

welcome

Technology exists to revolutionise many aspects of our lives. Whether we choose to let it, however, is a different matter. After all, just how successful has online shopping become since the initial boom of the internet revolution?



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Five years ago I was sitting in the back of a cab with an IT professor from Cranfield School of Management. We were on our way to the Sky TV studios in West London to take part in a live debate about the affect the then-booming internet revolution would have on large companies.

It was April 98 and the dotcom bubble was just about to inflate. As we bumped along in traffic on the Great West Road we passed a large Tesco supermarket. The professor looked at it and remarked how retailers were still buying plots of land and yet in five years the majority of grocery shopping would be done online. So what were they going to do with all the empty buildings?

I replied that I didn't think conventional retail would die that quickly, that people still enjoy going shopping and handling the things they buy. Besides, I reasoned, even if retail does migrate to the web in five years, Tesco will still need local depots from which to deliver. The stores will be converted to warehouses and the car parks, instead being full of customers' cars, would be full of delivery vans. We agreed that this would be the likely scenario.

No-go area

Five years on, Tesco is still there and so are the customers' cars. Were we so wrong? The professor's estimated timescale was way out even though, at the time, the hype and the promise of the internet lent force to his argument.

But it soon became apparent that the problem of buying groceries online was the same as any mail order operation: fulfilment. What customers want is groceries when it's convenient to them, not when it's convenient to the delivery company. So what we have seen is a rapid growth of 24-hour shopping and gradual growth of online grocery shopping.

I still drive to a supermarket because I know I can go when I like. But there are some things – for example, CDs and tickets for entertainment and long-distance travel – I wouldn't consider buying anywhere but online. There's an array of video-conferencing equipment available, but I still travelled to the CeBit computer show in Hanover to see people and products first hand.

The technology exists to revolutionise our lives, but culture and society changes at a much slower rate. ■

Andrew Charlesworth

reader information

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