Focus

Roland Berger

Quick commerce – a lasting revolution? | How omnichannel retailers are rising to the challenges of q-commerce

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Quick commerce – a lasting revolution? / *How omnichannel retailers are rising to the challenges of q-commerce*

A revolution is underway in retail, and its impact will be felt across retail channels for years to come. Quick commerce or "q-commerce" has become the new benchmark for convenience, offering delivery times of no more than 30 minutes from mouse-click to doorstep. But the question is, will q-commerce have a long-term impact on retail? Can it achieve sustainable profitability or will it just continue to burn cash? And how can omnichannel retailers integrate it into their offering without cannibalizing their other channels, especially their traditional bricks-and-mortar stores?

In this study we examine the q-commerce revolution and what it means for the retail industry. We investigate the potential of q-commerce, the current market landscape (with a focus on Germany, France and the United Kingdom) and the impact of macroeconomic factors. To gain insights into how shoppers view this new development, we present the results of a survey of more than 6,000 consumers carried out for the purposes of this research. We also look at what specific steps players can take to improve their top and bottom lines.

A key question for retailers will be whether to partner with existing q-commerce providers or build their own capability. Both options have pros and cons, which we discuss below. What is clear, however, is that the q-commerce revolution will have a major long-term impact on the industry. Existing retailers need to adapt their offerings as a matter of priority – in particular by expanding their digital business model to make it fit for the future.

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Cover photo Alex Treadway/Gettyimages

1 / What is convenience?

FROM FAST TO SUPER-FAST

In the world of retail, "convenience" used to mean a simple, efficient shopping experience that met customers' needs. Today, it means providing maximum customer comfort in terms of ease, speed, flexibility, safety and service for minimum time, effort and cost.

Home delivery has seen delivery times fall from two or three days to same day, now accepted as standard in the world of omnichannel retail. The pandemic and the restrictions it imposed on consumers, such as social distancing and contactless shopping, have accelerated developments even further, and nowadays delivery times of less than 30 minutes in larger cities are no longer the exception. Both the consumer base for such services and the number of competitors offering it are growing daily.

The benchmark for this new type of convenience is quick commerce or "q-commerce" (also known as "q-com"). Q-commerce emphasizes fast delivery, usually no more than 30 minutes after the customer places an order online. This creates major challenges for retailers taking an omnichannel approach. The landscape is highly dynamic and players are asking themselves whether q-commerce can become a sustainable business model or is destined to remain a money-burning one. Until recently, it was the new darling of investors, but the current macroeconomic situation has highlighted the challenges it creates – and above all the need for q-commerce to be sustainably profitable.

INFOBOX

What is q-commerce?

Q-commerce (quick commerce, q-com) is a type of online commerce in which goods are delivered quickly, usually in less than 30 minutes. Fulfillment takes place either via a network of small warehouses or via stores, which may be "dark stores," and delivery is with micro-mobility bicycles or motorbikes within a small radius of the picking location. Q-commerce is primarily offered in densely populated urban centers. Typically, offerings are limited to a few fast-moving and high-margin items within a broad assortment.

Whether q-commerce finds a permanent place for itself in the retail landscape or not, it is clear that retailers taking an omnichannel approach need to engage with it as a matter of priority. Even brands whose customers are not yet demanding q-commerce must keep a close eye on it and adjust their channel strategy in light of this new understanding of convenience and e-commerce. Omnichannel retailers can do this either by cooperating with existing platforms or by building their own q-commerce delivery services. The challenge is how to integrate q-commerce into their omnichannel offering without cannibalizing their other channels – especially traditional bricks-and-mortar retail.

2 / The q-commerce gamble

A SOLID BUSINESS MODEL?

The idea of q-commerce is by no means new. As long ago as 1998, the online company Kozmo.com started delivering DVDs, books and coffee in under an hour in several cities in the United States. The high costs of offering this speed of delivery led to the company's closure in 2001. But today, boosted by the pandemic, q-commerce is back, with restaurants, grocery stores and even some fashion retailers offering instant delivery. The trend is soon likely to expand into other sectors. The question is, will it go the way of Kozmo.com and eventually burn itself out, or is the revolution here to stay?

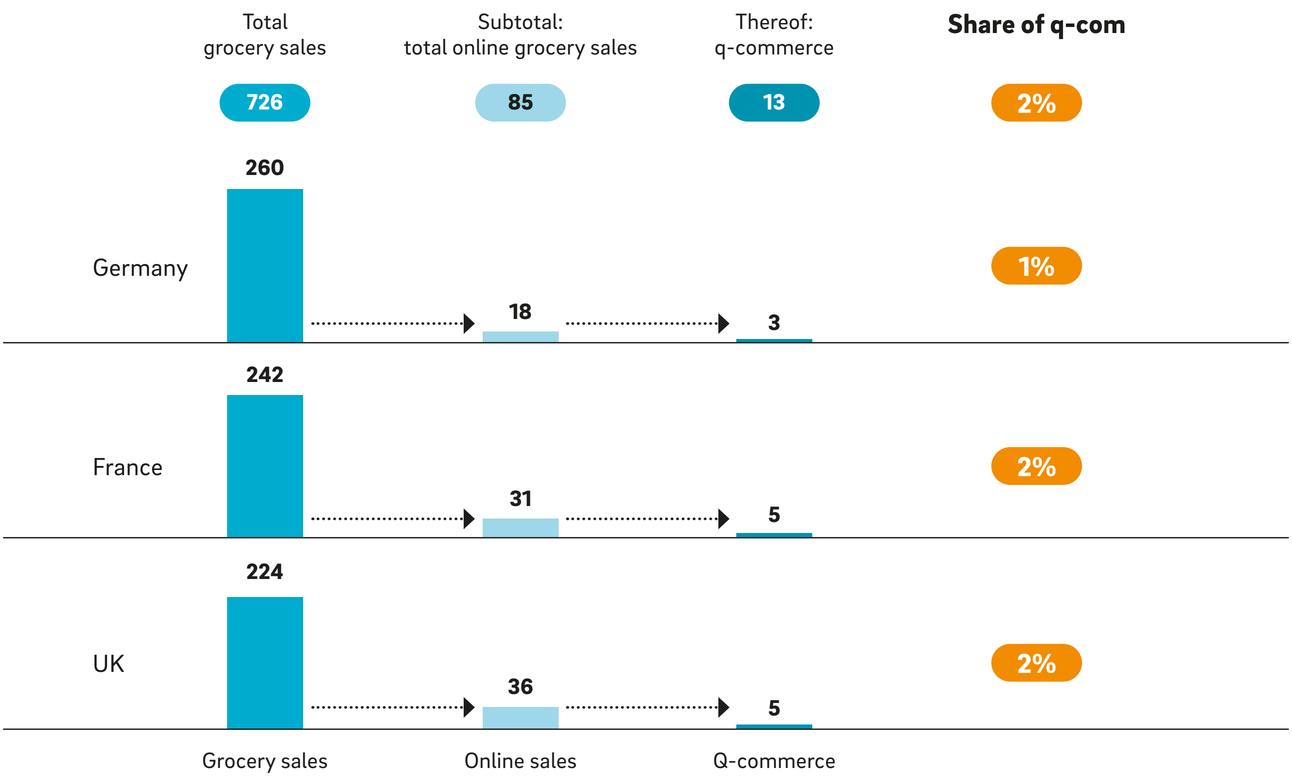
It is tempting to see q-commerce as simply a step-up in service levels – a natural progression from same-day delivery to even faster delivery times. But at Roland Berger we believe that it represents a completely new convenience channel within the omnichannel universe, with its own unique business model. Thus, it mainly targets spontaneous, emergency and emotional purchases. Moreover, it competes not only with traditional online shopping but also with offline convenience retail formats, such as corner shops, gas-station stores and minimarkets. Pioneers from different industries have already jumped on this trend, either investing in their own platforms or partnering with others for instant delivery. → A

A: The q-commerce landscape
Business models and sample players

Pure q-com player	Platforms	Omnichannel retailers	Online retailers
Vertically integrated players that deliver from their own locations using their own staff	Asset-light players that act as an intermediary between retailers and consumers, providing last-mile transportation only	Asset-heavy players with a focus on bricks-and-mortar stores, which have been expanding into other channels, especially e-commerce and recently q-commerce, too	E-commerce players with a pure online presence
Zapp, gopuff, Flink, Dija, getir, ARIVE, Gorillas, JOKR, GoTiger, cajoo	Glovo, Delivery Hero, Wolt, bringoo, foodora	REWE, TESCO, Sainsbury's, CHOP CHOP, Walmart	Zoom by Ocado, PiCNiC, FRISCHEPOST

Source: Roland Berger, desk research

B: Potential market for q-commerce
Grocery retail in 2030 [EUR bn]



Source: Roland Berger, desk research

The potential of q-commerce is compelling. Assuming that, by 2030, around 12 percent of the almost EUR 730 billion groceries market in the United Kingdom, France and Germany has moved online and q-commerce accounts for 15 percent of online orders, q-commerce would enjoy a two percent share of the total groceries market, equivalent to EUR 13 billion.[1] At the beginning of 2022, analysts were predicting significant growth of the average basket size for q-commerce, which is around EUR 20 today; however, the current macroeconomic situation has tempered their expectations. Whatever happens, if q-commerce expands to include more online product categories than today, this could mean an additional increase in market size. → B

[1] Euromonitor, Roland Berger assumptions

Within Europe, multiple companies are currently competing in the q-commerce market. Standalone pure players and delivery platforms in particular have received significant funding, some achieving unicorn status soon after launch. To keep up with the competition, some omnichannel retailers have started building their own fast-delivery capacities, such as German supermarket chain REWE, or partnered with pure players, such as Gorillas' partnership with the French retailer Casino. Most of these concepts initially focused on groceries and meal delivery, but some have now started expanding into other retail categories, for instance offering a cross-category assortment drawn from fashion, beauty and homeware items.

Funding remains essential for q-commerce startups, as significant resources are needed to establish a warehouse network and begin working towards breaking even. The current macroeconomic situation, characterized by inflation and increasing energy and raw material prices, has made investors more cautious when it comes to expanding funding or investing in new ventures. The critical question on investors' minds is whether the revenues generated by product margins, commission fees, customer delivery fees, service fees or in-app advertisements can cover operating costs and ultimately make the business model lucrative.

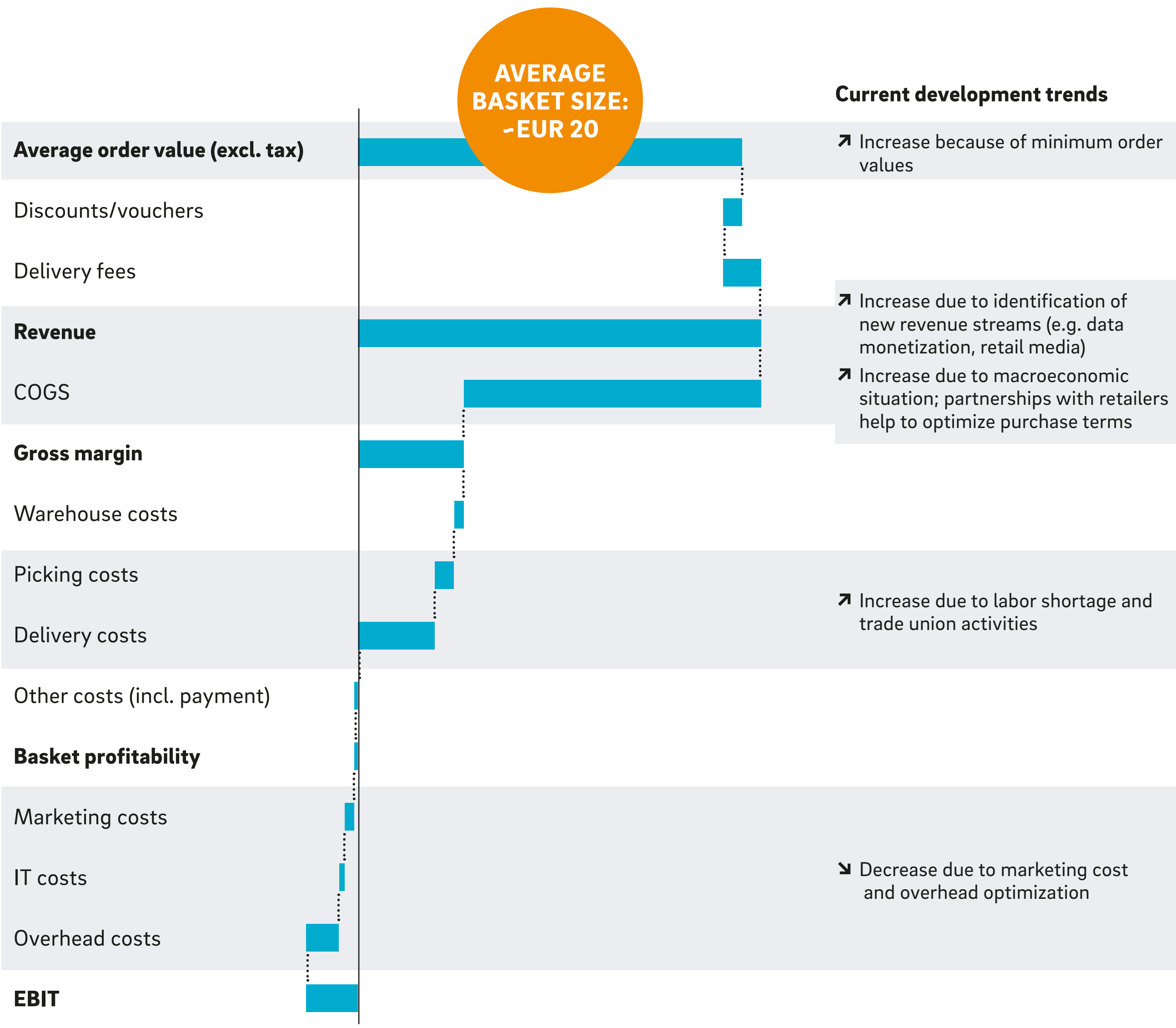
Here, the jury is still very much out. Product prices in q-commerce are often identical to those in the supermarket – or slightly higher where the q-commerce player does not benefit from the same purchase terms as a larger retailer. Marketing for brand-building can account for up to 30 percent of total costs in the initial phase (a fact that has led q-commerce players in German grocery retail to make great efforts to reduce their marketing costs in recent months, for example). Delivery fees, which tend to be around EUR 2, with no minimum order value, rarely cover the actual costs. And in non-food segments such as fashion, return costs for logistics, reprocessing and so on are an additional cost factor. → C

The current macroeconomic situation will lead to increased consolidation in the sector, with only a few players ultimately able to hold their ground.

One thing is for certain: Reaching the necessary size to be able to tap into economies of scale, capture efficiencies and reduce last-mile costs is key for long-term profitability. Companies are therefore keeping a close watch on developments such as the Riders Law in the European Union, changes in minimum wages, labor shortages and new technology such as automation in warehousing and delivery drones. Anything that increases the speed and efficiency of delivery and cuts costs is of make-or-break importance.

The current macroeconomic situation is likely to lead to increased consolidation in the sector, with only a few players ultimately able to hold their ground. The most prominent example is the current takeover of Gorillas by Getir. But beyond the challenges for individual players who engage in q-commerce, the broader question affecting all retailers, regardless of which sector they operate in, is how q-commerce will impact their omnichannel ecosystem. To find out more, we conducted a survey of consumers in Germany, France and the United Kingdom. We report on our findings in the following chapter.

C: Basket economics
Sample structure for a q-commerce pure player



Source: Roland Berger, desk research

3 / Q-commerce is here to stay

AN INDUSTRY REMODELED

In our survey we attempted to discover what consumers think about q-commerce, which categories of goods they would use it for, and in which situations they prefer it over traditional channels. Three findings in particular stand out.

Our first major finding is that all sectors of consumer goods retailing will need to incorporate learnings from q-commerce in some way in the future. The survey showed that q-commerce is a promising retail channel with much currently untapped potential. Considerable differences between different retail sectors exist today. Thus, q-commerce started out in the restaurant sector with the fast delivery of meals. From there, q-commerce spread to groceries (used by nine percent of respondents), and it is now gaining momentum in pharmaceuticals (six percent of respondents). As yet, few players offer fashion items, cosmetics or lifestyle products, but as the number of players including these product categories in their portfolio increases, so will demand. → D

Depending on the product category, between 24 and 28 percent of our respondents stated that although they had not tried q-commerce as yet, they could imagine doing so in the future. The main reason for consumers not having used q-commerce services in a specific segment was that such services were not yet available in their local area, or that they had not heard about such services (48-53 percent of respondents). This answer was particularly common for respondents living in cities with fewer than 100,000 inhabitants – a reflection of the fact that many q-commerce services are currently only available in major metropolitan cities, where the number of consumers living close to warehouses is high. This will change as players expand into second-tier cities with around 250,000 inhabitants.

Some 40-47 percent of respondents said that the choice of products available in q-commerce was too limited, or that the brands that they liked were not offered. This will likely also change as q-commerce becomes more established and providers increase their assortment size. Initial signs of this already happening are visible in the market, with a Spanish q-commerce startup and the French retail chain Fnac recently expanding their delivery offering to more than 10,000 items.

Overall, 46 percent of respondents said that they would switch more of their shopping to q-commerce in the future. It is also worth noting that the survey took place against a background of rising fears about a looming recession; in more normal times, respondents might have been even more enthusiastic about embracing q-commerce.

Our second key finding is that q-commerce will likely be driven by specific use cases and will not entirely replace e-commerce. Indeed, we expect the opposite to occur: As a side effect, q-commerce will further boost e-commerce. Today, the specific occasion or situation determines whether customers choose q-commerce rather than bricks-and-mortar retail or regular e-commerce. Shoppers prefer q-commerce for spontaneous, urgent and on-demand purchases – when they run out of snacks at home during movie night, for example, or when they

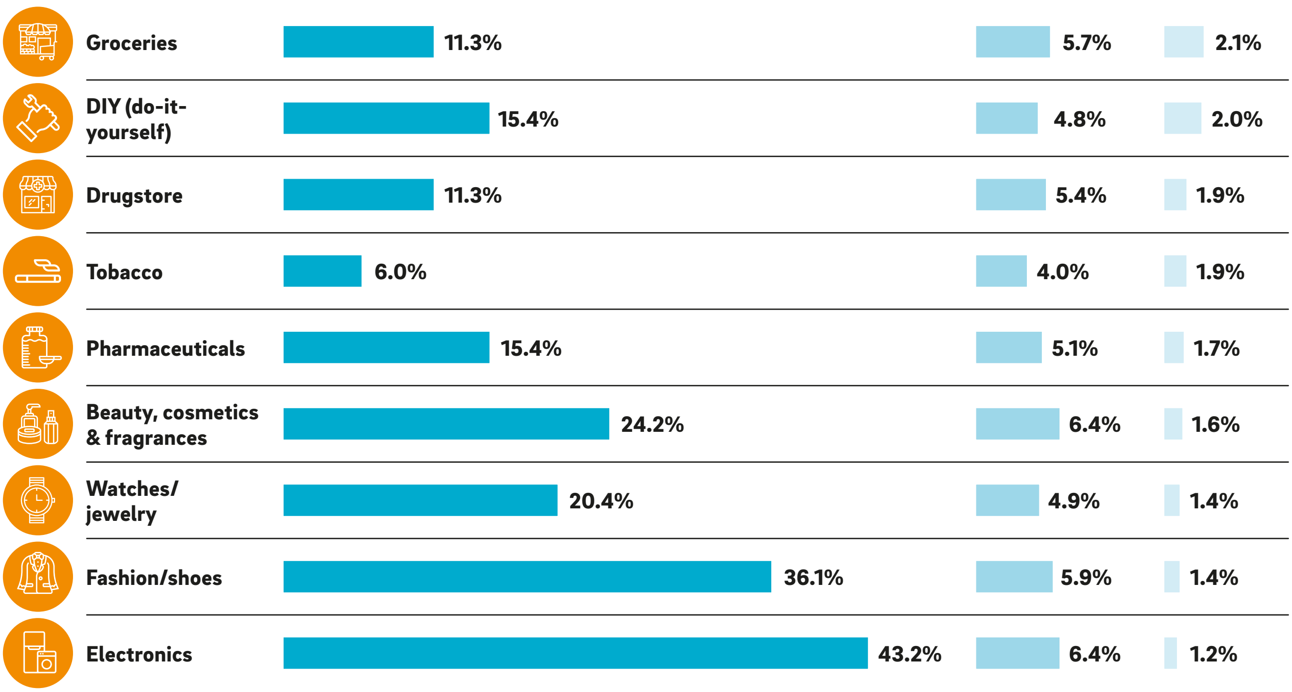
INFOBOX

Survey methodology

Between August 1 and 9, 2022, we surveyed more than 6,000 consumers in Germany, France and the United Kingdom. Our aim was to assess the relevance of q-commerce for specific retail segments and product categories and discover what matters most to shoppers when using instant delivery services. We also asked respondents about their preferences with regard to different types of shopping occasions.

D: Popularity of digital commerce by product category

Shopping preferences (selected categories)[1]



E-commerce (2-3 days delivery time) | E-commerce (same-day delivery) | Q-commerce

[1] Focus on respondents living in cities with more than 100 k inhabitants

Source: Roland Berger

urgently need some drugs to treat a cold, or when their cell-phone charger breaks. For retailers it is important to understand how often those occasions occur and, on that basis, to decide whether offering q-commerce makes sense for them from a financial perspective.

For planned and recurring online purchases, such as weekly food shopping, 27 percent of respondents said that delivery the next day or even two to three days later is fast enough. Even for emotional purchases, such as items seen in a magazine advertisement or TV commercial, 35 percent of respondents said that next-day delivery was sufficient. Thus, regular e-commerce will continue to coexist with q-commerce and other retail channels. → E

Our definition of q-commerce above stated that delivery takes less than 30 minutes. Few customers expect more than this, although q-commerce may actually improve its delivery times slightly in the future by optimizing picking and routes. Given that shoppers want to see a better range of products on offer

E: Different channels will coexist

Shopping preferences by shopping occasion

	<10 min delivery	<30 min delivery	Up to 1 h delivery	Same-day delivery	Next-day delivery	2-3 days delivery	>3 days delivery	Time-slot delivery	In-store shopping	Click & collect
Planned and recurring purchases (e.g. weekly food shopping)	4%	6%	7%	15%	16%	11%	3%	5%	30%	3%
		Total: 17%			**Total: 27%**					
Spontaneous or urgent purchases (e.g. unexpected event, broken items)	7%	9%	11%	18%	15%	9%	3%	2%	24%	3%
		Total: 27%			**Total: 24%**					
Emotional purchases (product just seen in magazine or on TV)	4%	5%	6%	12%	16%	19%	7%	2%	26%	4%
		Total: 15%			**Total: 35%**					

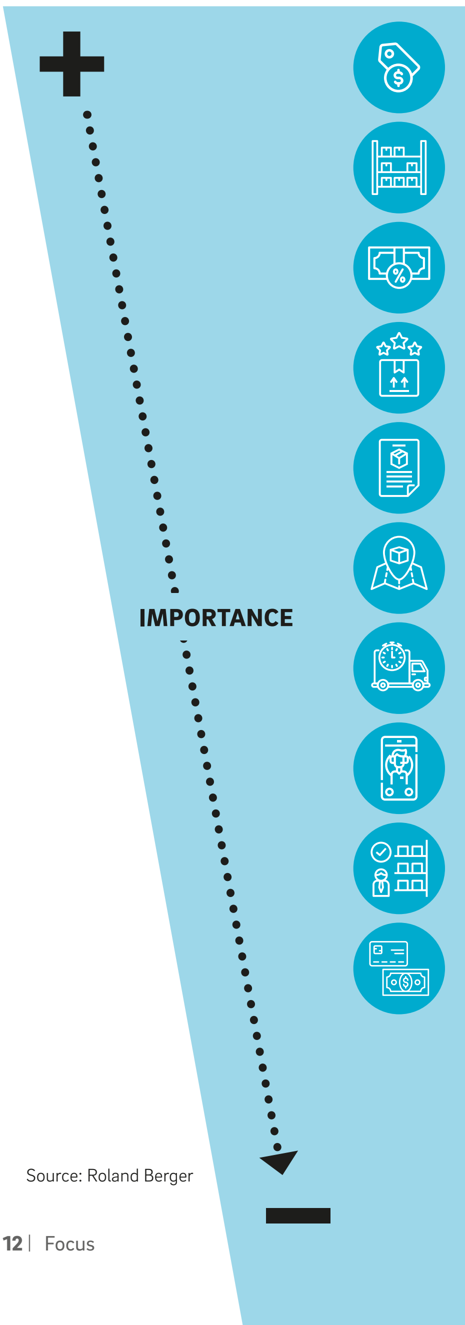
Source: Roland Berger survey, sample across 6,048 survey participants in Germany, France and UK

but are not willing to pay extra for those products or delivery, we expect in the long run to see q-commerce taking between 30 and 60 minutes from mouse-click to doorstep.

Overall, we believe that the share of q-commerce will grow but will eventually hit a ceiling, as shoppers only need certain items immediately. Growth will come not only at the expense of other e-commerce and convenience stores but also from new demand that was previously unmet – such as for more snacks during movie night.

Our third finding from the survey is that price, availability of products and delivery fee are key for q-commerce. But other factors seem to be almost as important, such as a an excellent customer experience, fast delivery and good product quality. The number of new market entrants means that competitive pressure is high, as witnessed by the massive levels of advertising and retargeting. Q-commerce players must therefore strive to outperform their competitors. → F

F: What matters to q-commerce customers
Importance attributed to decision factors by respondents



1. **Price of products**
2. **Availability of products** (in stock)
3. **Delivery fee**
4. **Product quality** (appearance, freshness, intactness)
5. **Detailed product descriptions**
6. **Choice of place of delivery**
7. **Speed of delivery and punctuality**
8. **Ease of using the app/shop/customer service**
9. **Assortment size** (choice of products within one category) **and listing of favorite brands**
10. **Payment options**

In the end, the customer wants everything and is not willing to compromise

Source: Roland Berger

4 / Making it work

CAN Q-COMMERCE BE PROFITABLE?

Q-commerce meets consumers' insatiable appetite for convenience. The key challenge is how to achieve sustainable profitability – an increasingly difficult goal in the current macroeconomic climate.

To master the challenge, players can consider a number of top-line and bottom-line actions. To boost the top line they may wish to explore additional revenue streams, such as selling digital space on their apps to consumer goods companies for use in promotions, preferential product placement and media placement. They may also consider sharing data on consumer shopping behavior or product preferences. In exchange, q-commerce players might ask for better conditions from producers or engage in retail media activities, such as the systematic management of retailers' online and offline spaces for advertising.

Another way for q-commerce players to increase the top line is by adjusting their delivery terms. For example, they could increase delivery fees, differentiating based on distance. Here, however, they should be aware that consumers are highly sensitive to delivery fees. An alternative would be to introduce minimum order sizes so that the cost of transportation is covered.

Dynamic pricing, as used in the air travel industry, is an efficient way to benefit from demand in peak times. Some players have already started benchmarking their prices in their advertising with bricks-and-mortar retailers rather than with their q-commerce competitors. Players can also optimize their assortment by adding high-margin products, and they can consider cross-selling options, for example through product bundles.

Increasing the price premium compared to offline prices is another effective tactic, although this will be difficult given consumers' current price sensitivity. Indeed, this and some of the other top-line actions outlined above may be more appropriate in the medium to long term, once the market has consolidated and the battle for market share has subsided.

To increase the bottom line, q-commerce players can look at marketing costs and discount vouchers: These currently eat up a lot of q-commerce revenues and cutting them would have a significant impact on the bottom line. Once the market has consolidated to just a few players, we expect to see a noticeable reduction in the number of costly customer acquisition programs, too.

Players can further improve the bottom line by introducing innovations in fulfillment operations, such as micro-fulfillment centers that add q-commerce pick capacity in existing spaces without creating large, capital-intensive automated warehouses. The more items are handled, the more efficiency improvements in picking are likely, leading to a reduction in costs. Efficiency gains are also possible by optimizing last-mile delivery through better routing and higher driver utilization. → G

TWO MODELS FOR PLAYERS

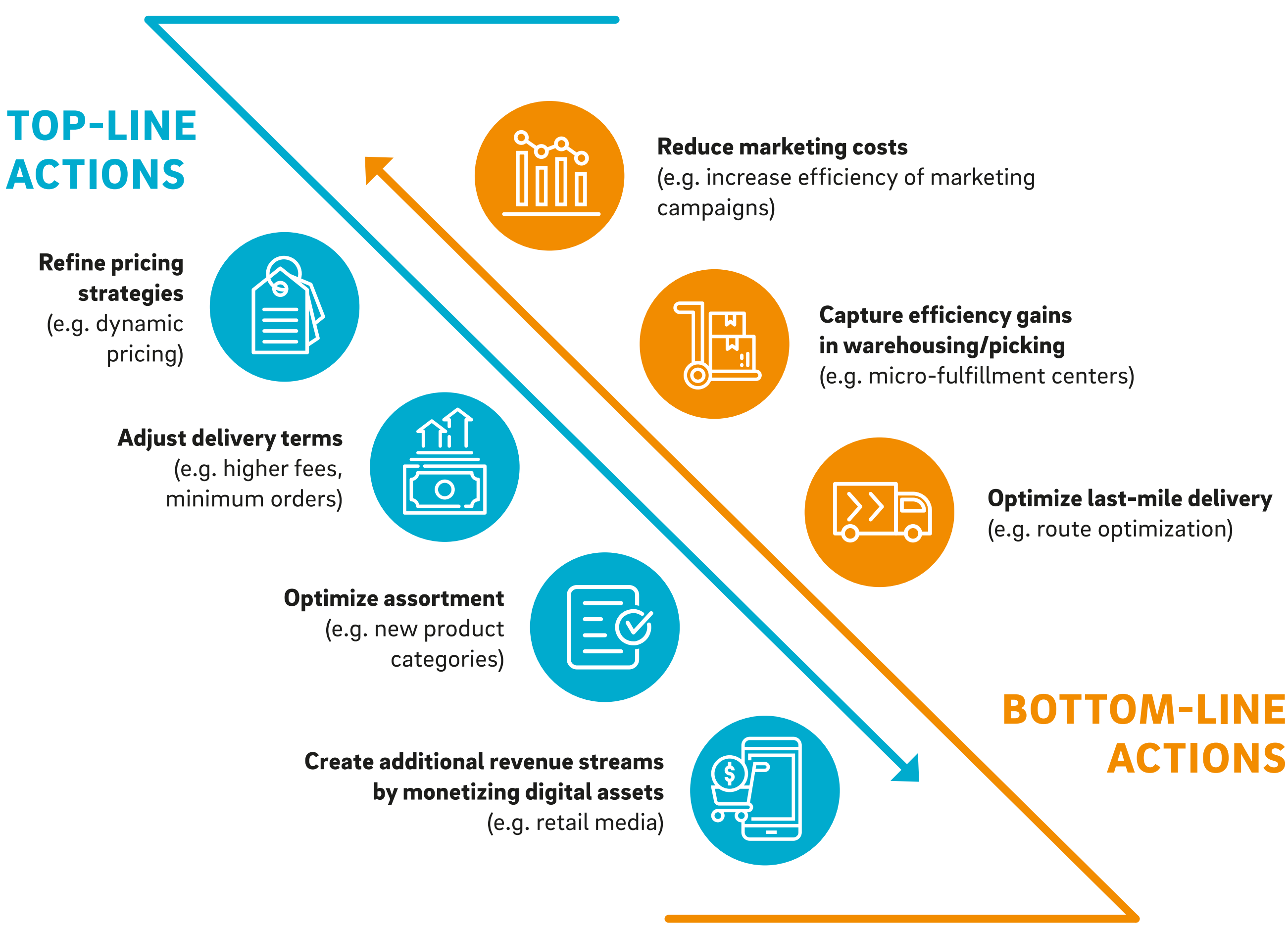
Multichannel retailers wishing to expand into q-commerce have two main options at their disposal: partnering with an existing q-commerce provider or building their own capability.

Model 1: Partner

Three possibilities exist here. First, players can cooperate with third-party delivery platforms. Second, they can partner with established vertically integrated players or simply invest in pure players – the latter option being increasingly popular, as evidenced by REWE's shareholding in the startup Flink, or French supermarket group Casino's stake in Gorillas. The third option, not yet seen in the market, is to establish a retailer network with other retailers offering complementary products and brands, building your own frontend solution and buying in last-mile delivery services.

The partnership model has many advantages. Indeed, we believe that it will be the preferred strategy for most multichannel retailers. Crucially, platforms are highly

G: How to transform q-commerce into a profitable business
Selection of top-line and bottom-line actions



Source: Roland Berger

attractive for customers as they cover categories that individual players' businesses do not cover. Consumers appear to remain loyal to platforms: As long as their speed requirements are met when buying groceries, they also buy other items such as pharmacy products and alcoholic beverages, and they want all the products delivered at the same time. Platforms also have good customer reach, which is beneficial for retailers. Moreover, they save retailers the initial CAPEX investment as the retailer does not need to build its own warehouse, logistics services, IT and so on. The only small investment in the case of delivery cooperations is that they may need to introduce "speed zones" at the front of their stores and stock them with the most popular items to enable delivery companies to speed up the picking, packing and delivery of orders.

Other advantages of the partnership model include shared running costs (for example, customer services), outsourcing of complexity and risks (including maintenance, personnel acquisition and staff planning), shared responsibility for warehouse and driver health and safety compliance issues, the possibility of leveraging third-party providers' dark-store networks and driver pools for expansion, and enforceable SLAs (service level agreements). In addition, omnichannel players can benefit from greater profitability on a per-unit basis, thanks to their partner's greater scale, efficiencies in picking and driver utilization, and better balancing of capacity peaks. They also stand to profit from the know-how of leading platforms, which continuously invest in process innovations and new technologies aimed at achieving cost efficiency and better service.

Model 2: Build

The alternative to partnering for omnichannel retailers is to build their own q-commerce capability. The central requirement here is simple yet challenging: establishing a dense network of warehouses. In Germany, for example, it would mean having 11 well-placed warehouses that stock the same assortment and can move it from click to ship in no more than two hours. Fulfillment would need to cover all tier-1 and tier-2 cities, so a q-commerce retailer in Germany would need 30 stores to serve almost half the population with same-day delivery and come close to matching Amazon's current service offer.

Q-commerce also blurs the role of the store. Stores can be used as warehouses, offering BOPIS (buy online, pick up in-store) and ship-from-store services. The physical network needs to be reimagined in terms of footprint, use of gray or dark stores, store formats, parcel locker networks, autonomous last-mile delivery and so on.

Building your own q-commerce capability has advantages and disadvantages. On the plus side, retailers do not face the risk of losing the consumer interface – one of their key advantages – or growing dependent on third parties. They retain their margins and can exploit their existing store network. Q-commerce also provides them with greater visibility with regard to product quality, inventory supply and pricing. On the minus side, however, they must make a large CAPEX investment in the platform, inventory and warehouse logistics. They must also engage in detailed demand forecasting to connect direct sales with pick-up points for riders, efficient inventory control, and management in preparation centers, all of which involves costs.

5 / Impact and outlook

HOW SHOULD RETAILERS RESPOND?

Q-commerce brings with it the risk of cannibalization of bricks-and-mortar retail and other forms of e-commerce. Retailers therefore need to take care when incorporating it into their omnichannel universe. At the same time, they need to strengthen their traditional channels to enable them to compete better with q-commerce.

Today, the customer journey is no longer focused one-dimensionally on a single channel. The customer decides which channel is best suited to their specific situation. Personalizing offerings and ensuring a joined-up experience across all channels is key to meeting customer needs.

As q-commerce expands its role, retailers would be well advised to focus on the omnichannel value of their customers. This involves building loyalty, personalizing offers and creating incentives for customers to visit bricks-and-mortar stores, at the same as increasing the frequency and basket size of their online purchases. Indeed personalization, supported by data and analytics, is a powerful tool for strengthening connection with the brand, winning consumer loyalty and drawing customers into the retailer's ecosystem.

KEY IMPLICATIONS OF THE RISE OF Q-COMMERCE

One of the main impacts of q-commerce will be that convenience stores will need to upgrade their services, for example by introducing unstaffed stores for 24/7 shopping. The one area where online cannot yet compete with bricks-and-mortar stores is on product touch and feel. Retailers need to optimize their store portfolio, introducing minimarkets in downtown areas and local neighborhoods. They must improve the layout of their stores, incorporating speed zones near the front of stores for fast-moving goods. They may also consider offering an exclusive portfolio instore, as well as instore discounts and promotions, and additional services from sales consultants. Other potential focus areas instore are automatic checkouts, safe customer experiences ("SafeX") and BOPIS.

At the same time, regular e-commerce needs to improve its delivery times to same day and increase ease of use via mobile. People now expect to receive their products no later than the day after they order. More and more often, shopping decisions depend on shipping times, combined with a limited willingness to pay extra for fast delivery. Retailers can incorporate innovations into their service offer, such as virtual appointments, livestreaming and experiential content. Virtual try-on and 3D models help avoid returns. Overall, websites and apps need to be optimized and online marketing refined in order to keep up with q-commerce.

As q-commerce expands its role, retailers are well advised to focus on the omnichannel value of their customers.

OUTLOOK FOR Q-COMMERCE

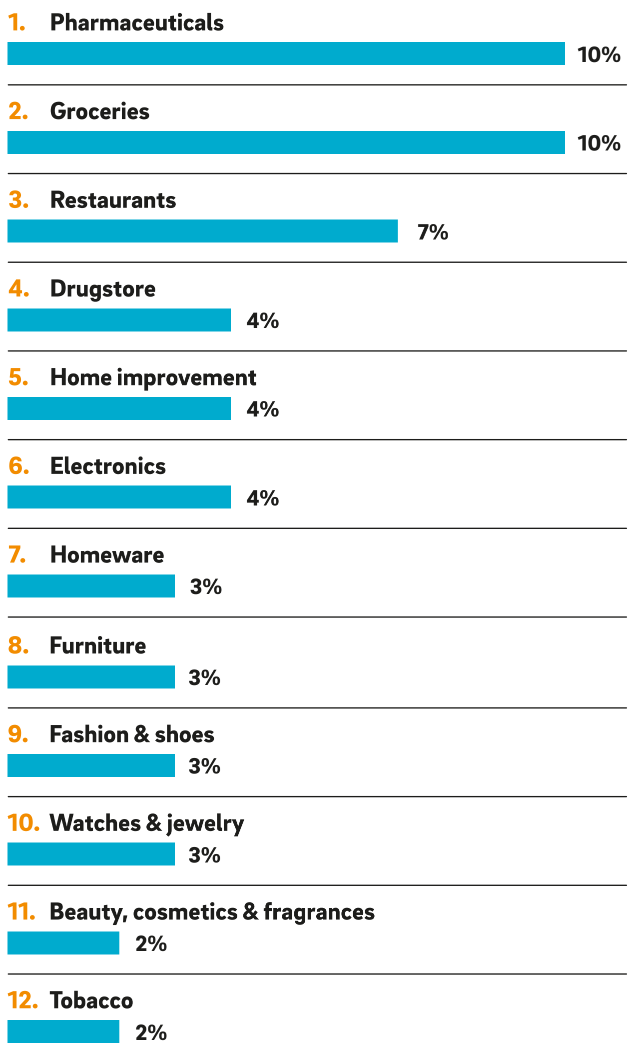
With ongoing inflation and increases in the cost of living, customers are already reducing their spending on spontaneous and emotional purchases, planning their shopping activities much more cautiously. As a result, we expect to see q-commerce players scaling back their revenue forecasts in the near future. In Germany, we are already observing a revival in discount retail with its lower-priced private labels. Reduced growth forecasts will impact q-commerce players for grocery and more luxurious product categories particularly strongly, while q-commerce players in product categories such as pharmaceuticals will be less hard hit.

Given this overall environment, we expect investors to be increasingly cautious. Very few new investments in new q-commerce players are likely to occur in the next few years. Expansion will probably only be seen in specific focus markets, while activities in less profitable markets will be discontinued – as has already happened for Gorillas in Spain, for example. Some new q-commerce players may emerge in categories where consumers make urgent purchases, such as pharmaceuticals, and categories with a high share of e-commerce already, such as electronics. This is supported by the results from our survey. → H

Ongoing revenue constraints mean that many q-commerce players will need to implement major cost and operating efficiency programs, with the aim of reducing cash burn and eventually achieving profitability. The negative effects of this will include layoffs as q-commerce players streamline their organizations. On the positive side, established retailers will have an opportunity to engage in partnerships with q-commerce players and provide an omnichannel digital experience – although q-commerce players will no doubt exploit their increased power to try to optimize purchasing conditions.

H: Product categories with further potential for new offerings

Survey results



Source: Roland Berger

Not all q-commerce players will be able to survive the macroeconomic pressure and decreasing investor interest. In categories with a larger number of q-commerce players, such as groceries, increased market consolidation is likely as players merge or are bought up by existing retailers. In the long term, only q-commerce players that provide an excellent customer experience and are thus able to justify a price premium in increased product prices or delivery fees are likely to survive.

In conclusion, we expect to see much of the hype around q-commerce dying down as the harsh reality of a channel struggling to achieve profitability sinks in. Only the most efficient players, those that keep their costs low and become profitable, will survive the coming market consolidation. Subsequently, we expect to see a stabilization of the q-commerce industry comparable to that which occurred in the e-commerce industry after the sector first peaked. What is beyond doubt is that the q-commerce revolution will have a major, lasting impact on the retail industry with regard to the perception and expectations of convenience. In response, existing retailers need to adapt their offerings and expand their digital business models as a matter of priority.

Only the most efficient players, those that keep their costs low and become profitable, will survive the coming market consolidation.

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