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AUTUMNFAIR

# Voices of Retail

The first-of-its-kind report capturing the real voice of retail across the UK — shaping the agenda for 2026 and beyond.

## 650 retailers

Surveyed on what they're seeing on the ground, what's holding them back, and what they need to thrive.

## 2,000+ consumers

Surveyed on what they're really looking for from retail, and what would bring them back to the high street.



# 650 retailers surveyed, across multiple sectors

In Q1 2026 we surveyed 650 UK retailers across England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland on performance, strategy, and what the industry needs. Here's who took part.

43%

trading 10+ years, these are experienced operators, not just newcomers

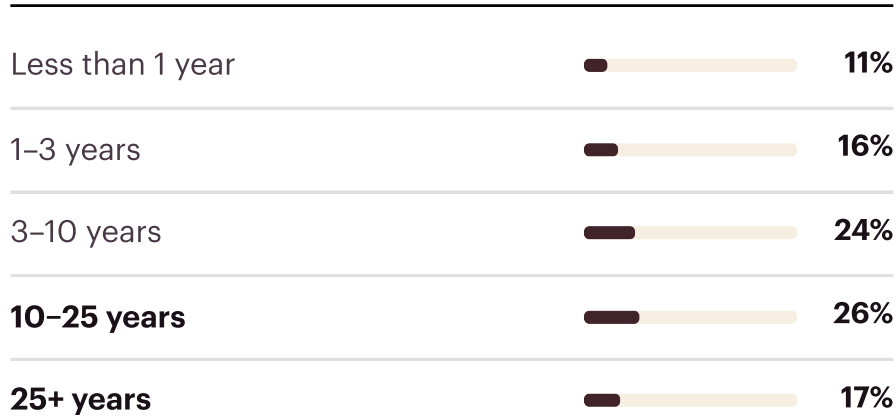
68%

small businesses of 3 or fewer people, including 35% that are solo operators

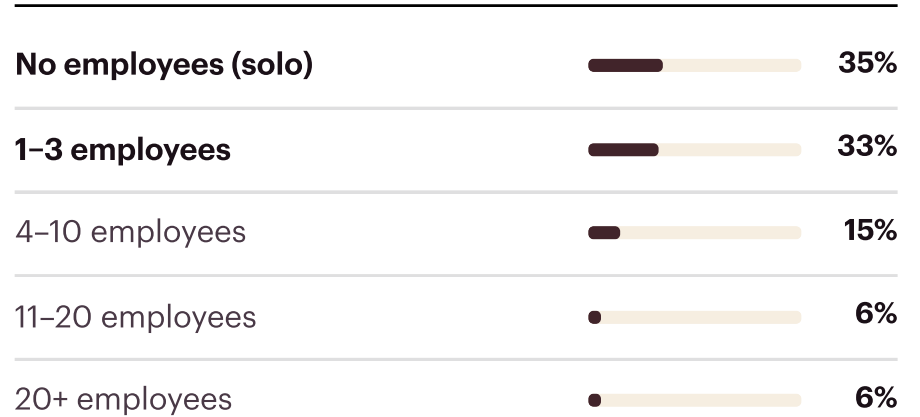
64%

making less than 10% of their revenue online

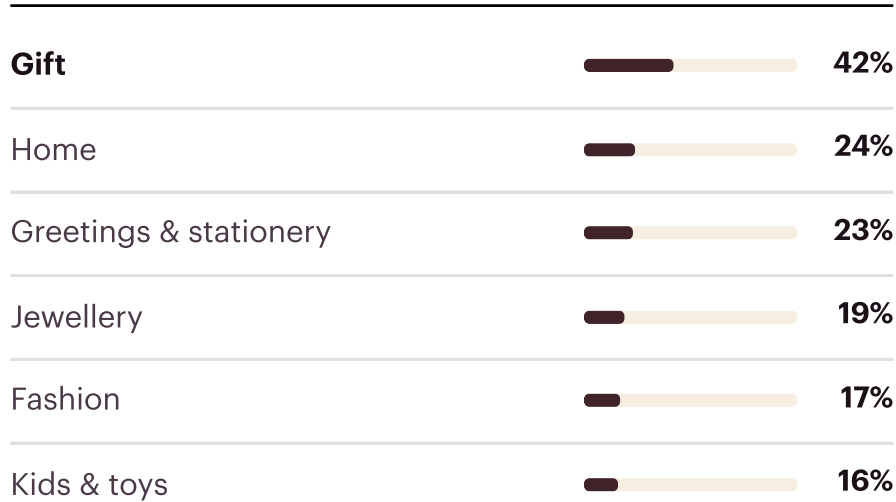
## YEARS TRADING



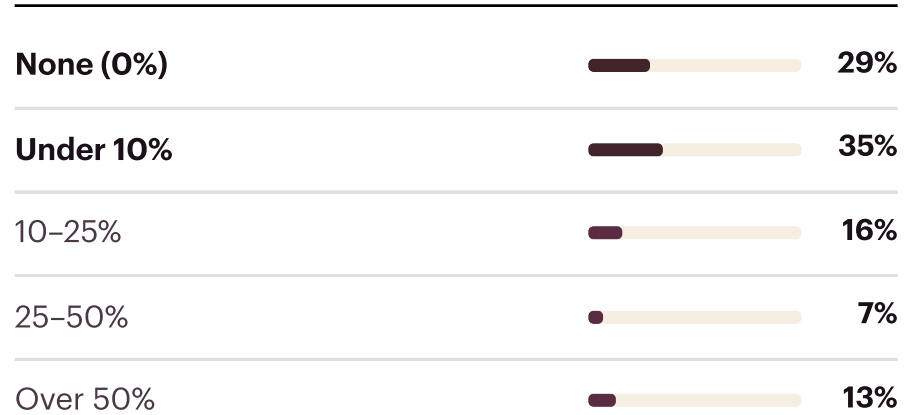
## TEAM SIZE



## PRODUCT SECTORS (MULTI-SELECT)



## ONLINE REVENUE SHARE



## BUSINESS PERFORMANCE VS LAST YEAR



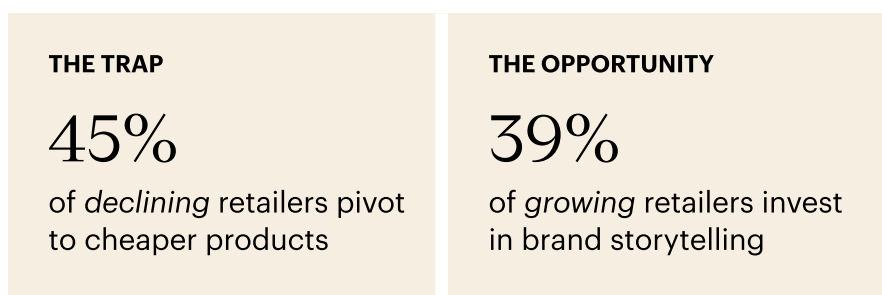
71% growing or stable

■ Up >20% 
 ■ Up 11-20% 
 ■ Up to 10% 
 ■ Stable 
 ■ Down to 10% 
 ■ Down 11-20% 
 ■ Down >20%

# The strategies separating growers from the rest

38% of retailers are growing year-on-year. Four strategies meaningfully separate them from those in decline – and one surprising trap.

Retailers who invest in **brand storytelling**—using marketing and merchandising to communicate who they are and what they stand for—are **nearly twice as likely to grow**. Yet it's still one of the industry's most underused strategies.



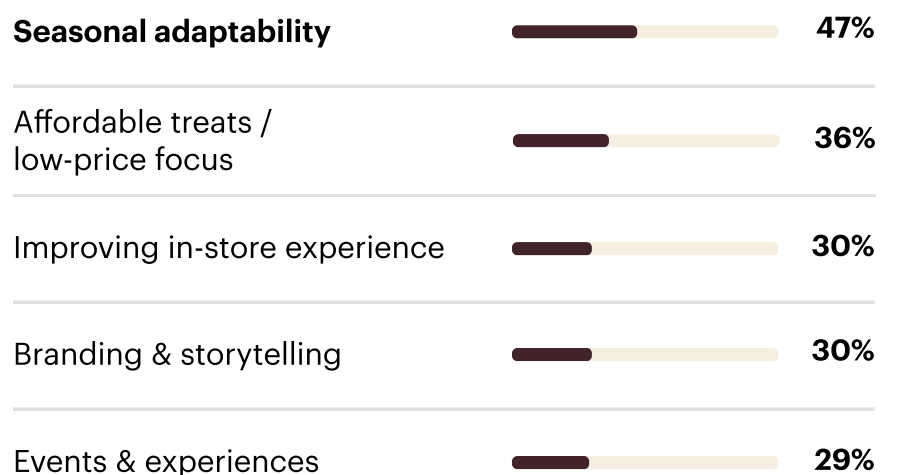
## WHAT SEPARATES GROWING RETAILERS FROM DECLINING ONES?

Each connector shows the gap between growing and declining retailers. Longer lines = stronger differentiator.



Growing retailers represent 38% of the sample. pp = percentage points difference.

## MOST-USED GROWTH STRATEGIES (ALL RETAILERS)



## CONSUMERS CONFIRM IT

**61%** choose independents because “they’ve got more personality.” Branding isn’t a luxury — it’s what shoppers are already paying for.

**82%** say they get a better experience with independents than chains. The in-store investment is noticed.

**18%** cite discounts and sales as a loyalty driver — some retailers are optimising for the thing their customers care least about.

# The untapped opportunity

Collaboration is proven to work, and 89% of those who try it see commercial gains. Yet only 23% are actively doing it. The opportunity is hiding in plain sight. What's holding most back isn't motivation — it's knowing where to start. The most commercial formats are also the least tried.

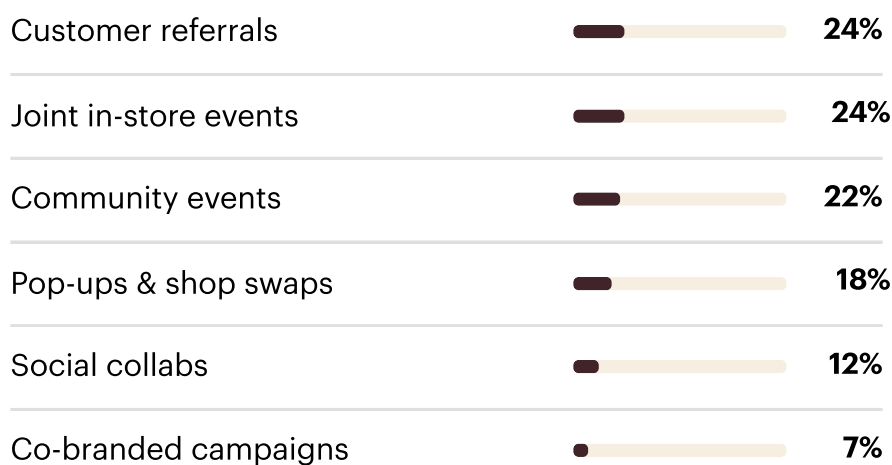
89%

retailers who collaborate directly with each other on business initiatives report commercial gains

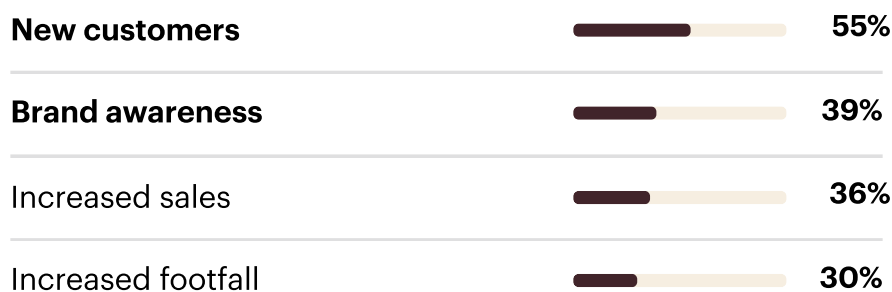
55%

gain new customers through collaboration

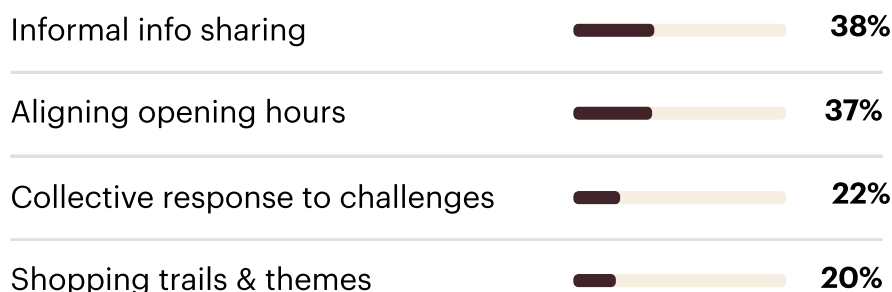
## MOST-USED COLLABORATION FORMATS



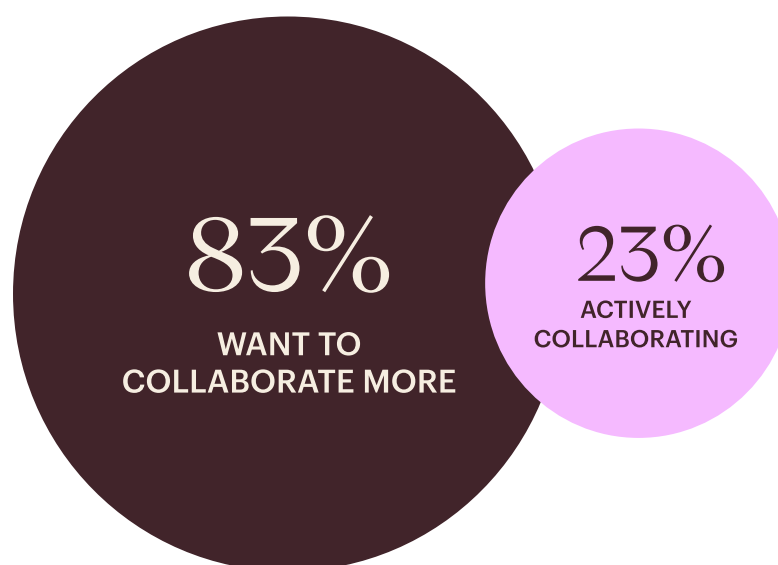
## WHAT RETAILERS GAIN FROM COLLABORATION



## WHAT RETAILERS ARE DOING INFORMALLY



## THE COLLABORATION PARADOX



## CONSUMERS ARE ALREADY SHOWING UP

36% of consumers say **more events** would encourage them to visit their local high street more often (the third biggest footfall driver behind free parking and more independents.)

30% of consumers attended a **maker's market** in the last year. 28% attended a community event. The audience for experiences exists.

51% want to see more **food tastings**. 44% want more maker's markets. The interest is there, but the formats just aren't available.

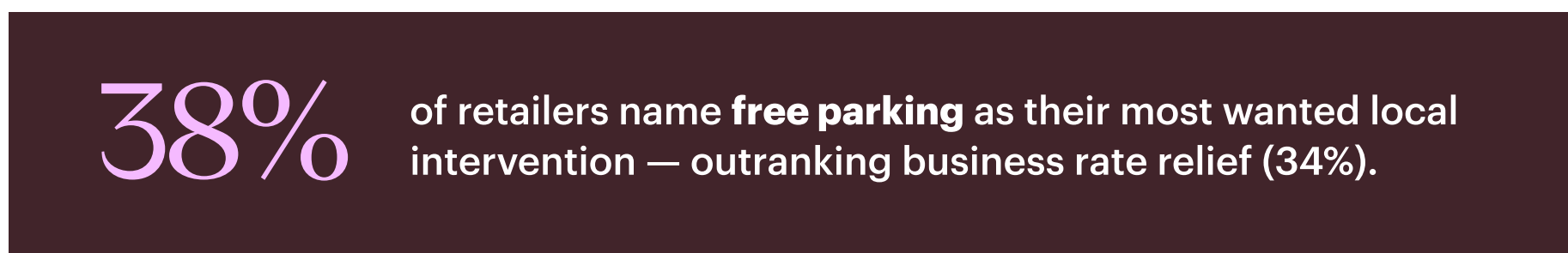
# Retailers are paying into BIDs, but feel underserved

Most active BID (Business Improvement District) participants say they get some value, but “could be better” is the dominant response. Customers agree, their frustrations mirror yours.



## WHAT RETAILERS WANT FROM LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND BIDS

- 47%** **Help telling their local story**  
Stronger area marketing & narrative
- 40%** **Events & footfall activity**  
More than one big Christmas market
- 39%** **Better council & BID support**  
More responsiveness, less bureaucracy
- 37%** **Funding & financial incentives**  
Direct business support
- 34%** **More collaborative events**  
Bringing retailers together to plan and act

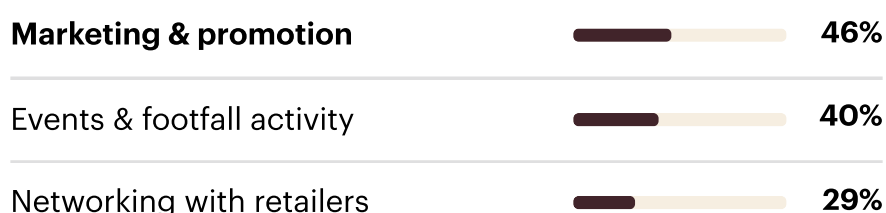


## CONSUMERS ECHO RETAILERS ON COUNCILS CONCERNS

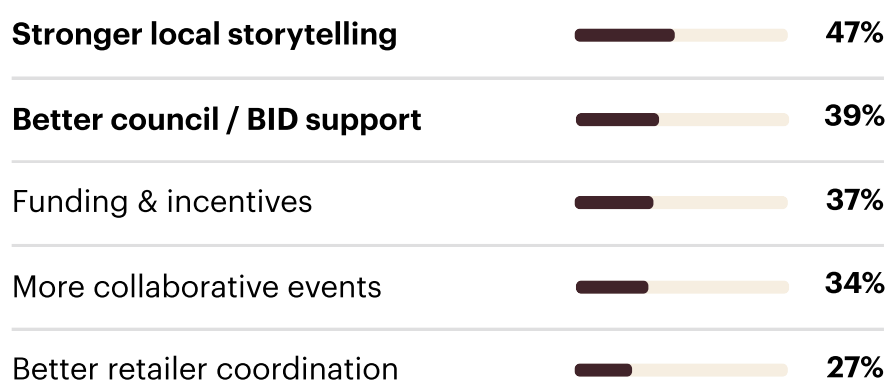
**62%** of consumers say their **local council isn't doing enough** to support high street retailers. Your customers are frustrated by the same institutions.

**84%** of consumers want **councils to do more**. The public mandate for change is overwhelming — on both sides of the transaction.

### WHAT THIRD-PARTY BODIES ARE USEFUL FOR



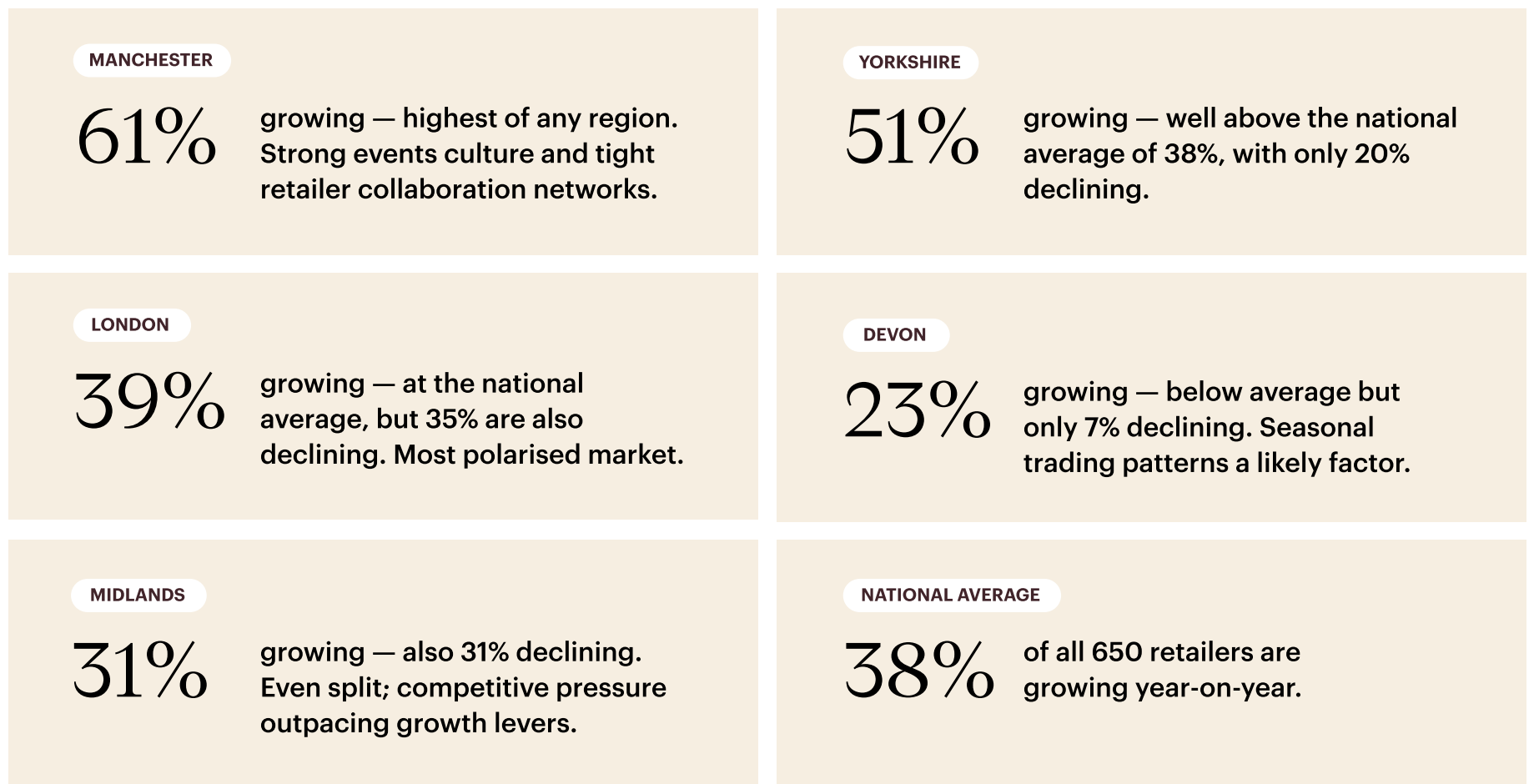
### WHAT WOULD MAKE THE BIGGEST DIFFERENCE



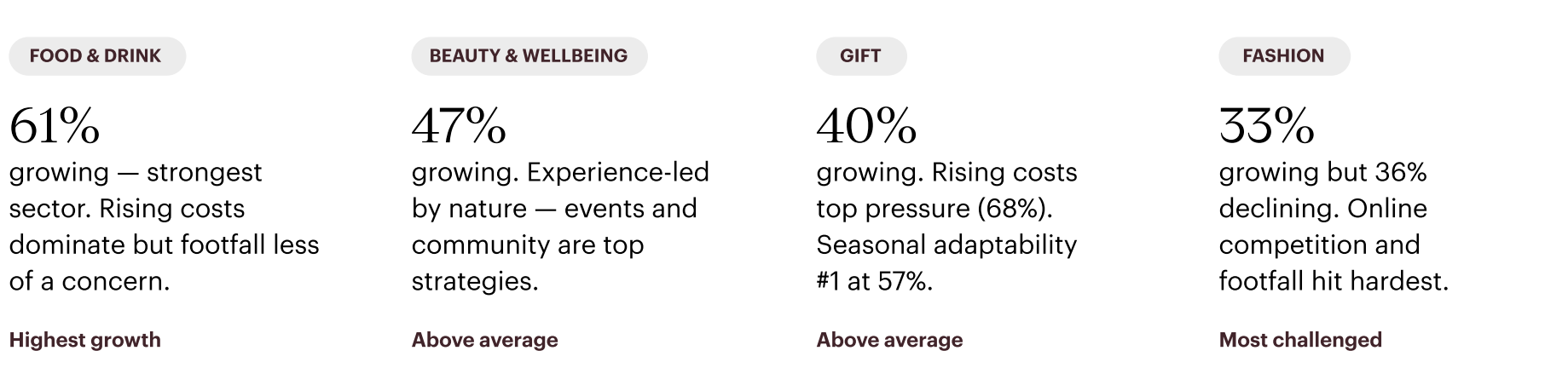
# Where growth is concentrated

The headline numbers tell one story. Breaking the data down by region and sector reveals sharper patterns, and more specific lessons for retailers.

## GROWTH RATES BY REGION — % OF RETAILERS REPORTING YEAR-ON-YEAR GROWTH



## GROWTH RATES BY SECTOR



### THE SHARPEST FINDING:

The fastest growing retailers aren't the most established, they're the newest. 1–3 year retailers are growing at twice the rate of those who've been trading for a decade or more. The energy is at the edges of the sector, not the middle.

# Cautious optimism, clear priorities

Despite the most sustained cost pressure in a generation, more than one in four retailers is actively investing for growth. Here's where the industry is heading.

**28%** of retailers are actively investing for growth right now, not waiting for conditions to improve.

A further 33% are experimenting and adapting as opportunities arise. Nearly two thirds of the industry is testing and adapting, with consumers ready to meet them there: 95% say they would spend more if the offer improved.

## TOP PRIORITIES FOR THE NEXT 12 MONTHS



## THE DIGITAL TRANSITION

**64%** of retailers make less than 10% of revenue online today — yet **53%** name growing their online presence as a top 2026 priority.

The fastest growers are already there: only **19%** of high-growth retailers have zero online revenue, vs **33%** of stable ones.

## SUPPORT RETAILERS MOST NEED



## CONSUMERS

**60%** consumers describe their local high street as struggling, but 95% say they would spend more if the offer improved.

**42%** already have a favourite retailer they return to

**46%** say they choose retailers that drive a sense of community.

# What your customers are telling us

2,040 consumers were surveyed and their message is clear: the demand is there, the spending power is there, and AI is making what you offer more valuable, not less.

96%

want to see more independent shops on their high street

95%

would spend more if there were more independent options

85%

would prefer to spend with local businesses over corporations

## SPENDING APPETITE

£145/month

consumers are willing to spend with local retailers

£67

average spend per high street visit

51%

visit their local high street at least weekly

## WHY SHOPPERS CHOOSE INDEPENDENTS

82%

get a **better experience** with independents than chains

61%

choose independents for **personality** — not price or range

61%

motivated by **supporting local businesses**

47%

want something **unique** they can't find elsewhere

63%

say **free parking & more independent shops** would bring them to the high street more often

## WHO CONSUMERS TRUST



Your recommendation carries **10x more weight** than an algorithm's. Expertise is the product.

## WHAT DRIVES LOYALTY



9/10

people say that AI actually makes them more eager to see products in person and speak with a real expert. So the team on your shop floor have never been more important.

Britain's retailers and shoppers want the same thing:

**A high street with character,  
expertise, and a reason to  
show up. The only thing  
missing is more of it.**



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