

THE LENS · WALKING INTO JAVITS · PART 6 OF 7

Inventory, Returns, and Reverse Logistics: Can You Keep the Promise You Made?

A store can have the item in the building and still lose the sale. It can make a return easy and watch shipping and handling eat up the margin. It can get the refund done in minutes and leave the item sitting in the back until it has to be marked down.

THE SHORT VERSION

The associate, the website, the warehouse, and now an AI agent can all tell someone, "Yep, we've got it." How sure are they that it'll actually be there?

Easy returns helped earn loyalty, and somebody still has to pay to get those items back and check them. Once the refund is done, a sellable item can sit behind the counter while its full-price window closes. All three can happen on the same shift.

WHY IT MATTERS

CRA partner Joseph Romain remembers what an inventory discrepancy looked like at the register.

> *"When I was managing a Verizon store, I could have the customer right in front of me and the phone in my hand. I'd ring it up, and the register wouldn't let me sell it. The phone was allocated to a pending order."*

Release a hold someone is counting on and you've broken a promise. If that adjustment gets forgotten or never finished, it can affect what gets reordered or allocated next.

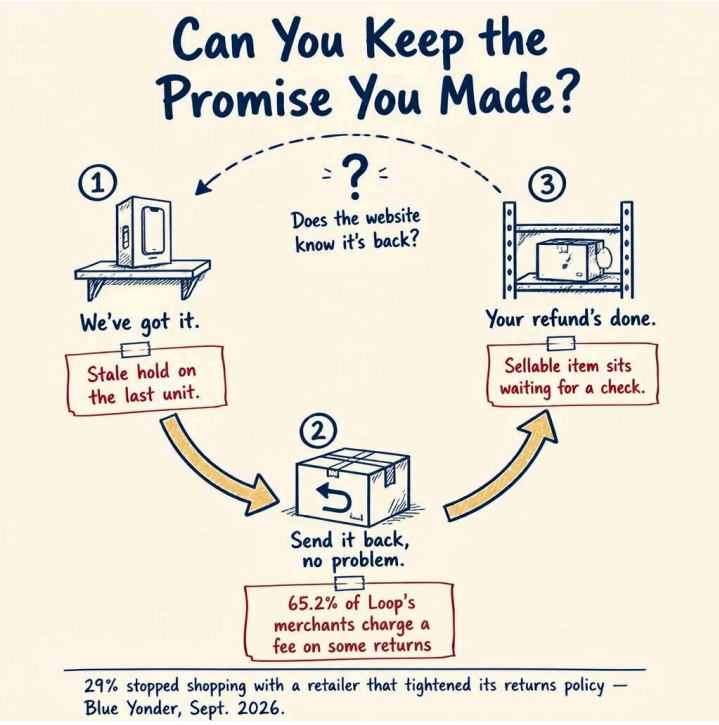
> **How sure are we that the customer can actually get the item we just promised them?**

WHAT'S CHANGING

1. **Better counts help keep the promise.** A manual count tells us what was there when somebody counted it. RFID, computer vision, and connected inventory systems can give a more current picture as items are received, sold, or reserved. An agent could flag a suspended order that's still tying up the last unit. And a pickup confirmation turns expectation into a specific promise: "I reserved it. I'm coming to get it."

2. **Guardrails around a benefit that earned loyalty.** Easy returns gave people confidence to shop online. Now brands have to decide how much of it they can afford to keep paying for. A mail fee, a restocking fee, or free returns as a loyalty benefit all weigh what the brand saves on this return against whether the customer comes back for the next order.

3. **Making the resale call sooner.** If the team at the return counter or a regional hub can verify the item and its condition, some merchandise can go straight back into stock or be offered as open-box. Items that need a closer look can go to a specialist.



Same item, three promises: "We've got it," "Send it back, no problem," and "Your refund's done."

WHO DECIDES WHAT COMES FIRST?

One associate is picking an online order, someone is waiting with a return, and a shopper on the floor needs help. Who decides what comes first?

Store operations and supply chain need to agree on which decisions the associate can make, what goes to a specialist, and who backs up the associate when a return-policy exception comes up.

THE LENS · INVENTORY, RETURNS & REVERSE LOGISTICS · AT THE SHOW

WHAT WE'RE WATCHING AT NRF

Five sessions across two days, from the store as a fulfillment hub to the state of returns. Supply Chain Sunday is off-site and needs its own registration.

ROAD TO NRF '27 · WALKING INTO JAVITS

Inventory and returns sessions on our list

Sunday, January 10 – Monday, January 11 · New York

SUN · 10:45 AM
The Revitalized Physical Store
FEATURING
Wegmans · Grupo Boticário

SUN · 12:15 PM
The Agentic Retail Enterprise
WHERE
AI Stage

SUN · 1:00 PM
Product Philanthropy
FEATURING
Good360 · JCPenney · Macy's

SUN · 3:30 PM
Supply Chain Sunday
WHERE
Lavan Midtown (offsite)
ADD-ON

MON · 1:45 PM
The State of Retail Returns
FEATURING
NRF · ReturnPro

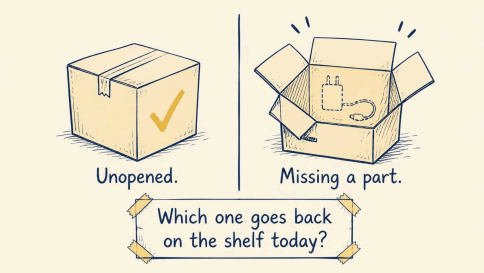
Cambridge Retail Advisors · Booth 6703

Check the NRF app for rooms and updates

A FEW COMPANIES WORTH EXPLORING

- **Manhattan Associates (Booth 5438, Level 3).** Order management, store inventory, and fulfillment on one platform. Built so the store, website, and warehouse can work from the same view of what's available to promise.
- **Avery Dennison (Booth 5921, Level 3).** RFID tags and item-level data. Useful for seeing what's actually on the shelf and in the back, and following an item from receiving through resale.
- **Zebra (Booth 3303, Level 3).** RFID readers, mobile computers, and frontline AI tools. Puts stock lookups and discrepancy fixes in the associate's hand, right on the floor.
- **Made4net (Booth 1652, Level 1).** Warehouse management and omnichannel fulfillment. Keeps the warehouse and stores in step as orders, transfers, and returns move between them.
- **Loop (Booth 1342, Level 1).** Returns and exchanges for online brands. Gives brands ways to steer returns toward exchanges and store credit while keeping the process easy for shoppers.
- **Reverse Logistics Pavilion.** Returns, refurbishment, resale, and recovery providers in one place on the Expo floor. A good stop for working out where a returned item should go next.

> **Show us what happens when the information is wrong.**
>
> Who owns the fix, and how soon can the next associate, the website, and the warehouse rely on it?



WHO PAYS TO MAKE IT EASY?

29%
65.2%

In a September 2026 Blue Yonder survey of 2,000 U.S. consumers, 29% said they'd stopped shopping with a retailer after it tightened its returns policy in the past year. Loop found that 65.2% of the more than 4,000 Shopify merchants using its returns portal charged a fee on at least some returns. Pass some of that cost to the customer, and you might save on this return and lose their next order.

TAKE THESE QUESTIONS TO EVERY BOOTH

INVENTORY

1. What can each channel confidently promise right now?
2. Who verifies a receipt or checks whether a hold is still valid?
3. Who gets the last unit when a walk-in, a pickup, and a shipment all need it?

RETURNS

1. What happens to returns, exchanges, and repeat visits when we change the policy?
2. Can a shopper finish an exchange without paying for the replacement before the refund comes through?
3. How can we help customers bring things back in good shape?

REVERSE LOGISTICS

1. What can the store grade and resell today, and who owns what goes to a hub?
2. Can an associate find the next customer for an open-box item?
3. Once an item is cleared for resale, how long before a customer can see it and buy it online?

THE TEST

We said we had it. Did we keep the promise?

COMING UP IN THE SERIES

Part 7 picks up where this leaves off. Once someone releases the hold or puts the return back on the shelf, how quickly do the other systems learn about it?

Previously: Part 5, In-Store Retail Media: Where Does Advertising End and the Experience Begin?

SCAN

Read the article

Open the guide

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