Bargain-hunting software will overcome shoppers' other ecommerce fears, says Brian Clegg.

Triple agents

You can't watch the news these days without being reminded of ecommerce. The web is ever-present, whether today's hot topic is yet another teenage web millionaire, or the closure of bank branches because of online servicing. As a reader of *PCW*, you are probably in the vanguard of those who are comfortable doing business on the web, but for many customers it's a frightening exercise. There's uncertainty attached to black-box shopping, not helped by dark stories of security problems and hackers. Ecommerce needs a killer application, the sweetener to bring in customers in their millions. And I think it's on the way.

Let's look at two recent ecommerce offerings. The first is a bookshop – no, don't yawn. I know that thanks to Amazon, books are already the most popular purchases on the web, but this is no ordinary online bookshop; BookBrain (www.bookbrain.co.uk) doesn't exactly sell books. Using the Whittaker's catalogue, a monthly CD-ROM of every book in print in the UK,

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BookBrain pinpoints the book of your choice. Then it contacts the UK online shops. From each it finds price, availability and shipping costs. Now you've an instant comparison. And the differences aren't trivial. You can usually save two or three pounds, while it's not unusual for savings to mount into double figures on an expensive purchase. Then it's just a click to the usual purchasing options.

BookBrain is that rare delight – added value that actually saves money. At the moment it only covers books, but the technology behind BookBrain can easily be applied to other online shopping areas, probably starting with music and DVD. As the owners of BookBrain point out, what they're offering is not just a cost saving. By bringing other information into the equation, the site gives an unbiased comparison of suppliers. So you can make a quick, informed decision.

A related product aimed at business customers is Sprinter. Developed by Tranmit (www.tranmit.co.uk) this software sits between a corporate's purchasing system and the web catalogues of its suppliers. When the company wants to buy 10,000 blue ballpoint pens, the system can search product databases and supplier CD catalogues to find the cheapest goods available, pulling back a list in price order. Another module of Sprinter then provides the in-house purchasing system with a way to place the order on the supplier's website, overcoming the complexities of a thousand different shopping carts.

This might not seem a big deal if you don't work for a large company, but those who are used to corporate life will be familiar with purchasing frustration. You see the product you want in WidgiSales' online catalogue, but you can't buy it, because your company's procedures require a form 34B filled out in triplicate and signed by your boss. WidgiSales knows nothing about form 34B – it wants hard cash (or at least your flexible friend). With Sprinter you still use an electronic form 34B, but as soon as your boss presses the Go button, the system interfaces with the WidgiSales site and your order's on the way.

What's emerging here is the next piece in the intelligent agent jigsaw. In a recent column about Apple I mentioned Knowledge Navigator, John Sculley's imaginary trip into the future of computing. Knowledge Navigator featured an intelligent agent, a talking head and shoulders on the computer screen. The agent acted as the user's go-between, translating spoken human requests into a myriad of electronic transactions, then pulling together the results.

One component of the agent already exists – products to (semi-intelligently) search the web. But BookBrain and Sprinter take things one stage further. They don't just search, they undertake actions for you. They're electronic middlemen without the middleman's cut. Within 10 years I think the Knowledge Navigator agent will be here – but not quite as Apple envisaged it. Instead of doing everything, it will just be a front man. There's nothing IT people like better than software that works in three layers; it seems to verge on a natural law. The shoppers of the future may well ask an electronic replica of their favourite film star to find them a book on skiing, but that front-end agent will then act through middleware agents – and they've already arrived.

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