

Consumer Drivers for Online Supplement Shopping

Ordering dietary supplements online has become increasingly popular, offering convenience and access to a wider range of brands. However, navigating the online supplement market can be daunting for consumers, with potential risks associated with purchasing from unreliable or unregulated sources.

About the Survey

To help brands and manufacturers understand what's driving online consumer choice, NSF commissioned an independent research firm to survey 500 US consumers about their concerns and expectations when purchasing health supplements online. The margin of error for this study is +/- 4.4% at the 95% confidence level. Consumers were permitted to weigh and choose several options for some multiple-choice questions.

The Increase in Online Supplement Shopping

The convenience and variety offered by online supplement stores have significantly contributed to the popularity of purchasing supplements over the internet. One of the primary drivers behind the growing popularity of online supplement shopping is convenience. With just a few clicks, consumers can browse and purchase a wide selection of supplements from anywhere on Earth. This convenience is particularly beneficial for individuals with demanding schedules or those residing in areas with limited access to local supplement stores.

Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic further fueled the growth of e-commerce, including online supplement purchases. As the public movement was restricted during the pandemic, consumers increasingly turned to online channels to obtain health supplements and natural products, contributing to the unprecedented growth of the online supplement market, and many retained those online buying habits post-pandemic.



Online supplement stores can offer a much broader selection of products compared to traditional stores, allowing consumers to find specific supplements, especially rare or hard-to-find products. Additionally, the online marketplace provides opportunities to explore alternative options and brands, empowering consumers with a wider range of choices.

Authenticity Concerns

One of the primary risks associated with purchasing supplements online is the potential for counterfeit or unsafe products. Unscrupulous sellers may create and sell supplements that mimic the appearance of genuine products but lack the advertised ingredients or contain harmful substances. These products can pose serious health risks to consumers, as they may contain undisclosed ingredients, impurities, or contaminants.

Even well-known retailers may inadvertently sell counterfeit products due to commingled inventory practices, where products from various sellers are stored together without proper Good Manufacturing Practices verification.

Measuring Consumer Confidence

According to the survey, only 38% of online supplement buyers feel highly confident about the quality and safety of supplements they purchase online. The confidence level is increased to 68% upon seeing an independent certification mark on the package of a supplement sold online.

66% of respondents believe independent certification protects against harmful contaminants in supplements, and 61% of online supplement buyers feel more secure with products certified by an independent third-party organization. 69% of respondents believe independent certification is a sign of product transparency and means the supplement is more likely to be safer to use.

The depth and frequency of certification audits make a significant difference: 76% of respondents believe that annual audits by certification bodies help ensure product safety, while 71% of respondents feel that product label claim reviews are crucial for supplement trust.

The top concerns buyers have with uncertified health supplements they buy online include:

- Safety – 53%
- Quality – 52%
- Ingredients – 47%
- Authenticity – 40%
- Contamination – 36%



Purchasing Influences

Independent testing has a profound impact on purchasing decisions. 69% of online buyers are willing to pay more for independently tested and certified supplements online. When asked why they would pay a premium rate, consumers responded:

- Health Safety – 59%
- Quality Assurance – 51%
- Trustworthiness – 45%
- Risk Reduction – 37%
- Transparency – 30%

An impressive 51% of online consumers are willing to pay at least 10-15% more for independently tested and certified supplements, and 32% would pay 15-20% more.

Products that prominently display an independent certification mark or include certification info in a product description will also see a strong boost in sales. Seeing an independent certification mark featured on the listing of a supplement sold online increases the likelihood of purchase for 70% of online buyers.

Written information about independent certification featured on the listing of a supplement sold online increases the likelihood of purchase for 69% of online buyers.

Supplement Brand Risks

Certification is a driver for online purchasing, but consumers stress the importance of keeping that quality information front and center. 93% of respondents believe that supplements without certification could contain harmful ingredients, and 77% of online consumers have trouble finding safety certification information in online descriptions. 27% of respondents remember researching independent certifications before purchasing supplements online.

43% of online supplement buyers have previously returned or discarded supplements due to quality concerns – this is especially impactful now that online platforms often include “This Product is Frequently Returned” warnings on listings.

67% of online supplement buyers believe independent certification differentiates quality supplements from others, and 71% of respondents would switch brands if they found an equivalent supplement which had received independent certification.

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The Power of Reviews

A bad review based on poor quality or deceptive claims is also a brand risk. 21% of online supplement buyers have been dissatisfied with an online supplement and given the product a negative review, and when asked about their likelihood of leaving a bad review for an unsatisfactory product, the number jumps to 43%.

A Power Reviews study also showed that reviews play a crucial role in the online supplement market, serving as a valuable resource for consumers to make informed purchase decisions.

Nearly three-quarters (74%) of consumers rely on ratings and reviews to learn about new or unfamiliar products. Moreover, 91% of consumers trust ratings and reviews when making purchasing decisions, with 82% trusting them as much as (or more than) recommendations from family or friends.

Notably, 56% of consumers do not trust star ratings alone as much as they trust star ratings accompanied by written reviews, highlighting the importance of understanding the reasoning behind the rating. Ratings and reviews are the most critical factor impacting purchase decisions, outweighing even financial factors like product price, free shipping, and free returns or exchanges.



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The Certification Brand Makes a Difference

Consumers were asked about their perceptions of several certification brands, including NSF.

- 54% of online supplement buyers recognize the NSF certification mark.
- 56% of online supplement buyers value the NSF certification mark more than any type of certification.
- 58% of respondents consider the NSF certification the toughest testing standard for supplements.

72% of respondents feel more assured knowing that NSF certification includes testing for unsafe levels of pesticides, heavy metals, and contaminants -- 61% of online supplement buyers trust NSF's contaminant review process.

Recent Drivers in Online Supplement Shopping

The future of online supplement shopping is poised to witness significant developments driven by retailer requirements and evolving regulations aimed at enhancing consumer safety and transparency.

In 2024, Amazon implemented new requirements for its sellers, mandating specific quality testing and documentation for some dietary supplement categories sold on the platform.

The Operation Supplement Safety (OPSS) scorecard, developed by the Department of Defense, is now being utilized to evaluate the safety and quality of supplements.

Organizations like the Council for Responsible Nutrition (CRN) have introduced voluntary guidelines for their members, urging them to provide the same level of information on their online platforms as they would on product labels. These guidelines aim to enhance transparency and ensure consumers have access to critical information, such as ingredient lists, allergens, dosing instructions, and storage recommendations.

Conclusion

As the online supplement market continues to grow, these platform requirements and regulatory efforts are expected to play a crucial role in enhancing product quality, safety, and consumer confidence, shaping the future of this rapidly evolving industry.

Brands must stay vigilant regarding product testing and certification, and adapt to changing consumer online shopping habits. Embracing new testing and certification requirements and adhering to industry guidelines can go a long way in fostering a secure and trustworthy online supplement market, empowering consumers to make confident health and wellbeing decisions.