

Delivering the goods

Ah, the joys of Christmas – the looks of panic on the faces of less techno-savvy shoppers, trawling the shops in the vain hope of inspiration. Luckily you can order last-minute gifts online. Good idea, but remember to double-check delivery dates warns Ben Camm-Jones

Christmas shopping has become a great deal easier for the consumer thanks to the internet. Online retailing has really taken off in the last few years – and there are good reasons for this. Buying things over the web and having them delivered to your door is just so much more convenient than battling through the crowds on the high street. It's no surprise, then, that some £815m was spent online on Christmas gifts in the UK last year, according to figures from market research firm Keynote Europe.

There's also a greater choice available – you're much more likely to find the perfect gift online than you are by confining yourself to the local town centre. Some online retailers offer to wrap the gifts for you, too, so they can be sent straight to the intended recipient rather than you having to drag them home only to find you've got no Sellotape. Indeed, when you take into consideration how much easier things are in this techno age you might wonder how you ever coped without the internet.

The festive season can be a time of great strain for many of us, but spare a thought for those poor souls who have to cope with the logistical nightmare of running an online retailing operation in the run-up to Christmas. It can also turn into a major disaster for the customer when the goods don't turn up on time – anyone who's ever had to explain to a disappointed five-year-old where his Harry Potter train set is on Christmas Day will know this only too well.

So if you're the type of person (and aren't we all) who leaves their Christmas



shopping until the last minute, you probably still need to locate a present or two. There's still time to log on and find the ideal gift for a loved one, but you'll need to get cracking if you want them to have it on time. Follow our advice here and, hopefully, the items you order should make it by Christmas morning.

How late is too late?

Of course, if you want to ensure your online purchases are sent to you in plenty of time for Christmas then you need to order things well in advance. There's no need to go overboard and purchase everything in mid-July, but bear in mind that online retailers will have masses of items to deliver in the run-up to Christmas. It's therefore a good idea to allow them plenty of time to deal with your order, even if it does mean having the presents hidden away in a wardrobe for a few weeks. If you're reading this feature, however, the likelihood is that you've already broken this golden rule and are finding yourself in a bit of a panic. Store this information

in the memory banks for next year and we'll stop nagging.

So just how late can you leave your online shopping and still ensure your purchases turn up in time? Many online retailers rely on the good old Royal Mail, so pay heed to the last posting dates. See the boxout *Don't miss the last post* opposite or, for more detailed information including last posting dates for other countries, visit the Royal Mail's website, which you'll find at www.royalmailgroup.com.

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US-based websites before Christmas

Day, so you'll have to stick to retailers situated in the UK. Many retailers have information on their sites about delivery times and you should read this carefully before making a purchase.

Paying for peace of mind

Online retail giant Amazon uses the Royal Mail when delivering to addresses in the UK, so you will have a choice between first class and special delivery. Both of these services take the same amount of time, but the latter option provides you with a better assurance of receiving your goods. Special delivery packages are guaranteed to arrive at their destination by noon the following working day or your money is refunded. It's therefore worth paying that little bit extra.

For an item to be dispatched, though, the retailer needs to have it in stock in the first place. Amazon is just one of many websites that gives you information as to its goods' availability when you are browsing. If Amazon has your choices in stock, it's marked on the product

Delivery costs

If you can't find what you're looking for online, you might still be able to find a local high street store selling the perfect gift. But if you don't want to traipse around the shops, visit www.yell.com and search for the item in question. Once you've located a shop then, yes, you will have to brave the crowds, wrap the gift yourself and perhaps even queue in the post office for three hours. Apparently the good old-fashioned methods are the best.

Below we've compared the price of getting two items sent from London to Newcastle. Both weigh around 2kg but each has different values.

Service	Delivery time	Value	Price
Special delivery	guaranteed next day	up to £1,000 up to £250	£6.90 £6.45
ParcelForce	next day by noon	unspecified	£19.10
UPS Express	next day by noon	up to £250 up to £50	£31.91 £29.41

information page as having 24-hour availability, which basically means that it is there and ready to be dispatched as soon as an order is placed.

If the availability time is given as anything longer than 24 hours, the item has to be ordered from a wholesaler or retailer. This means the predicted delivery time is much less accurate. If you want to be as sure as you possibly can that a gift will arrive on time, it's best to avoid items that you know the retailer hasn't even got its hands on yet.

Blame it on the van man

So how do online retailers know how much stock they are going to need for the Christmas period? James Morris, marketing director of Paramount Zone (www.paramountzone.com), an online gift shop specialising in gadgets, told *PC Advisor*: "We have been trading online for a couple of years [and] we have good experience of how orders escalate over the Christmas period. We do a forecast every week for the coming 10 days."

Paramount Zone also aims to help its customers get the gifts they've ordered on time by using both Royal Mail and courier firms, "to ensure fast delivery if any method has a problem".

Though online retailers are doing their utmost to make sure they meet demand and keep customers happy, the companies

have also learned the hard way that they need to cover their own backs. If you examine the terms and conditions of almost all online retailing operations in this country you will find that not a single retailer will give an absolute cast-iron guarantee of getting the goods to you on time. In fact, most will say that they will not take responsibility for items that are unavoidably delayed en route to the purchaser. Amazon, for example, states on its site, "Amazon.co.uk takes no responsibility for late deliveries attributable to the service offered by Royal Mail or Royal Mail Special Delivery."

Jungle takes a similar approach: "We make every effort to deliver goods within the estimated timescales, however delays are occasionally inevitable and time for

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delivery will not be of the essence."

Though it may seem somewhat cryptic, what this effectively means is that you won't have a leg to stand on if the items don't arrive until the New Year unless you can prove that the retailer has not fulfilled its side of the bargain and that any delays that occurred were avoidable.

In truth, there is no 100 percent effective way of making sure every gift you order will arrive on time. However, there are ways to minimise the risk of it being too late to make someone's Christmas special. Check the availability of the product, examine your delivery options and opt for a special delivery service if you possibly can. Next year, though, make sure you get things organised a bit earlier. Merry Christmas. ■

Don't miss the last post

Every year, the Royal Mail publishes a list of dates by which you need to despatch your gifts to be sure (or as sure as anyone can be) that they'll arrive before 25 December. Comprehensive information can be found at www.royalmail.com and is displayed in post offices. If you're really forgetful, you can even arrange for an SMS reminder to alert you via your mobile phone.

Recommended last UK posting dates for Christmas 02

2nd class	18 December
1st class	21 December
Special delivery	23 December