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Fri, Nov 26, 99

Bread and butter Internet sales win one more convert

By NIALL MCKAY

Can man (or woman) live by the Internet alone? Recently, I decided to find out. I ordered all my shopping, bread, milk, groceries etc from various Internet sites. Now the rules of the game were that for two weeks I was not allowed to enter a so-called bricks and mortar shop.

If I couldn't find what I wanted in cyber-space then I had to do without.

However, I was relieved to find that in California, at least, there is almost nothing that can't be bought on the Internet.

So off I went. My first port of call was to WebVan.com - an online market that sells fresh fruit, vegetables, meats and pre-cooked meals. The service will be launched across most major US cities later in the year but for the time being it's available in San Francisco.

WebVan has it's own warehouses, butchers, kitchens, and fleet of vans that can usually be seen double-parked in various locations around San Francisco.

The problem with WebVan, or any of the online grocery websites, is that it is difficult to find what you want on your first visit. Much like trying to make your way around a new supermarket. Furthermore, while you can dispense with queuing at the checkout, the service is massively over-subscribed. Every day is like a Saturday afternoon in Superquinn.

Web pages take too long to download and you need to think about three days ahead because it's practically

impossible to get a delivery any sooner.

That said, WebVan is impressive. Delivery is free and the fresh food I ordered was better quality than can be usually got in the supermarket.

Furthermore, the delivery man was two hours late so WebVan took \$10 (€9.68) off my bill and refused to take a tip. It was also quite reasonable - bread, milk and eggs were cheaper than the supermarket but its main focus is gourmet foods. So it's a bit like going to Marks and Spencer for your weekly shopping. I ended up ordering too many pre-cooked meals which cost around \$10 each.

My next stop was NetGrocer.com - a website that specialises in selling non-perishables such as, tinned foods, cleaning goods, tea, coffee. This website was also difficult to get around and find what you want. NetGrocer is based in New York and delivers everything by federal express. A typical supermarket shopping basket costs around \$10 to deliver. NetGrocer's prices are the same as the supermarket.

Overall my online exile turned out to be a good experience. Once I had my shopping done, I needed entertainment so I went to Kozmo.com, an online video rental site. The selection was dreadful but that can only get better with time. Again delivery was free. Even better Kozmo came to collect the video.

The great thing about Web shopping is that all grocery sites store your account information. So on my next visit I just pulled up my previous shopping list and edited it.

There is little doubt that online grocery shopping will become the rule rather than the exception in the near future.

Having an aversion to shopping, I am their ideal customer. I hate the supermarkets, the crowds, the parking and the checkout queues. The only thing worse than grocery shopping is Christmas shopping.

So this year I decided to do my Christmas shopping in Las Vegas. I was there doing a story on gambling and had a couple of hours to kill. I booted-up my computer and off I went to Amazon.com for the adults; GiftCertificate.com for those whom I don't know what to buy; and Etoys.com for the kids.

I have the same problem every year. I live in California and most of the people I want to buy gifts for are in Ireland. So I fight the Christmas crowds in San Francisco, stand in line for hours in the post office and end up paying

double for the pleasure of giving people gifts that are trashed in their six-week journey across the Atlantic.

Often by the time I have paid for shipping to Ireland, I have paid way over the odds.

Then I had a brainwave. I went to Amazon.co.uk, the British version of the site, and ordered my gifts. Costs of shipping from England to Ireland are quite reasonable. The gift certificates can be sent by e-mail so no problem there. But what about the toys?

Again I checked Etoys and they too have a British version of their site so off I went and ordered my gifts. However, what I would have really liked to do is order these goods from an Irish website. Shame I couldn't find one.

Perhaps it is time for Ireland to take the same lead in electronic commerce that it has taken in technology.

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