

Click, Buy, Return: What Amazon's Free Returns Are Actually Costing Us

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Where do you find yourself shopping the most? If you're like most people, the answer is probably Amazon. It's the place we turn to for everything from last-minute gifts to everyday essentials. One of the brand's defining features is its return policy. At first glance, it seems straightforward: buy something, and if you decide you don't like it, return it—no big deal. Amazon's return policy isn't flashy like Amazon's Prime Day with 48 hours of crazy deals, and it's not the company's AI assistant Alexa, always listening, and ready to respond to any command. Still, it's a feature many customers have come to rely on, maybe even more than they realize.

Shopping online is supposed to be easy. You click "Buy Now," and in 48 hours¹, it's on your doorstep. But there's a catch: buying things online is a lot like trying to order at a restaurant with a 30-page menu. You're sitting there, panicking, trying to decide between the truffle mac and cheese and the barbecue chicken pizza while the waiter glares at you impatiently. Amazon, with its millions of products², is that 30-page menu on steroids. Need a new phone case? There are over 60,000 options. Want new socks? Pick from over 80,000. White? Neon? No show? *Everything* is available on Amazon. With each additional option, your choice becomes harder. Before you know it, you've clicked on 20 different sock links with the exact same photo and discovered sock types you never even knew existed. Do you choose based on price? Reviews? Brand? It seems *impossible* to make the right decision. Here lies the paradox of choice.

¹ Or less, if you pay the \$14 monthly fee to have a Prime account with same-day delivery.

² Amazon sells more than 12 million total products through just Amazon-owned brands like Amazon Basics, and over 350 million products if you consider third-party Amazon Marketplace sellers.

Psychologist Barry Schwartz first introduced the concept that too many options lead to less satisfaction when making decisions (Pilat and Krastev). Amazon knows this, and that's where their return policy comes into play. Amazon gives you a get-out-of-jail-free card that most decisions in life lack: the FREE returns button. A safety net for every impulsive decision you've ever made. Forget buyer's remorse—when it comes to Amazon, the possibilities are endless, and the consequences are negligible.

Here's the thing: we can't always trust our spontaneous decisions. Maybe that air fryer seemed like a good idea when you added it to your cart at 2 am, but by the time it arrives at your door, you realize that it's too big, too bulky, and takes up more counter space than your microwave. No worries—thanks to Amazon's 30-day return window (for most items), you can undo that mistake with just a few clicks. Most companies make returns feel like a chore, their return policies are designed to make it just hard enough that you won't bother (Peterson 2024). Not Amazon. The usual hassles that come with returns are eliminated: No more printing labels, paying for shipping, finding packaging tape, or standing in long post office lines. Instead, returns are free, there are multiple ways to return, and you can forget about packaging altogether! Amazon has return drop-off locations at nearly every corner—Whole Foods, Kohl's, Staples, The UPS Store—and even offers return pick-up methods on most items (Amazon Staff 2023). In total, they have more than 8,000 drop-off locations in the United States, and four out of five Amazon customers live within 5 miles of a drop-off point (Pillai 2023). They provide label, box, and tape-free return methods using QR codes that remove the need to print or package anything

at home. Amazon returns kiosks allow customers to complete their returns in 60 seconds or less. The convenience of Amazon's system makes it so simple that relying on returns is a no-brainer.

Amazon's return policy allows us to look, touch, and feel without commitment, transcending one of the major challenges of online shopping. Amazon's policy is particularly unique for one main reason: the condition that the item is returned in doesn't matter. Missing parts? Already worn? Tags cut? Doesn't matter. Five pens missing out of a pack of twenty? No big deal. Did you rip open the packaging like a little kid on Christmas morning? That's fine too. Amazon will take it back, no questions asked. You could return a half-eaten box of granola bars with the excuse that "they tasted a bit off," and Amazon would happily issue you a refund.

This policy is more than just good customer service, it fundamentally changes the way we shop. In the past, shopping was often final sale, forcing us to be purposeful in our decisions. But now, Amazon has made returns so easy that excess is encouraged. Buy it, try it, and if it doesn't spark joy³ send it back. Instead of "less is more," we've embraced a "more is better" mentality. We buy impulsively, confident that we can reverse our choices with little consequences. Sure, maybe you don't need a second Stanley water bottle, but you love the newest color, and what if you accidentally lose the one you have somewhere at school? Amazon has built a system that encourages you to experiment and take risks with your purchases, fully knowing that you'll probably send half of it back.

Amazon's free returns have revolutionized the experience of shopping; however nothing in life is truly free, and this policy is no exception. Amazon conditions us to believe that any

³ "Spark joy" is a method created by Marie Kondo, a Japanese professional organizing consultant and author that encourages individuals to declutter by keeping only those items that "spark joy."

decision can be undone with the ease of a free return. In the real world, it isn't always as simple as “one-click” and your problems are solved. Major choices—like which school to attend, which career to pursue, or who to marry—don't come with a free return policy. These decisions require careful consideration and carry lasting consequences. Amazon's return culture presents a distorted reality where we explore our fantasies, knowing we can easily undo them if they don't meet our expectations. Amazon creates a bubble of instant gratification, making it harder to navigate a world where not everything comes with an undo button.

The convenience Amazon offers may be unparalleled, but it comes at the cost of how we value the world around us. Most of us don't stop to think about what happens to the items we return. They don't just disappear. Despite Amazon's efforts to avoid the disposal of products, every year, they process over 6 billion pounds of landfill waste and emit 16 million metric tons of carbon dioxide emissions due to returns (Tarasov). What feels like a harmless click to reverse a decision leaves a much bigger footprint than we realize.

While need and longevity previously dictated our buying patterns, Amazon's return policy has turned buying material goods into something hasty and thoughtless. We are less attached to what we own because the effort and commitment involved in making a purchase are no longer required. Now, instead of thinking, “Do I need this?” We buy without any hesitation, knowing we can easily send things back. Gone are the days when we actually cherished the things we owned.

The reality of Amazon's returns isn't as attractive as it might seem. We can't stop people from making quick returns or buying in excess of what they need, but maybe, requiring people to

put in a small amount of effort or pay a nominal fee, may be just enough of a nudge for them to reconsider their choices. For now, returns seem to be integrated into the fabric of our lives. Amazon trucks seem to be more prevalent than garbage trucks. Maybe, instead of rushing to click the return button, we should pause and think twice about why we're buying something in the first place. Maybe then, we might start to value what we own a little more, choosing things intentionally instead of out of convenience. And maybe then, each click would hold a little more weight, and we'd be a little more thoughtful about what we bring into our lives.

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