



Aparna Mehta: Where Do Your Online Returns Go? (Transcript) | 1

UPS's Aparna Mehta works with the top-tier retail customers to develop innovative, profitable solutions that enhance customer experiences.

Below is the full text of her TED Talk titled "**Where Do Your Online Returns go?**"

TRANSCRIPT:

Hi. My name is Aparna.

I am a shopaholic and I'm addicted to online returns.

Well, at least I was.

At one time, I had two or three packages of clothing delivered to me every other day. I would intentionally buy the same item in a couple different sizes and many colors, because I did not know what I really wanted.

So I over-ordered, I tried things on, and then I sent what didn't work back.

Once my daughter was watching me return some of those packages back, and she said, "Mom, I think you have a problem."

I didn't think so. I mean, it's free shipping and free returns, right? I didn't even think twice about it, until I heard a statistic at work that shocked me.

You see, I'm a global solutions director for top-tier retail, and we were in a meeting with one of my largest customers, discussing how to streamline costs. One of their biggest concerns was managing returns.

Just this past holiday season alone, they had 75 million pieces of clothing returned to them. I could not stop thinking about it. *What happens to all*

these returned clothes?

So I came home and researched.

And I learned that every year, 4 billion pounds of returned clothing ends up in the landfill. That's like every resident in the U.S. did a load of laundry last night and decided to throw it in the trash today.

I was horrified. I'm like, "Of all people, I should be able to help prevent this."

My job is to find solutions to logistical issues like these — not create them. So this issue became very personal to me.

I said, "You know what? We have to solve this." And we can, with some of the existing systems we already have in place.

And then I started to wonder: **How did we get here?**

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I mean, it was only like six years ago when a study recommended that offering free online returns would drive customers to spend more. We started seeing companies offering free online returns to drive more sales and provide a better experience.

What we didn't realize is that this would lead to more items being returned as well.

In the U.S., companies lost \$351 billion in sales in 2017 alone. Retailers are scrambling to recover their losses. They try to place that returned item online to be sold again, or they'll sell it to a discount partner or a liquidator.

Basically, if companies cannot find a place for this item quickly and economically, its place becomes the trash.

Suddenly, I felt very guilty for being that shopper, somebody who contributes to this.

Who would have thought my innocent shopping behavior would be hurting not only me, but our planet as well?

And as I thought about what to do, I kept thinking: Why does the item have to be returned to the retailer in the first place?

What if there was another way, a win-win for everyone? What if when a person is trying to return something, it could go to the next shopper who wants it, and not the retailer?

What if, instead of a return, they could do what I call a “green turn”?

Consumers could use an app to take pictures of the item and verify the condition while returning it. Artificial intelligence systems could then sort these clothes by condition — mint condition or slightly used — and direct it to the next appropriate person.

Mint-conditioned clothes could automatically go to the next buyer, while slightly used clothes could be marked down and offered online again.

The retailer can decide the business rules on the number of times a particular item can be resold. All that the consumer would need to do is obtain a mobile code, take it to the nearest shipping place to be packed and shipped, and off it goes from one buyer to the next, not the landfill.

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Now you will ask, “Would people really go through all this trouble?”

I think they would if they had incentives, like loyalty points or cash back. Let’s call it “green cash.” There would be a whole new opportunity to make money from this new customer base looking to buy these returns.

This system would make a fun thing like shopping a spiritual experience that helps save our planet. This is doable and would probably take six months to weave some of our existing systems and run a pilot.

Even before any of these logistical systems are in place, each of us shoppers can act now, if every single adult in the U.S. made a few small changes to our shopping behavior.

Take the extra time to research and think: Do I really need this item? No. Do I really want this item? — before making a purchase.

And if every one of us adults in the U.S. returned five less items this year, we would keep 240 million pounds of clothes out of the landfill. Six percent reduction, just like that.

This environmental problem that we have created is not thousands of years away; it’s happening today, and must stop now to prevent growing landfills across the globe.

I want to leave my daughter and my daughter’s daughter a better and cleaner place than I found it.

So I have not only stopped over-ordering, I recycle religiously as well. And you can, too.

It’s not difficult. Before we fill our shopping carts and our landfills with extra items that we don’t want, let’s pause next time we are shopping



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online and think twice about what we all hopefully really do want: a beautiful Earth to call home.

Thank you.

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