

Christmas shopping is simply too complicated

With Christmas fast approaching, the pressure to get out and buy is all too much for
DICK LUMSDEN

When I grew up in a small Scottish mining village, no-one really talked about

“shopping”.

There was a baker, a butcher, a TV and electricals shop, a chemist, a couple of newsagents and the local Co-op which dabbled in pretty much everything else. And that was about it.

You bought what you needed when you needed it, and you bought it from the shops that were there and the limited stock they had. We didn't know any different. It wasn't “shopping”, it was replacing and re-stocking as necessary.

But that was a long time ago and, as the countdown to Christmas 2013 begins, you can forget replacing and re-stocking – “shopping” is far more complicated now.

The British Retail Consortium tells us that there are around 297,000 shops in the UK – that's about one shop for every 200 people. From mega shopping malls, to outlet “villages”, down to niche boutiques and even “pop-up” shops...our choice this year is astonishing.

But even that is like a pimple on the backside of an elephant when you factor in the internet.

Every single one of the 21 million homes in the UK which has access to the internet has now become, effectively, a shopping mall in its own right. And as we sit at home with increasing numbers of desktop PCs, laptops, tablets and smartphones, we can



■ The shopping options for Mrs Lumsden's vacuum cleaner are bewildering. As well as the high street there are the giant online stores with their vast warehouses.

Photos: PA

“Let's say I wanted to buy Mrs Lumsden a vacuum cleaner for Christmas... (I wouldn't really, I value my life too much)

.....
browse, select, reject, buy or return as the mood takes us, visiting stores across the world without lifting our cheeks from the sofa.

Government statistics tell us that 72% of all adults have now bought something online. The value of online shopping in the UK is rising every year, and in 2013, with retail purchases overall expected to be over £300billion, almost 10% will be done over the internet.

But it isn't as simple as opening up a website, choosing and paying... that would be too easy.

The pattern which is emerging is one of savvy home shoppers looking at several websites until they find the right item at the right price. Then getting out of the house and into the store to

look at it, feel it, try it on and make their decision.

Then back outside and on to the internet to order it from someone else at a lower price and have it delivered right to their door.

And if they can't be bothered to do all of the research themselves, there are plenty of websites where they can go and read what other consumers think.

These sites give people free rein (well, almost) to say what they like about brands and products, and the rest of us use that information to make our own buying decisions. It's bewildering.

Let's say I wanted to buy Mrs Lumsden a new vacuum cleaner for Christmas. (Before you say anything, it's only an example right? I wouldn't really buy her a household appliance for Christmas, I value my life too much...).

But back to the vacuum cleaner. I could browse in a couple of the big electrical stores. Or I could look at their websites, or I could even go to a site like www.revoo.com where I can find hundreds of opinions on the latest bit of kit being sold by that famous inventor whose name rhymes with Bryson.

I would undoubtedly find the one I want on offer for several different prices. But do I go for the cheapest? Or buy from the best known retailer? Do I buy in store and hide it in the garage till Christmas Day? Or do I have it delivered to my office address and struggle back on the train with it, hoping she doesn't notice as I walk backwards in the front door?

Whichever way I chose to buy it... after Christmas everyone would have an opinion. I should have gone here...I should have gone there...have I never heard of Groupon? Surely I had a promotional code? I'd be a laughing stock. (Except Mrs Lumsden wouldn't be laughing).

The trouble is we just have too much choice now. I'm not exactly aligned with Henry Ford, “you can have it in any colour as long as it is black”, but I do think the retail treadmill has just been getting faster and faster.

When I want to buy something, I want to do it at my pace. Of course I don't want to pay over the odds...so I'll wait and buy it when I see it “on sale”. Oh, wait...even that isn't clever any more. A “sale” price might only mean that it was once offered at an inflated price for one day and then dropped back down again... too complicated.

As you read this there are just 49 shopping days till Christmas (when I was young it would have been just 44, but cash tills jingle 24/7 now) so flex your fingers and get browsing...but take my advice and don't mix romantic surprise with household appliance.

.....
■ Dick Lumsden is managing director of Owl Marketing Solutions, a specialist in marketing and advertising to older consumers. If you have any views on this article, or are over 50 and would like to take part occasionally in some gentle consumer research, please contact him on dlumsden@owlms.com

