

SOCIAL ASPECTS OF SHOPPING

BY

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I know it sounds backward and has been professionally pondered by others, but I've been thinking about why I don't shop more online. It is, after all, easier and provides more choices; it's more efficient and convenient. I can do it in my underwear. And I don't object to paying online, as some do. There is practically no good reason why I or anyone else with broadband Internet access and a few credit cards, never mind a hectic life, should choose the old offline ways. But still, I drive to the store. What's my problem?

The first thing that comes to mind is that I don't want too much of a good thing. Since I overindulge more often than I care to admit, that can't be it. Perhaps I like options. But there are so many choices online, what more could I need? Maybe I'm just a relic. I'm usually ahead of the adoption curve and have even created an ecommerce business, so that's probably not it either. Rationally, the only thing left is that I subconsciously object to online shopping. Understanding that we make choices emotionally, I suspect as well that an irrational attachment to traditional shopping subverts the technologically-advantaged alternatives.

Let's start with the dehumanizing insidiousness of online activity, shopping included. I think we all have to accept, or embrace, the fact that we are primarily consumers. As consumers, we need to feed off one another to support a product because

we've not evolved *that* far ("monkey see, monkey do"). But it's best that we don't talk too much. When consumers talk, the complainer is loudest. Even if the others don't share the complaint, it gets us thinking critically about products. Divide and conquer is successful to consumer marketing. I'll explain.

Broadcasting a message as an advertisement means that one message has to satisfy a group of people—the target market—as a collective. Because of the expense, unless target markets are substantial the commercial economics of broadcast don't work. But the best sales is personal. The odds go up with personal sales because if you care, you find out exactly what I need then show how your product satisfies my specific, if not unique needs. The best that pre-Internet marketing could do with broadcast was an approximation or best fit of my needs and wants as I fit into a group. It's watered down and less powerful, obviously and logically.

The promise of consumer-directed eCommerce is the creation of markets-of-one. Everyone's desires, interests, etc., can be tracked and analyzed with sophisticated software. Then very specific messages about products one might be ripe to accept, delivered when one will be most receptive and in a way that addresses that market-of-one very personally, can be delivered via the online communications pipe. The economics might

even work if a high-quality template can be created to deliver a unique message. For example, consider the message, “Buy the widget because you are [insert apparent personal emotional trigger], and the widget is [insert experienced parallel logical benefit] . . .” Who could resist? Good for marketing, and maybe even superficially good all us consumers who no longer suffer the inefficiency of only marginally relevant marketing messages.

Here’s my theory. The more time we spend alone in front of our computers, shopping and getting personalized commercial messages, the less time we have to see the watered down messages and hear others’ thoughts. Websites like e-pinions that allow “real” people to provide consumer feedback for others’ benefit help, but there’s nothing like getting out and doing your own study in person. Prevent everyone from talking to one another so as not to confuse the message or reveal the differences in what we each see and understand. Maybe consumer ecommerce is extending the marketing message to the next theoretical level. It’s possible that my unjustified objection is to this form of gentle **shoving**.

On the emotional side, although like everyone else I spend too much time being busy, I’m neither so occupied that I can’t shop nor so tired of people that I want to shut myself off from them. In fact, it turns out that I like to shop by walking around. I see what others are looking at and hear what they’re thinking. I can wander along the aisles of books and compact discs, hunting for specific items and enjoying the discovery of something new or unexpected. Besides, I make more impulse purchases when I’m in the store than I ever would online. Despite the good sites’ efforts to recommend items that are similar to what I’ve put in my shopping cart or match previous inquiries, at my computer I’m much less vulnerable.

That’s the story and the theory. I don’t want to get left behind and really ought to keep up by purchasing more online, whether from my computer or wireless device. We all should. But, I probably won’t. The next generation of consumers will have to push that envelope for me. Maybe there are other hesitant online purchasers

out there in the world who feel the same. Let’s form a support group. Somebody start it, and put it up on e-groups if you would. I don’t have time to get together for real meetings.

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