

Online shopping has gained a reputation for being **cheap and easy**, but it's not all a bed of roses.

Watch out for the thorns



The world wide web is fast becoming a world wide marketplace. There's almost nothing that you can't buy online and many people are finding that buying over the web can be cheaper as well as more convenient. Because the

Internet has no knowledge of countries, it's as easy for you to buy something from Australia as it is to order it from your local high street.

I regularly purchase items online. Being an avid film fan I buy a lot of DVD movies, but I don't want to wait until the films are released in Europe before I buy. The web is the ideal answer to this problem. Not only can I buy the discs cheaper from the US or Canada, but I also get them months before their European release. I also buy parts for my mountain bike, again saving a significant amount on the UK retail price, not to mention being able to track down items that are hard to find locally. All this is done from the comfort of my home or office – and the goods are delivered directly to me, without the need to wander around the high street.

The Internet has become a simple way to attract customers, without the need for high-cost marketing. If you are offering something that people want, customers will inevitably start to appear. Unlike regular marketing or advertising, customers don't need to have heard of your company to find it. Anyone who is interested in the products you sell will search for companies on the Internet that deal in such goods.

A prime example of this is car-import companies. Unless you've been avoiding the news for almost a year, you'll know that consumers in the UK pay well over the odds for new cars compared to the rest of Europe. To take advantage of this situation, many companies have sprung up that will import cars from the European mainland and sell them to UK customers, and what better place to advertise their wares than on the web.

Having recently decided to purchase a new car I did exactly what these companies want and searched the web for 'European car imports'. After a matter of minutes I had tracked down several import dealers and

asked for quotes to be sent to me. A week or so later and I'd struck a deal for a brand new car built to UK specifications, complete with manufacturer's warranty. And what had my few minutes of web surfing saved me? Just over £3,000 off the UK list price. Nothing to be sneezed at I'm sure you'll agree.

But before I have everyone thinking that the Internet is a shopper's Utopia, it's not all a bed of roses. Back in August 1999 my wife and I decided that we wanted to go to Thailand in February 2000. Being a very organised type of person, my wife instantly started searching the web for suitable accommodation. Eventually we found a mutually agreeable hotel and booked our stay.

Once the booking was confirmed we thought very little about it until we started looking for flights in January 2000. We emailed the hotel to check a couple of details and were told that they had no record of our booking. Without getting too angry I sent a copy of the booking confirmation we had received several months before. The reply we received was nothing short of

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stunning. A woman emailed us back and told us that the girl who had booked us in was no longer working at the hotel and that the room had since been double booked. She continued to tell us that even though the other couple booked after us, she wasn't willing to tell them because she had handled their booking and it would be embarrassing for her.

At this point I lost my temper completely, but what could I do? Even though as a customer I had been treated appallingly, the other party was on the other side of the world. I couldn't fly over to Thailand and demand that they give us our original booking, but if I had booked it at a high-street travel agent that's exactly what I have done.

So, shopping online may be the way forward, but it isn't perfect. However, if you're careful, I feel that the pros definitely outweigh the cons.

Riyad Emeran, Editor

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