

## Online Shopping: What Do You Think Of It?

Written by Filipe Nunes

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During the past holiday season, my fancy took me to surfing online shopping sites. A form of consumerism that is becoming popular in leaps and bounds.

All at once I could view, compare and critique items across a wide spectrum of commodities and articles and suppliers; all from the security of my home PC. It was like entering a new world. One where fancies, likes and imagination could be satisfied on the spot. Of course, the money issue did put a damper on the googly eyed adventure. In essence, a reality very much like the traditional way of shopping; except for the armchair bit.

In between the hours spent online, I kept thinking as to the popularity of the medium at hand: Is the South African populace in tune with this medium? Which population demographic finds this electronic shopping experience attractive? What is popular? What about the legal paperwork? Probability of scam attacks and phishing expeditions?

To the first and second question, in speaking to friends and acquaintances, I derived that generally middle to high income households have shopped online: be it tickets to a movie, to a motor car. Most also tried their hand at grocery shopping. Thus the appeal is there.

What was fascinating is how members of the lower income demographic made use of internet cafes (the least of all secure sites) to carry out their order of business (The numbers in question were few but growing.)

The interesting bit came in the guise of some using the information at hand to do comparisons, then going to a physical shop to purchase the selected item in question. Fear of Credit Card information theft and of the faceless entity behind the online façade were the greatest deterrents to actually buying online; specially when substantial payment had to be made (I use one dedicated credit card with low limits to transact across the world wide web.)

Thus more questions came to mind: What would make the online experience more palatable and attractive? What would make the existing system more secure? What would quell the fears a consumer has about shopping online? What impact would the incoming consumer protection act have on the online shopping fraternity (would online service providers

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have to be RICA'ed or FICA'ed?) Would this action put to the inherent consumer fear of shopping online? Would a 'comment box' assist the consumer in voicing their opinions on the service, articles, etc?

The one avenue I found in my searches relates to the commonality of after-sales support more so than the offering of an online shopping portal. In the whole, retail companies offer online after-sales support structures: An operator will contact a consumer after a certain lapse in time to find out about the satisfaction perception. If positive, then all is well, if negative, then how can they assist!?

The above process tends to mostly placate and pacify consumers to the inferred ethos that the company cares.

As a whole, those that can, make use of online shopping to buy low to mid-priced items. The caution factor kicks in where huge payments have to be made. Here the consumer will go to the physical shop and pay there.

The lower income groups use the net more for comparison and availability purposes rather than outright online buying. The picture with the lower income groups is that the mindset is changing as the costs of internet hosting are dropping. The advent of intelligent mobile phones is also helping to change the mindset.

Personally I found the whole exercise insightful and calming: the threats are there, but with a small amount of internet savvy, threats can be managed and overcome.

Will I continue to shop and buy online?