behind the news

Buying products online can be a frustrating business, but Andrew Charlesworth has found a possible solution in the shape of software that promises to put the intelligence back into e-commerce

Some two-thirds of virtual shopping baskets started by online shoppers are left abandoned – incomplete transactions that hide the reality behind the page impression numbers that e-commerce sites like to boast about. They also conceal the failure of the site to do what it is there for in the first place – to sell things.

When the idea of online commerce was first mooted it was hailed as the death of the salesman. Customers across the world rejoiced and so did the salesmen, seeing a great opportunity to sell e-commerce software.

In time e-commerce has turned out to be little more than mail-order by another means. The salesman lives on in the digital age, still earning commission, because quite often customers still need to ask questions before buying.
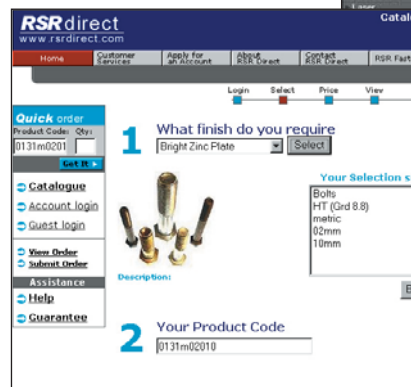
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Sigh online

For anyone who has bought anything more complicated than a CD or book online, the experience will be familiar. Even if you know exactly what product you want, you get half way through the purchase and you need advice: does product x work with product y? Will the two together meet your needs or do you need product z as well?

Search engines do little to alleviate this dilemma, as you rarely know what criteria the engine is using. Is it by product name or part number, full description, description of its use? Who can tell? In the end you pick up the phone and ask a human.

↘ ↓ → These business-to-business websites use Solutionsfinder to guide their customers through difficult buying decisions

"Oh yes, you need products x, y, z and w for that."
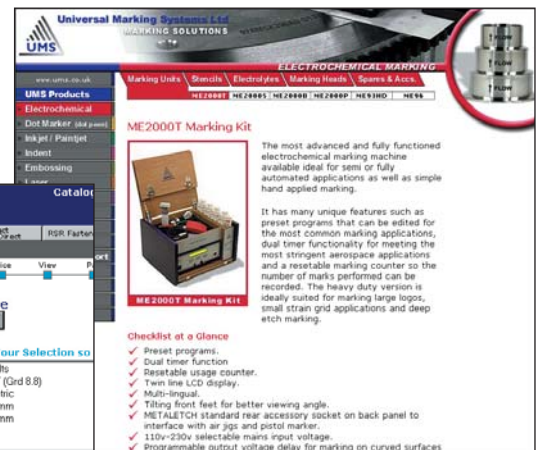
"And w?"

"I know it doesn't say that on the site, but you do. I've been asking our web monkey to update it for weeks but he's too busy with the Flash animation."

The problem tends to be exacerbated by cheap packaged software, sold to smaller businesses with the promise that it will turn their static info-only website into a lucrative and dynamic e-commerce store.

Essentially, many of these are little more than database publishing packages that splurge the company's product catalogue into HTML, providing a web front-end to the product database. This approach is fine if customers know what they want and it's a simple choice, but it runs out of steam when the choice is complex or vague. Visit Dell's site and you'll appreciate the time and money that the company has put into building a portal where customers can configure complex products.

Virtual assistant

The frustrations of purchasing online led James Rowlands to start a company called Selling Solutions Software. He developed a package called Solutionsfinder, which he claims puts the salesman's intelligence

back into e-commerce. Solutionsfinder is the first element of a two-part suite (the other is Solutionsbuilder) that uses AI (artificial intelligence) to pick products to fit a customer's needs. For example, if you went to an online DIY store using the software and said you wanted to hang a 5kg mirror on the wall, it will come up with a drill, bit, rawlplugs, screws and appropriate fittings.

The software would also fit perfectly into customer services, where hundreds of times a day telephone operators answer the same questions over and over from a knowledgebase of possible solutions.

What if the knowledgebase were put online and made searchable for customers? Got a problem with your PC? Not sure what it is? Describe the symptoms and the AI in Solutionsbuilder will search the knowledgebase and come up with a range of possible fixes.

Such systems can never replace human operators completely, but the PC business could certainly do with something similar to provide better customer support. ∎