

Chapter 1

Shopping the Global Superstore

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You've heard the hype about online shopping. You may have even dabbled in it a bit — purchasing a small gift here or an airline ticket there. But have you really given thought to the possibility of buying online just about everything you may need?

Well you can. The hype is true. The shopping opportunities online are big — really big. You can buy almost anything you can think of from the rapidly growing digital marketplace called the World Wide Web — and you can do it 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year — in your fuzzy slippers.

What Is Online Shopping, Anyway?

You can think of online shopping as, well, the shopper's nirvana.

Okay, maybe *nirvana* is a bit much. However, what else can free you from the earthly constraints of both time and space, provide you with a universe of products and services that you never thought existed, and enable merchandise to miraculously appear on your doorstep with a simple click of your mouse?

But it's not all peaches and cream in this shopping land of milk and honey. In the words of that great philosopher and sportsman, Yogi Berra, "If you don't know where you're going, you just might get there." Picking a merchant, choosing a product, and slapping down your credit card can be a recipe for disaster if you haven't done your homework.



Remember the axiom from the Introduction of this book? “An informed online shopper is a successful online shopper.” So many online purchases go bad for the simple reason that the online shopper didn’t do the proper research before entering his or her credit card number into the order form.

Stepping through the Buying Process

So how do people make a decision to buy? Well, in fact, we make a lot of little decisions that all add up to whether we’ve made a purchase we’re happy with. In the real world we sense a need either through advertisements on TV, radio, newspapers, or magazines. Or we may see something a friend has or while window-shopping in the mall. After we decide to purchase a certain product or service, we start looking for a place to buy it. We may have a favorite store in mind, or a store recommendation from a friend, or be swayed by a retailer’s advertisement.

In concert with your choice of merchants, you may consider which one can offer you the best “deal” on your chosen product. However, the best deal may not necessarily mean the best price. If the product needs little explanation before the sale or support after the sale, like a book, CD, or video game, the cheapest price will suffice. But if you’re buying a diamond or a car, you’ll need an education up front to make the proper buying decision. And after you make the purchase, you want guarantees, warranties, or service after the sale. All of these items may add to the price of the product or service.

If time is infinite, we never seem to have enough of it. In the real world all the factors discussed previously could turn into a real chore involving a lot of time and effort wandering from store to store looking for the best deal, or even just getting educated. But on the Web, the decision-making and educating process is much different. Yes, you still need to go through the process but it is far less time consuming and even fun.

So how do you find the information online you need to make an informed buying decision? Who do you turn to? Where do you start? Ah, young grasshopper. The journey of a million miles starts with but a single step. And that first step in becoming an informed shopper is knowing exactly what you want.

Choosing the goods

You heard *The DaVinci Code* was a great book. You decide to buy it. No problem. Decision made. But suppose you’re in the market for a digital camera.

Unless you know the exact make and model, and are certain you'll be happy with it, you need to do a lot of research if you're going to make a successful purchase.

Luckily for you, the Web shines when it comes to offering just this sort of information. The Web is basically an information storehouse. You can find information on just about anything made today. You can find sites offering professional product reviews or sites with reviews of products by other shoppers like you (and nearly all the reviews are free) that can help you make the proper product or service purchasing decision. Chapter 29 covers several online product review sites, but here are a few of the best.

Utilizing product reviews

For unbiased, objective product reviews, check out these three popular sites — Consumer Reports, ConsumerSearch, and CNET.

The granddaddy of all product review organizations is Consumer Reports. This independent, nonprofit testing and information organization has been in existence since 1936. It has an online site at consumerreports.org that mirrors its prestigious magazine. The only downside is that the site isn't free. But if you want the best of a certain item, then this site can help you find it.

On the other hand, ConsumerSearch.com (consumersearch.com) is free to use. Even though it's not as popular or esteemed as Consumer Reports, this organization offers an extensive list of product reviews for your examination. At this site, product reviews are analyzed and then ranked for your use.

If you're a denizen of the universe of electronics and want unbiased reviews on computers, personal assistants, digital cameras, cell phones, camcorders, TVs, and home theaters, then CNET.com (cnet.com) is your choice of destinations for reviews on these types of products. You can even find reviews of wireless plans and Internet service providers on the site.

Reading consumer reviews

Some of the best opinions you can get on products you're interested in buying are those of your fellow shoppers. Two sites listing consumer opinions are Epinions and RateItAll.com.

Epinions (epinions.com) is a reliable source of product insight from consumers offering unbiased advice, in-depth product evaluations, and personalized recommendations. And what about the disgruntled consumer who may not be giving his or her opinion in a fair and balanced light? Epinions tries its best to highlight the people behind the reviews so that you know exactly whom to trust.

An example of an opinion on a brand of microwave might be as follows:

I cannot sing the praises of this microwave loudly enough. Mine has been going strong for the past three years and I don't know what I would do without it.

Or maybe one like this:

If you are in the market for a new microwave like we are, your money would be better spent on a different model.

Another site for a wide and diverse selection of reviews is RateItAll.com (rateitall.com). Think of RateItAll.com as a consumer coffee house where you can find, share, and seek opinions on many products. This organization offers consumer opinions on not only products, but retailers, too. You get double your times' worth using this site.

Getting the goods

If the Web's one thing, it's a virtual wealth of merchant choices. That's why this book is so valuable to you, the online shopper. I've done the picking for you on hundreds of merchants in dozens of shopping categories. But suppose you find a merchant that has a product you're looking for but isn't covered in the listings, or perhaps you saw it mentioned in a newspaper, TV, or radio ad. How do you know the merchant is legitimate and safe to buy from?

The Web comes to the rescue again.

A number of reliable information sites track and review merchants on the Web. Chapter 27 offers a list of them, but one of the best is BizRate.com.

Researching a merchant

BizRate.com (bizrate.com) is one of the oldest and well-known merchant review sites. It was one of the first organizations to rate online merchants. The ratings are obtained from actual consumers who have just made a purchase at an online retailer; data is collected from more than one million online buyers each month. When the order is completed, the customer is asked to rate the shopping experience and the merchant. After a few weeks, the customer is sent an e-mail questionnaire asking whether he or she is satisfied with the purchase and if not, why. This information is stored as a review on the BizRate.com site.

Because the merchants that BizRate.com rates are all members of BizRate.com, a good thumbnail description of each store it rates is supplied, including a brief description of the store, full contact information, and a list of its features and services.

At BizRate.com you might see reviews like this:

Awesome experience. Everything is great. The tech support is first rate. They have my business for life. Perfect!

Or maybe one like this:

The JVC CD Recorder I ordered was a complete lemon. The plastic bag surrounding the machine was not sealed — it was probably a product returned for repair!

Either way, you get the information you're looking for.

Using the Vital Five to choose a merchant

Everyone is looking for a good deal when buying a product or service. But if the deal looks too good to be true, it probably is.



You may be tempted to grab that deal before it goes away. But here's some good advice: Another good deal is always coming down the pike. You may miss a lot of Queen Marys but all it takes is to catch one Titanic and you're left with the sinking feeling that you made a poor buying decision. That's why the Vital Five of *2005 Online Shopping Directory For Dummies* — Price, Selection, Convenience, Service, and Security — are so important to making an informed buying decision.

When it comes to the Price category, you can find a wide range of prices on products and within categories on the Web. Discount stores and outlet stores sell brand-name merchandise at low, low prices. At the other extreme are stores that sell high-end and expensive luxury goods. A large number of small one-of-a-kind boutiques exist that sell their wares at specialty prices. And some retailers sell products and services at the suggested retail prices or at a small discount.



Keep in mind that the low price you see may not reflect the best deal for that product or service on the Web. The best price may not be the *shipped* price. Be sure to check out what the shipping and handling fees are when buying from a merchant. That 30 percent off list price may be added back into the shipped price of the product — and then some.

As for Selection, unless the merchant offers a product not easily found elsewhere on the Web, look for retailers who have a wide and deep selection of the product they sell. Being able to compare products at a single site saves shopping time, which is one of the most important reasons to shop the Web.

The Convenience factor refers to how easy it is to purchase from a merchant and how many convenient services the merchant offers the shopper. For example, how easy is it to use the site? Do you arrive at the storefront and find yourself confronted and confused by a hundred different pieces of information? Is what the retailer sells presented to you in an easy-to-understand manner? Can you easily navigate the shopping site? Can you find what you're looking for without clicking through endless Web pages?



A good indication of a well-designed online store is this: If you can reach the Buy button of a product you came to purchase in three to four mouse clicks, then the merchant has done a good job of designing his or her Web store.

Other convenience factors to look for at a merchant's Web store are good descriptions of the product or service that answers your questions and, if a product, at least one picture of it. See whether the merchant offers multiple payment options, an easy-to-use shopping cart, a site search engine, and — very important for ease of use — a FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) page. Finally, look for convenience services like gift certificates or gift-wrapping, or a Preferred Shopper Club where you can get additional discounts the next time you visit the merchant.

Service for the online consumer is another vital component to take into consideration. The level of customer service offered the online shopper is very important because it offers a way to get answers to questions before you buy as well as a way to get answers to your questions after you buy. A merchant should offer you multiple ways to contact it. Look for phone and fax numbers, a complete mailing address, and an e-mail address. The more ways you can contact the merchant, the better chance you'll have of answering product and shipping questions before the sale, resolving customer service problems after the sale, or just checking on the status of your order. Keep in mind, however, that some small mom-and-pop stores only have an e-mail address. Consider this when making your purchase.



Make sure the merchant gives you a complete *shipped price* for the product you want to buy *before* you give out your credit card number. The last thing you want is a surprise at the end of your order.

Other service factors to look for are information on order confirmations and status updates of your order. These services are normally done with a confirmation e-mail after the sale and periodic e-mails alerting you to the status and shipping date of your purchase. Merchants should also offer a 100 percent satisfaction guarantee and be willing to take back the product with no questions asked. There may be some exceptions to this rule, such as for customized products or underwear and bathing suits. For these items, the merchant should offer some kind of partial refund or a store credit.

Also check out the company's shipping policies. What are the costs? Does the company have a flat rate for shipping products or a shipping rate based on carrier rates? Does it ship to APO/FPO addresses? Is overnight shipping or international shipping available? You should ask these questions and have them answered before you place your order.

Finally, there are the security concerns. These come in three flavors — credit card security, privacy issues, and third-party endorsements. If you place an order online and enter your credit card number onto an online form, you want to make sure that the information you entered is encrypted when it is sent over the Web. Also, you want to know what personal information the merchant is collecting from you and how it plans to use it. I cover this information in more detail in the next chapter.

Many sites have a third-party endorsement on how they do business and how they deal with their customers. The most popular of these third-party endorsers is the BBB or Better Business Bureau (bbbonline.com).

Two more popular third-party endorsers are BizRate (bizrate.com) and WebAssured (webassured.com). I discussed BizRate and the evaluations of their member merchants available to the consumer earlier in this chapter. A merchant endorsed by WebAssured promises a high standard of conduct in dealing with customers. Web sites carrying the WebAssured seal promise that customers get whatever they order.

There you are. You're now an informed online shopper. Use the product and merchant review sites before you shop, keep the Vital Five in mind when you shop, and your shopping excursions will be both rewarding and fun.

