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Shopping Online for Freedom, Control and Even Fun

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ABSTRACT

Consumers shop online for goal-oriented, instrumental reasons, and for experiential reasons. However, goal-oriented motives are more common among online shoppers than are experiential motives. Based on our research of online shopping using 5 offline and 4 online focus groups conducted in conjunction with Harris Interactive, we identify and discuss attributes that facilitate goal-oriented online shopping, including accessibility/convenience, selection, information availability and lack of unwanted sociality from retail sales help or shopping partners such as spouses. The goal-oriented characteristics of online shopping collectively result in an experience that is involving for buyers, but which results in low commitment, “nibbling” shopping behavior. Buyers shop when and where they want, and are comfortable abandoning a site and products placed in a shopping cart either on a whim or to further consider their purchase. While consumers are more likely to describe offline shopping in experiential terms, we find evidence of experiential motivations for online shopping emerging. We discuss four types of experiential/browsing behaviors that are reported by online consumers: 1) auctions, 2) ongoing hobby-type involvement 3) bargain hunting and 4) gift shopping. Positive surprise and sometimes the ability to interact with others who share their interests are attributes online buyers associate with enjoyment. We offer managerial implications of mixing online and offline shopping, suggest ways in which the experiential aspects of online shopping can be enhanced without interfering with the goal-oriented desires of consumers, explore the pitfalls of trying to create an online community and discuss the designing of features for consumers looking for an online experience.

SHOPPING ONLINE FOR FREEDOM, CONTROL AND EVEN FUN

The number of consumers buying online, and the amount being spent by online buyers has been on the rise; Forrester Research has estimated Internet sales in 1999 to be more than double that of 1998, \$20 billion. In comparison, overall retail sales in the U.S. totaled \$13 trillion in 1999. Thus, e-commerce sales currently account for only 1% of retail sales, and experts and scholars have argued over the possible upper limit to the percentage of consumer online spending. Will the upper limit of online spending exceed that of other direct marketing at 15%? Or will it be as much as one third of purchases in many retail product categories by 2010 as recently suggested by Forrester Research?

Ultimately, the degree to which online and offline shopping fulfill various consumer needs -- both utilitarian and experiential -- is likely to impact the amount of shopping dollars that consumers will choose to spend in each environment. Inarguably, online and offline environments present different *shopping experiences* even when the same products can be purchased. Consumers shop with utilitarian, goal driven motives as well as for experiential motives, such as fun and entertainment; in sum, they shop to acquire products or they shop to shop. Experiential motivations are associated with extended browsing behavior, while utilitarian shopping is more efficient and focused, “surgical” if you will. Of course, total customer satisfaction can be conceptualized as a combination of the degree to which the desired combination of experiential and utilitarian needs are met by a particular shopping experience.

Based on our research, we suggest that online and offline shopping experiences are perceived and evaluated by shoppers with respect to their ability to deliver satisfaction on two dimensions: (1) goal fulfillment and (2) experience-related outcomes. Customers vary with respect to their needs on a given product-buying occasion and will choose the venue (or mix of venues) according to their needs. Our research suggests that goal-directed motivations are more

likely to be satisfied online while experiential shopping motives are more likely to be associated with offline shopping. Nevertheless, there are online buyers who shop for fun; typically they shop auction sites, engage in ongoing hobby type interests, or enjoy looking for bargains online. And, there are utilitarian in-store shoppers who attempt to minimize time and effort. It is well known in retailing that the men's department is placed near the exit so that shopping-hating males can get in and out quickly. In store shopping also provides the utilitarian benefit of examining products and immediate gratification.

Our research (5 offline and 4 online focus groups of online buyers conducted in conjunction with Harris Interactive) indicates that current consumers of e-commerce are satisfied overall and expect to increase their e-commerce spending in the future as availability of products increases. At the same time, consumer expectations, particularly with regard to features that facilitate online consumers' tendencies to be goal-oriented, are increasing. Our focus groups were designed to cover issues identified by published research as being important, including selection, convenience, ease of use, price and personalization. Moreover, we asked focus group participants to compare online and offline shopping which increased our understanding of the underlying determinants of online shopping. As well, we investigated the degree to which online buyers perform relatively narrow product searches as opposed to browsing online. We categorize the various themes arising from consumer experiences online and offline as being more utilitarian/goal-directed or experiential.

Experiential Vs. Utilitarian Shopping Motivations

Marketers recognize that shoppers tend to shop differently depending on whether or not their motivations for searching are primarily experiential or goal directed. The nature of ongoing search and hobbyist activities is more process- than outcome-oriented. Collectors enjoy the

“thrill of the hunt” as much as the acquisition of items for the collection. Scholars have also suggested that the higher playfulness associated with experiential behavior results in outcomes such as positive mood and satisfaction. Nevertheless, recent market research indicates that an overwhelming majority of Internet buyers are searchers rather than the more experiential browsers. For instance, Jupiter Communications (1999) reports that 77% of shoppers go online with a specific purchase in mind. Duration time or "stickiness" is a measure used by marketing scholars to measure of the degree to which behavior is experiential, with longer times suggesting more experiential behavior. Currently, weekly data provided by Nielsen-NetRatings regularly show that the "stickiness" of e-commerce Web sites is quite limited, with the length of visits at the top 20 sites (with the significant exception of e-Bay) being largely 15 minutes or less. A typical weekly average time spent on Barnes and Noble, for instance, is 10 minutes, just about long enough to find a book and actually complete the transaction. The average time spent on Amazon.com hovers at around 15 to 20 minutes, despite their high conversion rate, wide variety of product categories, and their use of techniques designed to increase customer browsing, including customer reviews, opt-in special interest email lists, and purchase circles showing the top 20 book buys from your company, your current or former school, or your city.

As compared to experiential shopping, or shopping for fun, utilitarian shopping is task-oriented, efficient, rational, and deliberate. Utilitarian shopping is more likely to be described by consumers as "work" and to be evaluated by terms commonly associated with work performance such as "success" and "accomplishment." The online medium facilitates this task-orientation as search costs are dramatically reduced. Moreover, while search on the Internet can be non-linear, many users currently prefer to undertake efficient linear searches on the Internet using the fewest number of clicks to get to the information they want. For example, the mouseover pull-down

menus of EddieBauer.com and JCPenney.com allow users to head directly to particular categories of merchandise with only one click. And web site engines allow increasingly narrow searches such as “all women’s black pumps with 2 ½ inch heels in a size 7 narrow.”

Both online and offline shopping can be goal-directed. However, online buying particularly facilitates goal-directed search because it is convenient, accessible, allows comparison of pricing and products, and in general, gives buyers a great deal of freedom and control. In fact, several of our informants said they saved "impulse buying" for offline. Without the smells and appearance of tempting food items whose purchase was not previously planned, online grocery buyers may see their bills go down, despite the higher prices. On the other hand, offline shopping can facilitate goal-directedness by giving consumers the ability to touch and try on merchandise, and providing them the opportunity to take possession of goods immediately. Despite the significant advantage of immediate gratification from offline shopping, however, consumers consistently describe online purchasing as being more goal-directed than offline buying.

In fact, online buyers told us that they did not necessarily think of buying on the net as "shopping." Rather, they think of it as “buying.” As well, online buyers often said they decided to go online to shop only when they had a specific purchase in mind, describing online buying as consisting largely of planned purchases. We specifically asked online buyers if they are more impulsive while shopping online or offline and were overwhelmingly informed that shoppers are *more impulsive offline*. The general lack of impulsivity on online is due to the inability to take possession of goods immediately, the ease of returning later to buy the goods after further thought, and the trouble of having to mail back unwanted items. Moreover, slow download speed makes browsing several products online a somewhat unsatisfying experience. On the other hand, there are several features of online shopping that facilitate utilitarian buying

behavior. Specifically, goal-directed buying is facilitated online because of: (1) convenience and accessibility (2) selection (3) availability of information and (4) lack of sociality.

Convenience and Accessibility

The availability of websites 24/7 and not having to wait on the phone to place an order make web-based purchasing the ultimate in accessibility. Participants in our focus groups told us they like that they can shop at home after stores are closed. As well, they admitted shopping at work and school, partially because of the broader bandwidth afforded them. One participant who travels 50 weeks a year finds himself purchasing presents, books, flowers and travel arrangements and doing so at hotels and at the office at lunch.

Importantly, the qualities of accessibility and convenience are often related to control and freedom; in fact, focus group participants often used the very words "freedom" and "control" to describe the experience of shopping online. Perhaps the most poignant example of this was an 81-year-old woman who purchases groceries online. She explained that she lives alone and recently had pneumonia; access to online shopping allows her, and she believes will continue to allow her to live at home independently a lot longer.

In addition to the convenience afforded by the access of online shopping, overall buying effort is reduced because online shoppers do not need to conform to social conventions of grooming and acceptable behavior. For instance, some of our informants mentioned specifically that they can (not necessarily that they actually did) "shop nekked" or "in my underwear." Shopping online provides buyers an environment comfortable and personalized for them -- their own home.

Nevertheless, in some important ways, websites are less convenient. Buyers cannot touch products or try on clothing. Visual inspection is not nearly as easy as in a store. While some

sites, such as LandsEnd.com and EddieBauer.com offer “virtual” dressing rooms or models, no participants in our research mentioned trying out clothing on virtual models. Consumers sometimes cope with the inability to touch or try on by not purchasing clothing or shoes online, or by checking out items offline before buying online. Web site policies can affect consumer willingness to take the risk of buying something they have not physically inspected. While barnesandnoble.com does not permit merchandise bought online to be returned to their bricks-and-mortar stores, other retailers such as Gap, Inc. and J. Crew Group, Inc. do allow it. When pets.com makes an error in the type of pet food sent, they ship the correct food and ask that the customer donate the other to an animal shelter, saving the customer shipping costs.

The fact that there is no immediate gratification from online purchases is probably the most frustrating inconvenience. Developers such as Trammel Crow are developing “pass-through facilities” and Amazon.com is investing in distribution space across the country to speed the delivery of goods ordered online. Barnesandnoble.com is testing a system for same day delivery of books ordered online while Kozmo.com is systematically spreading its ability to deliver convenience items within an hour of purchase into new geographical areas. However, it is doubtful that most online retailers will ever match the immediate gratification of offline stores.

Selection

Online product selection is frequently offered as a goal-directed reason to shop online. Several of our online participants lived where many of the products they desire to buy would require them to drive relatively long distances. Others mentioned specialized hobbies such as sword collecting or the need for special sizes in clothing. The Internet’s ability to concentrate geographically dispersed consumers allows niche players the ability to serve their markets profitably. For example, oddballshoe.com enables men with large feet (up to 25 EEEE) to find

fashion and selection on the Internet when local communities don't have sufficient numbers of large-footed men to support a bricks-and-mortar store. Similarly, Indiagalore.com offers a wide array of food, home products and clothing for Indian expatriates.

Online is also perceived to be a potential source of inventory when the local offline store is out of stock. Importantly, online buyers' perceptions that e-commerce offers them better selection, however, refers to the selection available on the Internet in general, rather than the selection on individual sites, which is often perceived as limited as compared to the retailer's offline stores and even catalogs. A recent Forrester Research survey of 50 online apparel stores found that the selection at these sites compared to catalog and in-store is limited. Thus, consumers see the Internet as a place where they expect to find selection, and where they do find selection, but often not on the web site of a particular seller. Moreover, online buyers expect that over time the complete product lines of their favorite retailers will be available online, and cite the anticipated increase in selection as a reason they will be shopping on the Internet more in the future.

Availability of Information/Comparison

Information is an important resource for consumers using e-tailing in a goal directed fashion; the widespread availability of information is one of the reasons that many buyers often view buying on the Internet as a utilitarian activity. On the web, search costs are dramatically reduced. Improvements include the reduction of irrelevant information, improved information organization and better information processing aids. But the most important of the information benefits to consumers in our focus groups is simply the availability of information.

The Internet as a medium facilitates researching product specifications and prices quite well; in this sense, the medium is the message. Consistent with the importance of finding information

easily, the ability to locate desired information on a web site -- including manufacturer's websites where products are not necessarily sold -- is very important to most buyers and increases their sense of control. Online buyers frequently complained that sites they would otherwise like to patronize have inadequate navigation and search engine capabilities. Yet, despite the fact that both online buyers and the business press stress the importance of ease of use, Internet companies presently spend 300 times more on advertising than on usability testing. Interestingly, unique selection and occasionally good deals entice some customers to tolerate difficult-to-use sites.

Another aspect of the importance of information to customers involves the interactivity of some e-commerce sites. For instance, when making plane reservations, online buyers feel that they can more fully investigate options than they can offline. In addition, information can be printed out and saved, something that cannot be done based on a spoken conversation. Importantly, most online buyers *revel* in the fact that they can get information directly without having to go through a salesperson who is largely perceived to be limited compared to a website; thus, buying on the web gives consumers more perceived control over the interaction. Nevertheless, sometimes the information is perceived to be too much and users lament that they must look through a lot of unneeded information to find what they need. Hewlett Packard re-organized their site last year, as it had become too complex and difficult to search, and increased sales immediately.

As well as text, information is also provided by appropriate use of graphics. Users do not want to see graphics they do not need, but they appreciate the opportunity to download larger pictures and different angles of products they want to see. According to Bizrate.com, consumers rate product representation to be the most important factor to them when purchasing online.

Gallery Furniture, located in Houston, has placed cameras throughout the store and web users can click on a picture to move cameras around the store. With the increased ability to inspect products from a remote location, Gallery has seen sales increase 20% to \$120 million, more than recovering the \$1 million to install the more than 48 cameras.

Lack of sociality

While shopping online, the primary relationship is not between the seller and buyer, but rather between buyer and the mediated environment. Interestingly, it turns out that online buyers largely like the relative lack of social interaction while buying online. Absent online are sales people, spouses, crowds and lines. Moreover, the ability to find what they need and to complete a transaction without having to go through a human being is associated by online buyers with freedom and control. Some buyers enjoy the ability to anonymously visit upscale sites or stores where they might be embarrassed to shop offline, such as Victoria's Secret.

The absence of retail workers is appreciated for two reasons: (1) salespeople are often perceived to be unhelpful or uninformed and (2) they pressure or obligate buyers. Online buyers frequently and vividly explained that the ability and helpfulness of retail workers is lacking and has declined over the years. They often connect their desire to shop online with their frustration with offline help. From the youngest member of our focus groups to grandmothers, online buyers appreciate the fact that they can avoid sales workers online. Shoppers sometimes like to avoid even those salespeople who are helpful, because they feel obligated to purchase even when they do not really desire to buy an item. Thus, shoppers considering a transaction online perceive less pressure to purchase; again, the decision to make or not make a transaction is under their control, and this control is an advantage of online shopping. As with other goal-directed themes, the lack of people online is associated with freedom. As one informant summed up the

primary advantage of online shopping: "Freedom. 90% of shopping hassle is dealing with people. I need them, but not as much as they think I need them."

But, the lack of sociality online isn't just due to unwanted sale help and pressure. As well, it occasionally extends to the unwanted presence of a spouse while shopping. Spouses interfere either by purchasing too much during a shopping trip, or by pressuring their mate to finish their shopping more quickly.

Despite the fact that online consumers largely like *not* having to deal with other people while online, they do sometimes require help and want to talk to someone when they do. E-mail assistance helps satisfy the need for help online, but is sometimes perceived as being too slow. Again, users like to be in control, which means that while they would like to avoid needing help, they expect and want help to be available when needed. Responding to this need, Amazon recently built a huge call center in recognition that customers with problems want to talk to someone, while Land's End has offered live help at their web site. Unfortunately, online sources are sometimes mentioned as being as unhelpful as offline sources. Online buyers also complain that email responses are often not individualized for them and thus do not resolve their problem (e.g. form email responses).

In short, online buyers largely appreciate the lack of people while they are shopping; they do occasionally want help, but they want that help to be at their request and to be responsive to their individual needs. According to a study by Forrester Research, 37% of online buyers say they use *more* customer service from e-tailers than bricks-and-mortar stores, yet a study by FAC/Equities indicates that one-third of the top 100 online retailers do not respond to e-mail or do not offer an e-mail address for customer service on their websites. E-commerce providers can utilize their sites to combine the properties of impersonal mass communication with face-to-face

communication. Users, however, want the choice of when and how they interact with this "human face" to be firmly under their control.

Freedom, Control, High Involvement, Low Commitment

The four attributes that facilitate goal-oriented shopping -- convenience, availability of information, selection, and lack of sociality online are associated with freedom and control. Web customers are not passive recipients of marketing efforts, but instead, central players with a reasonable degree of control over the marketing process. In fact, consumers are actively involved with and interested in the search and buying process online, but paradoxically, not very committed. The high-involvement, low commitment quality of online shopping is very desirable to participants. Online shoppers specifically use words like "commitment" and "dedicated experience" to describe offline shopping and to contrast it with the *less committed* experience online. If consumers have a few minutes in their schedule, they can sit down at the computer and search for a needed item. If they complete the transaction, fine, and if not, they feel they can pick up where they left off whenever they like. Given this in and out, on and off shopping behavior, the often-mentioned importance of ease of use and making it easy for consumers to easily pick up where they left on when they return to a site takes on increased proportion. Some sites, such as Gap.com, save shopping carts that are abandoned knowing that online buyers often come back to complete the transaction at a later time. Web pages could be personalized to display product pages recently browsed to facilitate the tendency to spread a purchase decision across several visits.

When shopping offline, consumers find it much more important to reach closure and make a purchase; coming home empty-handed results in disappointment. Online however, coming away empty-handed is not problematic because of the more limited investment required as compared

to offline shopping wherein shoppers have to drive the car and visit a store. Relatedly, shoppers will put off transactions, because of the lack of investment and pressure and the “always there” quality of online shopping; it's easy to come back and complete a transaction a later time when they've had more time to think about it. The lack of sales help online is also associated the sense of feeling lower commitment online. Online buyers can much more freely abandon shopping carts because a sales person isn't watching them and because they've decided that they just don't want to spend the money right at the moment. While various studies show that more than 80% of shopping carts are regularly abandoned, about one in five consumers ultimately return to complete the transaction.

In summary, our informants reported that their freedom and control is increased because they can shop when and where they want, they don't have to deal with salespeople, and they can find the information they want. Online shopping requires less investment in time and effort and less obligation because of the limited interaction with salespeople. The result is that online shopping is perceived as being low in commitment. Online shoppers enjoy this lack of commitment: it increases their efficacy, helps them minimize the effort of making a purchase, and thus increases their sense of control in the online environment compared to other purchase situations.

Experiential Themes

In contrast to the deliberate process many online buyers describe, offline purchases are more likely to be described as spontaneous. Experiential shopping behavior is shopping with a desire to be entertained, have fun, and to be immersed in the store. In contrast to shopping on the net, shopping offline is described as resulting in many more opportunities to have fun and be diverted, both serendipitously finding desired products and by sales. Customers like the perhaps

relatively rare but *good* help they receive offline. In addition to having access to help when needed, focus group participants often enjoyed shopping with friends and family offline. Factors such as ambiance, smells, sounds and people-watching were mentioned as enjoyable elements of offline shopping. While offline shopping is more likely to be associated with these experiential benefits, some online buyers nevertheless describe online shopping as being enjoyable, fun, and even sociable.

Positive Sociality

Although positive sociality in online shopping is limited by contrast to in store shopping, many eBay participants report that they enjoy chatting with other eBay sellers and buyers concerning their shared hobbies and had developed friendships with people all over the United States. OnSale.com enables its bidders to attach comments to their bids, allowing participants to taunt and brag, all in good fun. An especially intriguing opportunity for putting a sociable face on an online transaction is through the contact that occurs offline through delivery service and follow-up phone calls. For example, participants in our focus groups who purchase groceries from HomeGrocers.com describe the service as being more "alive" than other online businesses and evince more of an emotional connection than to other online businesses.

A relatively new service, Icontact.com, offers some insight into utilizing customer service in a proactively social way on the web. The service tracks consumers' movements through websites, and customer service representatives step in if they believe they are needed. The service has increased sales at the Marriott site 400% in two months. Icontact.com particularly promotes the use of the service for heavy and loyal users; these customers are not only more likely to be open to experiential and conversational interactions at a site, they are also more likely to be a segment meriting the financial investment required. The service is probably quite

appropriate for sites that draw highly involved hobbyists as well, as these shoppers are more likely to be looking for an experience rather than being narrowly focused on a specific purchase. For sites with highly involved customers, and for loyal buyers, the service should enable a stronger bond between the company and their customers.

Browsing Online

While some of our participants said they do not browse at all online, others report specific circumstances that are associated with frequent and longer visits to sites. In fact, buyers told us they browse for four reasons: (1) auction activities (2) ongoing hobby-type search (3) bargain hunting and (4) avoiding offline shopping. Auction activities and ongoing hobby-type search are the most frequently mentioned motivations for online browsing. Auctions present several experiential benefits. The available products change often; many of the products are unusual, unique or collectible; bidding introduces an element of risk and gaming. Consumers don't "buy," they "win"! All in all, positive surprise is the major benefit of auction sites.

Online shoppers often have hobbies that they actively pursue while online. The most natural hobby is computers and software, but shoppers reported other interests, such as camping and buying toys for grandchildren as well. These shoppers frequently and regularly check sites of interest.

Another activity that results in browsing online is looking for great deals. Buy.com is frequently mentioned as a place to look for bargains, consistent with their positioning and their online popularity; buyers checked the site often not just for specific products but also to find good deals. Some shoppers specifically use online shopping agents to help them price items; in fact, in our online focus groups, shoppers shown MySimon.com, although previously largely unaware of the site, evinced enthusiasm for the site and immediately started using it to browse

various sites. Consistent with discount shopping being a more experiential motive, goal-oriented shoppers are actually *less* likely to use shopping agents than are the experiential shoppers we interviewed; the experiential shoppers enjoy the fun of surfing various sites and finding the best deals.

The final reason that shoppers report browsing online is to avoid doing so in malls; these users report that their online browsing behavior mirrors offline browsing. While not many participants reported using online shopping in this way regularly, gift shopping in particular was related to online browsing. These shoppers browse to find ideas for gifts and are largely doing so to avoid offline crowds and hassles.

Based on our discussion, we present Table 1. This table suggests that accessibility/convenience, selection, information availability, control of sociality, low commitment to the experience and an outcome of freedom and control all mark goal-directed search. These factors and the outcome of control and freedom are more likely to be associated with online as compared to offline shopping.

Goal Directed Search	Important Factors	Outcome Desired
	Accessibility/Convenience	Freedom, Control
	Selection	
	Information Availability	
	Control of Sociality	
	Commitment to Goal, Not experience	
Experiential Search	Ambiance	Fun
	Positive Sociality	
	Positive Surprise	
	Commitment to Experience as important or more important than goal	

On the other hand, experiential search is more likely to be fulfilled offline rather than online; the important factors of experiential search involve the dedicated nature of the experience, the ambiance of the environment, immediate gratification, shopping with friends and family, good

help, and the experiences and products the consumer encounter serendipitously. Nevertheless, there are shoppers who find positive sociality and thus derive significant experiential benefits online.

Managerial Implications

The Mix of Online and Offline Shopping

Admittedly, consumer experiences are likely to change as technologies such as broadband and information appliances become a mainstream reality, and as offline retailers adapt to the competitive threat of e-commerce; nevertheless, Jupiter Communications suggests that broadband capability is largely not expected to hit mainstream users for at least five years. Moreover, information appliances (such as smart phones and PDAs) are not likely to deliver a rich media experience soon, and their diffusion may accentuate use of online environments for efficient searching and buying. As well, the virtual marketplace may not mirror the offline marketplace in the foreseeable future for reasons that have little to do with technological limitations; the online environment has unique capabilities, such as relative anonymity and information richness, that are likely to encourage e-tailing to grow and develop in directions that might be compromised by attempting to mirror the bricks and mortar shopping experience too closely. Nevertheless, the experience of being present online, or telepresence, is currently far less compelling during online shopping than the multidimensional, multi-sensation possibilities offered by offline.

Importantly, customers are already showing clear signs of multimodal shopping: checking out the store so they can touch or try online and then buying offline or looking for product information and pricing online and then purchasing offline. The unique attributes of each setting are thus valued by consumers. In fact, the two modes of shopping complement each other so

well that former Internet pure-plays such as Gazoontite.com which specializes in allergy-friendly products, are now building bricks and mortar stores as showrooms and places to better learn about customers. REI.com leverages the tendency of consumers to use online websites as a source of retailer stock and selection not available in the store by locating kiosks with access to their website in their bricks and mortars stores. As well, pure plays are forming partnerships with land-based businesses. For example, Petopia.com has partnered with Petco to help with marketing and distribution; Petco is using the opportunity by testing Petopia-branded merchandising displays in-store and placing kiosks in stores with access to the Petopia website.

Nat Goldhaber, chief executive of Cybergold, predicts that shopping malls will decline and begin to disappear over the next 10 years due to consumers' closer relationship with manufacturers. He predicts that bricks-and-mortar shopping will lose its social function "as people use the Internet for the purpose of social interaction." We disagree. The experiential qualities of offline shopping meet real needs that cannot be met virtually

The Importance of Goal-Focused Shopping

Before designing the mix of experiential vs. goal-focused features offered on a site, a company needs to understand both its products and its users. Those using web sites to complete transactions desire sites to offer the complete selection offered offline or in a catalog. They want to serve themselves and will serve themselves by locating information as long as it is relatively easy to find. Additionally, online buyers largely do not expect or desire "high touch" service unless they have questions or problems with customer service, in which case they expect relatively speedy answers responsive to their individual problems. These goal-oriented shoppers may visit a site several times before making a purchase as they often look in short spaces of time, but make the actual purchase decision across several online sessions. Those sites such as

Gap.com who leave the shopping cart still full even after a customer has left the site are responding to the knowledge that online buyers often come back at a later time to complete the transaction. Any feature that increases the sense of user control and freedom, including order tracking, purchase histories, saving information for quicker transactions during future sessions, and opt-in email notification of new products and special deals, increases the satisfaction of goal-oriented users.

In sum, companies anxious to build experiential features into their site may be overlooking the fact that transaction-oriented customers can build ties to an online business over time when they are well-served. These customers are busy and are not likely to make the effort to switch or look for lower price alternatives, as long as they can find the selection and information they want, make the transaction easily and have it delivered in a timely fashion. In short, offering goal-oriented online consumers what they want, when they want it, and answering inquiries in a timely fashion creates loyalty, even if these customers are not interested in browsing, being entertained, or interacting with other customers or service representatives on the site.

In fact, focus group participants said that the first opportunity to cement them to an online brand came when there was a problem with the order; customer loyalty increased substantially when online buyers learned that customer service representatives were available online or at a 1-800 number and were willing and able to resolve the situation quickly. Conversely, online buyers who did not receive satisfaction at these critical incidents terminated their relationship and became willing to do business with a site that may charge more, but offers better customer service. For example, customers who were completely uninterested in Amazon.com's experiential features such as customer review or purchase circles nevertheless often expressed

great loyalty to the company and willingness to pay somewhat higher prices because of the superior customer service offered by the site.

The advent of wireless "m-commerce" in which users "surf" their phones is likely to amplify transaction-oriented consumer behavior. At the same time, local businesses should be able to use m-commerce to provide convenient service, such as allowing customers to purchase movie tickets, to be notified when their dry cleaning is ready for pick-up, or when their favorite restaurant is offering a new dish at a special price.

The Difficulty of Creating Online Community

The positive importance of freedom from people -- including sales people, spouses and crowds online -- partially explains why many schemes designed to integrate community with sites have so far elicited limited interest. Business writers suggest that building user communities, or "hobby tribes" of the most involved, loyal customers, will be key to success on the Internet. There are examples of such user group communities on the Internet, such as ticalc.org and calc.org, which are sites devoted to Texas Instrument calculator enthusiasts. But, many of these community efforts have limited or no commerce abilities, and in fact, the notion of community and sharing is often antithetical to commerce. Occasionally, a high-involvement product area will draw a related community that may be blended with commercial interests; good examples are KBKids.com and FamilyWonder.com that offer parenting guidance including everything from articles on child development, to appropriate movies for children and planning birthday parties. High interest in products sold on the site or related content is necessary to sustain such a community.

Another model is to create community anywhere on the Internet to subscribers of a particular community software; Gooey and Third Voice offer ways for users to meet and interact as they

roam around cyberspace, leaving messages wherever they please, including e-commerce websites. Yet, Gooey and Third Voice have drawn limited use and attention of online surfers, and it is doubtful that sufficient numbers of consumers will value the service beyond the novelty stage.

Designing for Consumers Looking for an Online Experience

Experiential browsing behavior is desirable online as it is associated with increased impulse purchases, and more frequent visits. Before emphasizing such benefits, however, sites need to identify a base of users who are regular visitors and who are involved with the product category. Moreover, experiential benefits need to be offered without interfering with goal-directed search. An example of an experiential feature aimed at bargain hunters is the frequent markdowns on overstock items on LandsEnd.com that encourage customers who are discount shoppers to visit frequently to see if the products are still available and have been further cut. Auctions at SharperImage.com have a similar function; they draw customers interested in the excitement and community created by bidding. Moreover, products and services with a hobbyist or enthusiast base are natural matches for e-commerce, content and community. For example, in addition to finding a dealer who will make quotes on a specific car (aimed at more transaction-based motives), Autobytel offers "ask the expert" and "message board" features which are aimed more at car enthusiasts. Additionally, those organizations offering delivery, such as online grocers, Staples.com and Kozmo.com also have a significant opportunity to establish an emotional bond with customers through offline interactions even though their primary motivations for shopping online are goal-oriented.

Some features simultaneously offer both goal-oriented and experiential benefits. For instance, the interactive features of Buick-com that allow surfers to view the car from every angle offer goal-oriented shoppers information about the car, while engaging experiential shoppers with surprise and novelty.

Conclusion

The gold rush is on. New ideas and business models are erupting almost daily, technology is growing and changing, and consumers are learning that e-tailing and e-tailing support services such as comparison agents and reverse auctions can bring increasing control and freedom into their lives. Nevertheless, e-commerce will continue, to varying degrees, to satisfy both instrumental and experiential consumer needs. Understanding the motivations that consumers and consumer segments have for shopping at your website as well as your land-based stores and tracking these changes across time should provide direction for planning and implementing features and benefits that will increase customer satisfaction and loyalty both online and offline. "Owning" an online customer should prove challenging, but not impossible in the world of Internet Marketing.