



# OPTIMIZING REVENUE RECOGNITION MODELS FOR RETAILERS

## Abstract

Effective revenue recognition is a critical aspect of financial reporting for retailers. The selection of an appropriate revenue recognition model is influenced by various factors that include industry-specific practices and accounting standards. This paper provides an extensive analysis of revenue recognition models used in the retail sector, their impact on financial statements, their suitability for different retail sectors, and a detailed guide to implementing the percentage-of-completion (POC) accounting method.

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### Types of Revenue Recognition Models

Revenue recognition models used by retailers play a crucial role in determining when and how a company records revenue in its financial statements. These models impact a retailer's financials by influencing when revenue is recognized, which, in turn, affects profitability, financial ratios, and financial reporting accuracy. The commonly used revenue recognition models in retail and their impact on financials are described below.

### Point of Sale (POS) Revenue Recognition Model

In the POS model, revenue is recognized at the point of sale, typically when the customer pays for and takes possession of the product or service. This model aligns with the customer's expectation of immediate payment.

Example: If a retailer sells a US \$100 product, the entire US \$100 is recognized as revenue at the time of sale.

This model is widely used by retailers in the United States and globally, especially for businesses with straightforward sales transactions.

### Impact on financials

The POS model results in immediate revenue recognition at the end of each sale, which can positively impact reported revenues and profitability. It also simplifies accounting and financial reporting, making it easier to manage and audit.



## Industry examples

- **Fashion:** Well-suited for fashion retail, both online and offline, for standard inventory items
- **Grocery:** Suitable for grocery stores, where products are typically sold as-is
- **Shoe:** Appropriate for shoe retailers, particularly for off-the-shelf shoes
- **Bakery:** Ideal for bakeries selling freshly baked goods directly to customers
- **Stationery:** Fits stationery retailers for regular product sales. Office supply stores like Staples and Office Depot generally apply the POS model for stationery products.
- **Auto components:** Works for retailers selling auto parts as-is. Retailers such as AutoZone and O'Reilly Auto Parts use the POS model for auto parts, recognizing revenue at the point of sale.
- **Fashion:** Retailers such as Zara, H&M, and Macy's often use the POS model for their standard clothing items, recognizing revenue at the time of purchase
- **Grocery:** Supermarket chains such as Walmart, Kroger, and Tesco primarily use the POS model for groceries, recognizing revenue when customers check out
- **Shoe:** Retailers such as Foot Locker and DSW typically use the POS model for their off-the-shelf shoe sales



## Implementing the Point-of-Sales (POS) Model

1. Familiarize yourself with relevant accounting standards and regulations governing revenue recognition, such as ASC 606 (in the United States) or IFRS 15 (International Financial Reporting Standards). Ensure compliance with these standards throughout the implementation process.
2. Clearly define the criteria for revenue recognition at the point of sale. Determine the specific conditions or events that signify the completion of the earnings process and the transfer of goods or services to the customer.
3. Invest in a robust POS system that supports accurate and timely recording of sales transactions. The POS system should integrate seamlessly with your accounting software to facilitate real-time updates and ensure consistency in financial reporting.
4. Provide training to staff involved in sales and financial reporting. Ensure that they understand the criteria for revenue recognition at the point of sale and how to use the POS system accurately. This step is crucial for maintaining consistency in applying the POS model across the organization.
5. Develop and communicate clear sales policies that align with the POS revenue recognition model. Specify any conditions or exceptions that may affect revenue recognition, such as returns, discounts, or loyalty programs.
6. Configure the POS system settings to align with the established revenue recognition criteria. Ensure that the system accurately captures and records sales data, including product prices, discounts, and any applicable taxes.
7. Integrate the POS system with your accounting software to enable seamless data transfer. This integration ensures that sales transactions are accurately reflected in the financial records, promoting consistency, and reducing the risk of errors.
8. Implement regular monitoring and auditing processes to verify the accuracy of recorded transactions. This includes reconciling POS system data with financial statements and conducting periodic audits to identify and address any discrepancies.
9. Document your organization's revenue recognition policies, specifically detailing how the POS model is applied. This documentation serves as a reference for internal stakeholders, auditors, and regulatory authorities.
10. Establish a system for continuous review and improvement. Regularly assess the effectiveness of the POS revenue recognition model, address any issues or challenges encountered, and adjust as needed to enhance accuracy and compliance.
11. Keep abreast of any changes or updates to accounting standards related to revenue recognition. This ensures ongoing compliance with regulatory requirements and helps you adapt your POS model accordingly.

## Percentage-of-Completion (POC) Revenue Recognition Model

POC is typically used when a retailer provides long-term projects, customized products, or services that span over time. Revenue is recognized as the project or service progresses, based on the percentage of completion.

Example: If a retailer undertakes a \$10,000 customization project that is 30% complete, it recognizes US \$3,000 as revenue ( $\$10,000 \times 30\%$ ).

POC is primarily used in industries with long-term projects, customization, or multi-stage production.

## Impact on financials

The POC model involves delayed revenue recognition as revenue is recognized gradually over time while the project or service advances, potentially leading to lower reported revenues and profitability initially. However, this model provides a more accurate representation of revenue earned over time, especially for complex projects.

## Industry examples

### • Custom Furniture Store

In this case a retailer specializes in creating custom-made furniture. Each piece of furniture involves several stages, including design, material selection, manufacturing, and delivery.

**Application of POC:** The retailer can apply the POC method to recognize revenue as each stage of the custom furniture creation process is completed. For example, revenue might be recognized as a percentage of completion when the design is finalized, when materials are procured, during the manufacturing process, and upon successful delivery to the customer. Costs associated with each stage are matched to the revenue recognition.

### • Custom Apparel Boutique

**Scenario:** A boutique specializes in creating custom apparel. Each garment involves stages like measurement, pattern creation, cutting, sewing, and final fitting.

**Application of POC:** The boutique can utilize the POC method to recognize revenue as each stage of the custom apparel creation process is completed. Revenue might be recognized when key stages like pattern creation or final fitting are accomplished. Costs related to materials, labor, and other production expenses are allocated proportionally to the completion of these stages.

### • Rollout of a New Store Concept

**Scenario:** A retail brand is introducing a new store concept and plans to roll it out across multiple locations. The project includes designing the new concept, creating prototypes, testing, and implementing the new concept in each store.

**Application of POC:** The retail company can use POC to recognize revenue and costs as it introduces the new store concept in each location. Revenue may be recognized based on milestones like the successful implementation of the new concept in a specific store, and costs are allocated proportionally to each completed phase.

### • Supply Chain Optimization Project:

**Scenario:** A retail company is undertaking a supply chain optimization project to improve efficiency, reduce costs, and enhance inventory management. The project includes phases such as analysis, system implementation, and training.

**Application of POC:** The retail company can use POC to recognize revenue and costs as it progresses through each phase of the supply chain optimization project. Revenue might be recognized based on milestones like the successful implementation of a new inventory management system, and costs are allocated proportionally to each completed phase.

### • Implementation of a New E-commerce Platform:

**Scenario:** A retail company decides to upgrade its e-commerce platform to improve the online shopping experience. The project involves stages such as platform selection, development, testing, and the launch of the new platform.

**Application of POC:** The retail company can use POC to recognize revenue and costs as it completes each phase of the e-commerce platform implementation. Revenue might be recognized based on milestones like the successful launch of the new platform, and costs are allocated proportionally to each completed phase.

### • Customization of In-Store Displays for a Marketing Campaign:

**Scenario:** A retail brand is running a special marketing campaign and customizing in-store displays across its locations. The project involves designing, manufacturing, and implementing these customized displays.

**Application of POC:** The retail company can use POC to recognize revenue and costs as it progresses through each phase of the in-store display customization project. Revenue might be recognized based on milestones like the completion of manufacturing for a specific set of displays, and costs are allocated proportionally to each completed phase.

## Implementing the Percentage-of-Completion (POC) Model

Implementing the POC model involves several steps from recording financial transactions in the system to building a solution for reporting.

1. Determine which projects or contracts qualify for the POC method. POC is typically used for long-term projects with multiple stages, such as construction, real estate development, or custom manufacturing.
2. Choose an accounting software system capable of handling POC accounting. Popular options include enterprise resource planning (ERP) systems such as SAP, Oracle, or QuickBooks Enterprise.
3. Create a separate project or contract account in the accounting system for each eligible project. This account will track all financial transactions related to the project.
4. Record all project-related costs (for example, labor, materials, subcontractor expenses) and revenues (for example, customer billings, progress payments) in the project account. Allocate costs to appropriate cost categories such as direct and indirect costs within the project.
5. Regularly assess the progress of the project and calculate the percentage of completion. This can be based on milestones reached, costs incurred, or other suitable metrics. Update the percentage of completion regularly to reflect the project advancement accurately.
6. Based on the calculated percentage of completion, recognize a proportional amount of revenue and costs for the project. Debit the project account for costs incurred and credit the revenue account for the revenue recognized.
7. Keep detailed records of all project-related transactions including invoices, receipts, contracts, and progress reports. Ensure that all financial transactions are properly documented and linked to the corresponding project.
8. Prepare financial statements that reflect the POC revenue recognition method. These statements should include:
  - **Income statement:** Shows revenue, costs, and profit recognized for each project.
  - **Balance sheet:** Reflects the project's assets, liabilities, and equity.
  - **Cash flow statement:** Presents cash flows related to project activities.
9. Ensure that POC accounting practices comply with relevant accounting standards such as ASC 606 in the United States. Engage external auditors to review financial statements and validate the accuracy of POC calculations.
10. Document the company's POC accounting policies and procedures. This documentation should outline how the



method is applied, what metrics are used to determine completion, and how costs and revenues are recognized.

11. Train accounting and finance teams on the specifics of the POC method used to ensure consistent application. Stay updated on changes in accounting standards and regulations that may impact POC accounting.
12. Regularly review and monitor the POC accounting process to identify any discrepancies or issues. Adjust calculations as necessary to reflect changes in project status.
13. Ensure that all project-related financial data is securely stored and retained for the required compliance period.

## Subscription-based Revenue Recognition Model

For retailers offering subscription services such as streaming services or subscription boxes, revenue is recognized over the subscription period, reflecting the gradual provision of services.

**Example:** A retailer charges US \$20/month for its subscription service. If a customer signs up for a year, the retailer recognizes US \$216 as revenue over the course of the year.

## Impact on financials

The subscription-based model provides a steady revenue stream. Revenue is recognized evenly over the subscription period, leading to a stable and predictable revenue stream. This model lays emphasis on long-term customer relationships and customer retention as revenue continues to be recognized over time.

## Industry examples

- **Fashion:** Generally, not used for fashion retail unless offering subscription boxes or recurring rental services. Companies such as Stitch Fix and Rent the Runway offer subscription-based fashion services where customers pay regularly for clothing rentals, using subscription-based revenue recognition.
- **Grocery:** While less common in traditional grocery retail, subscription meal kit services such as Blue Apron apply subscription-based models
- **Shoe:** Uncommon for standard shoe retail but subscription shoe services such as ShoeDazzle operate on subscription-based revenue recognition principles
- **Bakery:** Not typically used for bakery products
- **Stationery:** Uncommon, unless offering subscription-based stationery services
- **Auto Components:** Rarely used in auto parts retail.

## Implementing Subscription-based Revenue Recognition Model

- Begin by understanding the relevant accounting standards and regulations governing revenue recognition, such as ASC 606 (in the United States) or IFRS 15 (International Financial Reporting Standards). Ensure compliance with these standards throughout the implementation process.
- Clearly define the criteria for recognizing revenue from subscription-based services. This includes understanding the specific conditions or events that trigger revenue recognition,

such as the subscription start date, billing cycles, and any contractual commitments.

- Choose a subscription management system or software that supports accurate tracking of subscription-related data. This system should facilitate the management of customer subscriptions, billing cycles, and other relevant information.
- Configure the subscription management system to align with your defined subscription criteria. Ensure that the system can accurately capture and record subscription-related data, including start dates, billing amounts, and any modifications to subscription terms.
- Integrate the subscription management system with your accounting software to enable seamless data transfer. This integration ensures that subscription-related transactions are accurately reflected in the financial records, promoting consistency, and reducing the risk of errors.
- Develop and document clear revenue recognition policies specific to subscription-based services. Specify how revenue will be recognized over the subscription period and how any modifications to subscriptions will be handled.
- Provide training to staff involved in managing subscriptions and financial reporting. Ensure that they understand the criteria for revenue recognition and how to use the subscription management system accurately.
- Clearly communicate subscription terms and billing information to customers. This includes providing information about the billing cycle, renewal processes, and any conditions that may affect billing or revenue recognition.
- Implement regular monitoring and auditing processes to verify the accuracy of recorded subscription data. This includes reconciling subscription system data with financial statements and conducting periodic audits to identify and address any discrepancies.
- Document your organization's revenue recognition policies related to subscription-based services. This documentation serves as a reference for internal stakeholders, auditors, and regulatory authorities.
- Establish a system for continuous review and improvement. Regularly assess the effectiveness of the subscription-based revenue recognition model, address any issues or challenges encountered, and adjust as needed to enhance accuracy and compliance.
- Keep abreast of any changes or updates to accounting standards related to revenue recognition. This ensures ongoing compliance with regulatory requirements and helps you adapt your subscription-based model accordingly.

## Hybrid Revenue Recognition Models

Some retailers use a combination of different models based on their product or service offerings. They apply different models to different segments of their business. Hybrid models are employed by retailers that have diverse product/service offerings requiring different recognition methods.

Example: A retailer sells standard inventory products using the POS model but offers customized products with a POC model for long-term projects.

## Impact on financials

Different parts of the business may experience different revenue recognition patterns, making financial analysis and forecasting more complex. However, the flexibility of choosing revenue recognition models allows the retailer to align revenue recognition with the nature of the products or services they offer.

## Industry examples

- **Fashion:** Suitable for retailers selling a mix of standard inventory items and customized fashion products. Retailers that offer both standard clothing lines and custom-made options, such as Savile Row tailors, may use a hybrid approach.
- **Grocery:** Generally, not used in traditional grocery retail
- **Shoe:** Could be applied if selling both standard shoes and **customized options**
- **Bakery:** Typically, not used unless offering both standard and customized baked goods
- **Stationery:** Uncommon, as stationery products are usually sold off-the-shelf
- **Auto components:** Suitable if selling both off-the-shelf parts and custom-made components for long-term projects.



## Impact of Revenue Recognition Models on Retailer Financials

The choice of a revenue recognition model significantly affects a retailer's financial statements, influencing key financial metrics and reporting accuracy.

- The POS model results in immediate revenue recognition upon each sale, potentially boosting reported revenues and profitability. In contrast, the POC model may lead to delayed revenue recognition due to its gradual approach.
- The revenue recognition method directly impacts reported profitability. The POS model may present higher initial profits, while the POC model spreads profits over the project's duration. This affects financial ratios such as the current ratio and return on assets.
- The POC model provides a more accurate representation of revenue earned over time, especially for complex projects. This accuracy can be crucial for financial planning, decision-making, and investor confidence.
- Retailers must ensure that their revenue recognition practices comply with relevant accounting standards, such as ASC 606 in the United States. Non-compliance can lead to legal and regulatory issues.



## Suitability of Revenue Recognition Models for Different Retail Sectors

The suitability of revenue recognition models varies across different retail sectors.

Retail Sector	POS	POC
Fashion	Well-suited for standard inventory items sold both online and offline. Hybrid model may be suitable for retailers selling a mix of standard and customized fashion items.	Appropriate for customized or made-to-order fashion products with multi-stage production processes.
Grocery	Commonly used for straightforward grocery sales where products are typically sold as-is.	Rarely used in traditional grocery retail.
Shoe	Typically used for off-the-shelf shoe sales.	May apply to custom shoe orders but is generally uncommon for standard sales.
Bakery	Ideal for bakery products sold directly to customers.	Rarely used for bakery products unless custom orders involve a complex production process.
Stationery	Typically employed for off-the-shelf stationery product sales.	Rarely used as stationery products are usually sold as-is.
Auto Components	Commonly used for auto parts sold as-is.	Rarely used unless custom projects involving complex production are part of the business.



## Case Study: Revenue Recognition Models for a Fashion Retailer

ABC Fashion, a leading fashion retailer in the United States, operates both physical stores and an e-commerce platform. The company offers a wide range of clothing and accessories, including customizable items. ABC Fashion faces unique revenue recognition challenges due to its mixed online and offline sales channels.

ABC Fashion illustrates how the POC model is suitable for online sales involving customization and subscription services, while the POS model is well-suited for traditional in-store transactions. Careful documentation and compliance with accounting standards are essential to maintain transparency and accuracy in financial reporting for such a mix of online and offline retail businesses.

### Scenario 1: POC model for online sales

ABC Fashion receives an online order for a custom-tailored wedding gown for US \$2,000. The customer selects the specific fabric, measurements are taken, and production begins. The gown takes two months to complete.

**Revenue recognition (POC):** As production progresses each week, ABC Fashion recognizes revenue proportionately. Assume the gown is 50% complete after one month. ABC Fashion recognizes 50% of the total revenue, which is  $50\% \times \text{US } \$2,000 = \text{US } \$1,000$ .

### Scenario 2: POS model for offline sales

A customer walks into an ABC Fashion physical store and purchases a ready-to-wear dress for US \$150. The customer pays at the checkout counter and leaves with the dress.

**Revenue Recognition (POS):** Revenue is recognized immediately at the point of sale, that is when the customer pays for and takes possession of the dress. In this case, US \$150 is recognized as revenue at the time of purchase.

### Scenario 3: POC model for online subscription service

ABC Fashion launches a subscription service offering personalized monthly styling advice to customers. A customer subscribes for a year at US \$25 per month.

**Revenue recognition (POC):** ABC Fashion recognizes revenue evenly over the subscription period. Each month, US \$25 is recognized as revenue. After three months,  $\text{US } \$25 \times 3 = \text{US } \$75$  has been recognized.

### Scenario 4: POS Model for in-store accessories sale

A customer visits an ABC Fashion store and buys a handbag for US \$80. The customer pays at the checkout counter and walks out with the bag.

**Revenue recognition (POS):** Like the previous offline sale example, revenue is recognized immediately at the point of sale. In this case, US \$80 is recognized as revenue at the time of purchase.



## Advantages

- The **POC model** ensures that revenue is matched with the progress of fulfillment, making it suitable for customized or made-to-order items.
- The **POS model** is straightforward and easy to apply, making it suitable for most in-store sales. It aligns with customer expectations for immediate recognition of revenue when making in-store purchases.

## Challenges

- Managing two different revenue recognition models can introduce complexity into the accounting process.
- Ensuring that the models are consistently applied and compliant with accounting standards can be challenging.

## Case Study: Revenue Recognition Models for an E-commerce Company

XYZ Electronics is an e-commerce company specializing in consumer electronics, selling products such as smartphones, laptops, and accessories. The company operates both an online store and a subscription-based tech support service. XYZ Electronics faces revenue recognition challenges due to the diversity of its revenue streams.

XYZ Electronics illustrates how various revenue recognition models are applied in an e-commerce context.

### Scenario 1: POS revenue recognition model

XYZ Electronics sells a laptop for US \$1,000 through its online store. The customer pays online using a credit card, and the laptop is shipped immediately.

**Revenue recognition (POS):** As per the POS model, revenue is recognized when the laptop is shipped because control and ownership have transferred to the customer. In this case, XYZ Electronics recognizes US \$1,000 in revenue at the time of shipment.

### Scenario 2: Subscription-based revenue recognition model

XYZ Electronics offers a technical support subscription for US \$50 per year, billed annually. A customer signs up for this subscription on the 1st of January.

**Revenue recognition (Subscription):** With the subscription-based model, XYZ Electronics recognizes revenue evenly over the subscription period. In this case, since the subscription covers 12 months, each month,  $US \$50/12 = US \$4.17$  is recognized as revenue. On January 1st, the company recognizes US \$4.17, and this amount is recognized each subsequent month until the subscription period ends or is terminated.

### Scenario 3: POC (long-term project) revenue recognition model

XYZ Electronics offers a customized PC-building service. A customer orders a high-end gaming PC for US \$2,500 which will take six months to build and deliver.

**Revenue recognition (POC):** Under the POC model, revenue is recognized as progress is made toward fulfilling the order. If after two months, XYZ Electronics has completed 40% of the project (for example, sourcing components and assembling), they recognize 40% of the revenue, which is  $40\% \times US \$2,500 = US \$1,000$ . This continues each month until the project is completed and the entire US \$2,500 is recognized.

In the Percentage-of-Completion (POC) Revenue Recognition Model, customers typically make payments based on the completion of specific milestones or stages outlined in the contract. The payment terms are agreed upon at the beginning of the contract, and they may vary depending on the nature of the project.



### Scenario 4: Multiple deliverable arrangement (bundled products) revenue recognition model

XYZ Electronics sells a "Tech Bundle" for US \$690, which includes a smartphone, a laptop bag, and a wireless mouse.

**Revenue recognition (Multiple deliverable):** Revenue Recognition: In a multiple deliverable arrangement model, revenue is allocated to each deliverable based on its standalone selling price. If the standalone prices are US \$600 for the smartphone, US \$50 for the laptop bag, and US \$40 for the wireless mouse, XYZ Electronics recognizes revenue for each item separately. So, at the point of sale, they recognize US \$600 for the smartphone, US \$50 for the laptop bag, and US \$40 for the wireless mouse, totaling US \$690.

### Scenario 5: Variable consideration (sales with discounts) revenue recognition model

XYZ Electronics offers a 10% discount on all orders over US \$1,000. A customer places an order for laptops worth US \$1,200.

**Revenue recognition (Variable consideration):** Under the variable consideration model, XYZ Electronics recognizes revenue at the amount they expect to receive. In this case, they expect to provide a 10% discount, so they recognize revenue at  $US \$1,200 - 10\% = US \$1,080$ .

## Conclusion

A range of revenue recognition models such as POC, POS, subscription-based, and hybrid models are available to retailers. Depending on the nature of the transactions and revenue streams, companies must carefully assess which models align best with their business practices and accurately represent their financial performance. Choosing only one model, or a mix of two or more is a choice retailers must make based on how their transactions are billed. Regardless of their choice of revenue recognition models, compliance with accounting standards and clear documentation are essential to ensure accurate revenue recognition and financial transparency.

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With 18 years of robust consulting experience in the retail implementation industry, I am a seasoned Senior Solution Architect adept at merging business strategy with cutting-edge IT solutions. My expertise lies in orchestrating end-to-end project lifecycles, from conceptualization to seamless execution. Specializing in retail, I bring a deep understanding of industry nuances, tailoring solutions that optimize operations and elevate customer experiences.

My proficiency spans diverse IT domains, encompassing cloud computing, data analytics, and emerging technologies. Collaborating closely with stakeholders, I have successfully delivered scalable and innovative solutions, consistently exceeding client expectations. I excel in fostering cross-functional collaboration and mentoring teams to achieve collective goals. Known for my strategic mindset, I leverage technology to address business challenges, ensuring alignment with organizational objectives.

I am a dynamic communicator, simplifying intricate concepts for diverse audiences. My commitment to continuous improvement is reflected in my ability to evolve strategies in tandem with the evolving retail landscape. With a rich background in IT and a passion for delivering impactful solutions, I am poised to drive digital transformation and elevate business outcomes.

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