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Now that many online consumers are comfortable engaging agents in live chats, it's time for retailers to take full advantage of this cost-effective method of communicating and selling.

*From:
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Human beings are social animals—and yet some interactions with other people make us anxious. Consider that 13% of consumers recently told the Pew Internet Research Project that they sometimes pretend to be on a cell phone to avoid a face-to-face interaction with another human being.

Those human foibles help explain why so many consumers have embraced live chat, choosing to type text messages into a box on an e-commerce site and receive text replies, rather than calling or e-mailing. Live chat provides immediate replies, but can avoid phone conversations some shoppers might find awkward, such as a weight-conscious shopper asking where on a retailer's site to find plus-size apparel. For some, typing that question into a chat box might be a welcome way to get the information they need without directly speaking to another person.

Whatever the reason, the statistics show that a growing number of consumers are taking advantage of live chat. In fact, one in five called it their preferred method of communicating with a retailer, in a recent survey by The E-tailing Group, a research and consulting firm. Further, 58% of U.S. online shoppers surveyed said they communicated with an online retailer via live chat the prior 12 months, up from 54% a year earlier.

Beyond avoiding embarrassment, live chat offers several advantages, for both the shopper and the retailer. For example, unlike an agent speaking on the phone, a live chat agent is using her computer to communicate with the online shopper, which means she can push product pages, images or video instantly to the shopper's screen to guide him to the products or information he seeks.

That powerful feature helps explain why **consumers who engage in live chat are four times more likely to purchase** than consumers who don't chat, according to The E-tailing Group.

"Consumers that use chat are more responsive to product recommendations, cross-sells and up-sells because they intend to buy," says Diane Buzzeo, CEO and founder of Ability Commerce, provider of integrated e-commerce and personalization solutions. "The important element of any live chat strategy is to remember that shoppers engage through it because they are not seeing what they need to make a purchase or they don't know how to get where they want to on the retailer's web site. That creates a **fabulous sales and service opportunity.**"

Agent all-stars

Taking full advantage of the sales opportunity starts with training agents so that they can quickly and confidently provide the information the shopper wants, and to recommend related products the shopper may not have thought of.

"Having knowledgeable service agents is crucial to success in live chat."