

Summer of Intelligence Lunch 'n Learn Series

eCommerce – What's new in 2026

June 24th, 2026

Hart Roberts, Chair 8 Media

Quick recap

Hart from Chair 8 presented a comprehensive Lunch and Learn session on e-commerce trends for 2026, focusing on how specialty food brands can improve their online presence across multiple channels. He emphasized that e-commerce has evolved beyond just having a website to becoming an omnichannel experience that makes products discoverable, shoppable, believable, and reorderable across platforms including Google, AI search engines, social commerce, and email marketing. Hart outlined key strategies including optimizing product pages with clear, accurate descriptions and structured data, leveraging Google Merchant Center and Shopify's sales channels, implementing automated email flows, and creating sensory-focused content that highlights taste, texture, and aroma. He provided a practical 30-day implementation plan covering product page optimization, Google Merchant Center setup, email automation, and social commerce content creation to help brands prepare for the holiday season. The presentation included specific recommendations for improving visibility in AI-powered search results and emphasized the importance of consistent product information across all channels.

Summary

E-commerce Trends for 2026

Hart presented on e-commerce trends for 2026, focusing on making products discoverable, shoppable, believable, and reorderable across multiple channels. He emphasized that e-commerce has evolved from a single channel to an omnichannel approach connecting awareness, direct-to-consumer sales, wholesale, and repeat purchases. Hart shared that US e-commerce accounted for 16.9% of total retail sales in Q1 with 9.8% year-over-year growth and introduced his customer journey map which shows how customers typically interact with brands across 6-8 touchpoints before making a purchase.

Generative Engine Optimization Strategies

Hart discussed the importance of optimizing product data for AI shopping experiences, emphasizing that brands with the clearest and most accurate product information will have better opportunities for discovery and recommendation. He highlighted key actions for food brands to improve their websites, including cleaning up product titles and descriptions, adding "best for" language, making important information easily accessible, and ensuring consistent reviews across platforms. Hart also stressed the significance of treating this as a new form of SEO, called Generative Engine Optimization (GEO), and the importance of maintaining consistent language across websites and social media profiles.

E-commerce SEO Strategy Discussion

Hart discussed SEO strategies for e-commerce websites, focusing on structured data and product optimization. He recommended using Smart SEO app for Shopify to handle structured data and suggested using Answer the Public tool to identify frequently searched questions for FAQ sections. Hart also highlighted the importance of Google Merchant Center for product listings and recommended the Shopify Shop app as a key sales channel for consumer brands.

Shopify AI Features Overview

Hart explained three new AI features in Shopify: Agentic sales channel, which helps products appear instantly on AI platforms like ChatGPT and Gemini; Sidekick, an AI assistant that can generate SEO-friendly product descriptions, analyze sales data, and optimize shipping configurations; and discussed how Agentic represents full automation in e-commerce, including automated product discovery, cart addition, and checkout processes. Hart was asked to clarify what Agentic means, and Hart explained it involves full automation where AI can search for products, read reviews, add items to cart, apply promotions, and complete checkout processes.

2026 Specialty Food Marketing Trends

Hart discussed two key trends for 2026 in specialty food marketing. The first trend was "SenseMaxing," where consumers seek intense sensory experiences across taste, texture, aroma, and visual impact, suggesting that product descriptions should emphasize these sensory elements to stand out in an AI-generated content world. The second trend was social commerce, where social media platforms like TikTok Shop and Instagram Shop have become significant e-commerce channels, with 67% of consumers discovering new products on TikTok Shop and 47% of Instagram users expected to shop on the platform in 2026.

30-Day Social Media Strategy Presentation

Hart presented a 30-day social media strategy with various content formats including founder stories, product demonstrations, and customer reactions, based on winning examples from association members. He emphasized the importance of email marketing as the top return on investment, recommending both campaigns and automated flows like welcome series and abandoned cart notifications. Hart noted that Klaviyo email flows generate nearly 41% of total email revenue from only 5% of total sends and provided a Google Doc with detailed breakdowns of seven must-have email flows.

AI Preparation 30-Day Business Plan

Hart presented a 30-day plan to help businesses prepare for the AI wave in 2026, focusing on website and e-commerce improvements. The plan includes cleaning up product pages, optimizing Google Merchant Center, building or improving email flows, and creating social commerce content. Hart emphasized the importance of these actions for enhancing discoverability, customer retention, and preparing for the holiday season, covering key pillars of awareness, purchase, and retention.

E-commerce Strategies for 2026

Hart presented on e-commerce strategies for 2026, emphasizing that successful brands will be the clearest, most consistent, and easiest to buy from rather than necessarily the largest. He recommended practical approaches to AI implementation, suggesting that beginners start with ChatGPT and Shopify Sidekick to understand the tools and their data sources before relying on them for content creation. The session concluded with Hart offering to answer follow-up questions and promising to share the presentation materials with attendees via email in the coming days.