

# Environmentally Sustainable Last-Mile Deliveries?

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**Making good decisions as a customer is made difficult when different terms are used with the same meaning and the same service is presented with different terms. The jungle of sustainability terms and definitions in Swedish e-commerce today risks doing more harm than good.**

With the continuous growth of e-commerce, more and more people can relate to the confusion that can occur when you make an online purchase and reach the step in the check-out where you choose the delivery method. The options usually differ in price, delivery time, delivery location, and environmental impact. The three first-mentioned differences are easy to comprehend, but how are you, as a customer, supposed to understand the difference between a “*climate-smart*”, “*climate offsetting*”, “*environmentally friendly*”, or “*fossil-free*” delivery? Is there even a difference? And in that case, do the e-retailers know what the difference is?

With the ongoing climate crisis, more and more actors are offering “sustainable” deliveries. To reach climate goals, these deliveries must be sustainable and perform as they promise. As of today, a customer would have to do research in terms of finding definitions, understanding the impact of specific fuels, and more to get a full understanding of what it is they are paying for when choosing a delivery method. This is not realistic, and in fact, it is not legal. According to The Swedish Marketing Act, an actor is required to validate and explain an environmental

claim. Still, 92% of the biggest e-retailers that use environmental claims do so without any clarification. Interviews with some of these e-retailers also showed that most of them do not know the correct definition of these terms, even though they are using them on their websites. To support e-retailers in this jungle of sustainability terms and definitions, our research resulted in eight propositions regarding e-retailers’ priorities, validation of the terms, and industry collaboration. The interviews showed that e-retailers tend to prioritize cost and speed in last-mile delivery options. Regarding validation, terms that are as quantifiable as possible should be used, e.g., “*fossil-free*”, since they are easier to measure and understand by e-retailers and customers. Lastly, to achieve a change in the industry, the e-retailers need to collaborate, e.g., by signing the industry agreement Aster.

Last-mile deliveries might be an area with seemingly limited impact, but they could be indicative of a much bigger picture of how companies resonate with sustainability questions. As last-mile deliveries are the least sustainable part of the distribution chain, a transition towards more environmentally sustainable deliveries and offering this to customers has to become a reality. E-retailers should make it easier for customers to make better decisions because small actions on a large scale can have an enormous impact.

*This popular scientific article is derived from the master’s thesis: Exploring Environmentally Sustainable Last-Mile Deliveries in Sweden. The thesis is written by Emelie Ehrensward and Clara Wilhelmsson (2023).*