

THE RETURNS REDUCTION PLAYBOOK

Five ways fashion brands cut return rates—without killing conversion.

A practical guide for ecommerce, merchandising and operations leaders. Built from public data, case studies and what we've seen running virtual try-on for fashion brands.

52%

of fashion returns are size or fit driven

19%

documented reduction in size returns with try-on

£500B

global cost of returns across retail in 2024

Returns are the silent margin killer.

Online fashion sees average return rates between 25 and 40%. For some categories (womenswear, denim, formalwear) it can exceed 50%. Every returned order eats into your unit economics through reverse logistics, refurbishment, restocking, and the hidden cost of inventory that's out of stock while in transit.

The good news: most fashion returns share a small number of root causes. Address those, and you can usually move return rate by 5–15 percentage points without touching your refund policy or upsetting customers.

This playbook walks through the five highest-leverage interventions, what they cost, what to expect, and where they tend to fail.

WHAT'S INSIDE

- 01 Why customers return clothing
- 02 Fix your size charts (the boring one)
- 03 Photography & PDP fit content
- 04 Virtual try-on done properly
- 05 Smarter returns policy & data
- 06 Putting it together — a 90-day plan

Why customers return clothing

Before you fix anything, know what you're fixing. Returns data is noisy, but the categories cluster reliably.

Across multiple post-purchase surveys, roughly 52% of fashion returns cite size or fit. Around 20% cite 'not as expected' (colour, fabric, drape). About 12% are quality or defects. The remainder is 'changed my mind', wardrobing, or duplicate orders.

The implication: if you can move the size/fit number, you move the whole rate. Photography and content fix the 'not as expected' bucket. Both are addressable. Wardrobing and bracket-buying need policy and data.

Track returns by reason code and by SKU, not just by category. Most brands discover that 10–20% of SKUs drive 60% of size returns — that's where to start.

Fix your size charts (the boring one)

Most size charts are wrong, copied from a manufacturer spec sheet, or written in units the customer doesn't use.

Audit every size chart against the actual finished-garment measurements of the production sample. We've seen 1–3cm discrepancies on bust and waist that cause systematic returns at one specific size.

Add a 'model is wearing size X, height Y' line. It's the single highest-impact PDP change you can make in an afternoon.

Switch from generic S/M/L to inches AND centimetres. Don't make the customer choose a unit system — show both.

For brands selling internationally, surface the local size next to your internal size (UK 10 / US 6 / EU 38). Confusion alone drives a few percent of returns.

Photography & PDP fit content

'Not as expected' is a content problem. The product arrives and doesn't match the picture in the customer's head.

Show at least one photo with the garment on a real body, not a flat lay or ghost mannequin.

Movement video (a 5-second loop) reduces 'drape' returns measurably.

Photograph multiple body types where possible. A single 5'10" size-2 model creates the wrong expectation for 80% of your customers.

Annotate the fit. 'True to size', 'runs small', 'oversized cut' — these labels reduce returns by setting the right expectation before purchase.

Add a fabric-detail close-up. Customers underestimate fabric weight from studio photography — a sheer top photographed against white looks opaque online and isn't.

Virtual try-on done properly

Try-on is the highest-leverage intervention available right now — if you pick the right kind.

There are three approaches in market. **Avatar-based** (the customer picks a body shape from a library) helps slightly with conversion but does very little for returns — the avatar isn't the customer.

Quiz-based fit recommenders (size predicted from height/weight/past purchases) reduce returns 5–10% in best cases. They fail when the customer is new, body shape is non-average, or the brand's sizing differs from their reference set.

Photo-based virtual try-on (the customer uploads a photo and sees the garment on themselves) is the most expensive to build but produces the biggest impact: documented 19% reduction in size-related returns at scale (Walmart/Zeekit, 2023), with 9% PDP conversion lift.

What to look for: identity preservation (it's still your customer in the result), garment-aware fit (drape and silhouette modelled per-SKU), and on-device or fast inference (under 15 seconds — longer and customers drop off).

Smarter returns policy & data

Policy changes are the lowest-cost lever. They're also the easiest to get wrong and tank conversion.

Don't shorten the return window. Studies repeatedly show longer windows reduce returns (the customer commits, the urgency to return fades). 30 days is the floor; 60–90 is better.

Charge for returns selectively. Free returns drive bracket-buying. A modest fee (£3–5) on second-and-subsequent returns from the same customer reduces serial returners by 30–40% without affecting first-purchase conversion.

Use returns reason data ruthlessly. If a SKU has a 60% return rate with 'too small' codes, the size chart is wrong, not the customer.

Identify and segment serial returners. The top 5% of returners typically account for 25–30% of return volume. They are not your target customer.

Putting it together — a 90-day plan

If you're starting from a 30%+ return rate, here's the order we'd recommend.

Days 0–30: Audit. Pull return reasons by SKU and category. Fix your top 20 worst-offending SKUs' size charts and PDP copy. Add 'model is wearing' lines. Expected impact: 1–3pp.

Days 30–60: Photography upgrade. Add real-body photos and short movement video to your top 100 SKUs. Annotate fit. Expected impact: another 2–4pp.

Days 60–90: Roll out virtual try-on on top traffic SKUs. Measure return rate per-SKU pre/post. Expected impact: 4–8pp on covered SKUs, with conversion uplift offsetting the cost.

Day 90+: Layer in returns policy changes (selective fees, serial-returner segmentation). Hardest to roll back — do them last, with clear data.

WHAT NEXT

Want to see what virtual try-on looks like on your catalogue?

GarmCheck builds photo-based virtual try-on for fashion brands. We plug into Shopify in under an hour, model fit per-SKU, and return identity-preserving results in around 10 seconds. Free tier with 25 try-ons/month, paid plans from £99.

Book a 15-minute demo → garmcheck.com/demo

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