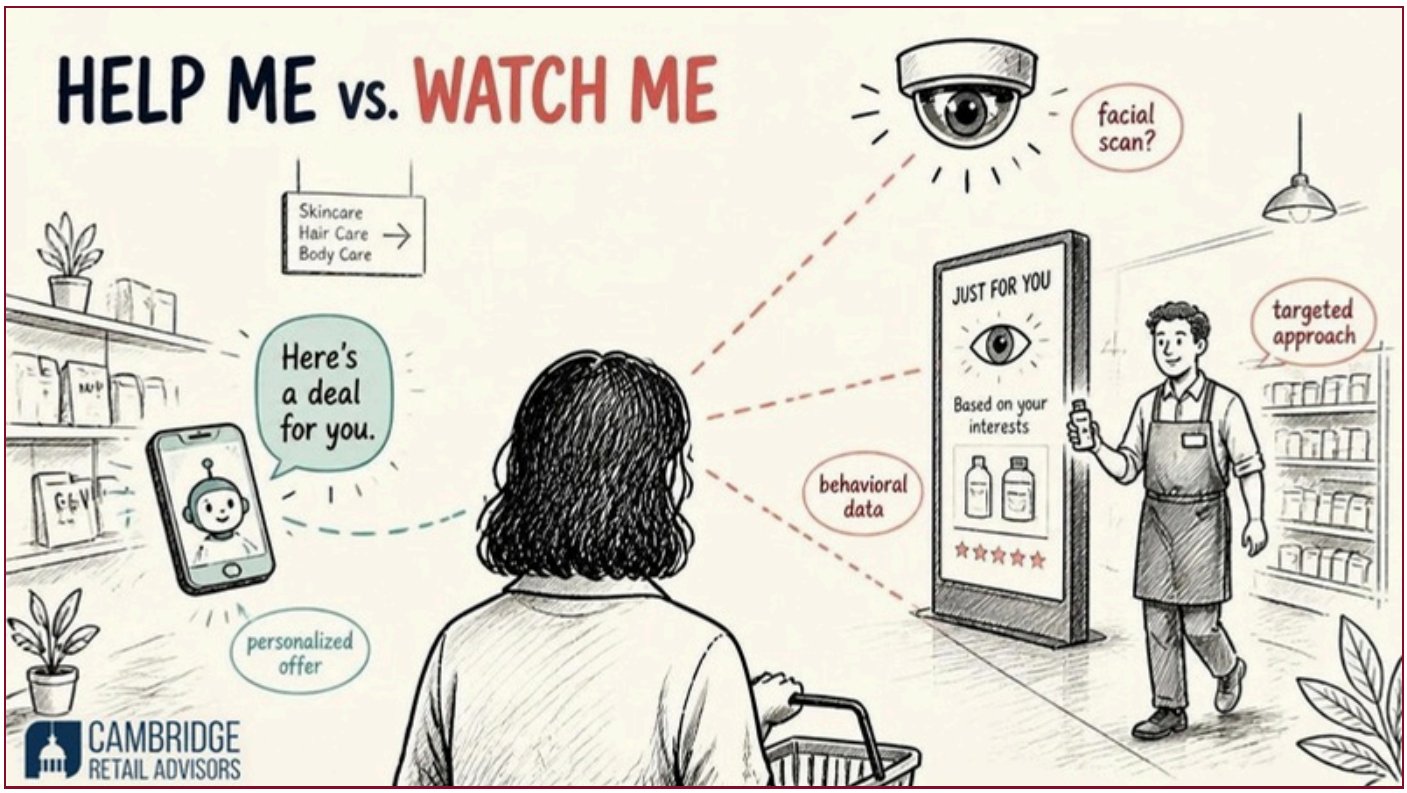


CHECKOUT EVOLUTION

Help Me vs. Watch Me

THE SHORT VERSION

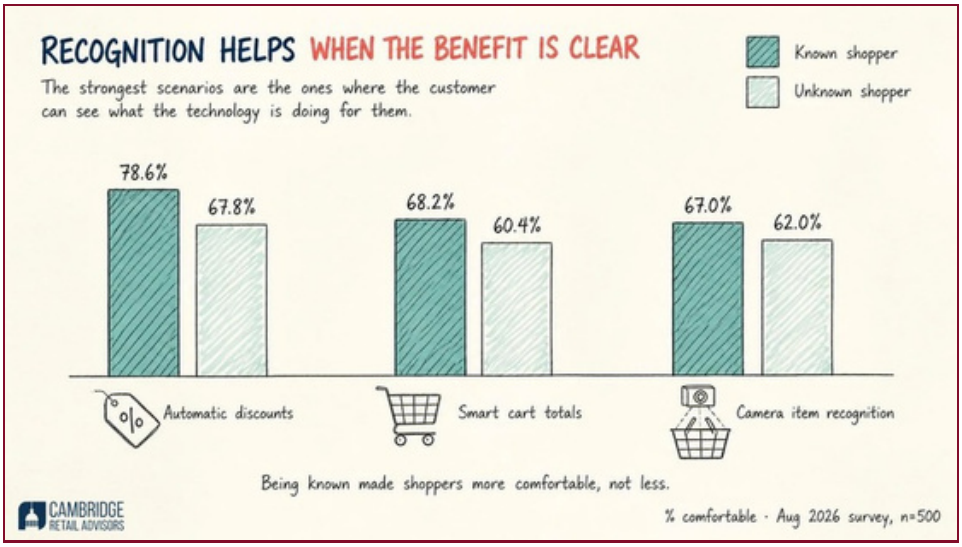
Shoppers are comfortable with recognition when they can see what it's doing for them. 78.6% of known shoppers were comfortable with automatic discounts. Comfort drops as recognition moves from the cart (68.2%) to the face (45.8%) to the car (36.2%).

A Cambridge Retail Advisors survey of 500 U.S. adults, ages 19–64 · August 2026 · Unweighted results

Customer experience and store operations teams have wanted to recognize the customer as early as possible for years. Once the brand knows who I am, what is that recognition actually being used to do? It might apply a discount or remove friction before checkout. Or it might operate quietly in the background, connecting behaviors and triggering actions the customer doesn't know are happening. That's where the line between help me and watch me starts to matter.

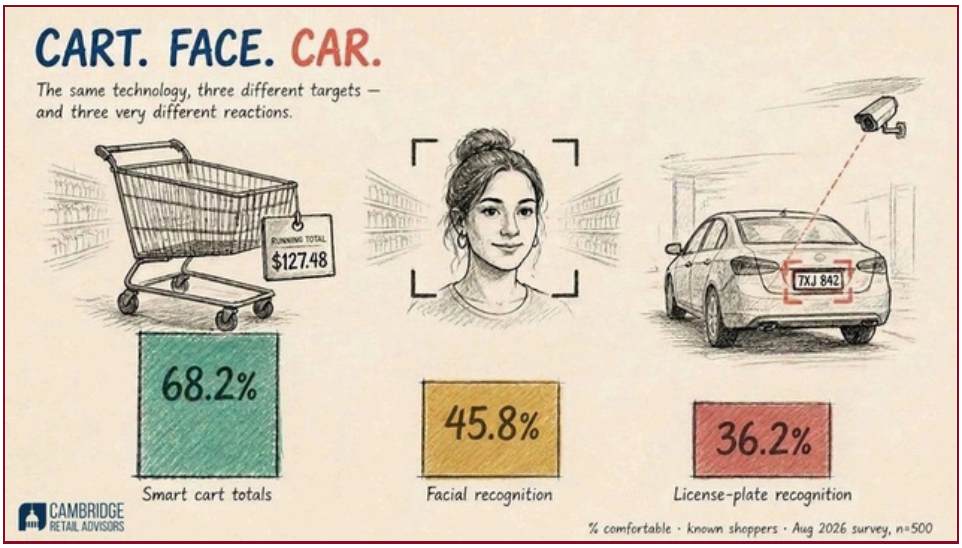
Recognition helps when the benefit is clear

Automatic discounts led at 78.6% comfort among known shoppers, followed by smart cart totals at 68.2% and camera item recognition at 67.0%. In each case, being known made shoppers more comfortable, not less.
The customer can see what the technology is doing for them. It saved them money, showed them their basket, or removed a step.



Cart. Face. Car.

Recognizing the merchandise lands differently from recognizing the person. Facial recognition fell to 45.8% comfort among known shoppers, and license-plate recognition to 36.2%.
Even an existing relationship doesn't rescue license plates: 54.0% of known shoppers were still uncomfortable.



Recognition isn't relationship

Watching doesn't require a camera. Recognizing a returning shopper by the card they paid with drew just 46.2% comfort among known shoppers, about even with facial recognition.

A loyalty program is visible. The customer knows they joined and expects benefits in return. Payment recognition is quieter. If a payment token becomes an identifier, does the customer know it's happening, what it's being used for, and what control they have?

The best salesperson, concierge, or maître d' uses what they know to help, not to throw a bunch of stuff at the customer. Recognition should work the same way.

What to listen for

1

How did you know that?

Recognition shows up with no explanation. Without a visible benefit, it feels like watching.

2

Why is everyone watching me?

Screens, prompts, and associates all push the same item. Help turns into a sales funnel.

3

Can I turn it off?

No clear control. 54.0% of known shoppers were uncomfortable with license-plate recognition.

THE TEST

Is your recognition helping customers in ways they can see, or just watching them?

UP NEXT · PART 4 OF 5

Help Me vs. Judge Me →

44.6% were comfortable with AI holding their transaction for review, even when the store knew them. 61.0% were comfortable with a simple scan-error flag.

About Cambridge Retail Advisors

We aren’t software vendors, and we aren’t theoretical consultants. CRA is a specialized retail advisory firm of seasoned industry operators who have lived with the systems, led the implementations, and solved the operational friction. Strategy, system selection, and execution grounded in real retail experience. Read the full article at cambridgeretailadvisors.com. See us at NRF ’27, Booth 6703.

Source: Cambridge Retail Advisors consumer survey of 500 U.S. adults ages 19–64, August 2026. Unweighted results. Each respondent rated every scenario as both a known and an unknown shopper.