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The Evolution of CPG Customer Acquisition since 2021

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Behavioral shifts driving an evolving customer acquisition reality

The Trust Gap

Consumer trust in brand advertising claims has declined materially since 2021. Buyers often validate claims through Reddit, peer networks, and reviews. This mirrors changes in broader society.

Discovery Goes Well Beyond Traditional Media & Search Bars

Consumers now encounter new CPG products through paid placements at live and digital events, TikTok feeds, Reddit threads, and micro-influencer reels, not just Google searches..

Subscription vs. In Store Replenishment Demand Cycles

Consumers will use auto-replenishment in habitual categories (e.g. powders, supplements, coffee, pet food), making CAC a higher stakes game.

Bifurcation of Premium Spend

Post-2020 inflation drove value seeking in CPG. Yet consumer spending grows rapidly outside CPG, and within CPG, certain categories (e.g. health, identity, and self-care) maintain premium pricing power.

In-Store Execution Now Part of Broader Funnel

Consumers who discover a brand outside the store already have expectations. In-store presence is an integrated closing tool in an acquired funnel, not just a land grab.

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CPG commentary on customer acquisition has shifted away from traditional methods

Company	2021 (from filings)	2024-2025 (from filings)	Source
P&G	Digital ~45% of media budget; ecommerce 11-12% of sales; TV still dominant reach vehicle	Digital majority of ~$8-9B ad budget; ecommerce 19% of sales; ad ROI +~40% vs. 2019; media reach +14 pts	P&G Annual Report 2024; Q1 FY2021 Earnings Call; FY2025 10-K
Unilever	Digital ~45% of €6.9B B&MI; ecommerce +44% YoY; TV declining as % of mix	"Social-First Demand Generation" a named pillar; double-digit digital commerce growth; live commerce China model exported globally	Unilever Annual Report & Accounts 2021 and 2024 (both SEC 6-K)
Colgate-Palmolive	TV dominant; digital growing; ecommerce ~11% of sales; 16,000 employees enrolled in digital upskilling	65% of ad spend digital; ecommerce 14-15% of global sales; first-party data and personalization cited as core acquisition levers	Colgate 2022 Annual Report; CDO Brigitte King disclosure (Aug 2024)
Nestle	Ecommerce 15% of sales; A&M spend at 6.6% of sales (low) in H2-2022; investing in digital-first channels	Ecommerce 18.5% of group sales (9M 2024); A&M recovering to 9% of sales by end-2025; AI-powered enterprise transformation underway	Nestle 9M-2024 Sales Release; Nestle FY2024 Full Year Results
Kellogg / Kellanova	Analytics team newly formed; ecommerce growing; traditional TV and trade promotions dominant; limited first-party data pipeline	CEO declared "new morning" for one-to-one marketing; first-party data investment a stated priority; digital tools personalizing at scale	Kellogg Q1 2023 Earnings Call (SEC 8-K, May 2023)
General Mills	Digital capabilities under investment; $100M+ committed over several years	Double-digit media ROI gains from social-first campaigns; tripled ecommerce growth at top 5 retail partners; retail media investment named explicitly	General Mills Q2/Q3 FY2026 Earnings Calls; DEF 14A Proxy Statement 2024
Church & Dwight	Digital 2% of sales influence in 2016 (baseline); shifting rapidly; ecommerce growing	Digital influence 16% of sales by 2022; 70% of media spend digital; ecommerce 21.4% of sales by Q4 2024	Church & Dwight Q4 2022 Analyst Day; Q4 2024 Investor Day Earnings Call
Reckitt	Ecommerce growing; no formal AI strategy cited in 2021 annual report; investment in DMC hubs beginning	Ecommerce more than doubled in three years; AI partnership with Dragonfly AI for Amazon optimization; generative AI cutting marketing dev time 60%	Reckitt press release 2023; FY2024 Results Transcript (March 2025)

Source: Company reports, filings and Optimal Advisory analysis

E-comm, digital efficiency, first-party data, retail media and social-first strategies are rising

- P&G: ecommerce ~11-12% of sales in FY2021 (earnings call) vs. 19% in FY2025 (10-K); advertising ROI improved ~40% and media reach +14 pts over five years
- Unilever: ecommerce +44% in FY2021, digital ~45% of media budget; FY2024 annual report names "Social-First Demand Generation" and "Scaled Artificial Intelligence" as formal strategic pillars
- Colgate-Palmolive: ecommerce 15%+ by 2024; 65% of ad spend now digital, up from predominantly TV; CDO disclosed first-party data and personalization as core acquisition tools
- Nestle: targeted 25% e-commerce by 2025; reached 18.5% organically by 9M 2024; A&M spend recovered from 6.6% low in H2-2022 back toward 9% of sales
- Kellogg (now Kellanova): CEO Steve Cahillane, Q1 2023 earnings call — "The true promise of one-to-one marketing is upon us. First-party data is more robust than it's ever been to really target consumers in a way marketers have dreamed of for years"
- General Mills: $100M+ invested in digital/technology capabilities over several years; CEO reported double-digit increase in media ROI from social-first campaigns (Q2 FY2026 call); tripled ecommerce growth at top 5 retail partners
- Church & Dwight: ecommerce 21.4% of consolidated sales by Q4 2024 (Investor Day); digital influence 16% of sales in 2022 vs. 2% in 2016; 70% of media spend digital (Analyst Day 2023)
- Reckitt: ecommerce more than doubled over three years to 2023 (company press release); using Dragonfly AI to optimize Amazon product images; generative AI pilots accelerating marketing by up to 60% (FY2024 results transcript)

Source: Company reports, filings and Optimal Advisory analysis

Retail media networks and social commerce are often named strategic channels

2021: Retail Media and Social — Nascent or Absent

P&G (FY2021 Annual Report)

Retail execution and trade promotion cited as primary in-store acquisition levers. Digital referenced broadly; no mention of retail media networks as distinct channel.

Unilever (FY2021 Annual Report)

eBD app Shikhar reached 700,000+ retailers in India. TikTok / gaming described as "test and learn." Social primarily an awareness layer.

Colgate (2021 disclosures)

Digital upskilling in progress. eCommerce growing. No retail media network or social commerce cited as named acquisition strategy.

Kellogg (2021 annual report)

Advanced analytics team newly established. One-to-one marketing described as aspirational rather than operational.

2024-2025: Retail Media and Social — Formal Strategy

Unilever (FY2024 Annual Report, SEC 6-K)

"Social-First Demand Generation" named as one of five formal demand creation drivers in Growth Action Plan 2030. China shift to Douyin cited; live commerce model being exported to US and Indonesia.

General Mills (Q3 FY2026 Earnings Call)

CEO: "We continue to invest in retail media to win online with consumers... By partnering closely with retailers, we have tripled our e-commerce growth across our top 5 e-commerce retail partners."

Church & Dwight (Q4 2024 Investor Day)

"We ranked in the first quartile of CPG peers for digital performance, driving share gains across its seven power brands in key online and social channels."

Reckitt (FY2024 Results Transcript)

"In China, strong e-commerce growth has enabled us to capture more digital-first consumers. In North America, our omnichannel partnerships and quick commerce platforms are expanding our reach."

Source: Company reports, filings and Optimal Advisory analysis

Representative capital signals in the CPG ecosystem

Signal	Type	Size (est.)	Date	Significance
Instacart IPO and Advertiser Platform Expansion	Public Offering	$660M raised	Sep 2023	Instacart Ads became a key CPG acquisition channel.
Klaviyo IPO	Public Offering	$576M raised	Sep 2023	Email and SMS automation for DTC and CPG. IPO confirmed strategic value of owned-channel data infrastructure.
Walmart RMN and Advertising Tech Investment	M and A / Internal	$2B+ est. total	2021-2025	Created a competitive retail media network that CPG brands must now engage alongside Amazon.
LiveRamp CDP and Identity Resolution Expansion	Strategic / Public	$600M+ annual rev. (est.)	Ongoing	Reflects the structural shift to first-party data activation.

Source: Company reports, filings and Optimal Advisory analysis

Emerging solutions across CPG brands

Capability Challenge	Incumbent Deficit	Emerging Solutions
Community Ownership	Most incumbent CPG brands have no owned community; challengers have tens of thousands of engaged members	Launch community platform for 1-2 high-identity brands; use live events, invest in community management
DTC First-Party Data	Limited DTC revenue means limited first-party data generation; compounding disadvantage	Accelerate DTC investment across top brands
Content Velocity	Incumbents operate on quarterly campaign cycles; challengers produce daily	Reorganize content production to weekly test-and-learn cadence; deploy GenAI creative tooling to scale
AI Search Visibility	Many incumbent brands have not audited or optimized for AI-generated search answer inclusion	Conduct AI search discoverability audit; optimize data
Micro-Influencer Infrastructure	Incumbents primarily use macro-influencers and celebrity ambassadors with rising costs	Pilot managed micro-influencer program, measure quickly and be willing to fail fast

Source: Company reports, filings and Optimal Advisory analysis

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Key Takeaways

Ecommerce Rising

Every company that discloses shows material ecommerce growth since 2021.

Digital Now Majority of Ad Spend

Colgate CDO: 65% of spend digital. Church & Dwight: 70% of media digital by 2022 Analyst Day. P&G: majority of ~$8-9B budget digital. Unilever: ~45% in 2021 and growing.

First-Party Data: Aspirational to Operational

Kellogg CEO Q1 2023: "first-party data more robust than ever" for one-to-one targeting. Kraft Heinz: built in-house trade management with real-time data on 10,000+ promotional events.

Social-First Is Now Formal Strategy

Unilever FY2024 Annual Report names "Social-First Demand Generation" as one of five formal demand creation drivers — language entirely absent from 2021 filings.

AI: From Pilot to Enabler

Reckitt: AI partnership for Amazon image optimization; GenAI cutting marketing dev time 60%. Unilever: "Scaled Artificial Intelligence" a named strategic accelerator. Kraft Heinz: in-house revenue management AI tools.

Retail Media Supplanting Traditional

General Mills Q3 FY2026: "We continue to invest in retail media to win online." Church & Dwight: first quartile CPG digital performance. Reckitt: omnichannel and quick commerce partnerships in North America.