

Exclusive

OpenAI Scales Back Shopping Plans for ChatGPT



Art by Mike Sullivan.



By Ann Gehan and Sri Muppidi

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OpenAI is scaling back its plan to introduce shopping directly inside ChatGPT, marking a change in its high-profile effort to put checkouts inside the chatbot. Instead of allowing users to make purchases directly from product listings that show up in ChatGPT search results, the company is now focused on having checkouts take place inside of specific apps that plug into ChatGPT, an OpenAI spokesperson said.

The reasons for the change of heart are unclear, although only a small number of merchants have been selling goods through checkouts inside ChatGPT. OpenAI staff had realized that while ChatGPT users were researching products to buy in the chatbot, they weren't using the chatbot to actually help them make purchases, one person familiar with the project said.

The Takeaway

OpenAI shifting its commerce strategy to focus on ChatGPT apps

Roughly a dozen of Shopify's millions of merchants had gone live with checkouts

The shift highlights the broader challenges of making AI-driven commerce a reality

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Just six months ago, OpenAI had touted the launch of checkouts inside ChatGPT chats as a major business opportunity and the start of a significant shift toward people buying goods online using AI. It teamed up with major players in online shopping and payments, including Etsy, Shopify and Stripe.

When it first announced the chatbot checkouts for U.S. users in September, OpenAI said it would soon have products available for purchase inside ChatGPT from millions of online shops. OpenAI said it would make money by charging merchants a percentage of sales and that it would continue expanding the checkout feature by adding shopping carts for multiple items and including users in more regions.

By contrast, checking out through apps means a smaller pool of potential retailers, at least initially. Early commerce firms that have launched apps for ChatGPT include Instacart, Target, Expedia and Booking.com. Instacart in December added a way for ChatGPT users to pay by linking their existing accounts with the grocery delivery service to their ChatGPT accounts.

“We’re evolving how we approach commerce in ChatGPT to better meet merchants and users where they are,” an OpenAI spokesperson said in a statement, adding that the company is prioritizing improving product search and discovery in ChatGPT. “Instant Checkout is moving to Apps, where purchases can happen more seamlessly. We appreciate our partners for learning with us and look forward to sharing more as we continue building in this area,” the spokesperson said.

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The change means that instead of purchasing directly from a product listing, a shopper will either need to pay through a retailer's app or be redirected to the retailer's own site.

Shopify didn't respond to multiple requests for comment. Etsy didn't respond to a request for comment. Stripe didn't have a comment.

The pivot for OpenAI's nascent checkout efforts underlines the challenges of combining AI with the intricacies of e-commerce businesses. It also ups the stakes for OpenAI's recently launched advertising business, which is the company's other main opportunity for generating significant revenue from ChatGPT's mostly nonpaying user base. (It's unclear whether or not OpenAI will take a cut of sales facilitated through ChatGPT apps.)

Getting chatbot shopping to work on a large scale has been tough for OpenAI and other AI firms. Merchants' product information, like pricing and in-stock availability, needs to be standardized and constantly updated for chatbots to access accurate information, while commerce and payment firms need safeguards against AI initiating fraudulent or erroneous transactions.

OpenAI had sought to list a wide range of products in one go by partnering with online marketplace Etsy and commerce software seller Shopify, both of which could handle some of the heavy lifting, since they already have systems that work with millions of individual merchants. The company also worked with payments giant Stripe to develop rules known as the Agentic Commerce Protocol for merchants, payments and AI firms involved in transactions.

OpenAI and Stripe will continue to work on the protocol, which will help power the app-based purchases, according to a person familiar with the plans.

OpenAI had to work hands-on with the few merchants it did have using the checkouts to get them up and running, *The Information* [reported in January](#). There have been other signs of slow going—as of February, OpenAI [hadn't set up systems](#) to collect and remit state sales taxes, which it would have likely had to do if shopping volumes had taken off.

More broadly, some merchants have been wary of AI shopping features, while shoppers' willingness to pay through an AI chat remains an open question. Still, Shopify and Etsy were touting their work with AI checkouts as a potential growth opportunity in February earnings calls, and Etsy previously said it had been footing the bill on merchants' commissions to OpenAI to get ChatGPT shopping off the ground.

But at an investor conference on Tuesday, Shopify president Harley Finkelstein said that only around a dozen of the millions of merchants that work with Shopify were currently selling through AI tools, and that the holdup to a broader expansion was coming from the AI firms' side. (Shopify's software enables merchant sales through ChatGPT as well as Google's Gemini and Microsoft's Copilot, which announced chatbot checkouts earlier this year.)

"The only reason it's gated is we're just waiting for the agent applications to continue to open the doors," Finkelstein said.

OpenAI's commerce strategy shift comes as commerce giant Amazon is set to make a \$15 billion initial investment in OpenAI, which it announced on Friday. Last week's announcement said Amazon could use custom OpenAI models in its own consumer-facing applications, which would include Amazon's Rufus shopping chatbot, but made no mention of Amazon selling within ChatGPT.

Amazon last year locked its site down against AI apps including ChatGPT, blocking them from showing its products inside chat responses. However, Amazon CEO Andy Jassy has said he would be open to working with outside AI shopping tools if the terms were attractive.

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