

From Bricks to Clicks: E-Commerce Becomes Critical in Canada's Retail Landscape

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Canada's retail industry is undergoing a significant transformation as consumer behaviour shifts from in-store shopping toward digital purchasing. Data from Statistics Canada indicates that national e-commerce sales more than doubled between 2019 and 2021, and experts say the trend is not reversing, even as in-person retail recovers from pandemic

restrictions. Retail analysts point to a

combination of factors driving this change, including evolving consumer expectations, the expansion of online marketplaces, and the widespread adoption of hybrid sales models that blend physical and digital experiences.

"E-commerce isn't replacing retail. It's redefining it," said Toronto-based retail strategist Liam Foster. "Stores are now acting as experience hubs while online platforms provide convenience and accessibility. Businesses that integrate both are best positioned for the future." This shift has been accelerated by the pandemic, which forced temporary closures of physical stores nationwide. Retailers without an established online presence were severely impacted, while those with digital capabilities were able to maintain operations and in some cases expand their customer base.

One example of this adaptation can be found in Housewares Plus, a family-owned home goods retailer founded in Mississauga in 1990. Originally a single-location store focusing on cookware, dinnerware, and household items, Housewares Plus built its reputation on product quality and long-standing customer relationships.

Under the leadership of founder Baljinder Kaur Kang, the business became a trusted local shopping destination. In recent years, her daughter, Sharon Kang, took on a leadership role, introducing new product lines, launching a proprietary dinnerware brand, and incorporating international design trends. By 2018, Sharon recognized that the growth of e-commerce was



Housewares Plus owners

reshaping the Canadian retail environment. She began implementing a digital strategy, which included building an online sales platform and engaging customers through social media channels.

When COVID-19 restrictions in 2020 limited in-store operations, Housewares Plus accelerated its digital rollout. Online catalogues were expanded, nationwide shipping was introduced, and curbside pickup options were offered to meet changing customer needs. Social media platforms such as Instagram and Facebook became not only marketing tools but also active customer service channels. The results mirrored national trends. Orders began arriving from customers outside the store's traditional geographic reach, transforming a local retail brand into one with a national footprint.

According to Statistics Canada, online retail sales across the country peaked during the height of pandemic restrictions but have remained significantly above pre-2019 levels, suggesting a long-term change in consumer habits.

Sharon Kang, the Managing Director - said the company's digital transition was driven by a need to align with how people now shop. "The future of retail in Canada is not about choosing between online or in-store," she noted. "It's about offering a seamless experience that allows customers to interact with the brand on their own terms — whether that's walking through the door, visiting our website, or engaging with us on social media."

Industry observers say this evolution is not limited to large e-commerce platforms but is also influencing independent retailers, who can now reach wider audiences without expanding their physical store count.

Hybrid retail models are emerging as a dominant strategy, allowing consumers to research products online before buying in-store, or make purchases online for home delivery or in-store pickup. These models also allow retailers to collect and analyze customer data to refine product offerings and improve service.

For businesses like Housewares Plus, this approach also means preserving the personal touch of traditional retail while leveraging digital tools to reach new customers. Staff familiarity with products — and often with customers themselves — remains part of the in-store experience, while online platforms deliver convenience to those unable to visit in person.

Looking ahead, Housewares Plus plans to continue expanding its digital capabilities, including the introduction of video-based product demonstrations, live online shopping events, and curated home styling content to engage customers across channels.

The company's experience reflects a larger reality in Canadian retail: businesses that adapt quickly to the integration of digital and physical operations are more resilient in the face of economic shifts and consumer behaviour changes.

As the retail landscape continues to evolve, both large and small businesses are finding that the ability to serve customers wherever they are — in a store, on a website, or through a mobile device — is becoming a key factor in long-term viability.

For more information on national e-commerce trends, Statistics Canada provides regular reports tracking retail sales by channel, offering insights into sector performance and consumer spending patterns.

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