

# Life has become more digital – and so will business

## Entrepreneurs are working hard to keep up with the e-commerce revolution

IAN WILSON  
DHL EXPRESS



E-commerce normally peaks in the run-up to Christmas, with shoppers ordering 40% more online than at other times of the year. But we are not in a normal year.

Our e-commerce customers saw order volumes reach that level in July – and they haven't come down since. When you add in the usual pre-Christmas increase, you can understand why businesses that focus on selling online have had a strong year.

It is clear that the pandemic has accelerated the adoption of e-commerce by between four and six

years. Official statistics show that UK internet sales hit 32.8% of total sales in May, up from 19% in February, and stood at 28.1% in October, against 19.1% the year before.

The pandemic has influenced where we buy: purchasing decisions now include “keeping myself healthy and safe” alongside convenience, and the usual attractions of value for money and discounts.

Such changes in behaviour look set to stay – and are creating opportunities for fleet-footed entrepreneurial companies, such as those on Fast Track 100.

It helps explain why there is a record number of e-commerce retailers on this year's league table: 42 appear, up from 31 last year; four in five also sell to overseas customers via their websites. These changes in behaviour have also affected business-to-business sales, and have led to a huge opportunity for B2B e-commerce. Exporters new to

this sector should try our free e-commerce health check, which has helped many companies increase growth overseas.

Many of these e-commerce stars were established and are run by women. There are a record 28 female founders this year, as we highlight in the table above. They include fast-growing fashion and beauty DHL Express customers such as RIXO (No 14), Oh Polly (No 18) and Cult Beauty (No 67).

London College of Fashion graduates Henrietta Rix and Orlagh McCloskey founded RIXO five years ago. We spotted their potential early on, and singled them out in 2017 from a strong shortlist to win our inaugural award for Fashion Potential, which we run in partnership with the British Fashion Council. The £20,000 prize money and mentoring helped them recruit a digital specialist to facilitate a successful global e-commerce push; overseas customers now represent more than a third of RIXO's

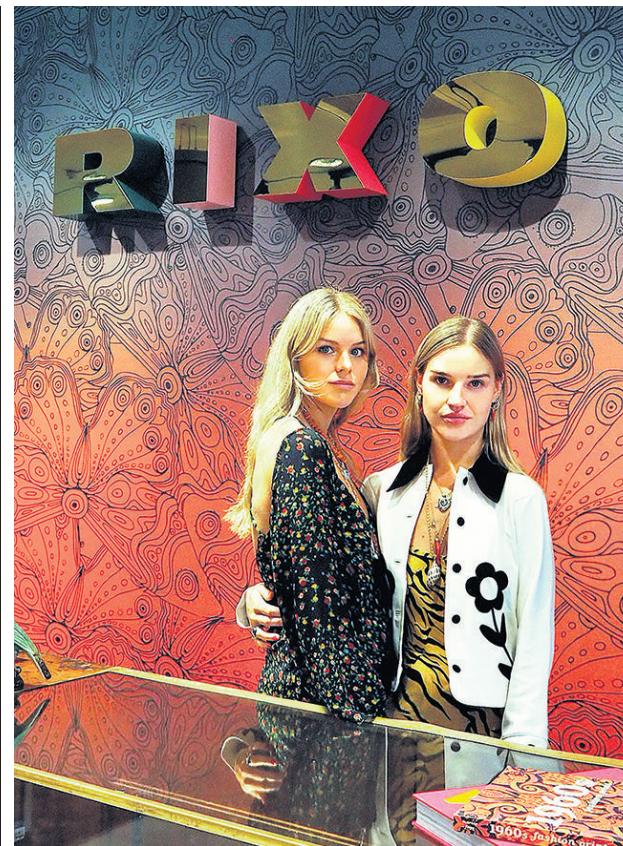
£10.5m sales in the year to June. The company has also cultivated strong audiences on social media, including more than 300,000 followers on Instagram.

The first national lockdown proved a challenge, as it did for all businesses, but RIXO had a robust e-commerce platform, and has invested in it further during the pandemic.

Henrietta Rix said: “We replatformed with an agency called Brave the Skies in May to Shopify Plus. We worked to a mobile-first design approach, and focused on having strong search and layered navigation to aid product discoverability.

“We have also incorporated the RIXO community into the website through user-generated content to showcase how the brand inspires and empowers women.”

McCloskey added that the wholesale side was tricky because some orders were cancelled, but they focused on being agile.



Orlagh McCloskey and Henrietta Rix of RIXO (No 14)

“We produced our next collections during the lockdown while other brands have skipped seasons, and we even moved into a new office,” she said. “DHL Express has been great where we've had to be agile with production shipping – and we have a great relationship manager, who kept us updated throughout Covid and has offered guidance on Brexit.”

Many businesses that sell to other companies online have also done well. Milexa Group (No 39) is growing from its base in Liverpool, dispatching its digitally-printed murals to businesses and homes, including the California HQs of Google and Netflix. Its managing director, Richard Wilde, said the company had seen a rise in business-to-business demand since September.

“For all our deliveries, we use DHL. This allows next-day delivery across the UK, most of the EU and most of the US – quite a remarkable logistical feat,” he said.

Sustainability in logistics remains an important issue for DHL Express, as it does for many businesses. Our target is to achieve zero emissions by 2050, and we are helping our customers do the same. Our GoGreen logistics option, for example, helps companies offset their carbon footprint, and we also offer a sustainability health check for those in the fashion industry.

Another imminent challenge is the UK's formal departure from the EU. There will be new customs requirements for sending and receiving goods to and from Europe, and companies need to be as prepared as possible. To help, we have created a simple checklist, which you can find at [dhlguide.co.uk/brexit](https://dhlguide.co.uk/brexit).

While 2020 has been a particularly challenging year, we have full confidence that companies will take this latest hurdle in their stride.

*Ian Wilson is chief executive of DHL Express UK & Ireland*