

Internet shopping helps Paul Smith put his money where his mouth is, and keeps the cat happy.

Shop cat



This whole internet thing: I wonder if it'll catch on? Recently I've turned my attention to e-commerce, wondering, on the one hand, whom it will be that finally 'gets' it and, at the same time, why more people aren't at it. I

use it all the time, yet no one seems to be making much money at it.

Amazon, for example, is a great success. I've ordered books at 3.30 in the afternoon and found them on my doorstep the next morning. It is in the middle of some fairly radical 'brand building' at the moment (this is an internet term meaning 'slash-and-burn price cuts') but it is something of which you should take advantage. The service is slick, fast and does something that high street retailers do not: it lets me find books immediately without getting off my butt.

We also use Tesco's internet shopping service for our monthly shop. Or rather we did until the appallingness

bookshop. You cannot see the labels nor squeeze the fruit at the online Tesco. And buying tickets involves just as much hunting around as it would if you did it by hand anyway.

We really need the internet — or rather the people setting up e-commerce sites — to do things better than the traditional methods. According to a recent Economist report, the answer is the 'infomediary'. I already love this concept because it's got a ridiculous name and comes surrounded by terms like 'aggregator' and 'reintermediation'.

The idea is simple: in the dark pre-history of the internet (last month), everyone was excited about the possibilities of 'disintermediation', cutting out the middle man and getting suppliers talking direct to customers. But now it is clear that people don't want to spend hours going from potential supplier to potential supplier. They want to go to some place that adds value to their purchasing, an intermediary that aggregates all of their supply needs and provides extra information of benefit to them.

These 'infomediaries' act as a virtual market at one level, but also leverage the data that is available to provide all manner of extra information. The Economist uses the example of US DIY store, Home Depot. Small contractors get access to the site's facilities which lets them choose from a range of suppliers, calculate the amount of

materials they will need for a particular job and decide whether to have them all delivered at once or on a just-in-time basis. They can also bid for other contractors to fulfil parts of the job because, say, their normal plumber is off ill. And the site is packed with tons of information about the job itself.

These sorts of sites will work best, at least in the next few years, in the business-to-business model rather than business-to-consumer, but it's a very exciting prospect because we will then be using the internet in ways that are orders of magnitude better than how we do things today.

Of course, like most things in this business, it's all promise. The usual saying applies: 'put up with what you've got now, because the NEXT version, well, that'll be everything you want'. So, like a computer that is easy to upgrade or doesn't crash, I'll believe it when I see it.

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of the software finally wore down our resistance. But when it works, it's a godsend: you call up your own shopping list, make a few changes and press a button. It also turns up on your doorstep within a couple of days. Tesco offers you two-hour windows and it is one of the advantages of working from home that you can choose one of the unpopular midday slots that are always available and get your delivery to you sooner. It hardly need be said that the great advantage of this service is that someone else gets to carry the cat food.

We buy most of our airplane tickets online and it is a simple matter to order or register software online too (although these facilities hold less interest for Edward, than the sudden and mysterious appearance of a month's supply of cat food does).

But it's not really enough. Each of these services may have advantages over traditional methods but they also have disadvantages. You cannot browse at Amazon in a way that matches the pleasure of walking around a real

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