

Web-to-Store: Understanding Online and Offline Consumer Shopping Attitudes, Behaviors, and Expectations

By Sue Larrison

The following information is drawn from several hundred qualitative studies conducted over the past five years with male and female consumers ages 25-55. The methodologies of the studies ranged from traditional focus groups to actual shopping trips with the individual participants.

Shopping is truly one of America's favorite pastimes. We go shopping for something virtually every single day. But how do average Americans describe their shopping experience? Well, we describe it as tedious, necessary and demanding— a real chore. And then we turn around and call it exhilarating, relaxing and fulfilling – fun!

Would you rather shop for aspirin or jewelry?

Well we're not schizophrenic, shopping is. Depending on the goal, it's either a task or a treat.

The everyday side of shopping is called power shopping. It's the need to buy essentials that keep the household running. In this case the goal is to get in, get out and not overspend. A power shopping trip usually includes some preparation that starts by making lists, comparing prices and cutting coupons. The next step is planning the route to stores that are both familiar and close. And finally there is the job of finding the time to actually go to the store. But power shopping is what most women, who buy the majority of products that enter the home, do nearly every day.

The other type of shopping experience is called patient shopping, and it's a very different process. It's buying big ticket items, personal items, gifts or home furnishings. In some cases the preparation involves extensive research: reading newspapers and magazines, going on the Internet and talking to friends. In other cases, where style, size and quality are very important, time is not the factor, perseverance is. Some women are willing to shop long and hard for just the right cocktail dress or pair of shoes.

And other people just “enjoy the hunt.”

Regardless of the type of shopping, whether fast or slow, necessary or enjoyable, most people describe the ideal shopping experience as “Finding what I was looking for at the very best price.” Notice, it’s not just price. A bargain is important, but it’s only part of the ideal.

Men and women shop differently

Women tend to be well organized and like to be prepared before they go shopping. They often review the newspaper ads and Sunday supplements and then make a shopping list. Many have an ongoing list of what the household members need or want. Most women know how their favorite stores are arranged, so they plan their trip accordingly.

Men, on the other hand, proudly proclaim that they “don’t shop they buy.” Most men aren’t especially interested in browsing around the store. They view shopping as a mission. The typical male approach is to hone in on the target, buy it and get out of there as soon as possible. However, men often admit to doing research on what they are shopping for before going to the store. They view this as intelligence gathering to make their mission time and cost efficient.

Women say that while shopping can be fun and exhilarating, it can also be time consuming and taxing. Shopping with the kids is neither relaxing nor fun. They find shopping without the children to be more productive and a lot less stressful. In fact, many moms admit that they would like to use their shopping time as “alone time.” And men agree. As a rule, they also like to shop alone.

Almost everyone says that fitting shopping into the daily routine is very challenging. Trips, even for essentials, are often sandwiched into a day of chauffeuring kids to school and activities, running errands, cleaning, volunteering and “all the other stuff.” Working women have to be equally skillful at finding time to shop. Some use their lunch hour. Others shop before the workday begins or late at night, after dinner, homework and clean-up is completed. Weekend shopping is sometimes “couples time” when the men and women team up to share the shopping tasks.

Pop's Variety Store and Wal-Mart are both local

Consumers define “local” stores by location and not size. Even though the giant national chain store that moved into the mall may seem to be an intruder in the community, the average customer views it simply as the “local” national store. That’s important to understand when building a selling strategy, whether you’re large or small. The same logic applies to The Home Depot vs. a Harold’s Hardware. From the consumer’s point of view “local” has nothing to do with size or national presence; it has everything to do with geography.

The good news is that consumers like to shop locally

Most consumers do the vast majority of their retail shopping at stores that are within five miles of where they live or work. This is convenient, of course, but it’s also practical now because of the great variety of stores and merchandise that are close to work and home. So customers don’t feel that they’re sacrificing choice for convenience.

Several things make local shopping important. The primary reason is saving time. In today’s changing world everyone sees himself or herself as time challenged. So choosing stores close to home or work is not just a matter of convenience, it’s essential.

Familiarity with the store makes it easier and quicker for the shopper to find merchandise, track prices and finish the task easily.

And then some people believe that they are helping their local economy by shopping close to home or work.

The Internet is influencing shopping behavior

Consumers see the Worldwide Web as intriguing, intimidating and, definitely, a great shopping tool.

Most of the shoppers that I spoke to believe that the Internet is a great place to track down hard-to-find items, and that there are always good deals to be found. Most people are convinced that no matter what they are looking for, they’ll find a bargain.

However, there are barriers to shopping online

Many people are still not comfortable shopping online. For some, it is a complicated and even overwhelming chore. There are so many websites, so many products, so many links and tracks and forms that the alternative prospect -- getting in the car and driving to a familiar local store -- starts to look very appealing.

Also, most websites and online stores are unfamiliar, which leaves them lacking in credibility. Consumers wonder about the quality of the merchandise, the sites' reputation for delivery, the return policy and if they are really oriented toward customer satisfaction.

Some people are very hesitant to turn over credit card information to a "stranger." And that puts a crimp in online buying.

Then there's the added cost of paying for shipping, the extra time waiting for delivery and the perception that any returns are probably going to be a hassle. As a result, most people use the Internet more for research and browsing than they do for buying.

On the other hand, the Web is a terrific resource

It's clear to people that the Internet makes research easy, quick and relatively painless. They see it as a great way to become knowledgeable about products, performance and competing brands.

Cost comparisons are another key use of the Internet. Consumers love the fact that they can check out prices without ever leaving the house or going store-to-store to accomplish the same thing. Some use the cost comparison sites, such as NexTag.com or Bizrate.com, while others go and compare prices on their own, clicking from one retailer's site to another.

In spite of all of the millions of products and possibilities the Internet has to offer, many consumers continue to prefer to buy at the brick-and-mortar locations. But consumers expect the retailer to have a website for them to visit as well. So the irony is that while a website may lack credibility, a store without one lacks credibility t

A store still offers what the Internet can't

Shoppers like to touch and feel the merchandise. In many product categories this is a very important aspect of the purchase decision. Looking at a small picture of an item online isn't usually enough to judge its quality, fit or actual appearance. There is also the immediate gratification that shoppers get in the store from finding the item, making the purchase and walking out with it in hand. This says to them, mission accomplished, job well done.

Shoppers tell me they prefer to go to stores that offer them a level of comfort. They like to shop where they know that finding the merchandise is not a challenge and the shopping experience will be a pleasant one. This comfort level is hard for a website to develop.

This is not to say that the Internet isn't providing a great service to brick and mortar shoppers. It is. The Internet is making everyone smarter and more efficient. People now rely on a variety of websites to help them make their store shopping a positive experience.

These days, before entering a retail store many consumers are doing their homework online. They research items, language, performance characteristics and alternatives to find out as much as they can about the merchandise and choices available before they decide to purchase. This is especially true for high-end merchandise. Comparing costs, finding out which store carries which item and finding the best price are huge factors in the selection process.

Availability is also confirmed by looking online. Many people use the retailer's website to see if they carry specific merchandise. This simple check can ensure that a store visit won't be a waste of time.

Web-to-store, an expanded view

While the Internet has had a significant effect on shopping behavior, it has not eliminated the public's desire to shop in stores. Internet websites that provide good information are very appealing. They help the consumer gather confidence and understanding, along with the knowledge needed to make an informed purchase. And, whether

shopping online or in the store, consumers are simply looking to “find what I was looking for at the best price.”

A summary of insights

Be aware that shopping behavior is changing

A few years ago the attitude of the female head of household toward computers and the Internet was: “I don’t have the time – to learn or to browse. It’s hard enough just finding the time to shop.” Many men shared the same attitude. But that’s quickly changing. Adults are catching up with their kids. Shoppers of all ages are discovering the benefits of looking online, and that is radically changing shopping habits.

Retailers need to have an online presence

Today’s consumers expect every store to have a website. Without a site, a store loses credibility and seems behind the times. The site may simply be a business card: location, directions, hours and phone number. But with such a terrific opportunity to display the unique personality of the store and its merchandise, it would be a shame not to do more.

Know your customer

Now, there’s a radical new thought. But it’s hard to achieve. Many merchants I talk to believe that *they think and act just like their customers*. This assumption can lead to poor decision making -- choosing media and advertising messages, for example, that don’t speak to the target market.

Know your product

People view shopping as quick, power trips; or thoughtful patient investigation. To build an effective site or retail store it’s important for you to know which way your customers approach your product offerings.

Evoke positive emotions

Shopping has an emotional component -- it can make you happy or mad. Shopping can be fun if it’s easy, interesting and informative. But if a shopper finds a website full of forms, broken links and outdated pages it

can be annoying, frustrating and goodbye. And the same easy access and friendly layout apply to a local store as well.

In summary, it is clear that every retailer, no matter how small in size or limited in shopping area, needs to have a presence on the World Wide Web. Customers expect it. Increasingly they are making the Web an important part of their shopping experience. And as technology evolves, shopping behavior will change with it, taking advantage of the ease and pleasures of shopping from Web-to-Store.

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Eight years ago, she started Larrison Communications, Inc. as a marketing consulting company. Prior to forming her own company, she was vice president and director of qualitative services at Conway-Milliken Corporation, Chicago and vice president and management supervisor at Marsteller Advertising also Chicago.