

SHOPPING ONLINE FOR FREEDOM, CONTROL AND FUN

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ABSTRACT

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As they do offline, consumers shop online for both goal-oriented and experiential reasons; in short, they shop to acquire items, and they shop to shop. However, goal-oriented motives are more common among online shoppers than are experiential motives. We identify and discuss attributes that facilitate goal-oriented online shopping, including accessibility/convenience, selection, information availability and lack of unwanted sociality from retail sales help or shopping partners such as spouses. Importantly, consumers report that shopping online results in a substantially increased sense of freedom and control as compared to offline shopping. While consumers are more likely to describe offline rather than online shopping in experiential terms, we find evidence of experiential motivations for online shopping emerging. We offer managerial implications of mixing online and offline shopping, suggest ways in which the experiential aspects of online shopping can be enhanced without interfering with the goal-oriented desires of consumers, and explore the difficulty of creating an online community. Finally, while closing transactions at websites is one important e-commerce goal, companies should not lose site of the continuing importance and power of their website as an information and communications vehicle as well.

SHOPPING ONLINE FOR FREEDOM, CONTROL AND FUN

The number of consumers buying online, and the amount being spent by online buyers has been on the rise; Forrester Research has estimated Internet sales in 1999 to be more than double that of 1998, \$20 billion. In comparison, overall retail sales in the U.S. totaled \$13 trillion in 1999. Thus, e-commerce sales currently account for only about 1% of retail sales, and experts and scholars have argued over the possible upper limit to the percentage of consumer online spending. Will the upper limit of online spending exceed that of other direct marketing at 15%¹? Or will it be as much as one third of purchases in many retail product categories by 2010 as recently suggested by Forrester Research?

Ultimately, the degree to which online shopping fulfills goal-oriented and/or experiential consumer needs will impact the amount of shopping dollars that consumers will choose to spend in each environment. While many writers are touting the unique capabilities of the online medium to provide interactivity and personalized experiences, for instance, few have focused systematically on what online shoppers really desire, and why they are shopping online in the first place. Clearly understanding what motivates consumers to shop online can and should inform strategy, technology and marketing decisions as well as website design. So, what motivates online shopping? In the offline environment, marketers recognize that consumers shop differently depending on whether their motivations for searching are primarily *experiential* (for fun) or *goal directed* (for efficiency)². Our research of online customers suggests that these two motivations generalize to the online environment as well.

Experiential behavior is especially likely in categories where shoppers have an ongoing, hobby-type interest. Collectors and hobbyists enjoy the “thrill of the hunt” as much as the acquisition of items for the collection. As well, having time available and desiring stimulation

results in more experiential shopping behavior. Scholars have also discovered that the higher playfulness associated with experiential behavior results in a more positive mood, greater shopping satisfaction and a higher likelihood of impulse purchasing compared to goal-focused shopping³.

Goal-oriented or utilitarian shopping has been described by various marketing scholars as task-oriented, efficient, rational, and deliberate.⁴ Thus, goal-focused shoppers are transaction-oriented and desire to purchase what they want quickly and without distraction. Retailing consumers describe utilitarian shopping as “work” and evaluate the success of their effort by terms commonly associated with work performance, such as “success” and “accomplishment.”⁵ Importantly, marketing research firms have found that two-thirds to four-fifths of Internet buyers engage in narrowly defined searches for specific products online.⁶ In an online survey we recently conducted with 1013 members of the Harris Interactive online panel, 71% of shoppers said their most recent online purchase had been previously planned, while 29% said they had been browsing when they made their purchase. Thus, online shopping is more likely to be goal-focused rather than experiential. Clickstream analysis of major e-commerce sites also suggests that online consumers tend to be goal-focused. For example, duration time spent in a store or at a site, termed “stickiness” by e-commerce insiders, is strongly correlated with motivations as experiential shoppers “stick” around longer than do transaction-oriented consumers.⁷ Currently, weekly data provided by Nielsen-NetRatings regularly show that the “stickiness” of e-commerce Web sites is quite limited, with the length of visits at top sites (with the significant exception of e-Bay) being largely 15 minutes or less. A typical weekly average time spent on Barnes and Noble, for instance, is 10 minutes, just about long enough to find a book and actually complete the transaction.

Why are more e-tailing consumers expected to be goal-focused? One clue is the finding that time starved consumers are especially likely to be online shoppers.⁸ Another clue is that early and heavy users of the Internet tend to have a strong internal locus of control, and thus are goal-oriented personalities.⁹ Moreover, the online medium facilitates utilitarian behavior as search costs for product information are dramatically reduced.¹⁰ Our research with online shoppers suggests that goal-oriented shoppers are interested in e-tailing because of four specific attributes: (1) convenience and accessibility (2) selection (3) availability of information and (4) lack of sociality. Importantly, shoppers frequently and explicitly associate these goal-oriented attributes with increased freedom and control.

Despite the preponderance of utilitarian online shopping, there is evidence that some online shoppers engage in experiential shopping, or shopping for fun, a behavior desirable to marketers as fun-seekers tend to be impulsive and to make more purchases.¹¹ Why are some online shoppers engaging in experiential behavior? Experiential shoppers tell us they enjoy (1) auctions (2) involvement with a hobby/product class and (3) bargain hunting; in sum, these shoppers focus on "the experience" or fun of online shopping as much as they do on product acquisition (see Table 1).

Table 1: Goal-Oriented and Experiential Factors and Outcomes of Online Shopping

Goal Directed Shopping	Important Factors	Outcome Desired
	Accessibility/Convenience	Freedom, Control Commitment to Goal, Not experience
	Selection	
	Information Availability	
	Lack of Sociality	
Experiential Shopping	Involvement with Product Class	Fun Commitment to experience <i>as important</i> or <i>more important</i> than goal
	Positive Sociality	
	Positive Surprise	
	Bargain Hunting	

Research Methodology

This research was supported by the Center for Research on Information Technology in Organizations (CRITO) at the University of California, Irvine. The purpose of the project is to understand the attributes that contribute to consumers having a satisfying, high quality online shopping experience. Our specific purpose in undertaking this research was to fully understand consumer motivations for online shopping, as these motivations will affect the website attributes and experiences desired by shoppers. Given our interest in consumer perceptions, and the current lack of qualitative data to address the subject, we undertook 9 focus groups of online buyers (64 consumers altogether). Three focus groups included MBA students and staff, a group likely to be technology "Fast Forwards"¹² and thus early adopters of online shopping. In addition, we conducted two offline focus groups in Southern California recruited from Harris Interactive's online panel. Finally, we worked with Harris Interactive to conduct four online focus groups (including participants from across the U.S. and Canada). Harris Interactive recruited both online and offline participants with the aim of creating groups who were diverse with respect to age, sex, online experience, and products purchased online. Our sample included

participants aged 19 to 81; they purchased CDs, books, software, hardware, toys and travel, and engaged in online auctions, all common online buying categories. But, outside these major categories, a wide variety of purchases were made, including ammunition, lingerie, groceries, camping equipment, cars; one participant had even purchased his house online!

Online qualitative research offers the advantage of obtaining individual as well as group reactions to concepts and research questions, while minimizing the opportunity for individuals in the group to dominate the group or persuade other respondents by the force of their personalities. The online focus group methodology evokes dialogues that are honest, direct, and somewhat less constrained by social conventions present in traditional focus groups. Online qualitative research is uniquely suited for engaging Internet savvy respondents. It is especially appealing to those for whom time is at a premium. As well, online focus groups reach audiences not generally reached by traditional face-to-face focus groups, including those in outlying areas and respondents who are home bound. In addition, individuals located in geographically diverse areas can participate in the same session. Respondents use their own computers and do not have to travel to a focus group facility.¹³

Based on existing literature on goal-focused and experiential motivations in offline shopping and speculations about these motivations applying to the online environment we asked participants if they shop for entertainment or for specific needs.¹⁴ As well, we investigated the degree to which online buyers perform relatively narrow product searches as opposed to browsing online. We also asked focus group participants to compare online and offline shopping which increased our understanding of the underlying determinants of online shopping. More specifically, our guide for the portion of focus group focusing on motivations contained the following questions:

I want to start by talking about shopping. Just about everybody likes to shop, or has to shop.

- Describe your typical online shopping experience. (Probe:)
 - Where do you usually shop from? At what time of day? How often?
 - What types of things do you usually shop for online?
 - Do you go to a specific site to shop, or do you search for items first?
 - How often do you shop for entertainment vs. shop for a specific need?
- In general, what differences come to mind when thinking about on-line shopping and off-line (bricks and mortar) shopping. (LIST ON EASEL)
- Offline – what makes experience enjoyable? What are the headaches?
- Online – what makes experience enjoyable? What are the headaches?
- What are the factors that influence whether you shop in a store vs. online?
- Are there items that you buy in one mode that you wouldn't buy in the other?

While there was a protocol for the focus group questions, each focus group covered unique ground as participants' comments and answers would prompt follow-up into different areas; the offline protocol had to be adapted somewhat for the online focus groups. In the four online groups, a professional moderator ran the groups, while both researchers "lurked," being present without being visible to participants; researchers could communicate with the moderator behind-the-scenes, suggesting questions or probes. The online groups are held in real time in a "chat room" format. As part of the online group, selected websites were "spawned" on participant computers, where they could respond to and interact with the website.

Offline focus groups were transcribed while online group transcriptions were automatically generated. We analyzed the transcripts by systematically categorizing and labeling attributes of online shopping.¹⁵ We undertook coding and development of theory together¹⁶ and ultimately developed four categories of goal-oriented motivations and three categories of experiential motivations. Table 2 shows how goal-oriented and experiential motivations,

characteristics and attributes were contrasted and coded. As well, we looked for connections or theoretical connections to goal-oriented and experiential motivations,¹⁷ a process called "iterative tacking."¹⁸

TABLE 2: FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS DESCRIPTIONS OF ONLINE SHOPPING	
Focus Group Participant Descriptors of:	
<u>Goal-Oriented Shopping</u>	<u>Experiential Shopping</u>
Accomplishment	Enjoyment
Going to specific site	Surfing/trying new sites
Looking for specific product	Looking for new things
Saving time	Killing time
I have a purpose in mind	I look for ideas
I make repeat purchases	I check my favorite sites regularly
Finding the best price for a specific item	Bargain hunting for what's on sale
Focus Group Participant Desires when:	
<u>Goal-Oriented Shopping</u>	<u>Experiential Shopping</u>
I want to get in-and-out quickly (fewest clicks)	I want a welcoming site that draws me in
Do-it-myself	I can interact with other consumers
Don't waste my time	Show me lots of choices
I want immediate response to questions	I like to browse sites related to my hobby
I want ease of use	I want a unique experience
Focus Group Participant Descriptors of:	
<u>Freedom and Control</u>	<u>Fun</u>
Control what information I receive	Read reviews (but don't believe them)
No salespeople	I get drawn in
No lines/crowds	Excitement of bidding
Only brands/sites I know	Window shopping
I can come back anytime/delay purchase	I'm impulsive
I have options	I have to limit myself
Show me what I want	Surprise me

Rather than reporting specific tabulations, and in line with common managerial practice in analyzing focus group data, we have suggested degree of consensus without necessarily claiming specific proportions or orders of magnitude, especially when such information might be useful to managers.¹⁹ However quantitative market research data reported by major firms that dovetails with our findings is used to support our claims. Nevertheless, preponderance of responses did not guide our analysis entirely. Idiosyncratic responses not only offered clues about the boundaries within which findings are relevant, but also surfaced issues not articulated as well by other study participants.²⁰

Goal-Oriented Shopping

Especially impressive is the frequency with which goal-oriented shoppers mentioned the increased freedom and control they experience while shopping online (see Table 3 for sample verbatims). Thus, web customers are not passive recipients of marketing and selling and are instead central players who experience increased control in the online environment.²¹ Interestingly, online buyers often said they decided to go online to shop only when they had a specific purchase in mind, with the majority describing online buying as consisting largely of planned purchases. In fact, many online buyers told us that they did not necessarily think of buying on the net as "shopping." Rather, they think of it as "buying." We specifically asked online buyers if they are more impulsive while shopping online or offline and were overwhelmingly informed that shoppers are more impulsive *offline* (except at auction sites, where buying behavior is much more likely to be experiential). The general lack of impulsivity during online shopping is due to the inability to take possession of goods immediately, the ease of returning later to buy the goods after further thought, and the trouble of having to mail back unwanted items.

TABLE 3: Goal-Oriented Behavior and Outcomes: Sample Verbatims
Goal-Oriented Behavior
“I don’t think anybody goes online to have an enjoyable experience, if you go shopping [offline] there’s a lot of things you can do...but if you’re online you just want quick, simple, you get out.”
“I’m really specific when I’m shopping or anything I’ve ever purchased has been something I’ve wanted to get.”
“You know exactly what you want [online], you order it and go away.”
“I cannot think of when I would browse. I generally only target shop. I have a need and go looking for it”
“[What I want from online shopping is] the opposite of browsing: show me what I want fast and get me on my way.”
Outcomes Associated with Goal-Oriented Online Shopping
Freedom and Control
“You’re not as committed [online]. You haven’t driven over there and parked and walked around so you have a little more flexibility and can get around a lot faster.”
“...when I go to a store and a salesperson’s helping me for a long time and it’s not really what I wanted...I’ll oblige them, they spent all this time with me...but...online, I know I will get to the point and be ready to order but I know I don’t have to, I can come back anytime I want to.”
“[At eToys] you can monitor the progress of your order which I really like instead of just ending up not knowing what’s going on.”
“You can sit on your arse and eat while you shop. You kin even shop naked!”
“For me, online browsing is similar [to offline browsing], but I have more of a sense of freedom. I’ll browse stores I might not go into offline ...Victoria’s Secret comes to mind... ..also I’ll go into swank stores that I might feel intimidated in going into offline....when you’re a 51 yr old chubby gramma, online Victoria’s Secret just feels a bit more comfortable.”
“[The single most satisfying aspect of online shopping is] the freedom to shop when & where I want...So easy & convenient.”

Consequently, shoppers will put off transactions because of the lack of investment and pressure and the “always there” quality of online shopping; it's easy to come back and complete a transaction at a later time when they've had more time to think about it. In our focus groups, participants specifically used words like "commitment" and "dedicated experience" to describe offline shopping and to contrast it with the *less committed* experience online. If consumers have a few minutes in their schedule, they can sit down at the computer and search for a needed item. If they complete the transaction, fine, and if not, they feel they can pick up where they left off whenever they like. Online shoppers enjoy this lack of commitment²²; it increases their efficacy, helps them minimize the effort of making a purchase²³, and thus increases their sense of control in the online environment compared to other purchase situations.²⁴

Thus, shoppers report that they feel little pressure to buy while online, whereas offline they are disappointed if they come home empty-handed. They shop in whatever minutes they have free to locate information, shop across multiple sessions that include online and offline looking, and

often abandon online shopping carts, as it is easy to return and make the transaction later after further thought. Thus, goal-oriented buyers "nibble" or "snack" on commercial websites. And paradoxically, many online shoppers engage in low commitment, high involvement behavior as they leave sites easily without purchasing, but find their online shopping trips interesting, informative and useful. During the 1999 season, Andersen Consulting reported that 88% of experienced online shoppers abandoned their carts at some time during the 1999 holiday season, although 1 in 5 ultimately returned to complete the purchase. Almost one-third of those abandoning carts say they simply "change their minds."²⁵ Given this in and out, on and off shopping behavior, the often-mentioned importance of ease of use and making it easy for consumers to pick up where they left off when they return to a site takes on increased proportion. Some sites wisely save shopping carts that are abandoned knowing that online buyers often come back to complete the transaction at a later time.

TABLE 4: Characteristics Associated with Goal-Oriented Shopping: Sample Verbatims

Convenience
"Why leave the house, waste gas, wait at red lights, stand in line and have to go to five places just to find what you're looking for..."
"The main difference is having the time savings of not having to go to the store."
"I work and go to school full time, I can shop late at night when everything else is closed."
Selection
"They have all these things in the catalog and when you go in the bricks and mortar stores they are never in stock. Online it's always there because it comes...directly out of their warehouses."
"Online is the world's stores in your face."
"I live in a very rural area...other than a WalMart and Kmart, my selection of physical stores is fairly limited...have to drive over an hour to get to anything that resembles a real store."
Informativeness
"I bought something from Sony['s website]. You can be pretty confident that the information would be correct."
"[The website] gives you all the different [flight] times, locations, non-stop, and everything about the flight."
"I know I that I have the full information at hand online. At a store, I only know what the clerk knows. And I don't know the clerk. I can't trust his knowledge as much as my own research."
Lack of Sociality
"[Offline] sometimes I feel bad if the salesperson is too nice and I don't end up buying."
"I don't have to drag my kids [out shopping] anymore."
"If you have a real person involved, the transaction might go wrong."

In summary, goal-oriented shoppers achieve freedom and control and lack of commitment in the online environment, as they experience little pressure to purchase before they are

absolutely ready, and are thus not impulsive. Importantly, goal-oriented consumers explicitly associate four attributes of online shopping -- convenience, informativeness, selection and lack of sociality -- with increased freedom and control. Table 4 shows sample verbatims for each attribute.

Convenience and Accessibility

Consumer behavior scholars have often defined convenience in terms of saving time and effort, including physical and mental effort.²⁶ In addition to time and effort savings, accessibility of the store (location and hours availability) has been included in some conceptualizations of convenience.²⁷ Thus, attributes of convenience long important to consumers are now found in new forms in online shopping. In particular, web-based purchasing is the ultimate in *time savings*, *effort savings* and *accessibility*.

Participants in our focus groups told us they like that they can shop at home after stores are closed (24/7). As well, several admitted shopping at work and school, partially because of the broader bandwidth afforded them. One participant who travels 50 weeks a year finds himself purchasing gifts, books, flowers and travel arrangements and doing so at hotels and at the office at lunch.

In addition to the advantage of increased access of online shopping, overall buying effort is reduced because online shoppers do not need to conform to social conventions of grooming and acceptable behavior. For instance, some of our informants mentioned specifically that they can (not necessarily that they actually did) "shop nekked" or "in my underwear." Shopping online provides buyers an environment comfortable and personalized for them -- their own home.

Importantly, the qualities of accessibility and convenience are often related to control and freedom; in fact, focus group participants often used the very words "freedom" and "control" to describe the experience of shopping online. Perhaps the most poignant example of this was an 81-year-old woman who purchases groceries online. She explained that she lives alone and recently had pneumonia; access to online shopping allows her, and she believes will allow her to live at home independently a lot longer.

Nevertheless, while the transaction itself is more convenient online, in some important ways, websites are less convenient. Buyers cannot touch products or try on clothing. Visual inspection is not nearly as easy as in a store. While some sites, such as LandsEnd.com and EddieBauer.com offer "virtual" dressing rooms or models, no participants in our research mentioned trying out clothing on virtual models. Consumers sometimes cope with the inability to touch or try on by not purchasing clothing or shoes online, or by checking out items offline before buying online. Web site policies can affect consumer willingness to take the risk of buying something they have not physically inspected. While Barnesandnoble.com does not permit merchandise bought online to be returned to their bricks-and-mortar stores, other retailers such as Gap, Inc. and J. Crew Group, Inc. do allow it. When Pets.com makes an error in the type of pet food sent, they ship the correct food and ask that the customer donate the other to an animal shelter, saving the customer shipping costs.

The fact that there is no immediate gratification from online purchases is inconvenient as well. Developers such as Trammel Crow are developing "pass-through facilities" and Amazon.com is investing in distribution space across the country to speed the delivery of goods ordered online. Barnesandnoble.com is testing a system for same day delivery of books ordered online. However, it is doubtful that more than a very small percentage of online retailers will

focus on immediate delivery, as does Kozmo.com, and thus are not likely to match the immediate gratification provided by offline stores.

Selection

Online shoppers frequently offer product selection as a goal-directed reason to shop online. Several of our online participants lived where many of the products they desire to buy would require them to drive relatively long distances. Others mentioned specialized hobbies such as sword collecting or the need for special sizes in clothing. Moreover, the Internet's ability to concentrate geographically dispersed consumers allows niche players the ability to serve their markets profitably. For example, oddballshoe.com enables men with large feet (up to 25 EEEE) to find fashion and selection on the Internet when local communities don't have sufficient numbers of large-footed men to support a bricks-and-mortar store. Similarly, Indiagalore.com offers a wide array of food, home products and clothing for Indian expatriates.

Online is also perceived to be a potential source of inventory when the local offline store is out of stock. Importantly, online buyers' perceptions that e-commerce offers them better selection, however, refers to the selection available on the Internet in general, rather than the selection on individual sites, which is often perceived as limited as compared to the retailer's offline stores and even catalogs. Consistent with our findings, a recent Forrester Research survey of 50 online apparel stores found that the selection at these sites compared to catalog and in-store is limited.²⁸ Thus, consumers see the Internet as a place where they expect to find selection, and where they do find selection, but often not on the web site of a particular seller. Moreover, online buyers expect that over time the complete product lines of their favorite retailers will be available online, and cite the anticipated increase in selection as a reason they will be shopping on the Internet more in the future.

Availability of Information

Information is an important resource for consumers using e-tailing in a goal directed fashion; the widespread availability of information is one of the reasons that many buyers view search and purchase on the Internet as a utilitarian activity. On the web, search costs are dramatically reduced. Improvements include the reduction of irrelevant information, improved information organization and better information processing aids.²⁹ But the most important of the information benefits to consumers in our focus groups is simply the *availability* of information that previous to the Internet was either effortful or impossible to find.

The Internet as a medium facilitates researching product specifications and prices quite well; in this sense, the medium is the message. In addition to product information, price was a piece of information that was often sought by our focus group participants, and was often compared between multiple websites. Consistent with the importance of finding information easily, the ability to locate desired information on a web site -- including manufacturer's websites where products are not necessarily sold -- is very important to most buyers and increases their sense of control. Many online buyers revel in the fact that they can get information directly without having to go through a salesperson who is largely perceived to be limited compared to a website; buying on the web gives consumers more perceived control over the interaction. Nevertheless, sometimes the information is not easy to find on a website. Online buyers frequently complain that sites they would otherwise like to patronize have inadequate navigation and search engine capabilities. Focusing on the easy access and organization of information is thus an important but frequently underemphasized website design issue. Last year, IBM re-organized their site because it had become too complex and difficult to search; sales increased 400% almost immediately. As well, to improve the organization of the official Olympics

website, IBM uses clickstream analysis to enable them to determine which pages are most frequently accessed; these popular pages are then moved closer to the top level of the website.³⁰

Another aspect of the importance of information to customers involves the interactivity of some e-commerce sites. For instance, when making plane reservations, online buyers feel that they can more fully investigate options than they can offline. In addition, information can be printed out and saved, something that cannot be done based on a phone conversation with a travel agent.

As well as text, information is also provided by appropriate use of graphics. Users do not want to see graphics they do not need, but they appreciate the opportunity to download larger pictures and different angles of pictures they want to see. According to Bizrate.com, consumers rate product representation to be the most important factor to them when purchasing online.³¹ Gallery Furniture, located in Houston, has placed cameras throughout the store and web users can click on a picture to move cameras around the store. With the increased ability to inspect products from a remote location, Gallery has seen sales increase 20% to \$120 million, more than recovering the \$1 million to install the more than 48 cameras.³² Amazon.com recently contracted with Xippix.com to deploy "Image Pump," an innovation which allows consumers to zoom in and easily check out products as closely as they like with high resolution and at several angles; this service is important because it increases the informativeness of the website and brings it closer to the experience of in-store inspection.³³

Lack of sociality

While shopping online, the primary relationship is not between the seller and buyer, but rather between buyer and the mediated environment.³⁴ Interestingly, it turns out that online buyers largely like the relative lack of social interaction while buying online. Absent online are

salespeople, spouses, crowds and lines. Moreover, the ability to find what they need and to complete a transaction without having to go through a human being is associated by online buyers with increased freedom and control. An additional benefit of people being absent online is anonymity; some online buyers visit upscale sites or stores where they might be embarrassed to shop offline, such as Victoria's Secret.

The absence of retail workers is appreciated for two reasons: (1) salespeople are often perceived to be unhelpful or uninformed and (2) they pressure or obligate buyers. Online buyers frequently and vividly explained that the ability and helpfulness of retail workers is lacking and has declined over the years. They often connect their desire to shop online with their frustration with offline help. From the youngest member of our focus groups to grandmothers, online buyers revel in the fact that they can avoid sales workers online. Participants even sometimes like to avoid helpful salespeople, because they feel obligated to purchase even when they do not really desire to buy an item. Thus, considering a transaction online results in shoppers feeling like they do not necessarily have to buy; again, the decision to make or not make a transaction is under their control, and this control is an advantage of online shopping. As with other goal-directed themes, the lack of people online is associated with freedom. As one informant summed up the primary advantage of online shopping: "Freedom. 90% of shopping hassle is dealing with people. I need them, but not as much as they think I need them."

But, the lack of sociality online isn't just due to unwanted sale help and pressure. As well, it occasionally extends to the unwanted presence of a spouse or children while shopping. Spouses interfere either by purchasing too much during a shopping trip, or by pressuring their mate to finish their shopping more quickly.

Despite the fact that online consumers largely like *not* having to deal with other people while online, they do sometimes require help and want to talk to someone when they do. E-mail assistance helps satisfy the need for help online, but is sometimes perceived as being too slow. Again, users like to be in control, which means that while they would like to avoid needing help, they expect and want help to be available when needed. Amazon recently built a huge call center in recognition that customers with problems want to talk to someone. As well, online sources were sometimes mentioned as being as unhelpful as offline sources. Online buyers also often complain that email responses are often not individualized for them and thus do not resolve their problem (e.g., form email responses).

In short, online buyers largely appreciate the lack of people while they are shopping; they do occasionally want help, but they want that help to be at their request and to be responsive to their individual needs. According to a study by Forrester Research, 37% of online buyers say they use *more* customer service from e-tailers than bricks-and-mortar stores, yet a study by FAC/Equities indicates that one-third of the top 100 online retailers do not respond to e-mail or do not offer an e-mail address for customer service on their websites.³⁵ E-commerce providers can utilize their sites to combine the properties of impersonal mass communication with face-to-face communication. Users, however, want the choice of when and how they use the medium to interact with this "human face" to be firmly under their control.

Shopping Online With Experiential Motives

Experiential shopping behavior is shopping with a desire to be entertained, have fun and to be immersed in the store and is assorted with increased impulse spending.³⁶ While some of our participants said they do not engage in extended browsing at all online, others report specific

circumstances that are associated with frequent, longer, and thus more "experiential" visits to sites. In fact, buyers told us they browse for three reasons: auctions, ongoing hobby-type search

TABLE 5: *Experiential Behaviors and Outcome, Sample Verbatims*

Experiential Behavior
"First thing I do [when I get home from work] is check my e-mail and then I start browsing and things pop up...and I might investigate that or see something else I'm interested in."
"I have to open eBay from one end to the other and that takes an awful lot of time because there's so many entries."
"Right now, with Xmas lurking around the corner I've been browsing a lot. Just like going to the mall and walking around, except I only need to wait for my modem."
"I constantly browse products. That is what I do in my spare time surfing. I see what I can buy. Most of it I'm not interested in, but sometimes, I start shopping for things."
"I don't use shop-bots...where's the thrill of the hunt in THAT?!?!?!?!?"
Experiential Outcome
Fun
[Online shopping is a] fun and exciting way to shop."
"Yeah, usually it's software [I buy at bargaindog.com] which I enjoy. Like a hobby."
"I enjoy the excitement of bidding [at eBay]...if I'm going to get the bid or not."
"Well, I haven't shopped at eBay but use it for recreational purposes. It's fun because it's out there in the world."

and bargain hunting. Experiential shopping is associated with specific benefits: (1) surprise/uniqueness/excitement, (2) positive sociality (3) online deal searching and (4) involvement with a product class. Table 6 shows sample verbatims for each of these experiential themes, while Table 7 shows how online consumers associate experiential with fun.

TABLE 6: *Characteristics Associated with Experiential Shopping, Sample Verbatims*

Surprise/Excitement/Uniqueness
"I'm also intrigued by the auctions. When I can find one that's going on right then and it's coming right out of my speakers, it's wonderful, the feeling of participation."
"A good site will surprise you with stuff you had no idea existed."
"It makes me sound like a cheeseball, but I like the 'chanciness' of auctions."
Positive Sociality
"I have developed friendships with [fellow eBay users] and they all communicate with me. They're all over the United States and it's something, I feel like a family."
"[I] like reviews at Amazon.com, you read about what people like and what they don't like. It's kind of like an online community."
"I have a coin shop, sell a lot on eBay, we usually talk about what is hot and what is cold."
Deals
"I check out the [online] stores I guess like when people check out the malls. I mean I enter my store, check out the sales, and end up buying and buying."
"I find wonderful deals...online coupons have made my Christmas shopping almost a game...what wonderful deals!"
"[Online] promos seem to beckon me."
Product Involvement
"Online has made me into a COLLECTOR."
"I'm a software guy, and it's always interesting to see what the latest program will do, so I visit all kinds of software companies [online]...I visit Apple almost every day."
"There is an adult site that I check out for new videotapes...should I be admitting that?"

Auction activities and ongoing hobby-type search are the most frequently mentioned motivations for online browsing. Auctions such as eBay draw much longer visits than do other e-commerce sites on average; eBay consistently averages an astounding 45 minutes to over an hour according to weekly Nielsen Net-Ratings. Auctions present several experiential benefits. The available products change often; many of the products are unusual, unique or collectible; bidding introduces an element of risk and gaming. Consumers don't "buy," they "win"! All in all, positive surprise³⁷ and excitement are major benefits of auction sites.

Although positive sociality in online shopping is limited by contrast to in store shopping, many eBay participants report that they enjoy chatting with other eBay sellers and buyers concerning their shared hobbies and had developed friendships with people all over the United States. OnSale.com enables its bidders to attach comments to their bids, allowing participants to taunt and brag, all in good fun.

As well, experiential online shoppers often have hobbies³⁸ that they actively pursue while online. The most natural hobby is computers and software, but shoppers reported other interests, such as camping and buying toys for grandchildren as well. These shoppers frequently and regularly check sites of interest, looking for new items and updated information. Like auction participants, consumers who are involved in a hobby or product category on an ongoing basis are much more interested in surprises, positive sociality and community online than are less involved consumers.

A third activity that results in browsing online is looking for great deals. While goal-directed shoppers often seek price information, it is to comparison shop for a specific product rather than hunt for bargains. Consistent with discount shopping being an experiential motive, goal-oriented shoppers are actually *less* likely to use shopping agents than are the experiential

shoppers we interviewed; the experiential shoppers associated surfing various sites and finding the best deals with having fun. In fact, when shown comparison shopping site MySimon.com during focus groups, experiential shoppers almost immediately "dived in" and started shopping during the online focus groups, even though most were previously unaware of the site! A relationship between deal-seeking and experiential motivations has been found in offline contexts as well.³⁹

A relatively new service, Icontact.com, offers some insight into utilizing customer service in a proactively social way on the web. The service tracks consumers' movements through websites, and customer service representatives step in if they believe they are needed. The service increased sales at the Marriott site 400% in the first two months of use.⁴⁰ Icontact.com particularly promotes the use of the service for heavy and loyal users; these customers are not only more likely to be open to experiential and conversational interactions at a site, they are also more likely to be a segment meriting the financial investment required. The service is appropriate for sites that draw highly involved hobbyists as well, as these shoppers are more likely to be looking for an experience rather than being narrowly focused on a specific purchase. For sites with highly involved customers, and for loyal buyers, the service should enable a stronger bond between the company and their customers.

CONSUMER MOTIVATIONS AND E-TAILING STRATEGY AND IMPLEMENTATION

As stated previously, the way in which online and offline shopping fulfill utilitarian and experiential consumer needs ultimately will impact the amount of consumers' dollars spent in each environment. Inarguably, online and offline environments present different *shopping experiences* even when the same products can be purchased. Admittedly, consumer experiences are likely to change as technologies such as broadband and information appliances become a

mainstream reality, and as offline retailers adapt to the competitive threat of e-commerce; nevertheless, Jupiter Communications suggests that broadband capability is largely not expected to hit mainstream users for at least five years.⁴¹ As well, the virtual marketplace may not mirror⁴² the offline marketplace in the foreseeable future for reasons that have little to do with technological limitations; the online environment has unique capabilities, such as relative anonymity and information richness, that should encourage e-tailing to grow and develop in directions that might be compromised by attempting to mirror the bricks and mortar shopping experience too closely. Mirroring the offline experience closely will be extremely difficult in any case; the experience of being present online, or telepresence,⁴³ is currently far less compelling than the multidimensional, multi-sensation possibilities offered by offline. Moreover, while the ability to build and sustain a fantasy in online environments may exceed the ability to do so in offline environments, the immersive environments found in online gaming environments, such as MOOs, MUDs and MUSHs, are not currently integrated with commerce, nor is it likely that goal-oriented shoppers will demand or accept immersive online shopping environments.

The advent of wireless "m-commerce" in which users "surf" their phones is likely to amplify transaction-oriented consumer behavior. At the same time, local businesses should be able to use m-commerce to provide convenient service to goal-oriented customers, such as allowing customers to purchase movie tickets, to be notified when their dry cleaning is ready for pick-up, or when their favorite restaurant is offering a new dish at a special price.

The Mix of Online and Offline Shopping

Importantly, customers are already showing clear signs of multimodal shopping: checking out an offline store so they can touch or try on merchandise before buying online or

looking for product information and pricing online and then purchasing offline. Consumers thus value the unique attributes of each setting. In fact, the two modes of shopping complement each other so well that former Internet pure-plays such as Gazoontite.com which specializes in allergy-friendly products, are now building bricks and mortar stores as showrooms and places to better learn about customers. As well, pure plays are forming partnerships with land-based businesses. For example, Petopia.com has partnered with Petco to help with marketing and distribution; Petco is using the opportunity by testing Petopia-branded merchandising displays in-store and placing kiosks in stores with access to the Petopia website.⁴⁴ Jupiter Research estimates that \$632 billion in consumer purchases will be made as a direct result of online research by 2005, dwarfing the \$199 billion in consumer transactions that will actually occur online⁴⁵; Jupiter's research underscores our finding of the importance to consumers of website informativeness. Websites must be considered both a marketing communications vehicle as well as a transaction generator; thus the financial returns from a website in terms of contributing both to offline and online purchases must explicitly be taken into account.

Nat Goldhaber, chief executive of Cybergold, predicts that shopping malls will decline and begin to disappear over the next 10 years due to consumers' closer relationship with manufacturers. He predicts that bricks-and-mortar shopping will lose its social function "as people use the Internet for the purpose of social interaction."⁴⁶ We disagree. While consumers like to shop online when they are goal-oriented, they told us they shopped offline when they wanted to touch and feel items, and enjoy the "experience" of being out, including sights, smells, people-watching and spending time with friends and family. The experiential qualities of offline shopping meet real needs that are not likely to be met virtually in the near future.

The Importance of Goal-Focused Shopping

Before designing the mix of experiential vs. goal-focused features offered on a site, a company needs to understand the motivations of its users. Too many companies have listened to the "3 C's" mantra: commerce, content and community. Yet, only experiential consumers are interested in content and community, and they are a minority of users. For goal-oriented users, e-tailers need to place priority on easy to access and use information about products, full selection, and customer service, not on content and community. The need for information and customer service is amplified by the fact that first time buyers are common on the Internet. A Forrester study recently discovered that two-thirds of all e-commerce transactions are not completed; of these transactions, about two-thirds are not completed because shoppers can't find the information needed to complete the purchase.⁴⁷ Too many website designers continue to overlook the importance of the most basic building block of their website, information about products and intuitive design interfaces that facilitate easy use of the site for information search and completion of transactions.

In addition to availability of information and ease of use, customer service is extremely important. Most consumers want to serve themselves and will serve themselves by locating information as long as it is relatively easy to find. Online buyers largely do not expect or desire "high touch" service unless they have questions or problems with customer service, in which case they expect relatively speedy answers responsive to their individual problems. Importantly, focus group participants said that the first opportunity to cement them to an online brand came when there was a problem with the order; customer loyalty increased substantially when online buyers learned that customer service representatives were available online or at a 1-800 number

and were willing and able to resolve the situation quickly. Conversely, online buyers who did not receive satisfaction at these critical incidents terminated their relationship and became willing to do business with a site that may charge more, but offers better customer service. For example, customers who were completely uninterested in Amazon.com's experiential features such as customer reviews or purchase circles nevertheless often expressed great loyalty to the company and willingness to pay somewhat higher prices because of the superior customer service offered by the site.

Goal-oriented shoppers may visit a site several times before making a purchase as they often look in short spaces of time, but make the actual purchase decision across several online sessions. Those sites that save a customer's shopping cart still full even after a customer has left the site are responding to the knowledge that online buyers often come back at a later time to complete the transaction. Personalization is seen as positive to users when it refers to features that increase the sense of user control and freedom, including order tracking, purchase histories, saving information for quicker transactions during future sessions, and opt-in email notification of new products and special deals. The online buyers participating in our focus groups saw personalization as negative, however, when it results in unsolicited offers or in users feeling less anonymous; such features are perceived to take away user control and freedom. One participant noted that personalization gave him “that Big Brother feeling” because one site he does business with “is linked to other companies...It distributes your information all around so they know you even before you know them.” Some features improve quickness for goal-oriented users without being personalized. For instance, More.com uses "QuickShop™" which allows customers to instantly purchase the most popular products from one page, and then promptly check-out in just one click.

In sum, companies anxious to build "sticky" experiential features into their site to encourage visitors to stay longer and visit more often may be overlooking the fact that transaction-oriented customers can build ties to an online business over time when they are well-served. These customers are busy and are not likely to make the effort to switch or look for lower price alternatives, as long as they can find the selection and information they want, make the transaction easily and have it delivered in a timely fashion. In short, offering goal-oriented online consumers what they want, when they want it, and answering inquiries in a timely fashion creates loyalty, even if these customers are not interested in browsing, being entertained, or interacting with other customers or service representatives on the site.

The Difficulty of Creating Online Community

The importance of freedom from salespeople, spouses and crowds online for goal-oriented users at least partially explains why many schemes designed to integrate community with commercial sites have so far been of limited success. Business writers suggest that building user communities, or "hobby tribes"⁴⁸ of the most involved, loyal customers, will be key to success on the Internet. There are examples of such user group communities on the Internet, such as Ticalc.org and Calc.org, which are sites devoted to Texas Instrument calculator enthusiasts. But, many of these community efforts have limited or no commerce abilities, and in fact, the notion of community and sharing is often antithetical to commerce. For example, Calc.org sells Texas Instrument calculators, but they sell them at cost because of their enthusiasm for the calculator community. Kindsnow.com, a community site for snowboarders, sent its members an email notification on April 1 explaining that they had "sold out" to bidders desiring to use their content/community site to sell products; the next day site owners emailed again to explain that the previous day's email was an April Fool's joke.

However, occasionally a high-involvement product area will draw a related community that may be blended with commercial interests; products and services with a hobbyist or enthusiast base are natural matches for experiential e-commerce, content and community. For example, in addition to finding a dealer who will make quotes on a specific car (aimed at more transaction-based motives), Autobytel offers "ask the expert" and "message board" features which are aimed more at car enthusiasts. KBKids.com and FamilyWonder.com that offer parenting guidance including everything from articles on child development, to appropriate movies for children and planning birthday parties. High interest in products or site content and proactive community moderation is necessary to sustain online communities.

Designing for Consumers Looking for an Online Experience

Despite the fact that online consumers tend to be goal-oriented, experiential browsing behavior is desirable online as it is associated with increased impulse purchases, and more frequent visits.⁴⁹ While they are a minority, one-fifth to one-third of online consumers are not engaged in narrow, goal-focused behavior, and are thus looking for fun in their online buying experience.⁵⁰ Moreover, as younger surfers who have grown up on the net become full-fledged consumers, experiential benefits are likely to become more desirable. Before emphasizing such benefits, however, sites need to identify a base of users who are regular visitors and who are involved with the product category. Longer average time spent on sites, frequent visits, and many pages being accessed, are measures associated with experiential use; thus, using clickstream data, companies should be able to estimate how many of their visitors are experiential vs. goal-oriented.

Because of the predominance of goal-focused consumer behavior online, experiential benefits need to be offered without interfering with goal-directed search. An example of an

experiential feature aimed at bargain hunters is the frequent markdowns on overstock items on LandsEnd.com that encourage customers who are discount shoppers to visit frequently to see if the products are still available and have been further cut. Auctions at SharperImage.com have a similar function; they draw customers interested in the excitement and community created by bidding. Experiential users like surprises such as new products and features.

Additionally, those organizations offering delivery, such as online grocers, Staples.com and Kozmo.com (which delivers Krispy Creme donuts, Starbucks coffee and soon will deliver selected Amazon.com titles) also have a significant opportunity to establish an emotional, experiential bond with customers through offline interactions even though their primary motivations for shopping online are goal-oriented. Importantly, some website design features simultaneously offer both goal-oriented and experiential benefits.⁵¹ For instance, the interactive features of Buick.com that allow surfers to view the car from every angle offer goal-oriented shoppers information about the car, while engaging experiential shoppers with surprise and novelty.

CONCLUSION

New ideas and business models are erupting almost daily, technology is growing and changing, and consumers are learning that e-tailing and e-tailing support services such as comparison agents and reverse auctions can bring increasing control and freedom into their lives. Nevertheless, e-commerce will continue, to varying degrees, to satisfy both utilitarian, goal-focused and experiential consumer needs. Understanding the motivations that consumers and consumer segments have for shopping at your website as well as your land-based stores and tracking these changes across time should provide direction for planning and implementing features and benefits that will increase customer satisfaction and loyalty both online and offline.

"Owning" an online customer should prove challenging, but not impossible in the world of Internet marketing.

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