The near-term winner is the company that already owns the customer's trusted identity, payment credential, delivery promise and returns relationship, rather than the AI service that started the search. The data below is what we're compiling to test that.

Four terms we keep separate

1

AI-assisted research

The consumer uses AI to discover, compare or decide, and then completes the purchase. This is already large, measured behavior.

2

Agent-completed purchase

The agent submits the order and initiates payment. This is the smaller and less measured behavior, and the one the question is really about.

3

Delegated authority

The consumer gives an agent permission to act within rules, such as a maximum price, an approved merchant list or a requirement to ask before using credit.

4

Agentic payment

This is a payment initiated as part of an agent-led transaction. It still needs a credential, authentication, fraud controls, a record of consent and a party that carries liability.

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WHAT HAPPENS WHEN CONSUMERS **SHOW UP AT THE PROMPT**

Imagine a shopper says: "Find me a carry-on bag under $600 that will arrive by Friday. I want easy returns, and I would rather use my loyalty points, but show me an installment option if the price is over $400." That sounds like one request, but it contains several different kinds of permission.

The agent can research without touching identity or money. It can also recommend a product without choosing the merchant, or it can choose a merchant without choosing the payment method. Once it starts using a loyalty account, selecting a financing offer or submitting an order, it's no longer only answering a question; it's acting on the shopper's behalf.

Decision point	What the agent is doing	The issue
1 **Discover**	**Find products that meet the request.**	Can the agent browse freely, and may it use prior shopping history?
2 **Rank**	**Decide which products and merchants appear first.**	Is the ranking based on price, quality, commission, loyalty or something else?
3 **Personalize**	**Use identity, membership, location and preferences.**	Which data may the agent reveal and to whom?
4 **Choose**	**Select the item, seller, delivery promise and returns terms.**	Did the consumer authorize the choice or only ask for a recommendation?
5 **Pay**	**Select a wallet, card, bank account, points or installment plan.**	May the agent optimize tender, and does borrowing require a separate yes?
6 **Execute**	**Submit the order and initiate payment.**	What proves the cart, amount, merchant and timing match the consumer's mandate?
7 **Resolve**	**Track delivery, cancel, return, dispute or seek a refund.**	Who can reverse the decision, and who carries the loss if the agent is wrong?

What matters at each step is the decision being delegated, the evidence that proves the delegation, and the point where the shopper expects the system to stop and ask.

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THE NUMBERS THAT **FRAME THE QUESTION**

Behind the headline question sits one commercial question. Who closes the gap between a recommendation and a trusted transaction, and what do they get paid for doing it? The data that follows approaches it from four places: the shopper, the merchant, the payment and the AI platform itself.

Six numbers to keep in mind

132M
U.S. adults have bought something at retail with AI help.

24%
would let an AI agent shop and buy for them.

14%
would let the AI app hold their card.

80%
of merchants expect an agentic model based on a fee or commission per completed sale.

59%
of AI-assisted buyers completed their most recent purchase on Amazon.

39M
U.S. adults (15%) replaced traditional channels for product discovery with AI.

Source: PYMNTS Intelligence consumer and merchant surveys, August 2026.
Full bases appear with the section evidence and in the methodology note.

SESSION 1: The shopper

AI-assisted shopping is already mainstream, but full delegation is not. Is today's 24% willingness a ceiling on trust or a queue waiting for a better way to authorize and pay?

SESSION 2: The merchant

Merchants are investing and exposing inventory, but they want control over agent access, terms and attribution. Are they building a new channel or defending the channels they already own?

SESSION 3: Payments, identity and authority

Consumers trust wallets, issuers and networks more than the AI platform. Can payments supply the identity, consent, credential protection and recourse needed to make delegated buying feel ordinary?

SESSION 4: How AI evolves

Will a general-purpose model become the front door to commerce, or will AI be absorbed into retailers, marketplaces, wallets and payment apps? The answer determines who owns the customer and who pays whom.

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SESSION 1

THE SHOPPER

A better search box and a purchase that hasn’t moved … yet

The shopper has arrived at the prompt. The open question is how much of the purchase follows.

Ask people what the AI did on their last AI-assisted purchase, and the answers sound like research. Find the best price, compare products or brands, check reviews, find where to buy and work out what kind of product is needed. The agent is useful because it can hold a multi-part question and explain the trade-offs, not because it can press the buy button.

FIGURE 1:

The assistant shops. It does not pay.
Share of U.S. consumers citing what an AI tool helped with on their most recent AI-assisted purchase, August 2026



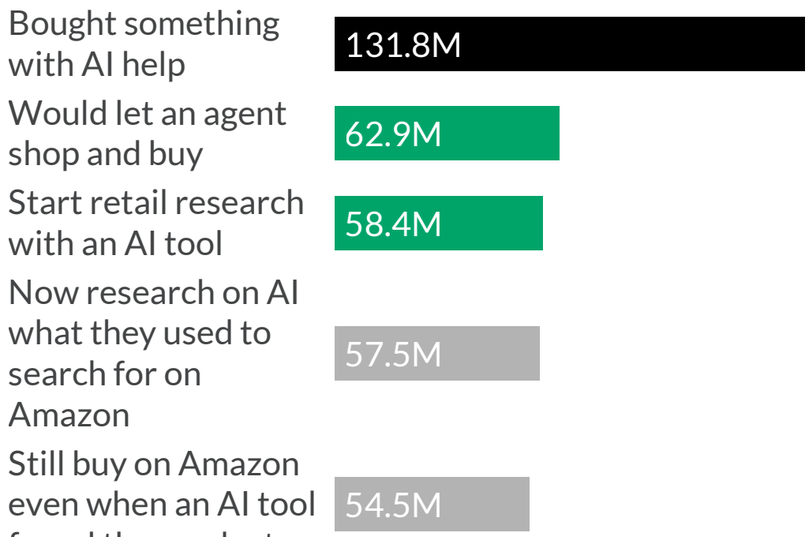
Source: PYMNTS Intelligence
Consumer survey, August 2026
N = 952 consumers who made an AI-assisted retail purchase (= 131.8 million U.S. consumers)

Price leads at 46%, but the pattern matters more than the ranking. Every leading use case helps the consumer make a decision; none require the consumer to delegate the transaction itself. That’s why “AI-assisted shopping” and “agent-completed buying” shouldn’t be quoted as if they are the same market.

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FIGURE 2:

The search moved. The purchase did not.
Number of U.S. consumers, in millions, August 2026



Source: PYMNTS Intelligence
Consumer survey, August 2026
Each bar is a separate measure on its own base, not a nested funnel.
Bars 1–3 project to 262.3 million U.S. adults. Bars 4 and 5 project to the 95.6 million AI-assisted buyers who were asked those statements (N = 690).

The scale is real: 131.8 million consumers have bought with AI help, and 58.4 million now start retail research with an AI tool. The handoff is where the numbers thin out, with 62.9 million willing to let an agent shop and buy and only 36.8 million willing to let the AI app hold their card.

PRICE IS THE CONSISTENT INSTRUCTION.

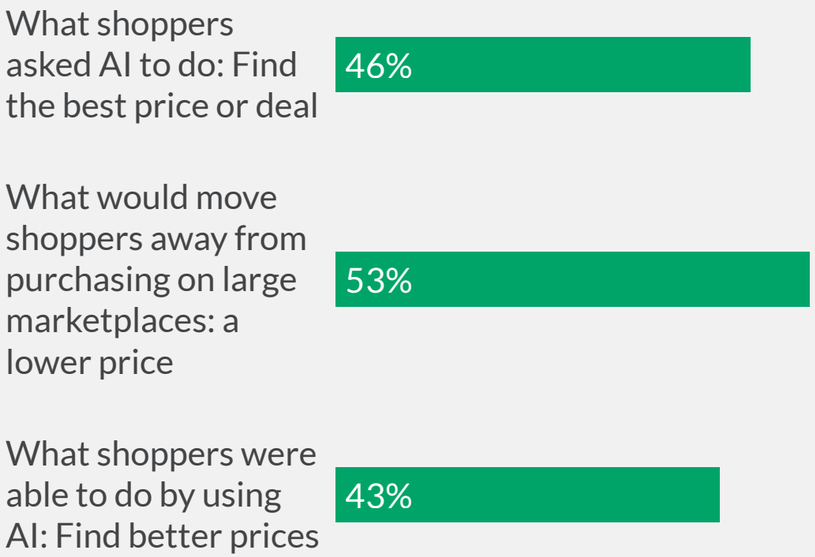
The same answer wins across three differently worded questions and two survey waves. Consumers say that the AI helped them find a better price, better pricing changed the decision and a lower price would move them from a marketplace to a brand's own site. This is the clearest instruction consumers have given the agentic commerce market.

That instruction creates a tension for brands and merchants. A price-auditing agent can open a new route to the customer, but it can also flatten brand value into a ranking of price, shipping and returns. If the agent is paid by a platform or a merchant, it's fair to ask whether the recommendation remains the shopper's agent in practice.

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FIGURE 3:

Three questions, three bases, one answer
Share of U.S. consumers choosing the price-related answer in three separate questions, 2026

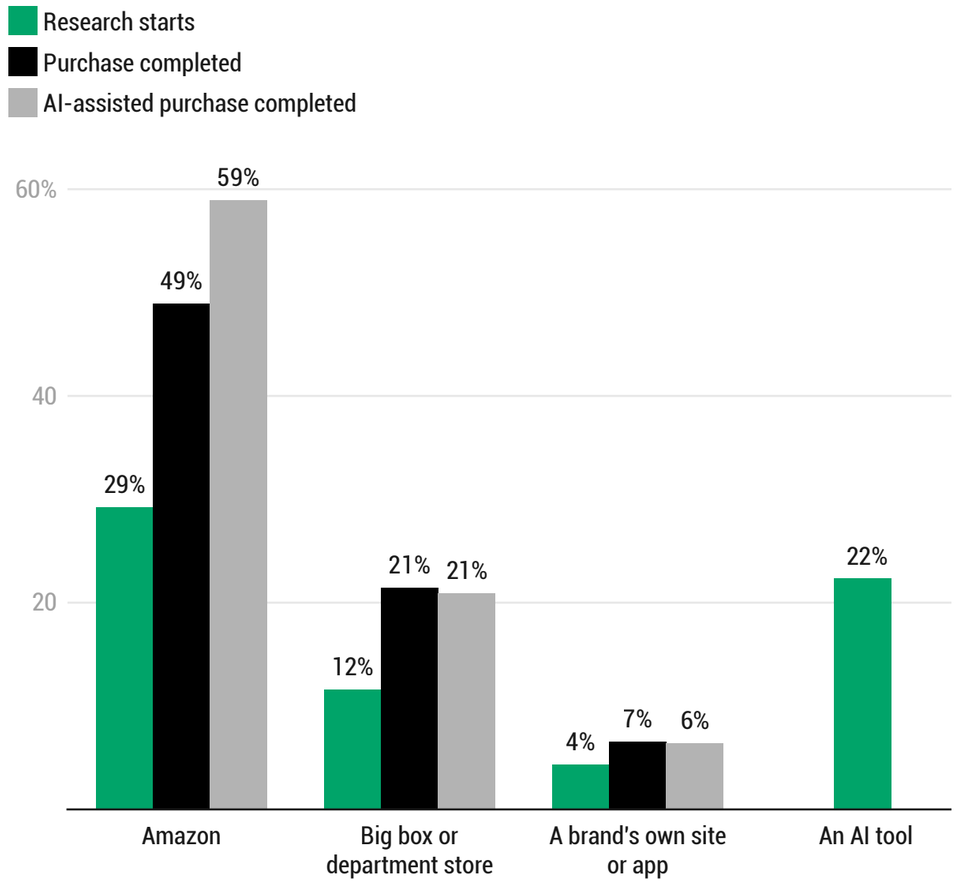


Source: PYMNTS Intelligence
Consumer survey, August 2026
Three separate questions on three separate bases: most recent AI-assisted purchase (N = 952), what would move a marketplace shopper to a brand site (N = 1,212), and what AI research changed about the decision (N = 423). Price is the top-ranked answer in all three.

The research start moved, but completion remains concentrated. Amazon accounts for 29% of research starts, 49% of main purchase completion and 59% of the most recent AI-assisted purchase. These are independent distributions rather than a tracked funnel, but the direction is still striking: AI changes discovery more than it changes who gets the sale.

FIGURE 4:

Research moved. The money did not.
Share of U.S. consumers by where they start online retail research and where they complete the purchase, August 2026



Source: PYMNTS Intelligence
Consumer survey, August 2026
N = 2,061 for research start and main completion channel. AI-assisted completion N = 952.

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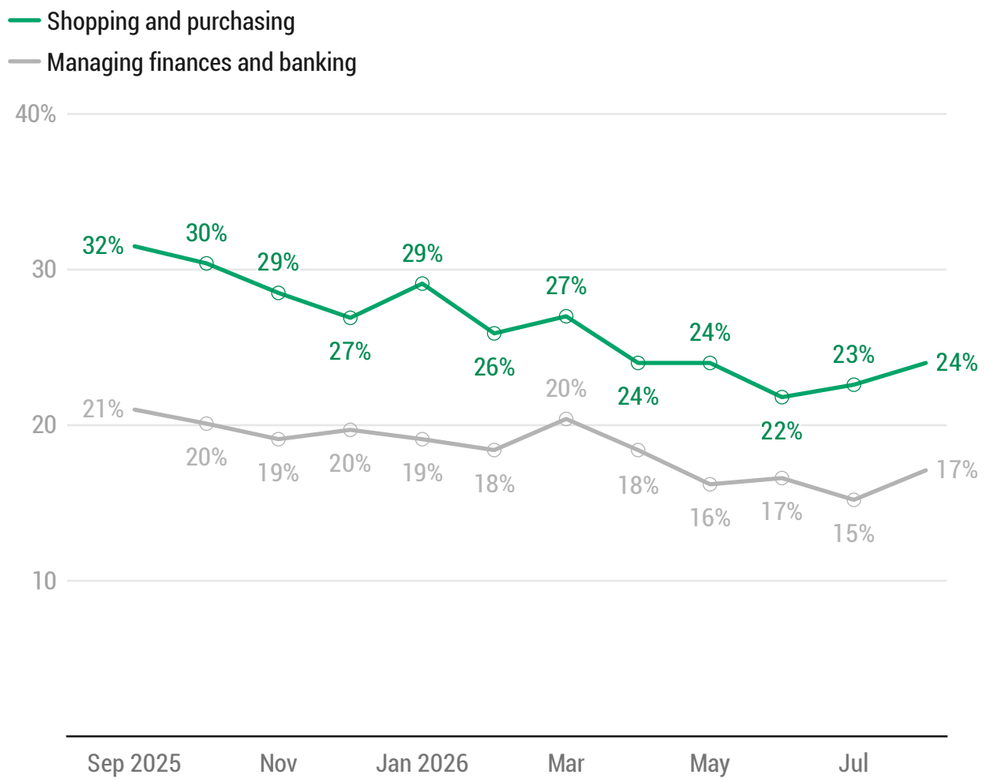
DELEGATION IS A LADDER, NOT A SWITCH.

Willingness to let an agent handle both shopping and buying fell from 32% in September 2025 to 24% in August 2026, with a June low of 22%. The recent recovery is worth watching, but August remains below every month from September through March. This isn't the growth curve the market expected a year ago.

Consumers are still more willing to delegate shopping than banking, which suggests they aren't rejecting delegation outright. They're ranking the risk of the job, and the ranking changes again when the agent approaches a card credential or an irreversible action.

FIGURE 5:

Willing to delegate the basket, not the bank account
Share of U.S. consumers who would want an AI agent to do each task autonomously, September 2025 to August 2026

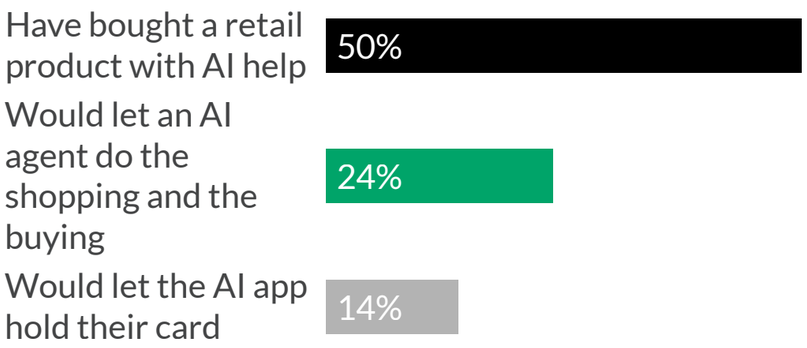


Source: PYMNTS Intelligence
Consumer survey, August 2026
N = 2,061 in August 2026. Wave bases range from 1,969 to 3,288.

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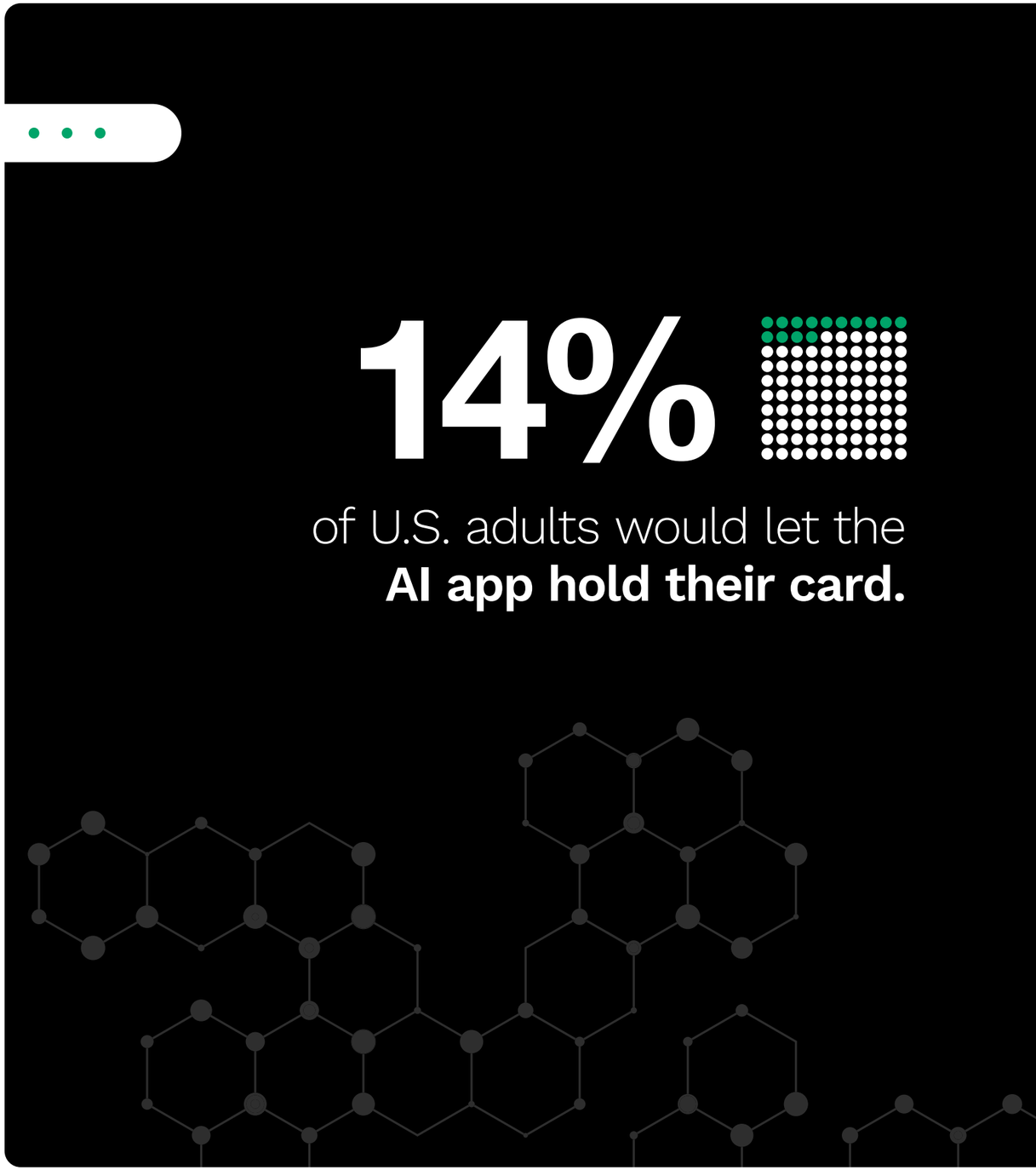
FIGURE 6:

The closer the AI gets to the card, the fewer follow
Share of U.S. adults, three separate measures on three separate bases, August 2026



Source: PYMNTS Intelligence
Consumer survey, August 2026
Not a funnel. Three distinct questions on three bases: AI-assisted purchase incidence and delegation willingness project to 262.3 million U.S. adults (N = 2,061); payment preference inside an assistant is N = 1,392. Reported together because the direction is the finding.

Half of adults have used AI in a retail purchase, but only 24% would let the agent shop and buy, and just 14% would let the app hold the card. The most useful question is which decision they'll delegate, under what rules and with which provider standing behind it.



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SESSION 2

THE MERCHANT

Merchants have shipped the shelf. They haven’t connected it to checkout.



Merchants are investing. The missing piece is the handshake between a verified agent and a merchant willing to accept its instructions.

Merchants aren’t sitting this out. Eighty-seven percent call agentic commerce an opportunity, 90% have started product and catalog work, and they report spending an average of 2% of annual revenue to prepare. On a $500 million business, that’s $10 million a year.

87%

of merchants see agentic commerce as an opportunity for their business.

Only 13% say neither threat nor opportunity.

2%

of annual revenue is going into preparing for agentic commerce.

Roughly the equivalent of $10M on a $500M business.

80%

expect to pay a fee or commission on every agent-completed sale.

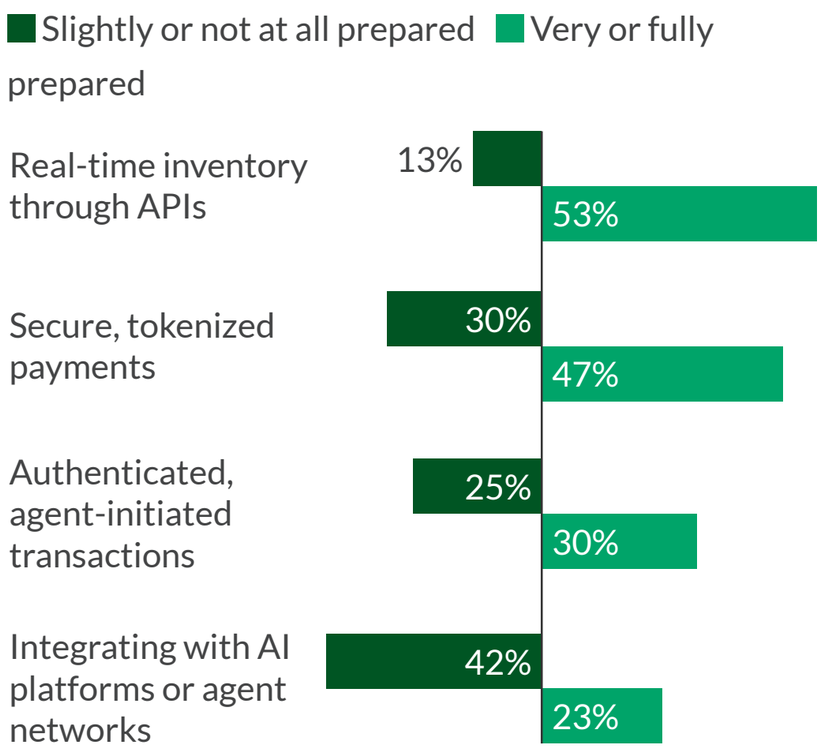
92% expect to pay something.

The readiness pattern shows where control sits. Real-time inventory APIs and tokenized payments are the strongest capabilities because merchants already built them for other uses and can keep them inside their existing stack. Readiness to integrate with an AI platform or agent network is only 23%, and it’s the only capability shown where the unprepared outnumber the ready.

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FIGURE 7:

Shelf- and rail-ready, but not agent-ready
Share of U.S. retail merchants citing preparedness for four capabilities needed to support AI shopping agents, August 2026



Source: PYMNTS Intelligence
Merchant survey, August 2026
N = 60. Four of nine capabilities shown. Mean readiness score 3.05 of 5; only 12% are very or fully prepared in seven or more of the nine areas.

This can be read as a standards problem, but it can also be read as a control decision. Connecting to an agent network requires the merchant to decide which agents are legitimate, what they may see, which terms they receive, how the sale is attributed and who is responsible when an automated instruction is wrong.

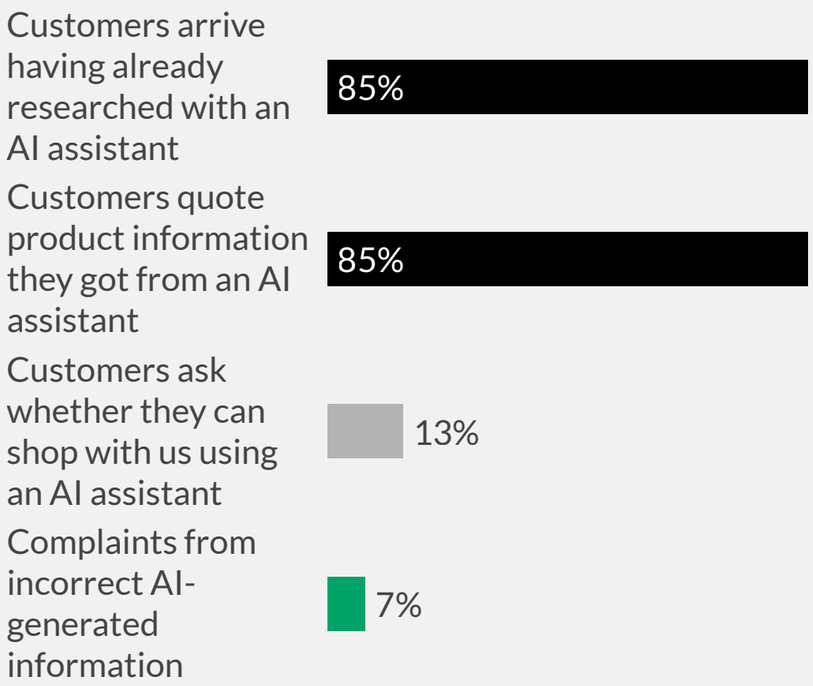
CUSTOMERS ARRIVE AT THE MERCHANT'S FRONT DOOR AI-INFORMED, BUT ALMOST NONE ASK FOR AN AGENT WHEN THEY GET THERE.

Merchants see the shopper after AI has already influenced the purchase. Eighty-five percent say customers arrive having researched with an AI assistant, and the same share say customers quote product information they got from one. Only 13% report a customer asking whether they can shop using an AI assistant.

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FIGURE 8:

Customers bring the AI. They don't bring the agent.
Share of U.S. retail merchants citing what they have observed in the last 12 months, August 2026

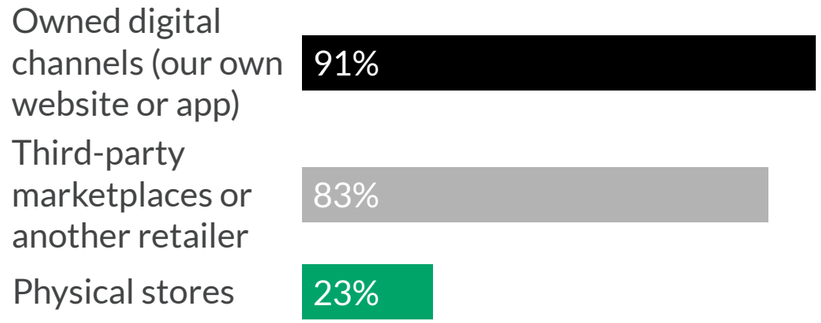


Source: PYMNTS Intelligence
Merchant survey, August 2026
N = 60. Multiple responses allowed. Selected signals shown. 90% observed at least one AI signal; 10% observed none.

That nearly seven-to-one gap is easy to misread. It may mean there's little demand for an agent at checkout, or it may mean the agent is acting upstream where the merchant cannot identify it, and the merchant is merely a fulfillment channel. With no merchant in the study reporting full attribution, both explanations remain plausible.

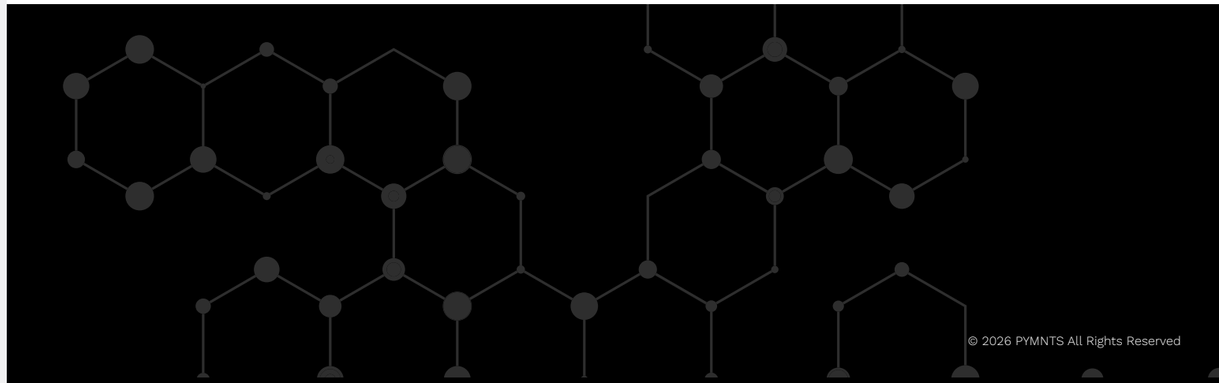
FIGURE 9:

Agents come for the digital front door
Share of U.S. retail merchants citing the channels AI agents would take the most traffic or sales from, August 2026



Source: PYMNTS Intelligence
Merchant survey, August 2026
Each group is asked only of merchants who use those channels: owned digital N = 57, marketplaces and other retailers N = 29, physical stores N = 56. Only 5% expect no channel to be affected.

It may lean more to the latter. Merchants expect agents to take traffic from the channels they own and control. More than nine in 10 name their own site or app as exposed, and 83% also name marketplaces or other retailers. Only 23% expect the main effect in physical stores.



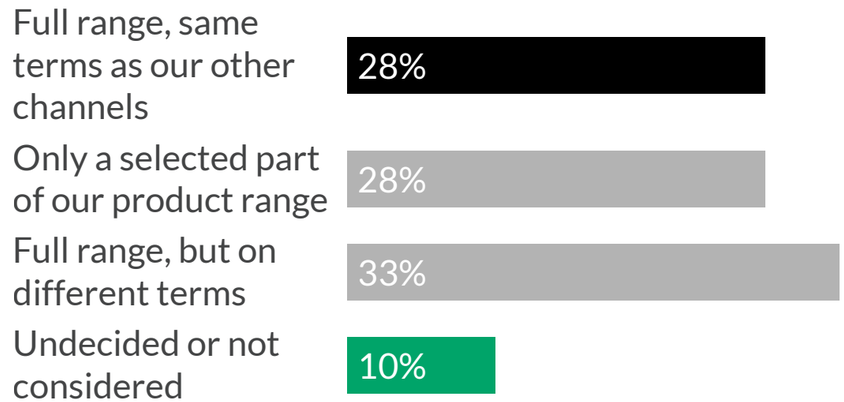
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THE AGENT CHANNEL WILL NOT NECESSARILY SEE THE SAME SHELF.

Only 28% of merchants say they'd give agents the full selection on the same terms as every other channel. One-third would offer the full range on different pricing, promotions or delivery terms, and another 28% would expose only part of their catalog. In other words, most merchants expect to curate or negotiate the agent channel.

FIGURE 10:

Agents get a different shelf
Share of U.S. retail merchants citing what they would make available to AI agents that can purchase for a customer, August 2026



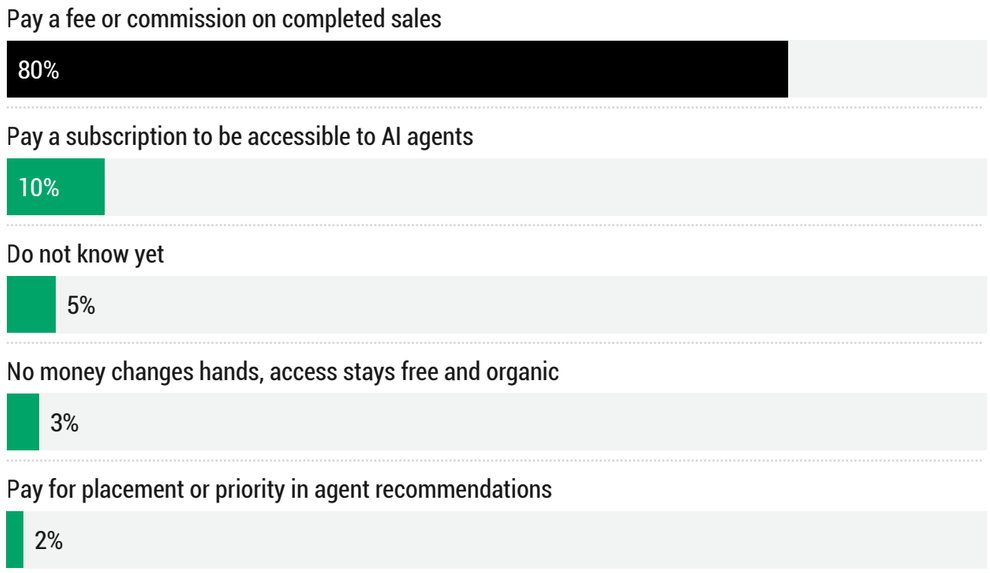
Source: PYMNTS Intelligence
Merchant survey, August 2026
N = 60. Single response. "Different terms" was defined in the question as different pricing, promotions or delivery options. Gray marks the answers that differ from what the merchant already sells elsewhere.

The consumer is sending the agent to find the best price while the merchant may be giving the agent a different price or a narrower assortment. The two sides of the handshake are already optimizing against each other, before a common rulebook exists. That's the shape of the closed-ecosystem play: an agent channel the merchant controls, on the merchant's terms and ideally the merchant's own agent doing the shopping. The consumer data says shoppers want the opposite.

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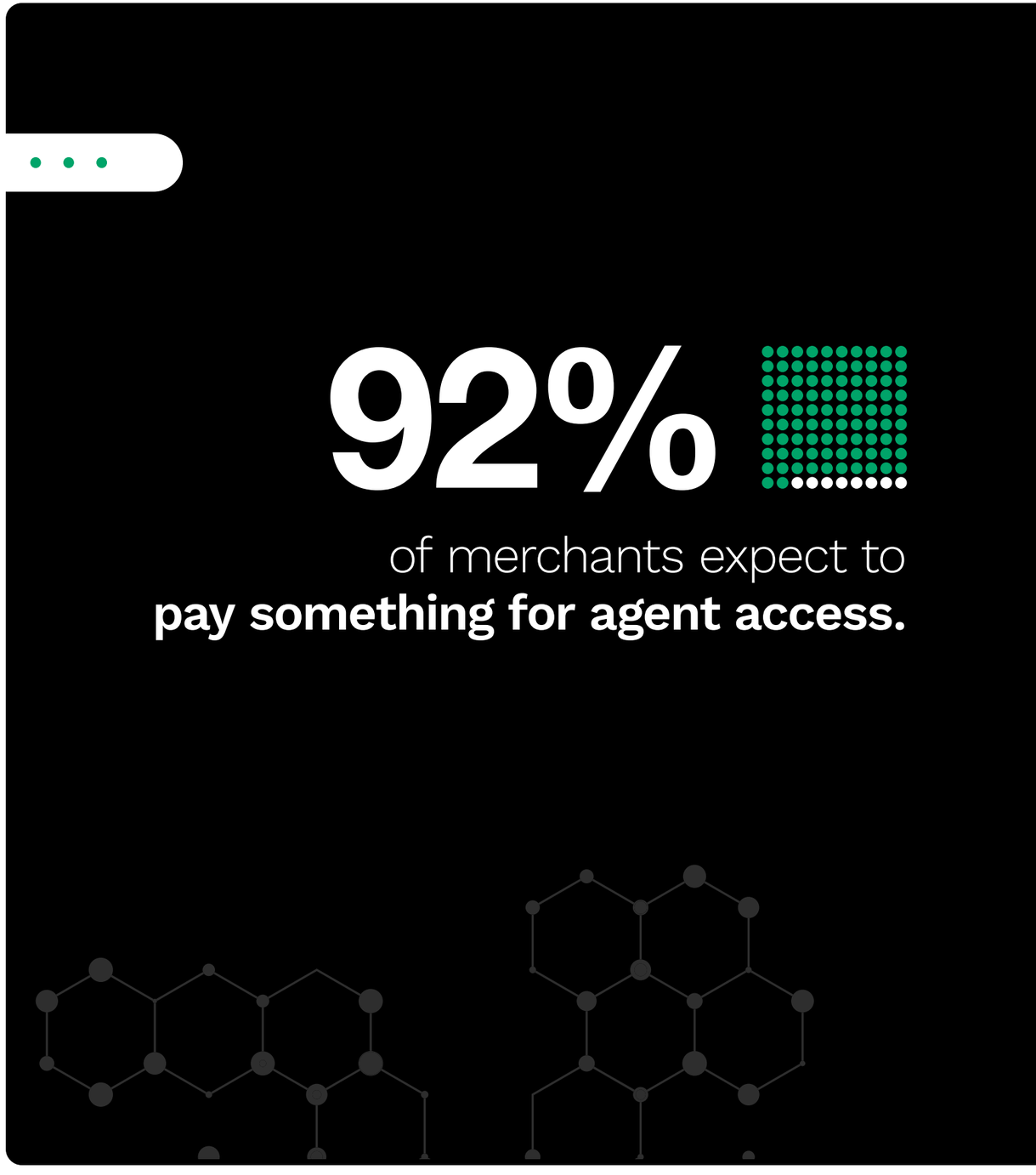
FIGURE 11:

Merchants expect to pay per sale
Share of U.S. retail merchants citing the agentic commerce business model they consider most likely, August 2026



Source: PYMNTS Intelligence
Merchant survey, August 2026
N = 60. Taken together, 92% expect merchants to pay something for agent access.

Eighty percent of merchants expect the model to be a fee or commission to the AI platform for the referral on each completed sale, and 92% expect to pay something. Merchants have therefore made two decisions in advance of agents showing up to checkout. Agentic distribution will be a paid channel, and access will be conditional. The unanswered question is who gets to set the admission rules and the rate.



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SESSION 3

PAYMENTS, IDENTITY AND AUTHORITY

Before an agent can pay, the transaction must answer five identity questions.



Agentic commerce doesn't have one identity problem. It has a chain of identity, authority and evidence problems that different parties solve.

A normal digital checkout lets the merchant connect a customer, device, account and credential to familiar fraud and authentication rules. In an agent-led purchase, software acts through another platform for a person whose identity and intent may be partly hidden. A legitimate agent can carry a bad instruction, and a valid instruction can carry a misused credential.

Identity is therefore larger than "know your agent." The transaction has to connect the agent, the person behind it, the permission granted, the cart and amount covered, and the evidence available if the purchase is challenged.

Who is the agent?	A verifiable software identity and provider, with enough information for the merchant to distinguish a trusted commerce agent from a bot or impersonator.
Who is behind it?	The consumer or business principal, revealed only to the degree needed for the purchase, account, loyalty, location, age or regulatory requirement.
What may it do?	A mandate that states the scope of authority: product or category, approved merchants, price limit, timing, delivery terms, refundability and whether credit is allowed.
What exactly was approved?	A binding between the mandate and a specific cart, merchant, amount, payment method and expiry. The evidence should make replay or silent substitution difficult.
What happens later?	An audit trail and recourse path that show what the consumer asked, what the agent chose, what was charged and who can cancel, refund, dispute or absorb the loss.

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THE MINIMUM USEFUL MANDATE

A usable mandate should be specific enough to prevent a broad permission from becoming an open-ended purchasing right. At minimum, it needs a spending cap, an expiry, allowed or excluded merchants, product constraints, delivery and refund rules, a payment policy, a rule for using loyalty value, and a threshold for asking the customer again.

The privacy principle should run in the other direction: reveal as little identity as the transaction requires. A merchant may need proof the shopper is eligible, an account exists or an address is serviceable without receiving the shopper's full history or the agent's entire preference profile.

If the agent changes the merchant, raises the total by $30, uses a different card, selects a nonrefundable rate or turns the purchase into credit, does the original permission still apply? If the answer differs by decision, the mandate needs to express those differences before checkout.

TRUST SITS WITH THE PAYMENT.

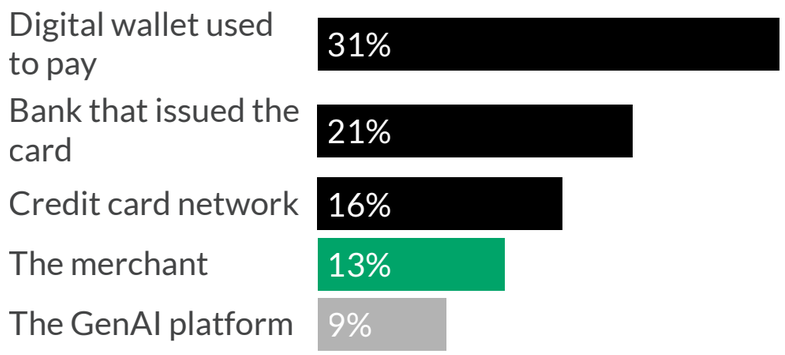
Consumers were asked whom they trust most in a purchase they found on an AI platform. Thirty-one percent chose the digital wallet they would use to pay, 21% chose the issuing bank, 16% chose the card network, and 5% chose the FinTech that issued the card. Added together, 73% name someone in payments, while 9% name the AI platform.

Payment preference reinforces the same boundary. Roughly 32% would pay through a linked wallet, and roughly 20% would return to the store to pay there, for a combined 52% who keep the card outside the AI app. Only 14% would let the AI app hold the card, a figure that is down 12% from a year earlier.

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FIGURE 12:

Trust sits with the payment
Share of U.S. consumers citing whom they trust most when buying an item discovered on a GenAI platform



Source: PYMNTS Intelligence
Consumer survey, August 2026
N = 1,275. Black marks a payments party. With the FinTech that issued the card (4.7%, not shown), the payments parties take 73.1% of first-choice trust.

The consumer isn't necessarily asking for a human checkout. They may be asking for a familiar trust layer: a wallet, issuer or network that protects the credential, authenticates the decision, preserves choice and offers a way back if the agent is wrong.

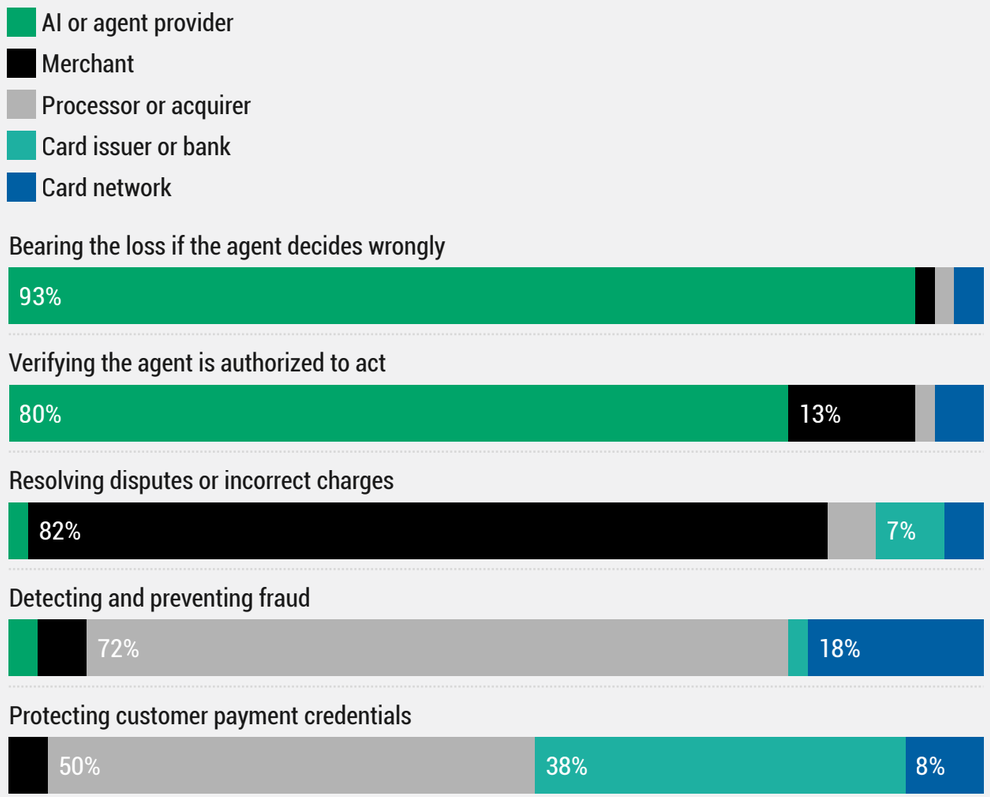
THE PARTIES AGREE ON THE PLUMBING AND DISAGREE ON THE LIABILITY.

Merchants send credential protection and fraud detection to payments providers, and they are close to unanimous on the first task. They keep disputes largely with the merchant, but 93% say the AI or agent provider should bear the loss when the agent makes the wrong decision. Eighty percent also say the AI company should verify that the agent was authorized to act.

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FIGURE 13:

Five jobs, three different owners
Share of U.S. retail merchants citing who should be primarily responsible for each job in an agent-completed transaction, August 2026



Source: PYMNTS Intelligence
Merchant survey, August 2026
N = 60. Segments below 8% are unlabeled. Rows total 100%. Five jobs; merchants assign them to three primary owners.

That creates a mismatch between trust and liability. The company merchants want to carry the largest new loss is the company consumers trust least among the major participants, and it may not have the fraud operations, disputes process or regulatory role that payments providers already operate.

3rd

The card network is the third-most trusted party in an AI purchase

16.4%, behind the wallet and the issuer

33.6M

consumers would trust a card network to provide an AI assistant

ahead of FinTechs and government

3%

of merchants would ask a card network for agentic commerce guidance

vs. 60% their commerce platform

Networks occupy an unusual position. Consumers rank them third for trust, acquirers often see them as an owner of credential security, and 33.6 million consumers say they would trust a card network to provide an AI assistant. Yet only 3% of merchants say they would rely primarily on a network for guidance on how to get ready.

The top trust features are the ability to approve or undo a decision and a human override for important choices. Together, 38% make some form of taking control back their first choice.

Whoever owns that approval or undo moment may own the trust layer of agentic commerce. It could be the AI interface, the merchant, the wallet, the issuer or a shared protocol, and the choice will shape both liability and customer ownership.

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THE AGENT ISN'T ONLY CHOOSING WHAT TO BUY. IT MAY BE CHOOSING HOW TO PAY.

Payment methods are not interchangeable credentials. A card, wallet, bank account, loyalty balance, pay-in-four loan, card installment plan and longer-term point-of-sale loan can change rewards, protections, foreign-exchange cost, available credit, merchant economics, approval rates, returns and the timing of cash leaving the consumer's account.

A person makes those trade-offs imperfectly but usually knows when they are making them. An agent may make the choice silently in the name of speed, or optimize the wrong objective. The "best deal" can mean the lowest total price, the lowest amount due today, the most rewards, the longest repayment period, the highest chance of approval or the merchant's preferred tender, and those answers are not the same.

FOUR MODELS FOR PAYMENT PREFERENCE

Model	How it works	The trade-off
Ask every time	**The shopper chooses tender at checkout.**	Highest visibility and control, but little improvement over today's checkout friction.
Use a fixed default	**The agent uses the shopper's preferred wallet or card unless it is unavailable.**	Simple and familiar, but may miss rewards, cost or acceptance differences.
Optimize within a policy	**The shopper sets rules such as "use points above this value" or "never use credit without asking."**	Potentially useful, but the policy must be understandable, portable and enforceable.
Let the agent choose	**The agent selects the method it believes best fits the purchase.**	Fastest model, but it raises ranking, conflict, credit, consent and explanation questions.

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WHY BNPL MAKES THE DELEGATION PROBLEM SHARPER

Buy now, pay later (BNPL) isn't just another button in the payment row. Pay-in-four, card-based installments and longer-term point-of-sale financing can look similar to a shopper while carrying different underwriting, cost, repayment, dispute and merchant fee structures.

When an agent introduces financing, it's helping the consumer borrow, not just helping the consumer pay. That should raise the permission threshold. The agent may gather eligible offers and explain them, but selecting a loan, accepting disclosures or turning a $600 purchase into four smaller amounts should require a clear rule or a fresh confirmation.

The optimization problem is also easy to distort. A product with the lowest installment isn't always the lowest-cost purchase, and a merchant-funded offer may rank differently from an offer that's best for the consumer. The agent should show total cost, repayment timing and any important consequences without letting the monthly or pay-in-four amount masquerade as the price.

Post-purchase handling matters just as much. Returns, partial refunds, cancellations and disputes must unwind the financing schedule correctly, and the consumer needs one place to see what happened. If the agent owns the recommendation but disappears after checkout, it has solved the easiest part of the job and left the trust problem behind.

Data tells us that price is the leading consumer instruction, payment trust sits with familiar financial providers, and consumers want approval and undo controls. We do not yet know how many would let an agent choose among cards, wallets, points and installment offers, or what rules would make that delegation acceptable.

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SESSION 4

HOW AI EVOLVES

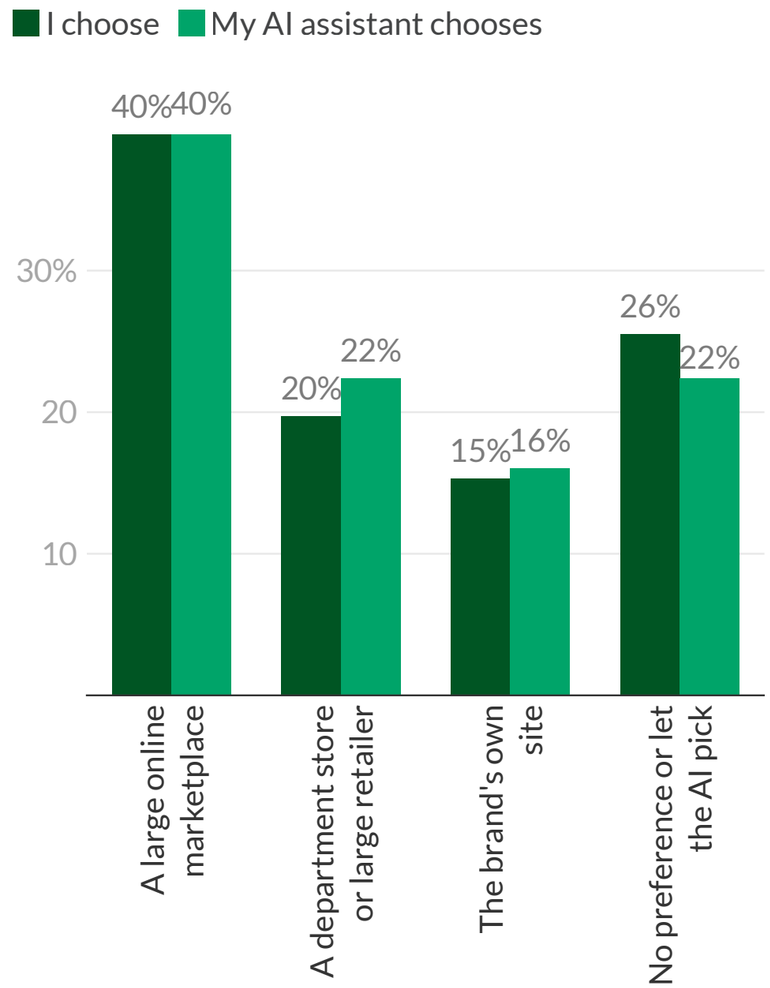
One front door or AI embedded everywhere?

The discovery layer may consolidate around general-purpose models, while the transaction remains embedded in retailers, marketplaces, wallets and payment apps.

The front-door case begins with a strong number. Nearly one in four consumers now start retail research with an AI tool, a substantial beachhead built quickly against decades of habit. A model that starts the journey can influence what people consider, which merchants they see and how value is framed.

FIGURE 14:

Handing it over changes nothing
Share of U.S. consumers citing where they would buy the same item at the same price, shipping and returns, August 2026.



Source: PYMNTS Intelligence
Consumer survey, August 2026
N = 2,061. The brand's own site moves from 15.3% to 16.0%, a change of 5%.

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The embedded case begins downstream. The AI tool has no measurable share of main purchase completion in the current data, while marketplaces and large retailers continue to hold the transaction. If the trusted credential, loyalty identity, delivery promise and returns relationship remain embedded elsewhere, the front door may become a powerful referrer without becoming the cash register.

Delegation doesn't materially redistribute destination preference when price, shipping and returns are held constant. A large marketplace receives about 40% whether the consumer chooses directly or lets an AI assistant choose. The department store gains modestly, the brand site barely moves, and most of the change comes from people giving up "no preference."

WHAT COULD BREAK THE INCUMBENT'S HOLD

The door isn't locked. Forty-three percent of AI shoppers say they've bought from an online store they hadn't used before, so AI can widen consideration. The question is what converts that consideration into a completed order.

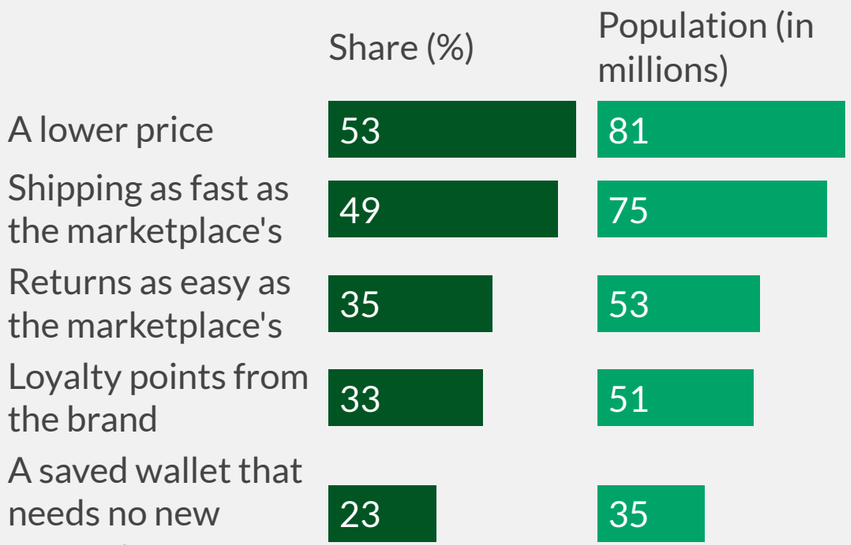
43%

of AI shoppers have bought from an **online store they hadn't used before.**

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FIGURE 15:

Not one of the top five is a better model
Share of U.S. consumers citing what would shift their purchase from a large online marketplace to a brand's own site, August 2026

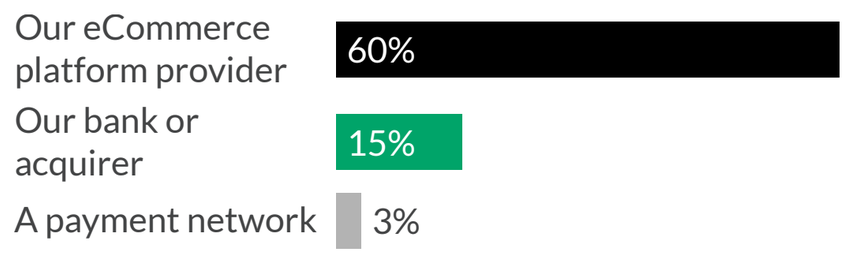


Source: PYMNTS Intelligence
Consumer survey, August 2026
N = 1,212 consumers who prefer a large online marketplace. Multiple responses allowed. 43% of AI shoppers report having bought from an online store they had never used before since they started shopping with AI.

Lower price, comparable shipping, easy returns, loyalty points and a saved wallet lead the list. A better model or a more elegant agent does not. The agent may create the opportunity, but the merchant still wins on the terms of the transaction. The merchant with the strongest hand on every one of those terms is Amazon, which is why a closed-ecosystem agent from any other retailer starts the season at a disadvantage.

FIGURE 16:

Merchants are building through the platform, not the network
Share of U.S. retail merchants citing who they would primarily rely on to get ready for agentic commerce, August 2026



Source: PYMNTS Intelligence
Merchant survey, August 2026
N = 60. Selected responses shown; the three do not sum to 100%. The party acquirers most credit with owning credential security (44%) is the party merchants are least likely to consult about the build.

Sixty percent of merchants say they'll rely primarily on their commerce platform to prepare, compared with 15% for a bank or acquirer and 3% for a payment network. This doesn't decide the market, but it shows where merchants currently expect integration and control to live.

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THE RULEBOOK IS BEING WRITTEN IN PUBLIC—AND IN PIECES

The market isn't waiting for one standard to solve every part of the transaction. Public initiatives are separating the problem into components. Identifying a trusted agent, proving the shopper's intent, binding that intent to a cart and amount, passing a restricted credential and preserving the merchant's existing payment and risk role. The pattern is becoming clearer even though the winning protocol is not.

Public infrastructure sources:

- Mastercard Agent Pay
- Visa Trusted Agent Protocol
- Google AP2 Overview and Samples
- OpenAI Agentic Commerce Protocol–Key Concepts
- Stripe Shared Payment Tokens

Mastercard Agent Pay

Describes registered and traceable agents, network-token-based payments, verified order intent and consumer consent. Its framing puts "know your agent" alongside credential security rather than treating agent identity as a replacement for payment controls.

Visa Trusted Agent Protocol

Focuses on helping merchants distinguish trusted commerce agents from malicious bots and receive merchant-specific, purpose-specific and time-bound signals about agent intent, consumer recognition and payment information.

Google Agent Payments Protocol (AP2)

Uses mandates to represent what the user intended, what a specific cart and payment require and what evidence closes the transaction. The useful idea is the separation between broad intent, transaction-specific authorization and the receipt.

OpenAI Agentic Commerce Protocol and Stripe Shared Payment Tokens

Keeps the merchant in control of checkout, risk and acceptance while passing a one-time delegated payment request with a maximum amount and expiry. This is one practical example of an AI interface initiating a purchase without becoming the merchant of record or storing an unrestricted credential.

These initiatives aren't interchangeable, and their product status and reach differ. Taken together, however, they suggest a shared direction. Agentic payments will rely on constrained authority, tokenized or restricted credentials, merchant-visible evidence and an audit trail rather than on giving a model a reusable card number and hoping the intent can be reconstructed later.

Interoperability isn't only a technical question. If every network, wallet, AI platform and commerce platform defines its own agent identity and mandate, merchants may face several approval systems and consumers may have several incompatible ways to express the same payment policy.

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WHAT WE'LL REMEASURE **BEFORE THE HOLIDAY SEASON**

The table below carries the August 2026 baseline. We'll remeasure every line before the holiday season opens and report what moved.

Our prediction in 10 words: "Discovery goes agentic. Checkout does not. Amazon wins the season." The scoreboard is where we'll find out whether that's wrong.

What we will remeasure	August 2026	Direction of travel
Consumers starting online retail research with AI	**58.4M** (22.3%)	Rising; +18% since June 2026
Consumers willing to let an agent shop and buy	**62.9M** (24.0%)	Down 24% since Sept. 2025; +10% from June low
Consumers keeping the card outside the AI app	**52.3%**	Flat; 52.4% in Sept. 2025
Consumers letting the AI app hold their card	**14.0%**	Falling; down 12% in a year
Consumers who would never use GenAI to find and buy	**17.2%**	Concentrated among older consumers
AI-assisted buyers completing on Amazon	**77.6M** (58.9%)	First measured Aug. 2026; 20% above all-purchase rate
Merchant digital sales attributed to AI traffic	**3.8%**	Merchants expect 12.8% via agents
Merchants ready to integrate with an agent network	**23.3%**	Lowest of the four capabilities shown

Source: PYMNTS Intelligence consumer and merchant surveys, August 2026. The scoreboard uses precise figures; narrative sections may round for readability.

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WILL THE 2026 SHOPPING SEASON GO AGENTIC?

PYMNTS INTELLIGENCE

Will the 2026 Shopping Season Go Agentic? was produced by PYMNTS. This research was independently designed, fielded, analyzed and written by **PYMNTS Intelligence** with real-world data collected through rigorous survey sampling methods. Research partners provided funding support but exercised no control over the methodology, data collection, findings or conclusions. Unless otherwise indicated, all data is from PYMNTS.

METHOD AND SOURCE NOTE

Every survey figure in this report comes from PYMNTS Intelligence consumer, merchant or acquirer research fielded between September 2025 and August 2026. No public protocol announcement is used as evidence of consumer adoption, merchant readiness or market share; those sources appear only in the infrastructure context section.

Channel shares should be read as the share of consumers naming a main research or completion destination, not as transaction share or a tracked path for the same purchase. Projections to numbers of U.S. consumers are based on the survey incidence applied to the adult population. Where the prose rounds a number, the chart or scoreboard carries the more precise value.

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PYMNTS INTELLIGENCE

PYMNTS Intelligence is a leading global data and analytics platform that uses proprietary data and methods to provide actionable insights on what's now and what's next in payments, commerce and the digital economy. Its team of data scientists includes leading economists, econometricians, survey experts, financial analysts and marketing scientists with deep experience in the application of data to the issues defining the future of the digital transformation of the global economy. This multilingual team has conducted original data collection and analysis in more than three dozen global markets for some of the world's leading publicly traded and privately held firms.

We are interested in your feedback on this report. If you have questions, comments or would like to subscribe, please email us at feedback@pymnts.com.

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