

Retail and wholesale see EU Digital Strategy as a positive step towards European competitiveness

EuroCommerce Director-General Christian Verschueren, speaking on the launch of the European Digital Strategy by Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, executive Vice-President Margrethe Vestager and Commissioner Thierry Breton, underlined the many positive elements in the Commission communication:

“Our sector has been using digital technologies and artificial intelligence (AI) to make sure that consumers have the products they want at the right time while making their operations more efficient and offering better services. It is welcome that the Commission proposes an approach which both builds up consumer trust and also promotes the development and application of new technologies. It is also beneficial that their white paper on AI looks to a differentiated approach to rules on the application of AI depending on the degree of risk involved. It is clear that an AI system predicting what goods to order according to the weather holds fewer risks for citizens than an application process for personal medical data.”

Equally, if our sector is to be able to compete with global players from outside Europe, it is essential, as the strategy indicates, that the right balance is struck between building citizens’ trust and avoiding unnecessary barriers to developing and applying new technologies in Europe. In this respect, data-sharing will be important, as will the need, where appropriate, to be able to retain information relevant to the commercial needs of the company in question.

Our sector is made up principally of small companies – some 99% are SMEs, most of them having less than 10 employees. They are in town centres and rural areas, and often lack access to the skills and support needed to go online. Many European towns are seeing shopping streets with empty shops, leading to a circle of decline; when a village loses its shop, it loses an anchor for the whole community. Supporting these shops going digital and staying relevant can make the difference between such shops keeping open and disappearing forever.

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EuroCommerce is the principal European organisation representing the retail and wholesale sector. It embraces national associations in 31 countries and 5.4 million companies, both leading global players such as Carrefour, Ikea, Metro and Tesco, and many small businesses. Retail and wholesale provide a link between producers and 500 million European consumers over a billion times a day. It generates 1 in 7 jobs, providing a varied career for 29 million Europeans, many of them young people. It also supports millions of further jobs throughout the supply chain, from small local suppliers to international businesses. EuroCommerce is the recognised European social partner for the retail and wholesale sector.