

Shopping on

Still in its infancy in the UK, shopping via the Internet is sweeping the States. We find out what kind of products and services you can buy over the Net

the Net

Ahead of us by the usual year or two, PC users in the US are today enjoying virtual shopping in virtual malls. There's nothing virtual about the dollars changing hands though, so it's surprising that little hard data is available on the size of the new market. But although it obviously still represents only a fraction of total retail sales, few would doubt that on-line shopping will soon be a major force here in the UK.

What's on offer?

Virtually any product or service you can think of from A to Z is available on the Web. An antique or a zoo ticket; a trip to Australia or Zimbabwe; the wares of Argos or Zanussi. Books, banks and bathroom fittings, cars, courses and cottages – you name it, the Web sells it. The single largest category is probably computing, covering every platform and aspect: hardware, software, accessories, manuals, training. 'Adult' material would be up near the top of any league table too. But for the great majority of potential customers, the mainstream of on-line shopping is all about everyday products and services.

Why shop on the Web?

Perhaps the greatest attraction to on-line shopping is that there's less hassle. No bus, train or car, no parking – possibly netting a cost saving against phone and ISP (Internet Service Provider) charges too. No crowds, no tiresome shuffle-stand-shuffle. No boxes and bags, no dripping umbrella, no zealous shop assistants, no race to the car park before rates escalate. If we're talking about certain inner city areas and late night shopping, no risk of mugging either!

In addition to such obvious factors, we'll soon be seeing the introduction of 'entertainment' to on-line commerce, with no exact equivalent in normal shopping. Music, videos, games, competitions, novelty surprises and so on will abound. No doubt 'shoptainment' will be another addition to the computing vocabulary.

Downside?

Despite the fact that you can find examples of just about anything on the Web, the actual range of brands, quality, price and location is very limited by comparison. But the biggest disadvantage of on-line shopping is that you don't get to touch, smell or hear the product first. Even seeing the real thing instead of its 2D image on your PC monitor can affect buying. As for a dress or a pair of trousers, how many people are happy to order without trying them on first? Pending the launch of hologram software, give me an M&S fitting room any time.

Tesco

Although there are now many big name UK high street retailers on the Web, the first to develop an on-line Web site was Tesco. It offers two distinct shopping services. Tesco Direct at tesco.co.uk/ lets you order beer, wine or flowers, and covers deliveries almost anywhere in the UK and Northern Ireland. But for the entire Tesco product range the place to go is the superb Tesco Internet Superstore also at tesco.co.uk/. The only snag at present is that you must live in specified postal codes close to one of six stores: Osterley, Hammersmith, Leeds, Lea Valley, Romford and Sutton. However, until about six months ago the service was confined to Osterley, so Tesco is clearly carrying out the expansion it promised.

The basic procedure is similar to that at many of the more advanced UK secure on-line shopping sites. You select a department, choose from the product categories, then select from the resultant detailed list. Pushing no trolley, you add to your shopping basket at the bottom of the screen, and can then adjust the quantities. If it's a product such as loose bananas, you can purchase by count or weight. There's also a handy option to save your basket as a shopping list, so on the next visit you can copy regular items straight from the list to the new basket.

Before completing an order you must choose from two-hour delivery slots not already taken – one aspect which can't

Photograph by Bruce Mackie





be assessed without practical experience. Finally, you enter personal data, including credit or debit card information. This is transmitted to Tesco using a secure, encrypted connection based on Microsoft ActiveX technology. The software used by different 'secure services' varies between the on-line shops; many alternatives are based on Java, and yet other contenders are emerging. Come October, Tesco promises some exciting improvements, including a richer multimedia experience and more flexible off-line ordering using the Tesco Home Shopper software on CD-ROM to supplement the on-line Web service.

back within 24 hours to advise if the booking can be confirmed. Note that Tropical Places is available by phone from 9am to 9pm, seven days a week - illustrating an important factor for any service linked to an on-line facility. To confirm your reservation, a deposit is payable by quoting your credit card number over the phone.

Interflora and ChocExpress
A personal flower delivery service is on offer at

Food for thought: you can buy anything from food to pet insurance on the Web.

Tropical Places
For every big name on-line shop there are a hundred small ones, such as the West Sussex travel agent at www.tropical.co.uk which specialises in affordable holidays at exotic destinations. As with many companies selling specialised services and products, here you don't finalise your order on the Web itself. Instead, you either phone or submit details of your chosen destination and personal requirements. In the latter case the company phones UK customers

www.sainsburys.co.uk/flowers/index.html. You choose from five nicely illustrated bouquets costing £18-£35, and order either by credit card on line or phone a freecall number. As with many other full services, to ensure the security of your credit card details you need to use a browser such as Netscape 3 or Microsoft Internet Explorer 3 that supports a special protocol called SSL (Secure Sockets Layer).

Alternatively, ChocExpress offers such calorific luxuries as Belgian chocolates, fresh cream truffles, Godiva chocolates and Dream Fruit. You can send a card with a message of up to 20 words with the box and pay by credit card on line or by phone.

Argos
As well as searching the 13 sections of the main catalogue, this site offers the interesting idea of a Gift Selector. You specify the gender of the person for whom you're buying, their age, and how much you're prepared to spend. It's a fast way of organising a last-minute present, and illustrates the sort of added value that an on-line shop can offer. The Argos site can be accessed through the online Barclay Square centre (see below), or directly at www.argos.co.uk/. The major disappointment is that at present only about 150 products are available, compared with the thousands you can browse in your Argos catalogue.

Barclay Square
To emulate a real shopping expedition you can point your browser at an on-line shopping centre or mall, rather than going straight to a specific shop or service. There are hundreds of these in the US, but one UK example is Barclay Square at www.barclaysquare.co.uk/. It offers three small centres, and within each one there are a variety of shops. For example, fashions and accessories for ladies and gents are well covered at Debenhams, Dorothy Perkins, Principles, TopShop and Burtons. Other well-known names include Victoria Wine and Toys R Us. There's also a sprinkling of less familiar suppliers, such as Pet Protect, where you can insure your cats and dogs.

Lending itself well to an on-line environment, Innovations at www.innovations.co.uk/ can also be accessed, and is where you'll find the latest gadgets and gizmos, like a vibrating watch alarm.

Blackwell's Online Bookshop
Bookshops work extremely well on line, and there's considerable

competition. Contenders include Internet Bookshop, Waterstone's and the largest of them all, US-based Amazon. But a splendid UK site is Blackwell's, especially strong in the technical and academic categories. It will be even better by the time you read this, after the site is relaunched.

One of the key improvements is that the largely text-based pages have been enriched with more attractive graphics. More important, though, is that the site will cover a vastly increased inventory - up to about 1.5 million books. The com-

pany's ambitious strategy aims to incorporate the latest Internet technology, such as user profiling and historical interest patterns.

TUCOWS
Not surprisingly, you're spoilt for choice when it comes to on-line sources of PC software. One long-established USA provider especially geared towards Windows users is TUCOWS (The Ultimate Collection of Windows Software) which now has a UK Web site at tu cows.cableinet.net/.

King and Barnes Brewery
Unless you're local to Surrey or Sussex this company's fine ales might not form a regular part of your liquid diet. But its Web site at www.kingandbarnes.co.uk/ lets you sample one interesting product. Millennium Ale, 'A Special Beer for the Year 2000', was brewed in September 1996, orders are packaged in a straw-lined wooden box.

When the day comes, drink it with respect; not only does it set you back £9.99 per 640ml bottle, but it also has an ABV of 9.5%! Terry Pinnell

Try some of these Internet shopping sites

These sites have been chosen largely to illustrate the wide variety of large and small on-line shops.

Burton Menswear: www.burtonmenswear.co.uk/
Gents outfitters and accessories, accessible via Barclay Square.

Internet Book Shop: www.bookshop.co.uk/
Large bookshop based in Oxford.

Debenhams: www.debenhams.co.uk/
Department store armchair shopping.

Zanussi: www.zanussi.com/
White goods ranging from fridges to washing machines, with pictures and competitions.

Dorothy Perkins: www.dorothyperkins.co.uk/
Ladies fashions and seasonal recommendations.

Dyson Vacuum Cleaners: www.cali.co.uk/users/freeway/oman/dyson1.htm
Small range, high priced, high performance.

HSS: www.hss.co.uk/
Wide range for DIY enthusiasts to hire.

Principles Menswear: www.principles.co.uk/
More togs for the boys.

Amazon: www.amazon.com
Largest on-line bookshop with great facilities.

Sony: www2.sel.sony.com/SEL/consumer/index.html
Er, Sony stuff.

World of Interiors: www.worldofinteriors.co.uk/daily/woi/
Mind the doors, going up: Bed linen, soft furnishings...

Disney Store: store.disney.com/WebObjects/DisneyStore
All the usual suspects.

Angel Bathrooms: www.idiscover.co.uk/adverts/angel/bathroom.html
Illustrates the very small site. Selection of quality bathroom fittings. View then phone.



Antiques UK: www.antiques-uk.co.uk/
Old business, new technology. Essentially a catalogue on line.

Lifestyle UK: www.lifestyle.co.uk/aad.htm
Long list of small, specialised shops and services in UK, Europe and elsewhere.

GUS: shoppersuniverse.com/
Great Universal Stores, another UK big name on line.

TCNS: www.tcns.co.uk/tcns.html
New UK shopping service.

ISN: www.isn.com/
QVC: www.qvc.com/
The Virtual Market: www.vrvillage.com/searchpages/secureshopping.htm
3Dmall: 3dmall.buysafe.com
Ultimate Outlet: www.ultimate-outlet.com/bin/sct/ultimate/index.html
Five US malls to check out by way of comparison.

Virtual Emporium: www.vemporium.com/infoseek/
Finally, a US mall on a grand scale: three million products in 190 sites.

