



ONLINE RETAILER

# THE NEXT WAVE OF ONLINE RETAIL

Why 2026 is a pivotal year for Australian e-commerce



REPORT BY

InsideRetail®



In 2026, Australian e-commerce is hitting an inflection point. The technologies and behaviours that have been “on the horizon” for years – agentic AI, always-on loyalty, search-everywhere discovery – are now reshaping how customers find, evaluate and buy from brands in real time. At this year’s [Online Retailer Conference & Expo](#), that shift will be front and centre, with industry leaders unpacking not just what’s changing, but how to build the infrastructure, experiences and teams to stay ahead.

Across the program, speakers from brands including Bonds, Oz Hair and Beauty, The Memo, Culture Kings, Eva and Hismile will explore how to turn data into growth infrastructure, loyalty into emotional connection, search into “search everywhere” visibility and physical stores into a genuine differentiator in an AI-first world. This report offers a teaser of those [conversations](#) – and why spending two days in the room in 2026 could change the way you run your business for the next decade.

## Building the backbone for AI-era commerce



One of the strongest themes emerging ahead of [Online Retailer 2026](#) is that the real battleground is no longer the homepage, it is the infrastructure that sits underneath it. As AI Williams, VP of market strategy at Commerce, put it to Inside Retail, “The most important shift happening right now isn’t a feature or a platform, it’s a change in how customers move from wanting something to buying it.” That journey now begins in search engines, social feeds, voice assistants and AI-powered chat windows long before a shopper lands on your site – if they ever do.

Williams argued that in a world of agentic interactions and compressed purchase paths, retailers who win will be the ones who treat their product catalogue as their most important commercial asset, not a back-office chore. “Retailers preparing for that future aren’t spending their energy redesigning homepages,” he noted. “They’re investing in the infrastructure that makes their product data findable, trustworthy and consistent across every channel where a customer or an AI agent might encounter it.”

That shift from surface-level optimisation to deep operational discipline will be a recurring thread at [Online Retailer 2026](#). Case studies like APG Co, which saw Google Shopping ROI climb by 86 per cent and cost-per-click almost halve after cleaning and structuring its product data, show that these are not cosmetic upgrades but structural levers that compound over time. For retailers arriving at the conference with complex tech stacks and tight budgets, sessions on simplifying platforms, consolidating tools and focusing investment on conversion, fulfillment and product data will be particularly timely.





## From points to “personalising moments”

If infrastructure is the backbone of modern e-commerce, loyalty is fast becoming its beating heart. For **Jaimi Farrey**, senior group loyalty CRM manager at Hanes Australasia, the next era of loyalty is not about adding more tiers or points; it is about meeting customers wherever they are, in real time and making value tangible. “At Bonds, we don’t have an app, so we saw a gap in how we connect with customers beyond traditional channels like email and SMS,” she explained to Inside Retail. “The reality is, it doesn’t matter how much value you build into a loyalty program, if customers can’t see it or access it, engagement will always be limited.”

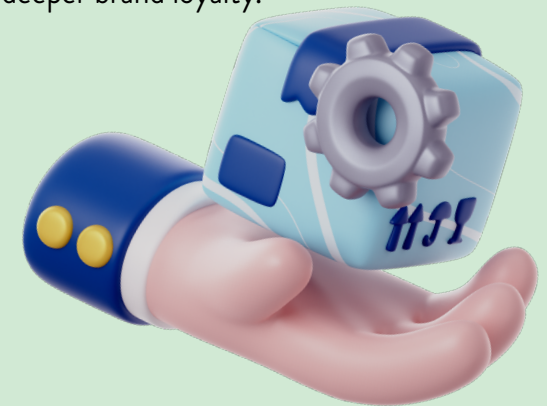
That insight led Bonds to a digital wallet-led strategy, designed to move the program from static to “always-on” across both online and in-store experiences. “The digital wallet really solved that for us,” Farrey said. “It gave us a new platform to be visible, to show up in real time, and to be part of customers’ everyday behaviour.” From surfacing points and rewards at the point of sale to nudging members when they are near a store, the wallet is reframing how and when loyalty value shows up.

Crucially, Farrey sees the biggest opportunity not in personalising messages, but in

“personalising moments”. “Those small, contextual moments are incredibly powerful because they tap into the behaviour that people are naturally motivated by – progress and completion,” she said. Whether that is a real-time notification when a reward is unlocked, a reminder when something is about to expire or a simple birthday greeting in a wallet instead of an email, the goal is to feel helpful rather than interruptive.



Looking five years ahead, Farrey’s expects wallets to be deeply embedded across everyday life, opening the door to loyalty moments that follow customers from stores to concerts and stadiums. Her upcoming keynote at **Online Retailer** will spotlight how Hanes Brands is redefining loyalty through its digital wallet channel, delivering a frictionless, hyper-personalised experience without the need for apps, logins or SMS notifications. The session will also explore how leveraging the digital wallet as an owned channel is driving stronger engagement, faster conversion and deeper brand loyalty.



## Winning in an AI-first discovery landscape

If loyalty is evolving, search is being rewritten in real time. “Search is changing – rapidly,” **Joshua Poole** told Inside Retail, head of sales and marketing partnerships at SEO agency StudioHawk. He sees two profound shifts, the move from blue links to fully-powered AI systems serving ultra-personalised results and the fragmentation of search activity across multiple platforms. “In the search world, Google is not the only player now,” he noted. “We now see massive search usage across not just Google Search but Gemini, ChatGPT, Claude, other trending AI models and now users are looking for the latest thing on Instagram Search and TikTok Search.”

For retailers, that means the old idea of dominating a single search results page is no longer enough. Poole describes the new challenge as a “search anywhere



– be found everywhere buying journey,” where discovery might start in a TikTok clip, continue in an AI assistant and end in a one-page checkout – or even within the AI interface itself. As

Shopify integrates directly with tools like ChatGPT, he expects some conversions to bypass traditional e-commerce sites entirely.

This shift is forcing SEO teams to rebalance optimisation for machines with authenticity for humans. Poole believes the answer lies in structuring content for algorithms while still writing for people. “To balance optimisation for machines but still upholding a human experience, brands need to focus on structuring content for machines, but still writing content for humans,” he said. That means clear layouts and schema markup to help large language models digest content, while leaning into human-led storytelling, case studies and original research that stand out from generic AI output.

At the conference, Poole will dive into strategies for maintaining visibility as AI-powered search experiences evolve, from building digital authority through brand mentions and backlinks to ensuring product feeds, schemas and technical SEO are all optimised for both traditional search engines and emerging AI models. He will also explore how organic search insights can inform product development, naming conventions and broader brand strategy by surfacing the questions customers are asking and the features they value most.



## Human expertise in a digital-first market



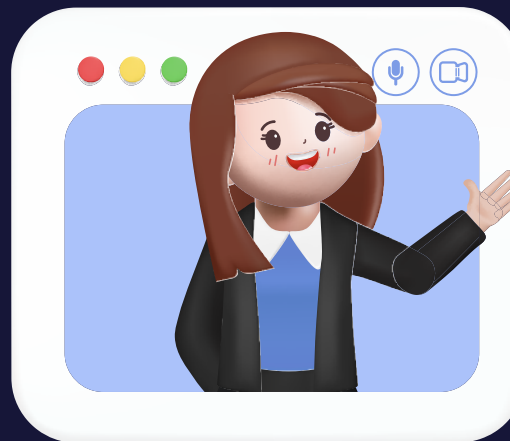
While algorithms and AI agents are reshaping discovery, human expertise still plays a decisive role in high-consideration categories like beauty.

For **Guy Nappa**, co-founder and chief operating officer at Oz Hair and Beauty, the last decade has seen a dramatic shift in how customers educate themselves and where they put their trust. “Historically, [customers were] going into the store or going online and seeking advice, whereas now they’re doing that right from the smartphone with things like TikTok and YouTube,” he explained to Inside Retail. Shoppers arrive more informed, more ingredient-conscious and more influenced by creators – particularly micro-influencers.

In response, Oz Hair and Beauty has had to change how it shows up where customers are looking. “We’ve needed to change our approach to be relevant and be seen where the customers are looking,” Nappa said. “So, you know, investing

heavily in the different media channels like Facebook and Instagram and TikTok, and making sure we’re across a lot of the trends that are happening.” But even as discovery moves to mobile, the brand’s differentiation still hinges on trust and service.

“Trust has always been important, and being known as the authority in hair care is something we really focused on,” Nappa noted. That focus comes to life through deep product and trend education, hiring people with strong service and education backgrounds, and operational excellence around fulfilment, including quick dispatch. The payoff is tangible: “We’ve seen that translate to over 1 million reviews, which is something that we do value, because it shows that all our work around building trust has paid off.”



At the conference Nappa will explore how retailers can build future-ready ecosystems where the boundaries between digital and physical commerce disappear, creating seamless, human-centred shopping experiences powered by AI. His panel will unpack the key trends set to define digital commerce success by 2030, alongside practical insights into operational models that prioritise resilience, agility and scalability. In an increasingly saturated market, he believes the retailers that thrive will be the ones who “look after the customer the best and provide them with the most perceived value.” Attendees can expect a forward-looking perspective on how to balance innovation with sustainable growth in an increasingly complex retail landscape.

## Why being in the room matters in 2026

Across these conversations, a shared message emerges: The next decade of online retail will be defined by the retailers who treat data, loyalty, search and service as interconnected parts of a single customer journey. Whether it is Bonds turning a digital wallet into a real-time loyalty engine, StudioHawk reframing SEO as “Search Everywhere Optimisation”, Oz Hair and Beauty blending creator-driven discovery with operational excellence or Commerce pushing retailers to think infrastructure-first, the leaders speaking at the 2026 Online Retailer Conference & Expo are already building for that future.

The event offers a rare chance to hear multiple perspectives in one place, ask questions specific to your business and benchmark your roadmap against brands that are already testing what others are only talking about. You will leave with practical frameworks for simplifying your tech stack, making your product data agent-ready, designing loyalty experiences that genuinely move the needle and staying discoverable as AI, social and commerce converge.

If you are planning your next phase of growth, rationalising spend or simply trying to keep pace with customers whose expectations are rising by the month, 2026 is the year to be in the room. Secure your place at the [2026 Online Retailer Conference & Expo](#) and plug directly into the ideas, case studies and connections that will shape the next wave of Australian e-commerce.





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