# THE GAMIFIED CUSTOMER JOURNEY

START



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# Introduction

**Gamification is a topic we know inside-out;** from the Monopoly Game at McDonald's to T-Mobile Tuesdays, we've woven game mechanics into some of the world's most successful promotions and loyalty programs for our clients.





Behind these playful moments, there's always real business purpose. During discovery mode, gamification can help with driving awareness and product education, before motivating consumers to sign-up, opt-in, or make a purchase. It doesn't end there, though: gamified interactions can be equally useful for providing post-purchase support, driving engagement with loyalty programs, and recapturing lapsed customers.

In short, gamification is a marketing superpower – when it's done well. This means being seamlessly embedded into the consumer experience, rather than bolted on as an afterthought.

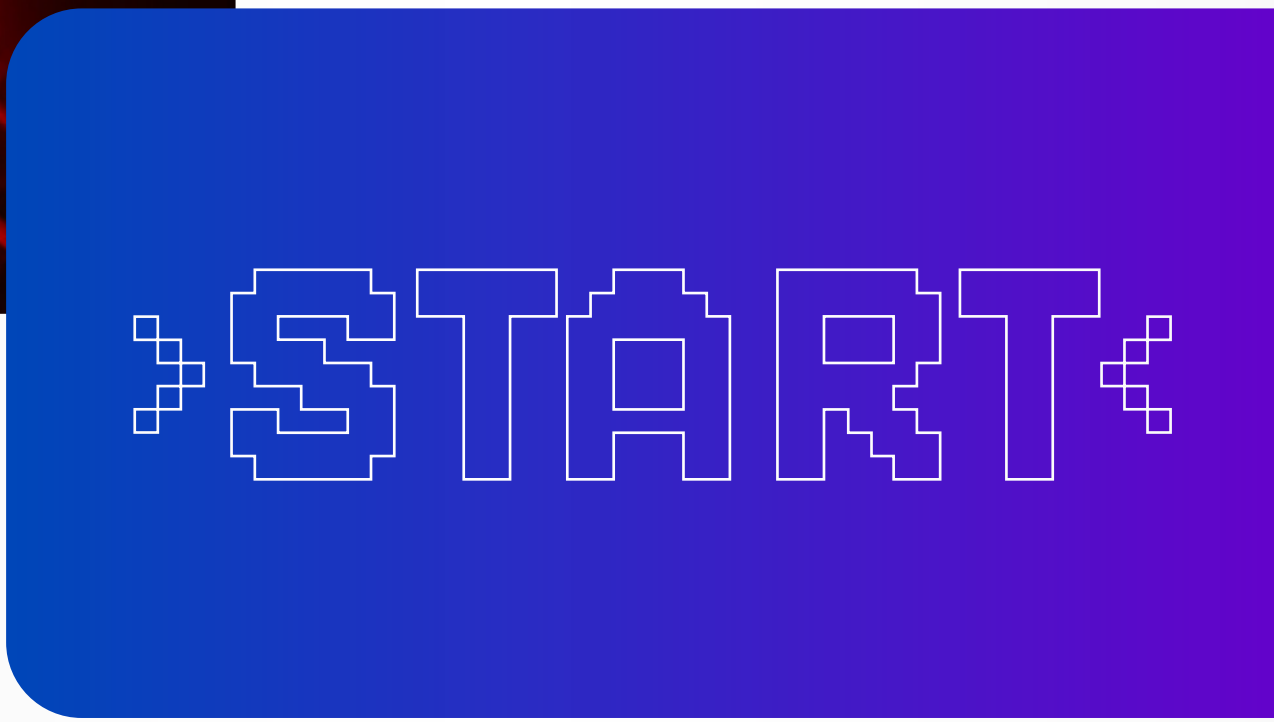


## Our white paper digs into how to get it right at each stage of the customer journey.

Revealing the results of our latest proprietary research, which surveyed 1,200 respondents across the U.S. and the UK, we'll explore four key customer journey stages in turn:

- Awareness and Discovery
- Purchase and Engagement
- Post-Purchase and Retention
- Winback






In addition to when and where to deploy gamified interactions, our findings shed light on how different generational cohorts view these experiences, and which kind of incentives motivate them to participate. By harnessing these insights, brands can win a competitive advantage in an increasingly crowded digital landscape.

# Defining Gamification

[the tms definition]

**Gamification**
gam·i·fi·ca·tion
gā-mə-fə-’kā-shən

*Noun.* We define gamification as the strategic application of behavioral science, game mechanics, and experience-based design to motivate a desired action. Bringing game-like elements into a wider range of consumer experiences and programs.






**Gamification** has become one of the biggest buzzwords in brand engagement. But many marketers are still getting it wrong, whether by overcomplicating the customer journey, failing to align effort with right rewards, or simply misconstruing what the term really means.

There's much more to the concept than branded games; instead, it's about bringing game-like elements into a wide range of experiences.




There are three main ways to implement gamification:

## 1 Behavioral gamification

**Behavioral gamification** taps into the psychological motivators that make people tick – such as curiosity or loss aversion – often operating subconsciously through experience-based design and strategic messaging rather than overt rewards.

***Scarcity:*** A restriction or limited quantity of something that leads to feelings of urgency, FOMO, and exclusivity.

***Loss aversion:*** The effect of feeling losses more strongly than feeling gains.

***Framing:*** Cognitive bias is used to shape consumer perceptions based on how information is presented rather than objective facts.

***Anchoring:*** The effect of overly relying on the first piece of information received (AKA the anchor) when making a decision.



## 2 Tactical gamification

**Tactical gamification** uses specific mechanics like progress tracker bars or countdown timers within a wider experience to make it more effective or engaging, rather than serving as its core components.

***Progress trackers:*** A visualization demonstrating how close someone is to meeting an objective.

***Countdown timers:*** A visualization of how much time is left to complete, enter, or engage with something.

***Social proof indicators:*** A signal of what actions or behaviors others have taken, resulting in a decision-making shortcut that motivates someone to copy the same action.

## 3 Promotional gamification

**Promotional gamification** leverages game mechanics creatively to provide entertainment, deliver value, and foster emotional connections, usually serving as the (or part of the) core experience.

***Collect-to-wins:*** A mechanic where consumers can win a prize or unlock something by collecting all items in a set.

***Surprise and delight:*** A moment where brands engage or reward consumers in unexpected ways to build emotional connections.

***Instant win:*** A “chance to win” mechanic where consumers can enter/play to instantly find out if they won.

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This is far from an exhaustive list, of course, but it shows some of the myriad ways gamification can be brought to life.

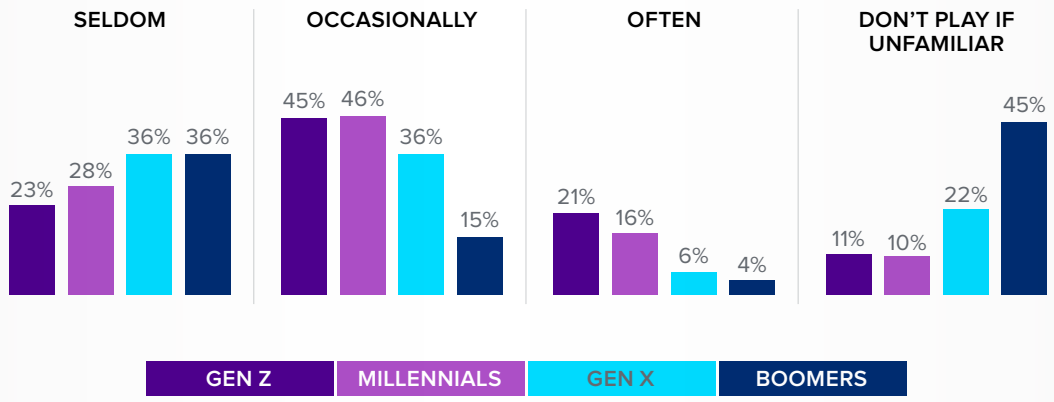
# Awareness and Discovery

Gamification frequently serves as an entry point given its effectiveness at reducing barriers, encouraging exploration, and making discovery more fun and rewarding.

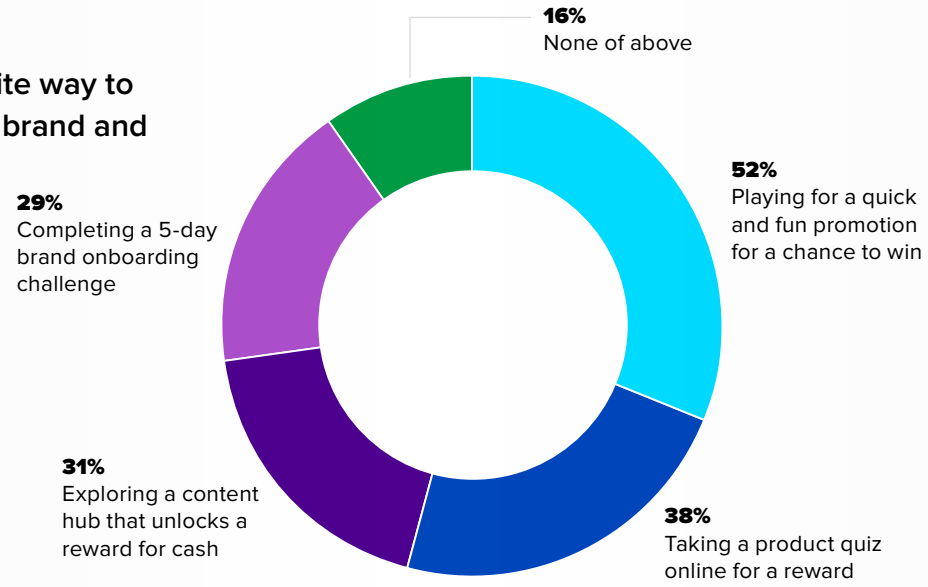
Almost three-quarters (72%) of consumers say they've participated in gamification from a brand they hadn't tried before in the last three months.

Consumers are primarily motivated to engage with new brands via discounts that encourage trial and opportunities to learn more about the brand. Gen X and Baby Boomers are more motivated by incentives, while Gen Z and Millennials are more motivated by learning objectives.

**How often have you played gamification for a brand you've never tried before?**

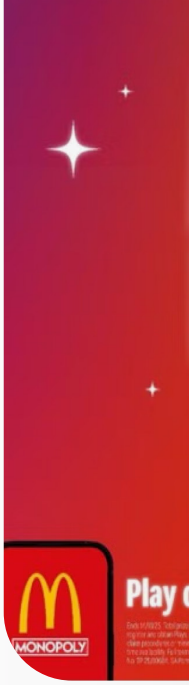


**What is your favorite way to learn about a new brand and their products?**




Openness to gamification from new brands varies by generation. Gen Z and Millennials are much more likely to participate and feel excited, happy, and interested when coming across a new gamified experience. Although the majority of Gen X and Baby Boomers are similarly interested, about a quarter approach gamification from new brands with a sense of skepticism. Interestingly, those with incomes +$100,000 are also more open to gamification, however they're drawn in for multiple reasons, most notably if the new brand partners with another brand they love.

At this stage, consumers are not yet seeking depth or looking to invest a lot of time. Instead, 47% want a guaranteed reward and 46% want quick and fun experiences, with these being the two most important factors influencing decisions to participate in gamification from a new brand. **That is why the most effective mechanics for awareness and discovery are short, lightweight, and immediately rewarding.** Instant win games and quizzes with personalized recommendations lend themselves well to this structure, driving learning objectives while serving as a mechanism to deliver rewards.




**From Exploration to Expectation**

For younger consumers, gamification with brands they haven't tried before is exploratory: a way to learn and have fun. For older audiences, the mindset shifts toward certainty and value. They want to know exactly what they will get in return for their time. Younger audiences respond best to playful interactions that encourage discovery; older audiences respond to simple experiences with overt incentives.

"Under 25s who grew up with phones in their hands are more able to intuitively understand a gamified experience, versus older generations where you might need extra signposting."

Olly Wapshott, Creative Strategy Lead at Snapchat

**Keep It Short**

The rule of thumb is to generally keep gamified experiences short. 62% of consumers say the ideal length of engagement is five minutes or less, though half of Baby Boomers prefer three minutes or less. There is some appetite for longer formats, such as group competitions or multi-day challenges, though this skews heavily toward Gen Z and Millennials.






"With Monopoly, for me, the free food items do feel attainable, so that keeps me peeling to win."

Focus group participant

## Match Effort To Incentive

The early journey is governed by a simple value exchange: low effort must be matched with clear rewards. Both intrinsic motivators (like curiosity) and extrinsic incentives (like prizes and offers) play a role. When encountering gamification from an unfamiliar brand, 42% of consumers say discounts to trial the brand motivate participation, followed closely by learning more about the brand (37%). Winning rewards, however, is still the number one participation driver.

**Which of the following incentives would motivate you to try a new brand?**

| | TOTAL | 22 to 28 years old | 29 to 44 years old | 45 to 60 years old | 61 to 79 years old |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Cash back | 53% | 52% | 51% | 55% | 57% |
| A gift with purchase | 53% | 52% | 55% | 56% | 49% |
| A welcoming offer to use on the immediate purchase | 48% | 49% | 56% | 47% | 41% |
| A chance to win a smaller prize instantly | 35% | 35% | 37% | 41% | 27% |
| A chance to win something big down the road | 32% | 39% | 38% | 29% | 23% |
| Bonus points for the brand's loyalty program | 21% | 27% | 20% | 19% | 17% |
| None of these | 6% | 3% | 3% | 7% | 11% |



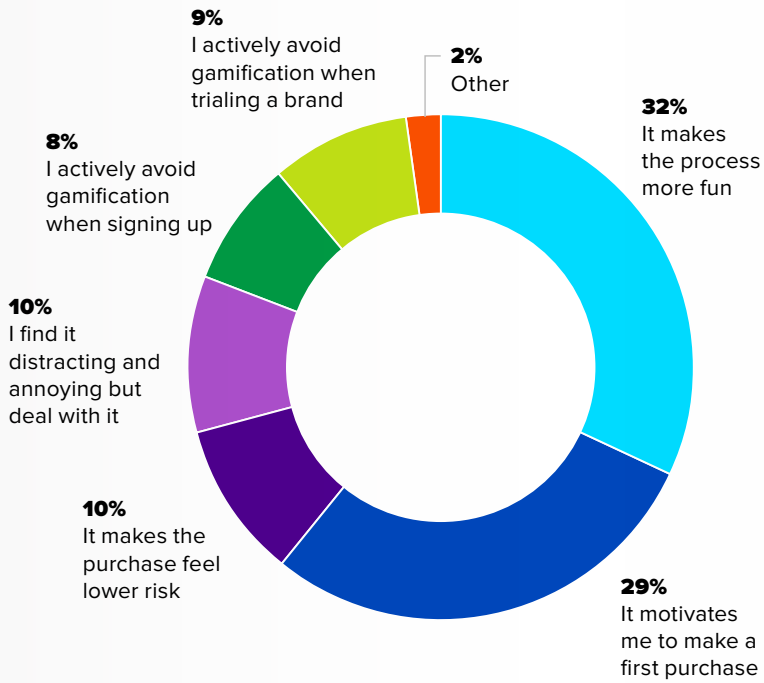
The awareness and discovery stage is where many brands overcomplicate. **Early gamified moments should be frictionless:** quick, simple, low-effort, and delivering immediate value. Brands that get it right are better positioned to convert attention into a first purchase, while missing the mark risks losing the consumer altogether. The lesson is clear: first impressions are not the time for complexity.

# Purchase and Engagement

The transition from intent to action is one of the most fragile, and powerful, points in the customer journey.

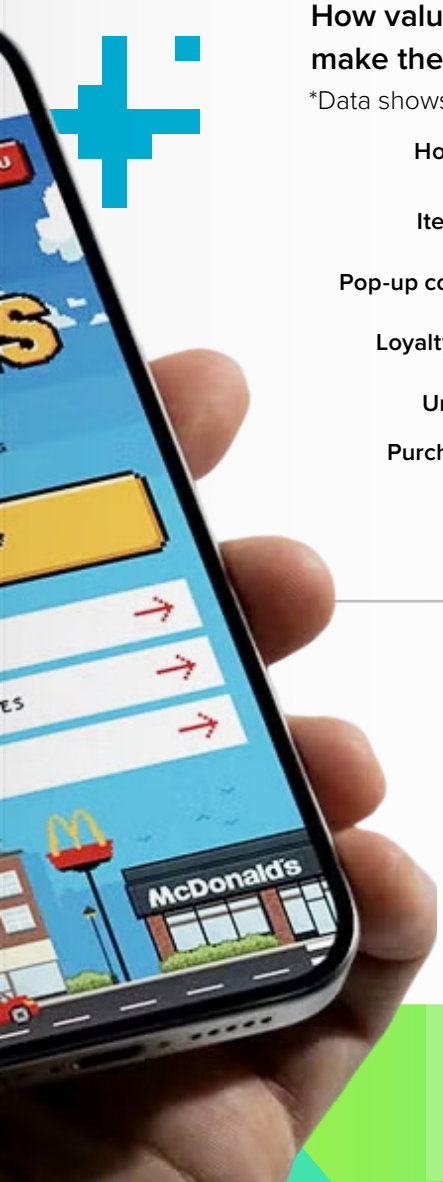
And gamification is often what gets it over the line: one-third of respondents said gamified interactions motivate them to make a first purchase from a brand.

**How do you feel about gamification when you are making your first purchase with a new brand?**



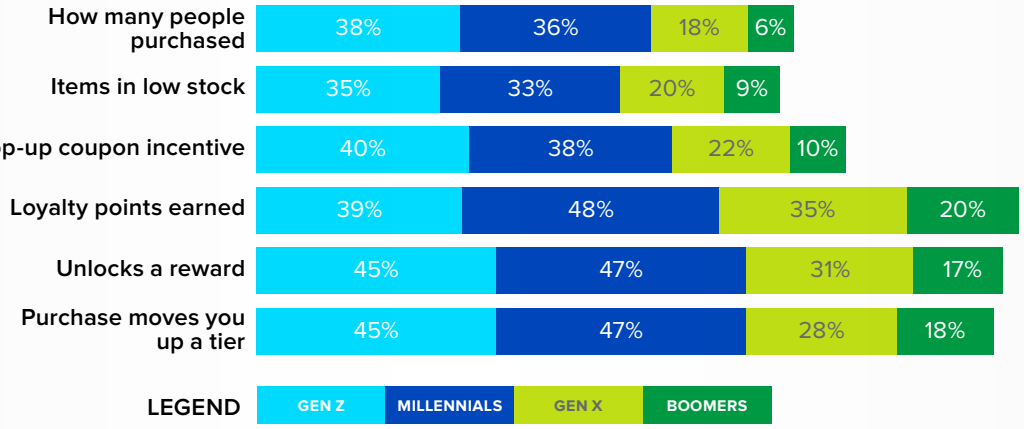



This is especially true when there are links to loyalty, signaling their purchase is the start of a visible progression loop. A whopping 94% of consumers are motivated to make a purchase by seeing how many loyalty points they'll earn, 92% by unlocking a reward and 88% by moving up a tier.




**How valuable is the following information/activity in motivating you to make the purchase?**

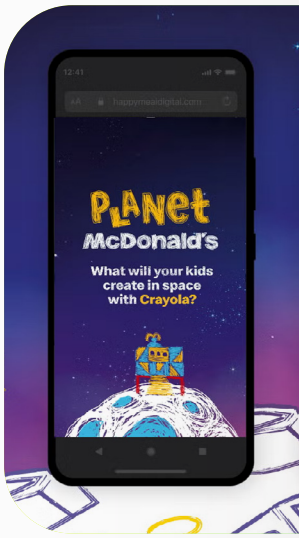
*Data shows results of people that answered "extremely valuable"




Age plays a significant role in how these purchase motivators are viewed, though. While younger generations are more open to gamification and are drawn to high-energy and social-based interactions, Boomers prefer simple and familiar game mechanics with tangible rewards tied to them – almost half stop engaging because they feel they never earn or win anything.

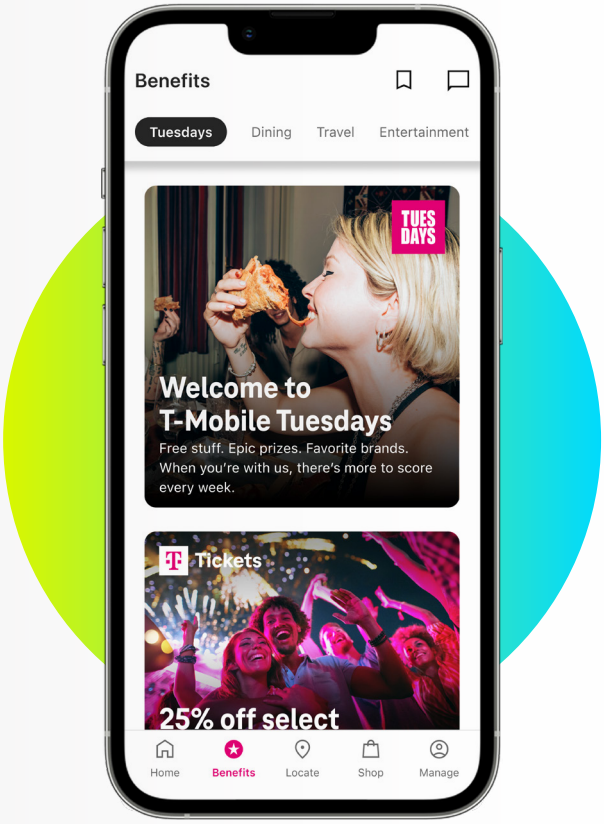
## The Final Nudge

At the point of checkout, immediacy wins. Pop-ups offering a limited-time discount or offer motivate up to 90% of consumers. Social proof similarly spurs the sale. Reviews and ratings, customer-submitted product imagery, low-stock alerts, and "people viewing this now" indicators all reinforce a single message: this is a safe, popular and timely choice, which results in a decision-making shortcut for consumers.




"Meijer sends coupons for what I regularly buy—that's helpful."

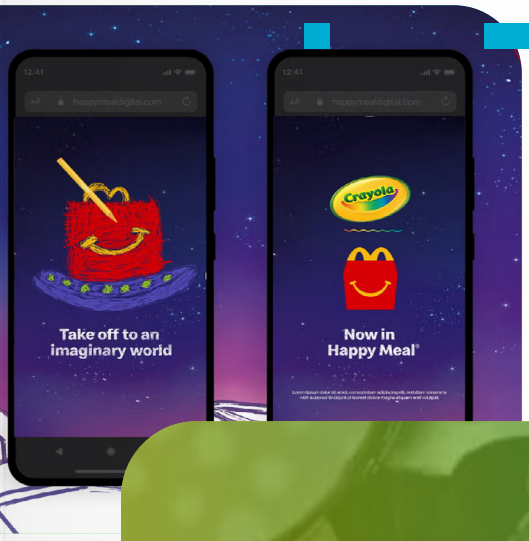
Focus group participant




## Timing is Everything

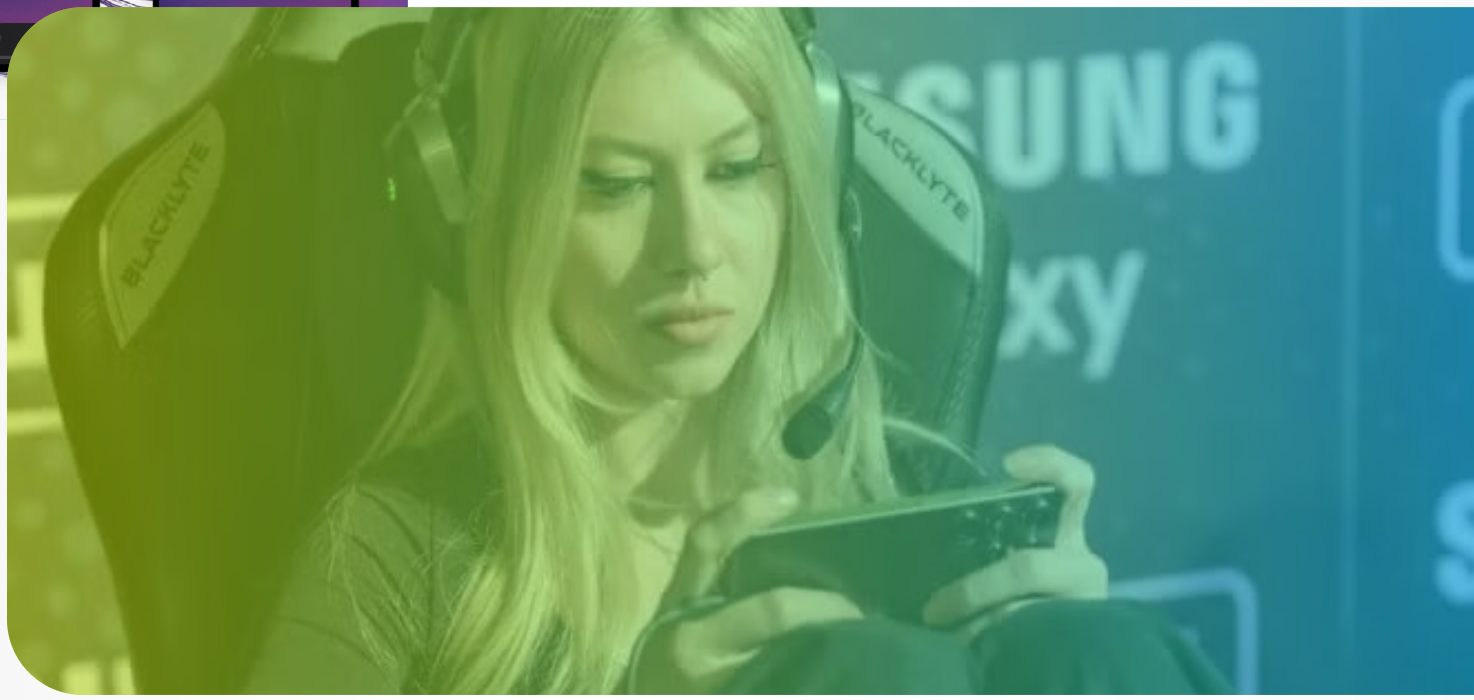
A purchase may only take a moment, but how brands reward this action, and how speedily, determines whether it'll be a one-off sale or the start of a longer relationship. Cash back, gifts with purchase, and immediate discounts perform well since they show that participation pays off, establishing early trust and momentum. Even chances to win can be impactful, with **39% of consumers saying an instant win after buying would motivate them to stay loyal.**

Near-term challenges with visible progress and attainable goals are similarly motivating. Almost **80% of consumers say they would attempt or complete a "three purchases in 30 days" challenge**, for instance.




"It's like finding $10 in your coat. That feeling is addictive."

Focus group participant

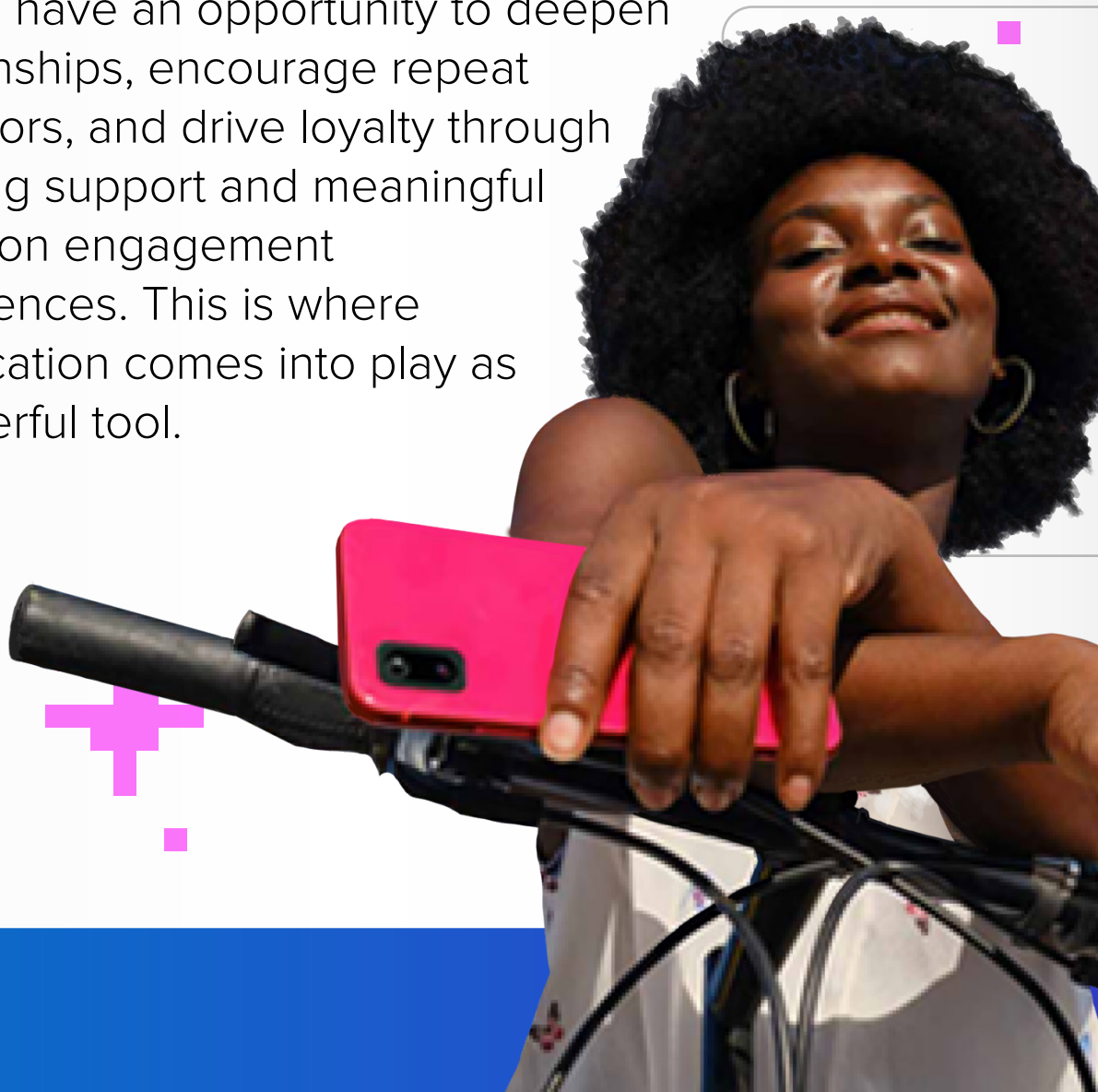



**Managing Expectations**

Scaling reward with effort is crucial to keep audiences engaged. Across all demographics, consumers have a highly developed sense of what constitutes a fair value exchange. Easy actions, such as answering a quiz, warrant micro-perks or points. Once real effort or money is involved, though, expectations rise sharply, with consumers typically expecting a guaranteed reward in the $25-$50 range. Both form part of a smart gamification strategy: use lighter rewards to build habits and sustain day-to-day engagement, then reserve higher-value incentives for meaningful milestones.

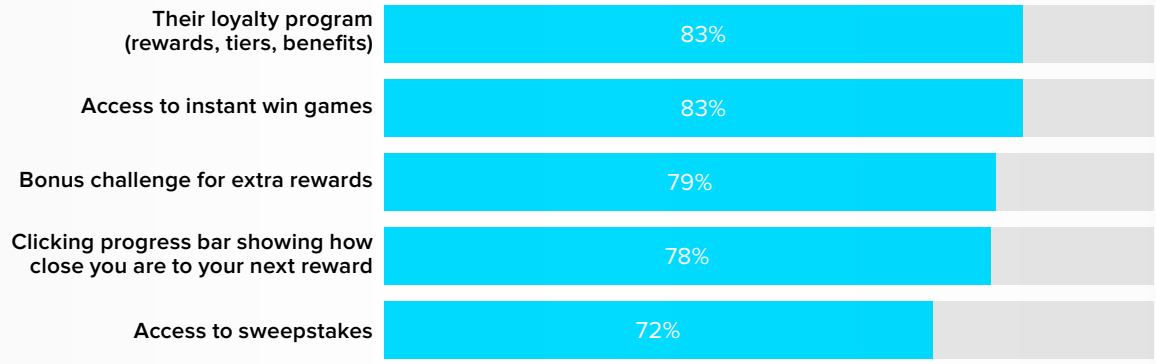
# Post-Purchase and Retention

Converting a first-time purchase or engagement is a critical milestone, but sustaining that momentum is what drives long-term value. At this stage in the customer journey, brands have an opportunity to deepen relationships, encourage repeat behaviors, and drive loyalty through ongoing support and meaningful follow-on engagement experiences. This is where gamification comes into play as a powerful tool.



A significant 72% of consumers say that gamification makes a difference in their post-purchase experience, making them feel valued and supported, building trust, motivating them to continue purchasing, and encouraging them to learn more about the brand and their products.

**After purchasing from a favorite brand, how likely are you to engage in the following activities? (Showing top five answers)**



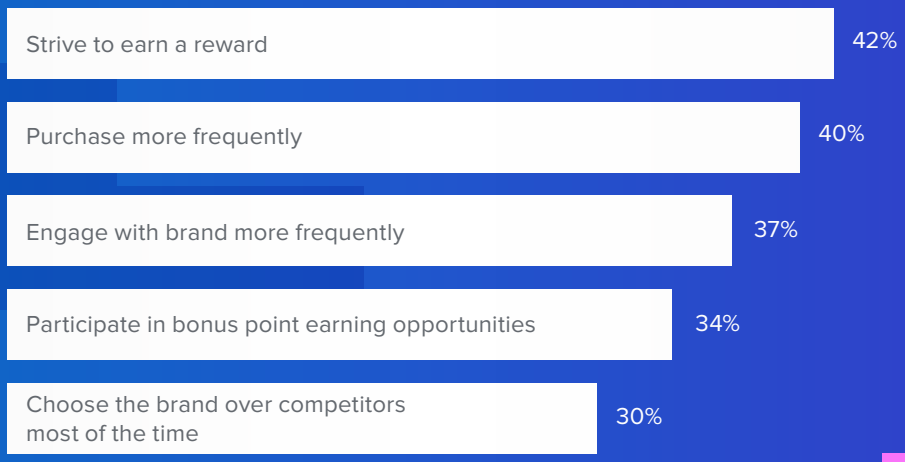



Post-purchase experiences involving loyalty programs and instant win games are the most preferred by all generations. However, Gen Z and Millennials also value experiences that don't have a monetary reward attached: including onboardings, accessing a community of experts/ brand enthusiasts, unlocking exclusive content, and event access.



Loyalty programs are a desired post-purchase experience for consumers, and they work well to motivate ongoing behaviors that align to business outcomes. **69% say loyalty programs play an important role in encouraging repeat purchases.** Additional behavior boosts that we see are advocacy, larger spend, and progress/rewards tracking.

**What does a loyalty program motivate you to do? Select all that apply (Showing top five answers).**




"I don't like it when you have to spend more to use the reward – it turns me off. If you're giving it to me, just give it to me."

Focus group participant

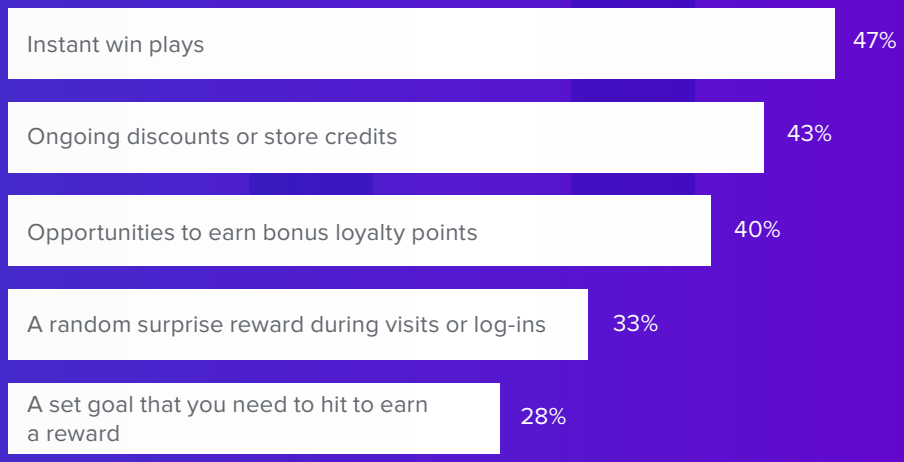
**The Behavioral Impact**

Without a thoughtful approach, loyalty programs won't work. **48% of customers stop caring about a loyalty program due to the rewards lacking excitement or value.** A confusing program structure and high effort to incentive requirements are additional key reasons brands lose loyalty members.

## Leveling Up Loyalty

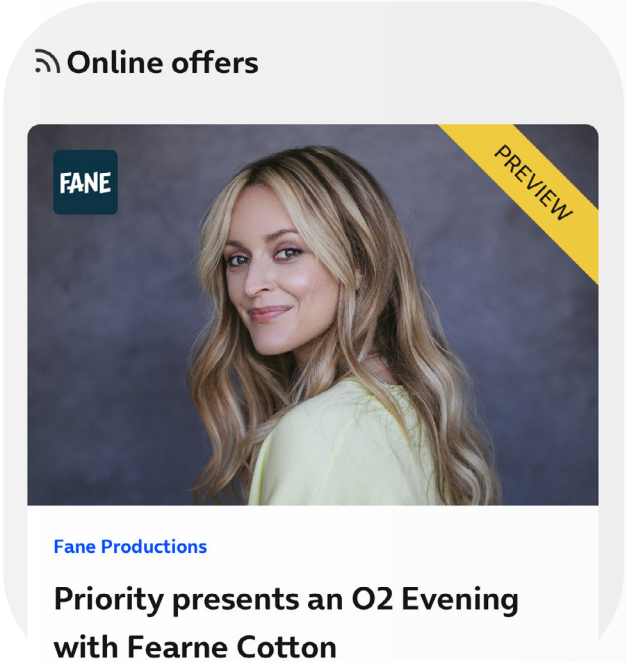
Introducing gamification to a loyalty program drives behaviors even more effectively. In fact, 85% of consumers appreciate gamification in programs, citing a more fun and exciting membership experience that makes them feel rewarded and valued while driving purchase motivation. Bonus point earning opportunities, engagement streaks, challenges to redeem points, and target thresholds that unlock a reward are just some of the desired ways brands can use gamification in loyalty programs to keep members engaged.

**What kind of reward structure would keep you coming back to a brand after you've purchased their products? (Showing top five answers)**




## A Rule For How To Scale

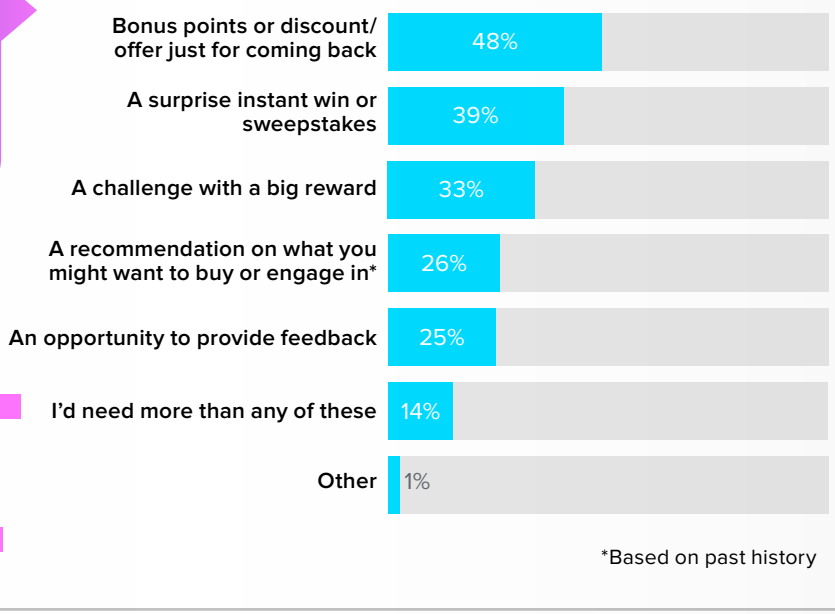
The bigger the ask, the faster and clearer the reward must be. Start with instant wins and simple point accrual to build trust. Then layer in challenges, milestones, or experiential perks for those seeking deeper engagement. Novelty may attract attention, but clear value earns commitment from consumers.



# Winback

Irrelevant or boring rewards, confusing structures, or making “tiering up” too hard—these are some of the main reasons why brands lose customers’ loyalty across the board. But the good news is that even when loyalty has lapsed, gamification can galvanize re-engagement.

If a brand you haven’t bought from in a while reached out to you, what kind of message would get your attention?



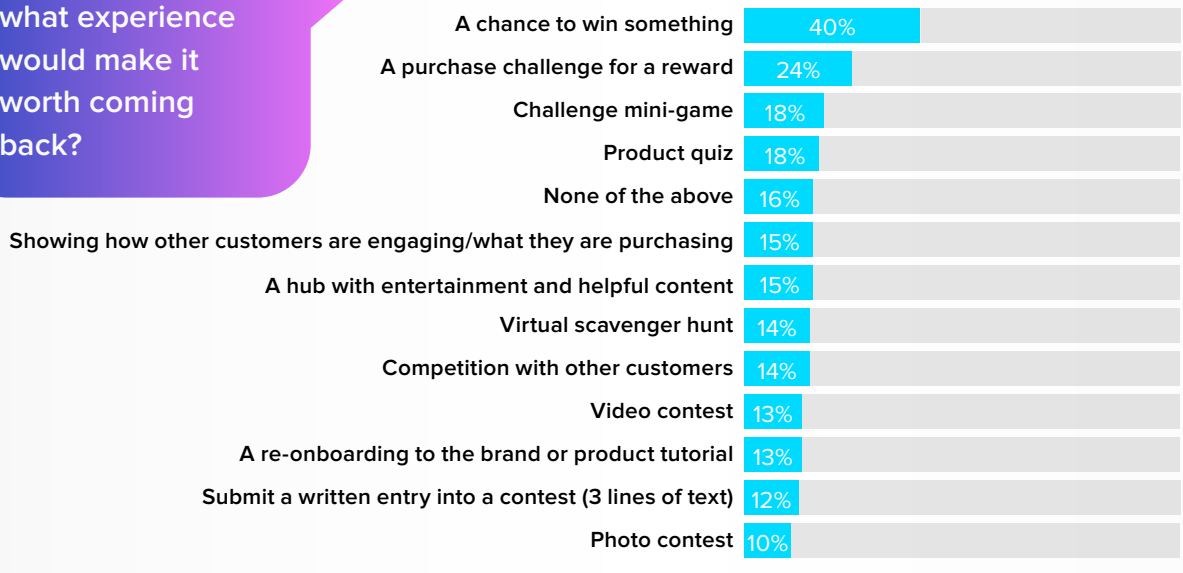

*Based on past history

Mechanics must be quick, simple, and offer immediate value to win back consumers' attention. Our research revealed that the strongest triggers are chance-to-win formats and guaranteed incentives. Nearly half of respondents (48%) said bonus points or a "welcome back" discount were likely to re-engage them, while 39% would be tempted by a surprise instant win or sweepstakes.

**Effort Must Reset, Not Resume**

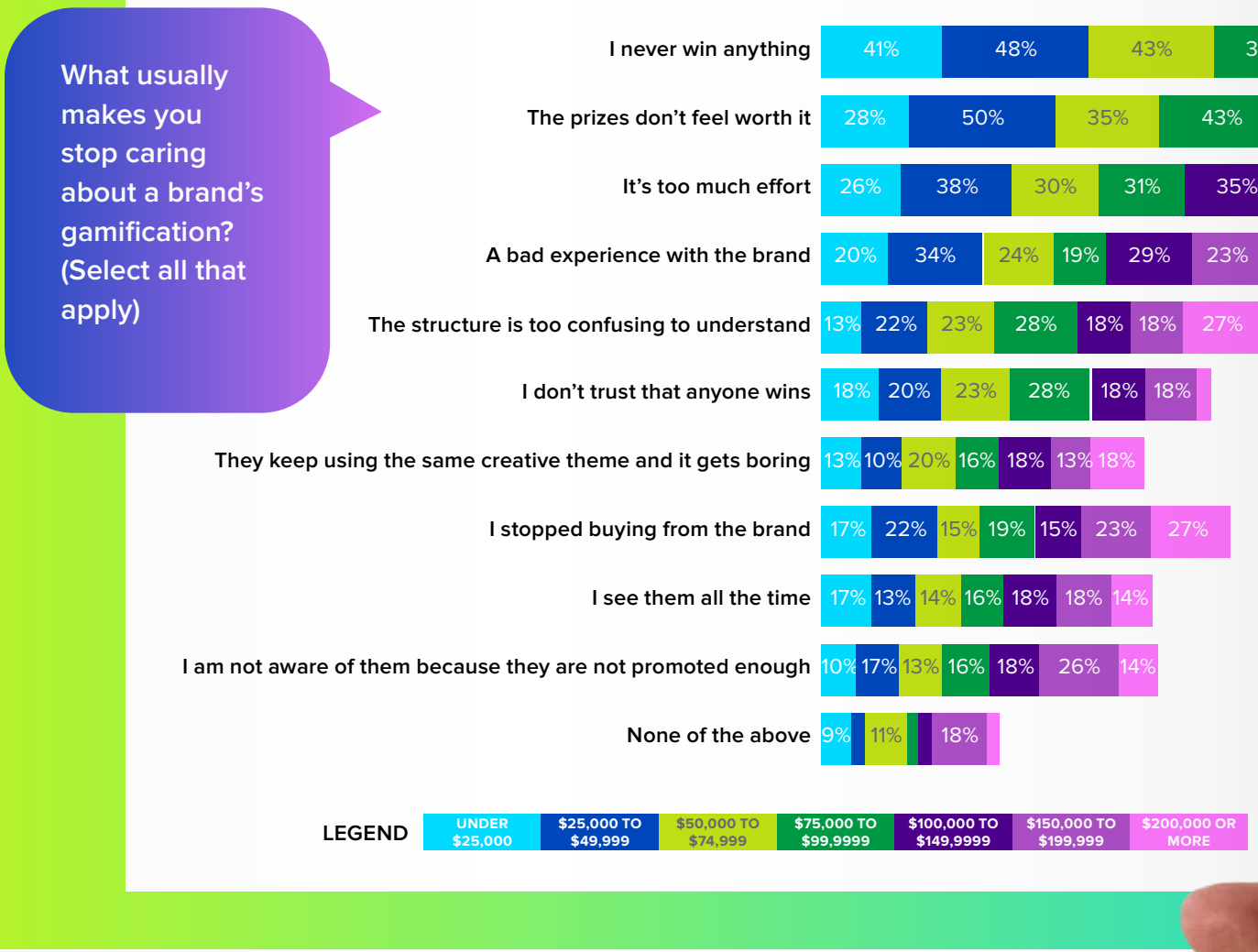
A common mistake in winback campaigns is expecting lapsed customers to engage at the same level as active ones. Our data shows that re-entry effort must be lower, while the perceived reward must be higher. Challenges can work, particularly with younger or higher-income audiences, but only when they are brief, clearly achievable, and attached to a meaningful incentive. One-third of consumers (33%) say a big-reward challenge would get their attention again.

**If you hadn't shopped with a brand in a while, what experience would make it worth coming back?**



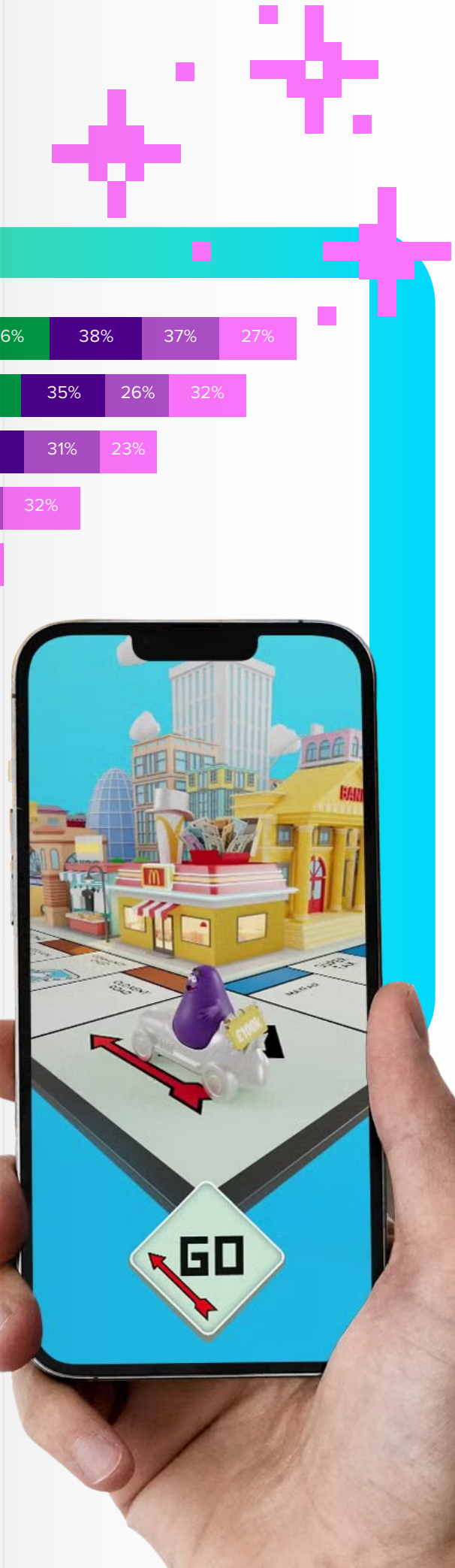
## “Don’t hound me or I’ll unsubscribe real quick.”

—Focus group participant




### Tailoring Winback Tactics to Income Demographic

To understand lapsed consumers, and how to win them back, brands need to take socio-economic status into account. Low- and mid-income consumers are most likely to switch off when rewards seem unfair (“I never win”) or require too much effort. To reverse this, gamification mechanics need to convey straightforward economic value, such as discounts, restoring expired points, and clear savings.




The loyalty of higher earners, on the other hand, tends to be lost due to the wider brand experience (poor design, customer service, or simply being unaware of promotions) rather than the reward structure. The winback subtext should therefore be “show me you know me” rather than simply “give me a deal”. Consider tailored recommendations, opportunities to give feedback, and compelling interactive content. This group is more willing to invest time in layered, richer “reward stacks” that combine an immediate incentive, a surprise or mystery element, and long-term value.

**Gamification’s Global Nuances**

Regionality also has a bearing on which gamification mechanics resonate.

In the UK, lapsed customers are more responsive to product quizzes that help them decide what to buy next, reinforcing the role of guided discovery. In the U.S., performance-based challenges and game-like experiences generate stronger re-engagement. The implication: winback should be localized not just in offer, but in interaction style.

# 7 Key Takeaways

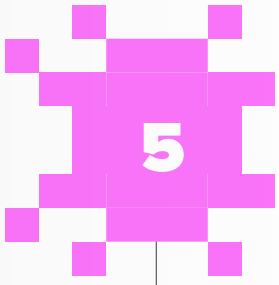
1. Gamification is a great acquisition lever for you; however first-time experiences should be quick, low-effort, and offer customers a reward immediately.

2. In general, engagements that last five minutes or less are the sweet spot; however, older audiences prefer under three minutes while younger audiences will also engage with longer formats.

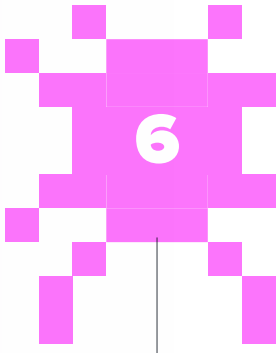
3. Segment your gamification strategy by generation (Gen Z and Millennials vs Gen X and Baby Boomers), not by channel.

4.

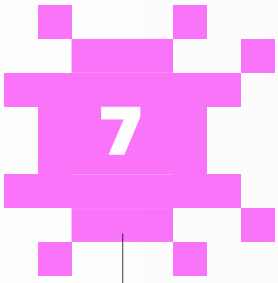
If you want purchase lift, tie consideration to loyalty outcomes; your highest-impact purchase nudge is a time-boxed offer, not a mini-game.




It's key to match incentives to consumer effort. Micro-perks work for simple actions and significant effort requires significant, guaranteed rewards.




Gamification in loyalty programs makes a real difference in how members feel and provides avenues to keep them engaged between purchases.




Your winback strategy should feel like a low-friction "welcome back" payout.

# Methodology

## Qualitative Survey

A total of 1,307 consumers completed an online survey between August 28 and September 4, 2025.

Within each country, all respondents were:

- Users of brand loyalty programs
- Half male/female
- Belong to four generations
  - **Gen Z** (ages 22-28)
  - **Millennials** (ages 29-44)
  - **Gen X** (ages 45-60)
  - **Boomers** (ages 61-79)

## Quantitative Focus Groups

- Users of brand loyalty programs
- Half male/female
- **GROUP 1** Ages: 18 - 44
- **GROUP 2** Ages: 45 - 61+

# Get in Touch

If you want to learn more about our research, tms' services, or discover how we can help you effectively implement gamified experiences into your business' marketing strategy, please don't hesitate to get in touch with **tmsmarketing@tmsw.com**.

