

THE MAVERICK

“INTERNET SHOPPING? IT WON'T CHANGE THE WORLD AFTER ALL”



Sure, it seems cheap and convenient now. But, says **Richard Asher**, buying online won't come close to replacing real stores

I have no taste for traditional shopping. Even by male standards, I despise trawling round clothes stores or pushing a trolley up and down the vegetable aisle at Tesco. By rights, that should make me a real online-retail bunny.

Yet internet shopping is becoming even more vexacious than the in-store version. Every time you want to buy so much as a pencil, you need a log-in code, a password and probably your mother's maiden name. I've got at least 50 of those to remember already (passwords, not mothers) and I'm just one away from snapping. So although the popular belief is that online shopping is going to take over the world, frustrations like mine will keep “bricks-and-mortar” stores in business for some time to come.

On the face of it, the amazing deals you can find online make web shopping's continued rise seem irresistible. The much-higher overheads of local stores, shopping-centre outlets and even out-of-town supermarkets mean that they often can't compete on price, and UK online sales rose 11.3 per cent (to £28bn) in the year to January, while other shops' sales increased ▶



Thinking differently!



ILLUSTRATED BY PAUL BLOW

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◀ by just 2.1 per cent. Smartphones and tablet computers are key drivers. According to research by the British Retail Consortium (BRC) and Google, mobile retail searches now make up ten per cent of the online total, up 168 per cent since 2010.

But internet business still only rep-

resents nine per cent of UK shopping and, although this proportion is expected to climb for another four years, Professor Joshua Bamfield, director of the Centre for Retail Research in Nottinghamshire, predicts that it'll stall at about 20 per cent.

But why? After all, web shopping can be cheaper and also convenient. Last summer, Tesco introduced virtual supermarket shelves on South Korean underground walls that allow commuters with fancy phones (in South Korea, that's everybody) to scan images of products for home delivery. What a great way to do something useful while you wait for your train!

But, all too often, online shopping seems to be more about retailers making you sign up for an account so they can capture your personal data than it does about making life easier for you—and that can be very off-putting. Take the minor comedy club (in a pub!) that recently refused to let me book through

a simple phone call or in person and insisted I go online. Twenty minutes and one unwanted account later, I was sorted—but the next time I go to a gig, I'll opt for a venue that lets me buy my tickets early-Nineties style.

And it's the same problem with everything from buying books to food.

Faffing about with your computer may often, technically, still be faster than driving to the shops, but it sometimes doesn't feel like it. Although the process can be less fiddly once you have an account set up, that's not much help to the one-off customer, in whose existence retailers apparently no longer believe.

"Another issue is the delivery process,"

says Professor Bamfield. "Unless there's some arrangement with neighbours or someone at home all the time, it can be awkward. The concept of special locked cages attached to people's houses hasn't taken off—nor have ideas about consolidating delivery using milkmen."

Collection from a parcel depot or an online retailer's local high-street branch can work, but if people have to travel some distance to get there, wouldn't it have been simpler for them just to have got their goods direct from a shop in the first place? Local convenience stores are also being used as parcel drop-off

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points, but surely they'll only ever have limited capacity?

As for the price gap between online and other shops, rising petrol prices and, with them, postal costs could level things out. "Online buyers of low-cost single items are likely to be most affected," notes Professor Bamfield. And having everything delivered will never quite fit with the spontaneous way most of us shop. "UK households are visiting grocery stores an average of four times a week. It's not economical for these small amounts to be traded online."

Lastly, for some reason, people enjoy real-life shopping. "It's a leisure activity," says Sarah Cordey of the BRC. "Internet retail mostly cannot replace that experience of going out to explore stores and having a wander round."

We still want to touch and try goods. Retailers must offer the "store experience" to show off their wares in the flesh and build their brands. Apple is an example: their customers are hardly afraid of shopping online, but they still pack out the firm's London Covent Garden store.

The recent trial "boutique" run by eBay in the West End of London offered physical examples of products but scan-led purchasing for delivery only (if you didn't have a smartphone, they'd lend you one). Ignoring the fact that this complicated system seems to merge the worst elements of online and ordinary shopping under one roof, the irony of a web-retail giant conducting such an experiment is clear. If that isn't a vote of confidence in bricks and mortar, what is? ■

Personal touch or double click—which do you prefer? Join the debate at [facebook.com/readersdigestuk](https://www.facebook.com/readersdigestuk) or email readersletters@readersdigest.co.uk

FANCY THAT! THE MYSTERY SURROUNDING RAISIN FINGERS

Have you wondered why fingers and toes go wrinkly in the bathtub? It may not be the most urgent question confronting us, but, surprisingly, scientists still don't know the answer to this pruney problem.

A popular theory holds that, as water is absorbed into the outer layer of skin, it causes the surface to expand, resulting in wrinkles. Others point to a narrowing of blood vessels and nerve fibres on contact with water, which pulls skin structures downwards. But why fingers and toes, and not other parts of the body? It may be that the thicker layer of dead cells (our feet and hands are subject to more wear and tear) absorb more water, but an evolutionary explanation posits that wrinkles act as miniature drainage channels, drawing water away from the fingertips and improving grip in wet conditions.

