

The Hidden Costs of Traditional Distribution in the Firearms Industry

**A Comprehensive Analysis of Total Economic Impact for
Manufacturers**

December 2025 (Updated December 18, 2025)

Executive Summary

In the firearms industry, manufacturers often evaluate distribution channels based on headline discounts alone. However, when freight concessions, extended payment terms, returns exposure, promotional allowances, MAP erosion, and loss of direct dealer relationships are fully accounted for, the total effective cost can range from 20-33% of dealer-level economics.

Industry data shows dealer gross margins on new firearms average 12-18% (averaging ~16.5% mid-2025 per Shooting Industry Magazine), leaving minimal room for upstream costs and amplifying the impact of each distribution expense layer. With dealers operating on compressed margins and facing estimated \$40-50 per transaction in operating costs (based on dealer surveys and industry forum discussions), the economics of traditional distribution deserve closer examination.

This white paper provides a detailed breakdown of these cost layers, drawing from industry publications, NSSF economic reports, and supply chain finance research. Traditional distributors provide significant value through established relationships, risk absorption, and broad dealer networks. However, understanding the complete cost picture—including both quantifiable expenses and strategic trade-offs—empowers manufacturers to make informed channel decisions.

Key Findings:

- **Quantifiable costs beyond base discount:** Freight (2-5%), payment terms opportunity cost (3-5%), returns (2-5%), and co-op/promotional (2-5%) add measurable expense layers
- **Strategic trade-offs:** Loss of direct dealer relationships, limited pricing control, delayed market feedback, and reduced product launch flexibility
- **Conservative total range:** When quantifiable costs are properly calculated, traditional distribution represents 27-33% of dealer economics in direct expense, plus strategic limitations
- **Industry context:** The firearms industry generated \$91.7 billion in economic activity in 2024 (NSSF). Retail firearms sales declined 9.6% in Q1 2025, with ongoing softening throughout the year intensifying margin pressure
- **Emerging alternatives:** Direct-to-dealer and hybrid distribution models are gaining adoption as manufacturers seek greater control and transparency

Important Context: This analysis presents industry-wide ranges and conservative estimates. Your specific costs will vary based on annual volume, product category, brand strength, distributor relationships, and negotiated terms. The goal is to provide a framework for evaluating total channel economics—not to prescribe a single path forward.

Financial Impact Examples

To illustrate how hidden costs accumulate, we present two worked examples using conservative mid-range estimates from industry data. These calculations use proper financial formulas and current cost-of-capital assumptions.

Important Disclaimer: These are illustrative examples only. Your actual costs will vary significantly based on your specific distributor agreements, payment terms, volume, product mix, and negotiating leverage. Consult your CFO for company-specific analysis.

Example 1: \$10M Annual Revenue Manufacturer

Assumptions:

- Base distributor discount: 22% of revenue
- Payment terms: Net 60 days (industry standard)
- Cost of capital: 10% annually (conservative business lending rate)
- Other costs: Mid-range estimates from industry data

Cost Breakdown:

- Base distributor discount (22%): \$2,200,000
- Freight & logistics (3%): \$300,000
- Payment terms opportunity cost*: \$164,000
- Returns, chargebacks, allowances (3%): \$300,000
- Co-op and promotional (3%): \$300,000

Total Quantifiable Annual Cost: \$3,264,000 (32.6% of revenue)

Working Capital Impact: Average accounts receivable tied up: ~\$1,644,000 (at 60-day DSO)

**Opportunity cost calculation: $AR = \$10M \times (60/365) = \$1,644,000$; $Cost = \$1,644,000 \times 10\% = \$164,000$*

Strategic Costs (Not Quantified Above): Complete loss of direct dealer relationship data, limited pricing control, delayed market feedback during allocation periods, reduced product launch flexibility.

Example 2: \$50M Annual Revenue Manufacturer

Assumptions:

- Base distributor discount: 20% of revenue (stronger brand position)
- Payment terms: Net 75 days (includes seasonal dating programs)
- Cost of capital: 10% annually
- Other costs: Mid-range estimates from industry data

Cost Breakdown:

- Base distributor discount (20%): \$10,000,000
- Freight & logistics (2.5%): \$1,250,000
- Payment terms opportunity cost*: \$1,027,000
- Returns, chargebacks, allowances (4%): \$2,000,000
- Co-op and promotional (4%): \$2,000,000

Total Quantifiable Annual Cost: \$16,277,000 (32.6% of revenue)

Working Capital Impact: Average accounts receivable tied up: ~\$10,274,000 (at 75-day DSO)

**Opportunity cost calculation: $AR = \$50M \times (75/365) = \$10,274,000$; $Cost = \$10,274,000 \times 10\% = \$1,027,000$*

At this scale, even a 5-percentage-point improvement in total channel cost represents \$2.5M annually—equivalent to funding 35+ employees at industry-average wages (\$68,300 per NSSF) or significant R&D; expansion.

Note on Cost of Capital: These examples use 10% as a conservative estimate for the cost of business capital. Your actual cost may range from 8-12% depending on your borrowing costs, opportunity cost of internal funds, and risk-adjusted return requirements. Adjust calculations accordingly.

Industry Context: The Firearms Distribution Landscape

Economic Significance

The firearms and ammunition industry represents a significant component of the U.S. economy. According to NSSF's 2025 Economic Impact Report:

- Generated \$91.7 billion in total economic activity in 2024 (up from \$90.5B in 2023)
- Employed 150,668 people directly, with an additional 232,327 jobs in supplier and ancillary industries
- Paid average wages of \$68,300 in wages and benefits (up from \$67,500 in 2024)
- Contributed \$10.97 billion in federal, state, and local tax revenues
- Supported nearly 383,000 full-time equivalent jobs across the broader economy

Source: NSSF Firearm and Ammunition Industry Economic Impact Report, April 2025

However, retail indicators show increasing strain. According to RetailBI, firearms retail sales declined 9.6% in Q1 2025 compared to Q1 2024, with continued softening throughout the year amplifying margin pressure on manufacturers and dealers alike.

Current State of Dealer Margins

Multiple industry sources confirm compressed margins facing dealers:

- Shooting Industry Magazine (2024-2025) reports firearms averaging 16.5% gross profit margin
- Current industry standard: 12-18% margins on new firearms depending on model and category
- MAP pricing structures often settle into 8-14% gross profit margins for retailers
- Estimated \$40-50 per transaction in operating costs (based on dealer surveys and industry forum discussions)
- Pre-pandemic margins: 12-20% (higher end less common post-2020)

Sources: Shooting Industry Magazine "Are We In A De-Evolution?" (July 2024), "U.S. Firearms Industry Today Report" (2025)

With dealers operating on 12-18% margins (averaging ~16.5%) and estimated \$40-50 per transaction in operating costs, firearms priced under \$400 leave minimal profit after expenses. This margin compression forces dealers to rely on accessories, gunsmithing, range revenue, and training for sustainable profitability.

Distribution Infrastructure

The firearms distribution network connects manufacturers to approximately 48,000 active Type 01 FFL dealers nationwide (ATF 2024 data, published March 2025), with traditional distributors serving as the primary intermediary layer. This infrastructure generated an estimated \$16-18 billion in distribution revenue, representing a critical but costly link in the supply chain.

The Core Challenge: Understanding Total Distribution Costs

Most manufacturers evaluate distribution channels primarily on the headline discount. This section breaks down the additional cost layers that accumulate beyond the visible discount.

1. The Obvious Cost: Distributor Discounts

The most visible cost in traditional distribution typically ranges from 18-30% off dealer MAP (Minimum Advertised Price) or 30-40% off inflated MSRP. These discounts vary significantly by product category, brand strength, and volume commitments. Stronger brands with higher pull-through can often negotiate 18-25% discounts, while newer or commodity products may face 25-30%+ requirements.

2. Freight, Logistics, and Handling Concessions

Beyond the base discount, manufacturers routinely absorb logistics costs representing 2-5% of transaction value:

- Free or heavily subsidized freight to distributor warehouses (often negotiated UPS/FedEx rates)
- Pallet optimization and partial order accommodation costs
- Damage allowances and insurance costs
- Special packaging requirements for distributor handling systems

The firearms industry's unique regulatory requirements (FFL transfers, ATF compliance documentation) add administrative overhead not present in other consumer goods distribution.

3. Payment Terms and Working Capital Impact

Extended payment terms create significant but often unaccounted-for costs:

- Industry standard: Net 60-90 day terms, with extensions to 120-180 days during seasonal dating programs
- Early-payment discounts of 1-3% (effectively pricing the implicit financing cost)
- Pre-season dating programs that extend manufacturer cash conversion cycles

The working capital impact is substantial. At a conservative 10% annual cost of capital, a 60-day payment term versus immediate payment represents approximately 1.6% of annual

revenue in opportunity cost. For 75-90 day terms, this rises to 2.0-2.5%. These costs compound when manufacturers must maintain higher inventory levels during peak demand cycles.

Sources: Bank of America Trade Finance Research; Supply Chain Dive, "5 Things Operations Managers Must Know About Opportunity Cost" (2019, updated 2025)

4. Returns, Chargebacks, and Inventory Risk Transfer

Traditional distribution shifts inventory risk upstream through mechanisms representing 2-5% of sales:

- Returns for slow-moving or unsold stock (typically 2-5% of shipments)
- Chargebacks from pricing disputes or MAP violations
- Allowances for damaged goods during distribution
- Stock balancing and obsolescence reserves for aging inventory

The 2020-2022 supply volatility period highlighted these risks. Industry sources documented allocation-driven over-ordering followed by inventory corrections when supply normalized, with manufacturers absorbing the adjustment through returns, promotional allowances, and price concessions.

Source: Shooting Industry Magazine "Supply Chain Woes" (February 2022)

5. Co-Op Advertising, Rebates, and Promotional Allowances

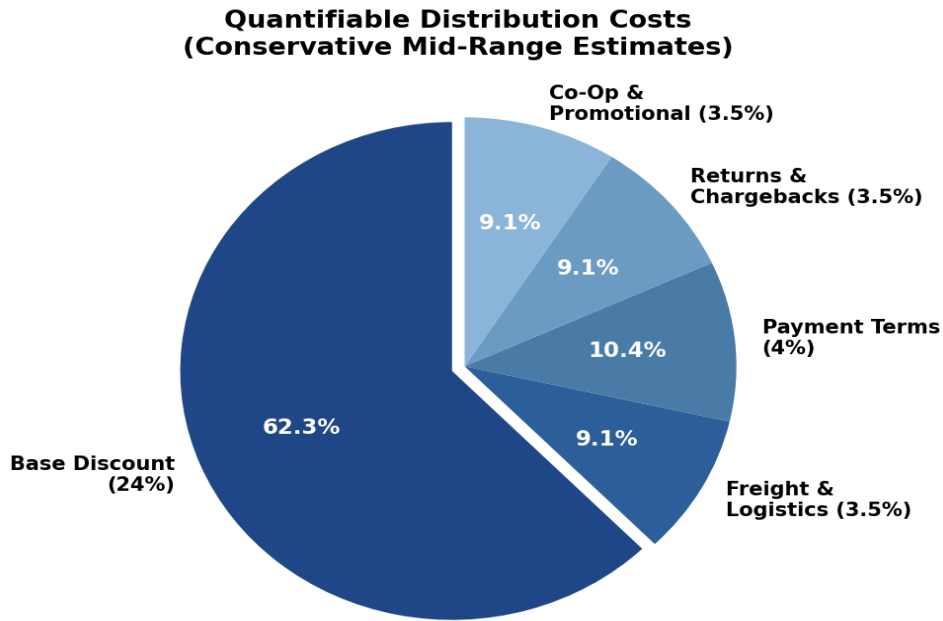
Distributors and large dealers typically require promotional support adding 2-5% to costs:

- Marketing co-op funds (typically 2-5% of sales volume)
- Volume rebates and tier-based incentive programs
- Seasonal promotional allowances (hunting season, Black Friday, SHOT Show timing)
- New product introduction support and display allowances
- Dealer event sponsorships and show participation requirements

These programs shift focus from sustainable sell-through to push-based sell-in metrics, making it difficult to distinguish genuine end-consumer demand from distributor inventory building.

The Aggregate Impact: Quantifying Total Channel Cost

When all quantifiable cost factors are combined using conservative mid-range estimates and proper financial calculations, traditional distribution costs can be summarized as follows:



Note: Does not include strategic costs (MAP erosion, relationship loss, data access)

Detailed Cost Breakdown (Industry Ranges):

Cost Component	Typical Range	Impact Notes
Base Distributor Discount	18-30%	Varies by brand strength, volume, category
Freight & Logistics	2-5%	Often absorbed but rarely tracked in P&L
Payment Terms (Opportunity Cost)	3-5%	At 8-12% cost of capital, 60-90 day terms
Returns & Chargebacks	2-5%	Unpredictable, varies by product lifecycle
Co-Op & Promotional	2-5%	Required to maintain distribution placement
MAP Erosion	Strategic	Long-term brand value and pricing power loss
Relationship & Data Loss	Strategic	Reduced market intelligence and leverage

Conservative Total (Quantifiable)	27-33%	Mid-range estimates using proper formulas
Plus Strategic Costs	Not Quantified	Control, flexibility, information access

Important Context: These ranges reflect industry averages compiled from multiple sources. Your specific costs will vary based on annual volume (economies of scale), product category (commodity vs. premium), brand strength (pull-through power), distributor relationships (negotiating leverage), and terms negotiated. The 27-33% conservative total uses mid-range estimates and proper opportunity cost calculations.

This aggregate view explains structural profitability challenges in the industry. Even with strong consumer demand, compressed margins create difficulty for both dealers and manufacturers when 30%+ of dealer economics flow to distribution infrastructure and hidden costs.

Strategic Costs: Beyond Financial Metrics

6. MAP Erosion and Brand Commoditization

Minimum Advertised Pricing (MAP) enforcement through multi-tier distribution has proven difficult:

- Distributors aggregate competing brands, prioritizing velocity over any single manufacturer's pricing goals
- Online retailers and marketplace sellers routinely violate MAP with limited consequences
- Big-box stores use firearms as loss leaders, selling below MAP to drive store traffic
- Enforcement requires constant monitoring and creates difficult decisions (cut off violators and lose volume, or tolerate erosion and lose pricing power)

As noted in Shooting Industry Magazine's 2024 analysis, 'MAP price—regardless of MSRP—becomes the Market Price' with many MAP structures settling into 8-14% dealer gross margins. The article identifies problematic manufacturer approaches: (1) pricing products as 'great value compared to competitors' (race to bottom), and (2) positioning products 'in the sweet spot of high-volume sales' (volume over margin).

Source: Shooting Industry Magazine "Are We In A De-Evolution?" (July 2024)

7. Loss of Direct Dealer Relationships

Traditional distribution systematically transfers customer relationships and market intelligence to intermediaries:

- Zero direct visibility into dealer purchasing patterns, seasonal trends, or SKU-level performance
- Dealer loyalty directed to distributors who control access and allocation during shortages
- Your products treated as interchangeable SKUs in distributor catalogs
- Feedback loops measured in months, not days—you learn about issues long after distributors
- Inability to segment dealer support (high-performing dealers get same terms as marginal ones)

The 2020-2022 allocation period demonstrated this dynamic acutely. Distributors, not manufacturers, controlled which dealers received

inventory. They decided which brands got priority placement. They owned the relationships that determined market access.

8. Operational Inefficiency and Demand Signal Loss

Multi-tier distribution creates signal distortion forcing reactive operations:

- Bullwhip effect amplifies demand variability (small consumer changes create large manufacturer swings)
- Unable to distinguish true end-demand from distributor inventory positioning
- Delayed visibility into regional and SKU-level performance (weeks to months lag)
- Forecasting errors compound through each distribution tier
- Slower identification of quality issues or product defects

Industry analysis documented 'extreme year-over-year market volatility' in 2021-2022 with YOY production swings greater than 20%. As Shooting Industry Magazine noted, 'such swings without adjustments on the manufacturing side aren't sustainable'—yet manufacturers lacked demand visibility to make proactive adjustments.

Source: Shooting Industry Magazine "U.S. Firearms Industry Today — 2023" (July 2023)

Evaluating Distribution Models: Balanced Perspective

Understanding the full picture requires acknowledging what traditional distribution does well, what it costs, and what alternatives involve. This section provides a balanced assessment with a direct comparison.

Distribution Model Comparison:

Aspect	Traditional Distribution	Direct-to-Dealer / Hybrid
Dealer Access	Immediate access to 48,000+ Type O1 FFLs nationwide	Must build relationships individually or via platform
Setup Cost	Minimal upfront investment (just negotiate terms)	Moderate to high (5-10% of revenue, one-time)
Credit Management	Distributor absorbs payment risk and collections	Manufacturer assumes credit risk; needs infrastructure
Total Cost (Ongoing)	27-33% of dealer economics (quantifiable + strategic)	Platform fees + logistics (typically 10-20% total)
Pricing Control	Limited; MAP difficult to enforce	Direct control over pricing, promotions, and terms
Market Intelligence	Minimal; no direct dealer visibility or feedback	Real-time purchasing data, direct dealer relationships
Cash Cycle	60-90 days DSO standard (extended terms)	15-30 days typical (platform-facilitated)
Flexibility	Constrained by distributor approval and systems	Rapid product testing, segmented dealer programs
Compliance Burden	Distributor handles FFL verification, reporting	Manufacturer or platform must manage compliance
Best For	Volume scale, risk-averse, established infrastructure	Control-focused, data-driven, willing to invest upfront

Strengths of Traditional Distribution

Traditional distributors provide genuine value that any alternative must address:

- **Established dealer networks:** Immediate access to 48,000+ Type 01 FFL dealers nationwide without building relationships individually
- **Credit and risk management:** Distributors absorb payment risk, extend credit to smaller dealers, and manage collections—functions manufacturers may lack infrastructure to handle
- **Inventory aggregation:** Dealers can source multiple brands in single orders, reducing transaction costs and minimum order barriers
- **Logistics infrastructure:** Regional warehousing, consolidated shipping, and established carrier relationships provide cost efficiencies
- **Compliance expertise:** Distributors maintain FFL networks, manage ATF reporting, and handle regulatory documentation at scale
- **Working capital sharing:** While expensive, distributor financing allows manufacturers to avoid carrying dealer credit risk

Trade-Offs and Limitations

The costs documented in this analysis represent the other side of that equation:

- **Opacity of total cost:** Hidden layers make true channel profitability difficult to assess
- **Loss of market intelligence:** No direct dealer feedback, delayed market signals, inability to segment support
- **Reduced control:** Limited pricing authority, constrained product launch flexibility, dependence during allocations
- **Working capital drain:** Extended terms tie up cash during peak cycles when manufacturers need liquidity most
- **Strategic dependence:** Manufacturers become reliant on intermediaries who own customer relationships

Direct-to-Dealer and Hybrid Models: Considerations

Direct-to-dealer (D2D) and hybrid approaches offer greater transparency and control, but involve different trade-offs:

Potential Benefits:

- Transparent, predictable platform fees replacing opaque multi-layer costs

- Direct dealer relationships and real-time purchasing data
- Greater pricing control and MAP enforcement capability
- Faster market feedback and product development cycles
- Shorter cash conversion cycles (15-30 day terms typical)
- Ability to segment dealer support and test new products rapidly

Implementation Challenges and Costs:

- **Setup investment:** Platform integration, dealer onboarding, systems development (estimated 5-10% of annual revenue as one-time cost, varying widely by scale)
- **Credit management infrastructure:** Manufacturers must assess dealer creditworthiness, manage collections, and absorb payment risk
- **Compliance burden:** Direct FFL verification, ATF reporting, and regulatory documentation become manufacturer responsibility
- **Dealer adoption barriers:** Dealers accustomed to distributor aggregation and credit terms may resist fragmented direct relationships
- **Volume risk:** Potential 10-20% short-term volume loss during transition as dealers adjust to new purchasing patterns
- **Operational complexity:** Managing thousands of small dealer accounts versus dozens of distributor relationships
- **Logistics coordination:** Must arrange shipping, handle returns, and manage dealer fulfillment directly or through 3PL partners

Hybrid Models: Emerging Middle Ground

Many manufacturers are exploring hybrid approaches that blend traditional and direct distribution:

- **Segmented by dealer size:** Direct relationships with large dealers (top 20% of volume), distributors for small accounts
- **Geographic segmentation:** Direct in strong regions, distributors for coverage gaps
- **Product-based segmentation:** New product launches and limited editions direct, mature products through distribution
- **Strategic account programs:** Key dealers get direct access while maintaining distributor relationships for breadth

According to industry analysis, firearms retailers are increasingly adopting hybrid models combining online/direct and traditional in-store distribution to navigate compliance requirements while accessing broader markets. Adjacent industries (consumer goods, industrial equipment) have successfully implemented hybrid models for decades.

Sources: "Firearms Retailers: Why 2025 Is Your Pivot Point for Hybrid Sales" (LinkedIn, 2025); Nike DTC + Wholesale strategy (consumer goods parallel)

Addressing the Channel Retaliation Question

The most common objection to exploring direct-to-dealer options is fear of distributor retaliation. This section addresses that concern directly.

The Concern Is Legitimate

Manufacturers reasonably worry that exploring direct relationships will trigger distributor pushback: reduced shelf space, unfavorable product placement, delayed shipments, or being dropped from catalogs. These concerns reflect real power dynamics in concentrated distribution.

A Different Frame: Optionality, Not Replacement

However, manufacturers with direct infrastructure view it as leverage, not rebellion:

- **Credible alternatives during negotiations:** Distributors adjust terms when manufacturers have proven direct capability
- **Serving direct-request dealers:** Large dealers increasingly want direct relationships; having infrastructure lets you respond
- **Geographic gap coverage:** Direct relationships fill regions where distributor presence is weak
- **New product testing:** Rapid market testing without requiring distributor buy-in or minimum orders
- **Strategic account management:** Direct relationships with key dealers while maintaining distributor access for volume

Industry experience shows manufacturers with direct capability negotiate better distributor terms. Distributors understand market dynamics and adjust behavior to retain volume.

Practical Implementation Without Conflict

Manufacturers can build direct infrastructure with minimal friction:

1. **Start with geographic gaps:** Build direct relationships in regions where distributor coverage is weak—adds value without competing
2. **Segment by dealer size:** Offer direct to dealers above certain volume thresholds; distributors typically serve smaller accounts better anyway

3. **Test with new products:** Launch limited editions or specialty SKUs through direct channels to prove capability

4. **Communicate openly:** Frame direct infrastructure as 'serving dealer segments distributors don't prioritize' rather than competition

The manufacturers who wait for distributor permission to build direct infrastructure will never get it. The manufacturers who build optionality and use it responsibly find distributors adjust their behavior accordingly.

Conclusion: Making Informed Channel Decisions

The firearms industry operates under distribution economics designed when dealer margins were healthier and manufacturers had fewer alternatives. Today's environment—with 12-18% dealer margins (averaging ~16.5%), estimated \$40-50 per transaction operating costs, and 27-33% aggregate distribution costs—warrants careful examination of channel strategy.

This analysis documents the quantifiable costs beyond base distributor discounts: freight (2-5%), payment terms opportunity cost (3-5% when properly calculated), returns (2-5%), and promotional allowances (2-5%). Additionally, strategic costs—loss of dealer relationships, limited pricing control, delayed market feedback, and reduced product launch flexibility—impact long-term competitiveness even when difficult to quantify precisely.

Traditional distributors provide real value: established networks, credit management, inventory aggregation, and logistics infrastructure. The question is not whether distributors add value, but whether the total cost—financial and strategic—justifies full dependence, or whether hybrid models might better serve manufacturer objectives.

Manufacturers who can capture even a portion of the 27-33% quantifiable cost through improved channel economics gain significant advantages: stronger margins, better dealer relationships, enhanced market intelligence, and strategic flexibility to innovate.

For Manufacturers Exploring Alternatives

For manufacturers evaluating direct-to-dealer or hybrid models, platforms like Oryx DTR provide transparent infrastructure connecting manufacturers to dealers while maintaining full FFL compliance. Unlike traditional intermediaries, these platforms offer direct manufacturer control over pricing, dealer relationships, and terms, with clear platform fees replacing opaque multi-layer costs.

Oryx DTR handles FFL verification, regulatory compliance, and dealer onboarding, allowing manufacturers to build direct relationships without creating entire infrastructure from scratch. This approach enables manufacturers to test direct models alongside traditional distribution, building optionality without forcing all-or-nothing channel decisions.

For more information or to request a complimentary channel cost analysis:

Visit: www.oryxdtr.com

Email: contact@oryxdr.com

Final Note: This white paper provides a framework for evaluating total channel economics using industry data and conservative estimates. Your specific situation will differ based on your unique circumstances. The goal is informed decision-making, not prescriptive recommendations. Consult with your financial and legal advisors when evaluating channel strategy changes.

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Data accurate as of December 2025. Industry figures are subject to quarterly/annual updates.

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About Oryx DTR

Oryx DTR is a direct-to-retailer platform infrastructure purpose-built for the firearms industry. We provide manufacturers with transparent, compliant connectivity to build direct dealer relationships while maintaining the scale and reach necessary for effective distribution.

Our platform combines FFL compliance management, logistics coordination, dealer verification, and real-time market intelligence to help manufacturers evaluate channel economics and implement hybrid distribution strategies. Whether you're an established brand seeking to supplement traditional distribution or an emerging manufacturer building your dealer network, Oryx DTR provides operational infrastructure for direct-to-dealer commerce.

For more information: www.oryxdtr.com