

## When it really pays to buy online

### How to know whether you're better off shopping digitally or in a store

Published: May 28, 2015 06:00 AM



Fido's got the right idea; you can save 15 percent by buying pet supplies online.

Photo: Travis Rathbone

You can buy practically anything online, but that doesn't mean you'll always want to—or ought to.

The convenience is undeniable, of course, but the matter of cost is still very much a question. About 71 percent of products are essentially priced the same online and in-store, according to a recent study by Anthem Marketing Solutions. When there was a difference, the online product was cheaper 72 percent of the time. Those deals are the biggest reason people choose to shop the Internet, according to a recent survey of 19,000 consumers worldwide by PricewaterhouseCoopers.

But stores have advantages that the virtual world can't match: opportunities for shoppers to touch, see, and size up the goods and to walk away with a purchase. Those are the top reasons people still opt for a brick-and-mortar experience, according to the survey. That might explain the relatively slow rise of online categories like groceries and eyeglasses.

More channels and more choices can mean more opportunity as well as more potential pitfalls. We asked our experts and industry analysts to share with us the things you should buy online—and when you're better off with a trip to the store.

Check our reviews of [shopping websites](#) to see how they stack up.

## 5 things to buy online

### Electronics

In addition to the fact that you'll find a much wider selection online, more than two-thirds of electronics are cheaper when purchased on the Internet, according to Anthem. That's true for big-ticket items like computers as well as for smaller accessories like HDMI cables and cell-phone cases, which are often 30 to 40 percent less than in stores. (Stores get away with charging more because customers don't always compare prices on items that cost under \$20, says Andrea Woroch, an independent consumer savings expert.) Still prefer to buy a TV in person? Do your research online. Many walk-in retailers will price-match a Web deal.

### Small appliances

You'll find the best selection of blenders, toasters, and the like online, although you're still better off trying out heavy or hard-to-maneuver items, like vacuums, in a store first.



### Pet supplies

By signing up for regularly scheduled pet-food delivery from Petco.com, you can save 15 percent on every qualifying order and guarantee that Fido never runs out of kibble. You can also net big discounts by buying pet meds online—if you're not in a rush—rather than going to the vet, where markups over wholesale prices can be 100 percent and up.

### Theme park tickets

You'll pass by the ticket booth anyway, but buying online helps you "avoid lines at the park and find some of the best ticket-price deals that a park has to offer," says Robb Alvey, founder of ThemeParkReview.com. If you're a member of AAA or have a credit card with rewards points, you may also be able to snag discounted tickets.

### Baby supplies

It's cheaper and more convenient to order diapers, baby food, and ancillary items (like diaper-pail refills) online, especially if you opt for a delivery program like Amazon's Subscribe and Save, which discounts your entire order by 15 percent if you select five or more items.

### 3 things to consider buying online

#### Bath fixtures

Online, you have the benefit of a massive selection that no single showroom could contain, particularly if you're seeking special features or unusual hardware. If you're buying toilets or faucets, make sure you have the exact measurements. Get it wrong and you could wind up having to return it and pay a hefty restocking fee, or having to drill extra holes in your sink or countertop or—even worse—having to hide extra holes or unsightly metal plates. (Check our buying guide and Ratings for [toilets](#) and [showerheads](#).)

#### Auto parts

Buying car components online could save you as much as 50 percent, Woroch says. Before you order, talk with your mechanic to make sure you'll come out ahead in the end. You could pay a premium to have your local guy or gal install an item that you didn't buy from him or her directly. There can also be quality concerns about a discount or aftermarket part. It could fail sooner than the original; it might even void your car's warranty.

#### Tires

Start with our Ratings to find the best models that suit your needs. Then go online to check out price and availability, and to determine whether it's worth closing the deal there. Online prices can be competitive, but you'll need to take into account the cost of shipping and installation. You can also take the best online price you find to your local tire store and see whether it can be matched.



Photo: Chevrolet

### 3 things not to buy online

#### Paint

The colors on your computer screen are made by emitted light and will never look the same as actual paints, which are made of reflective pigments.

"Color should be chosen only after viewing painted test patches or large sample color chips on the walls of the space to be painted," says Amy Krane, an architectural color consultant. "The changing light during the day, the orientation of the room to the sun, the types of artificial light, and the other colors in the room—including floor, textiles, and furnishings—all affect your perception."

#### Office and school supplies

You might notice fewer office-supply stores near you these days. As Staples and Office Depot contemplate a merger, your options could soon be more limited. You certainly don't have to leave your desk to restock paperclips, but some research shows that doing so might get you the best deal.

The customer-service firm StellaService has reported that the average cost of purchasing a typical list of school supplies in a store was 41 percent cheaper than buying them online. (Of the 12 categories in Anthem's study, only office/school supplies showed an offline price edge.)

That said, busy parents who want the convenience of ordering can urge school districts or PTAs to sign up for a mail-order service such as Staples' SchoolKidz, which enables you to order items on the next year's list ahead of time and have a box of supplies delivered when school starts in the fall.

#### Drugs from overseas

Up to 97 percent of online pharmacy storefronts are considered "rogue," meaning that they don't require prescriptions or they sell drugs not approved by the Food and Drug Administration, according to a January 2015 review of almost 11,000 sites by the National Association of Boards of Pharmacy (NABP).

Shop at one of those sites and you could wind up with a drug that's old or was improperly stored, or it could be adulterated or even fake. (Up to 80 percent of drugs from some countries are counterfeit, according to the World Health Organization.) You also risk having your financial or personal information stolen. If you want to order medication online, chose a reputable site like CVS.com, Walgreens.com, and Walmart.com, or go to legitscript.com to see whether an outlet you want meets NABP standards. Learn more about the [dangers of counterfeit drugs](#).

### Brick and mortar vs. one click: How to decide

With so many factors influencing your decision about where and how to shop—and more and more online categories to choose from—it helps to have a guide that will get you to the most seamless experience, the best deal, and most important, the right product. Jenn Markey, vice president of marketing for the online price-tracking firm 360pi, shared with us key questions to ask when deciding whether to buy online:

#### 1. How much is shipping?

If it's not free, you'll probably get a better deal in a store. The bigger or bulkier the item, the more valuable it is to you to have someone else pay its freight.

#### 2. Could I find this item easily at a store near me?

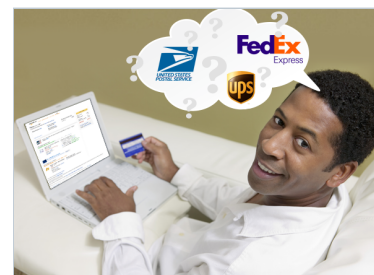
Brick-and-mortar retailers frequently use zone (or regional) pricing and assortments that reflect local market conditions and maximize margins, but many online outlets are still catching on to this idea. For now, the biggest retailers, including Amazon, largely default to a national price, which means that if you live in an area with limited competition, you'll probably find a better price online.

#### 3. How much will I need?

In general, online is optimized for large-pack sizes and packages. The larger the size, the lower the per-unit and per-volume price you'll pay.

#### 4. Can I actually get the deal?

It's a common tactic of online retailers to drop prices on out-of-stock items to encourage their competitors to also lower their prices and/or price match. So know that the best price online might not be attainable.



**5. When will it go out of style?**

You'll tend to find the widest selection of products online, but unless you're an early adopter, fast-aging products (such as electronics and apparel) are usually less expensive in-store once the initial rush has passed. On the other hand, products that evolve more slowly, like small appliances, will usually be more expensive in-store.

**6. Can I get a local store to match the price?**

If a physical store offers a price-match guarantee, then stepping away from the computer screen might be your best bet.

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