Images of Online and Store Shopping by Men and Women, Young and Old

Pamela L. Alreck, Gerard R. DiBartolo, Memo F. Diriker and Robert B. Settle
Marketing Educators Research Group - Franklin P. Perdue School of Business
Salisbury University, Salisbury, Maryland USA

ABSTRACT

This study examines the effect of the consumers' sex and age on their perceptions of the problems and the benefits of shopping and buying online, compared to doing so in a traditional retail store. Overall image profiles can be viewed, but the principal focus is on the similarities and differences between sex and age groups. Along with perceptions of problems and benefits of online buying, a direct comparison between store versus online buying sharply reveals the contrasts among men and women of different ages.

INTRODUCTION

The very first Web server and Web browser were invented by Tim Berners-Lee at Europe's CERN Particle Physics Laboratory in November of 1990. The effects of other radical innovations in communications technology, such as radio and television, were largely "one-way." Information moved from sender to receiver, but not so for the Internet and Web, which are truly *interactive.* But mere interaction is not the whole store, or even the most important aspect of online communications. With broadcasting, the *proactive* party is the *sender* of the information. On the Web, the *recipient* is the proactive party to the interaction, the seeker of information. The sender is, for the most part, the *reactive* partner who sits quietly, waiting to be called on for information.

Adoption by Consumers

Given the degree of effort required of the public who use the Web, the acceptance and adoption of this innovation has been extremely swift. If all that were required were to buy a receiver—radio or television—one would expect adoption to be rapid. Similarly, users of MP3 players such as the iPod play a passive role while listening or watching and only become an active participant when downloading content. How different the Internet and World Wide Web, where the individual must initiate the connection, specify the location to be visited, and largely control the interaction from beginning to end. With such demands on the user, some demographic groups might be expected to approach adoption of online shopping very differently and at a different pace than others.

Research shows that there seems to be an identifiable segment of consumers that has a preference for the Internet as a retail shopping alternative. [1] As of April 2006, 73% of American adults are Internet users. Consumers' attitudes and behavior toward online shopping are influenced by many factors such as ease of use, usefulness, enjoyment and risk. However, even with its ease of use, the risks inherent in online shopping are major concerns and reasons for consumers' hesitation to buying online. [2-4]

Adoption by Marketers

While there are myriad uses for the Internet that are important and valuable, use of the Web as a commercial vehicle has far outstripped all other functions, combined. The Internet as a marketing tool has facilitated significant changes in business marketing, such as productivity improvements, new business models, and increased focus on customer services. [5, 6] In addition to direct online shopping, consumers are using Internet to research products that they buy offline. Direct marketers, as well as many traditional store owners were quick to see the possibilities, and in fact, the necessity for a substantial presence on the Web. [7-10]

In the beginning, there were many predictions regarding what could and could not be marketed successfully on the Web. Some said only a narrow range of goods could be sold online. [11] Others took the opposite view, assuming almost anything could be marketed online with success if only the right methods were used. [12] Most took the middle ground, though nobody seemed to doubted, almost from the very beginning, that online marketing was here to stay and would find a substantial share of a wide variety of both consumer and commercial markets as the technology developed. [13-16]

Competitive Pressures

The increasingly popular online shopping activity has resulted in significant online retail sales which are estimated to grow even bigger from $172 billion in 2005 to $329 billion in 2010. [17] If the growth in online sales exceeds that of other modes of marketing, then these online sales to consumers must come, to some degree, at the expense of traditional store marketing and other direct marketing modes. [18] Retail Internet sales have been growing at a strong and steady pace in recent years, so much so that annual growth for many online merchants has been in the double digits. [19] But the online marketing inroads into store marketing sales volume may be limited, at least in part, by the use of technology in traditional store retailing. [20, 21] Retail store merchandisers have implemented a variety of tactics, such as creating entertaining physical shopping environments. By doing so, they provide something that is difficult or impossible for online marketers to provide. [22, 23] Furthermore, some research shows that retail stores are still preferred over catalogs and the Internet due stores' retail format. [1] Store merchandisers may also strive to match or even exceed the selection and economy offered online. Furthermore, in recent years the majority of all major retailers have become multi-channel, offering access to consumers through their stores, catalogs, and Websites. [19] The growth of outlets such as warehouse/membership clubs, big box retailers, category killers and superstores reflect these strategies. [24, 25]

Competition from online marketers may also be a major concern of catalogers and other direct marketers. Many Internet retailers are now approaching revenues equal to that of catalog sales, and many online retailers are now enjoying profitability. [19] Most consumer catalogers have already established their presence on the Web. [26] Others, such as television direct marketers, including QVC and Home Shopping Network, have substantial investments in their Web sites and online marketing operations. [27] Because of their extensive experience with direct, data based marketing, catalogers and other direct marketers are well positioned to move quickly and effectively to online consumer marketing. As such, they intensify the threat they already pose to traditional, store merchandisers.

Perceptions & Comparisons

The pictures in the mind's eye of consumers regarding online and store shopping and buying are likely to play an important role in encouraging or inhibiting adoption of online buying. [28-31] To what degree do visions of difficulty, confusion, or frustration inhibit adoption of online purchasing? And just how much do visions of excitement, entertainment, ease of shopping or time savings encourage it? This research is designed to examine such images, perceptions and opinions.

Ascribed Social Roles

The two main ascribed social roles—those associated with one's age and sex—have a profound effect on virtually every aspect of human behavior, including the purchase and consumption of goods and services. Obviously that includes *how* goods and services are purchased or what outlets are patronized.

Even though they are often simultaneously both homemakers and employed outside the home, women make the vast majority of *family* purchases. [32, 33] Shopping and buying for the family remains almost exclusively the province of women. Research indicates shopping and buying are more pleasurable, or at least less unpleasant activities to women than to men. [34-37] Consequently it is important to examine gender differences between store versus online shopping perceptions.

Despite women’s significant role on household purchases, shopping behavior for the male population is increasingly noticeable. Evidently, millions of boomer dads are shopping a lot more than their fathers or grandfathers. Younger males and teenagers are more proficient with the Web research skills to give them advantage in online shopping. [38] Moreover, in terms of online shopping, research shows that men are more likely to make purchases and spend more money online due to its convenience and reduced social interaction. [39]

Just as sex roles dictate that one should "be a man" or "act like a lady," so, too, do ascribed age roles prescriptions indicate how one should "act your age." Such age role prescriptions, together with the differences in the maturation, history and situation of different age cohorts can be expect to exert a measurable influence on the adoption of a technological innovation as dramatic and far-reaching as the Internet and Web.

Research Focus

This study is designed to reveal the sex and age effects on consumer perceptions of the problems and benefits associated with online shopping and buying. While the overall image profiles are discernable, the main focus is on the similarities and differences between sex and age groups. In addition to perceptions of problems and benefits of online buying, a direct comparison between store versus online buying sharply reveals the contrasts by men and women of different ages.

METHODOLOGY

A survey of 1,060 adult consumers residing in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States was conducted. The questionnaires were delivered and retrieved by university student field workers who were assigned a quota, based on the age and sex of the respondents. Respondents were required to have access to a computer at home, connection to the Internet, and at least some online experience on the World Wide Web to qualify for participation.

Online Shopping Problems and Benefits

The survey questionnaire included 15 statements regarding potential online buying problems and 15 describing potential benefits. These items were gleaned from records of preliminary focus group discussions among those with online shopping experience. To indicate their opinions, respondents checked a box on a 5-point scale with extremes labeled "No Problem" and "Major Problem" or "No Benefit" and "Major Benefit," respectively.

Online Versus Store Comparisons

A direct comparison between store shopping and online shopping experiences was obtained by listing a set of adjectives selected on the basis focus group participants' comments. There were 8 positive and 7 negative statements. Respondents recorded their ratings on 7-point comparative scales. [40] They were instructed to check one box on each line to show their opinion of online shopping, compared to shopping in a store. The extremes of the scale were labeled "Less Than a Store" and "More Than a Store" while the midpoint was labeled "Same as a Store."

Demographic Status

Respondents indicated their sex, age, marital status, education level, employment category, occupational category, home ownership and family income in the demographic section of the questionnaire. These data measured field worker adherence to quota specifications, as well as indicating the nature of the population represented.

RESULTS

Sample Demographics

Table 1 displays the demographic distributions of response for the entire sample. The similarities of proportions of respondents of each sex reflect the sample quota specifications. The convenience sample of respondents tended to be more educated, affluent, and engaged in more up-scale occupations than the general population from which it was drawn.

Rating of Problems by Sex

The mean ratings by men and women of potential problems regarding online shopping are depicted in Table 2. The items are listed in order from the most to least serious in the eyes of respondents. The two items rated as the most serious problems were both related to *privacy*: Sale of mailing lists and lack of security for card information. Other items rated fairly high included too many banners and pop-ups, inability to handle goods, and possibility of receiving unwanted "spam" e-mail solicitations as the result of purchase. Those seen as least vexing were about online shopping being a boring activity in which family and friends could not easily participate.

Table 1
Demographic Distributions of the Sample

	Number	Percent
Sex		
Male	530	50.0
Female	530	50.0
Age		
Under 35	361	34.1
35 - 50	344	32.5
Over 50	354	33.4
Marital Status		
Married	646	61.0
Not Married	413	39.0
Education		
High School Only	283	26.9
Some College	264	25.1
College Graduate	360	34.2
Post-Graduate	146	13.9
Employment		
Company Employed	492	46.7
Education or Government	173	16.4
Self-Employed	139	13.2
Not Employed	241	23.8
Occupation		
Professional	158	15.0
Executive, Managerial	155	14.7
Engineering, Technical	53	5.0
Administrative, Clerical	126	12.0
Sales, Marketing	147	14.0
Skilled, Semi-skilled	105	10.0
Not Employed	309	29.3
Home Ownership		
Owner	775	73.1
Renter	285	26.9
Family Income		
Under 20K	68	6.4
20K TO 39K	97	9.2
40K TO 59K	131	12.4
60K TO 79K	121	11.4
80K TO 99K	72	6.8
100K TO 119K	106	10.0
120K TO 139K	56	5.3
140K & OVER	77	7.3
Refused	332	31.3

Total N = 1,060

Six of the 15 items proved to differ significantly between men and women at the .05 level of probability. Women rated 5 of the 6 significant items as more important problems than did their male counterparts. The one exception, resulting in a statistically significant higher rating of the problem by men than women, dealt with the necessity to wait for delivery of online purchases.

Rating of Benefits by Sex

Table 3 contains the mean ratings by men and women of the potential benefits of online shopping. These items were also sorted from the most to least beneficial in the eyes of respondents, rather than as they appeared in the questionnaire. The two items rated highest by far by both sexes related to being able to shop online any time, anywhere. By contrast, the potential benefit rated lowest suggests respondents rarely found online shopping more interesting or entertaining than store shopping.

Table 2
Perceptions of Online Shopping Problems by Men and Women

	Male	Female	Diff.	Prob.
Sell mailing lists	4.1	4.1	0.1	.428
Credit card insecure	3.8	4.0	-0.1	.063
Pop-ups, banners	3.7	3.8	0.0	.570
Can't handle goods	3.7	3.8	-0.1	.040
May get spam	3.6	3.7	-0.1	.108
Shipping costly**	3.3	3.5	-0.2	.002
Sellers seek info	3.3	3.2	0.1	.346
Slow downloads**	2.9	3.1	-0.3	.002
Descriptions sketchy	2.8	2.9	-0.1	.354
Buying records saved	2.7	2.7	0.0	1.000
Ordering too slow	2.6	2.5	0.0	.821
Delivery too slow*	2.6	2.5	0.1	.037
Search too slow**	2.5	2.7	-0.2	.007
Boring, no fun***	2.3	2.7	-0.4	.000
Lonely, no company	2.1	2.2	-0.1	.199

5-Point scale labeled 1 = "No Problem" and 5 = "Major Problem"

Table 3
Perceptions of Online Shopping Benefits by Men and Women

Benefit	Male	Female	Diff.	Prob.
Shop anywhere	4.3	4.3	0.0	.472
Shop any time	4.2	4.2	-0.1	.166
Can read ratings	3.6	3.5	0.0	.558
Easier, less effort	3.7	3.5	0.1	.067
Online is quicker*	3.7	3.5	0.2	.019
No travel needed	3.6	3.6	0.0	.837
Easy price comparing***	3.6	3.4	0.2	.001
More technical Info	3.4	3.3	0.1	.105
Shop little at a time	3.4	3.4	0.0	.502
Easier searching	3.3	3.3	0.0	.735
Good delivered***	3.0	3.4	-0.4	.000
Appearance irrelevant***	3.0	3.5	-0.5	.000
Greater selection***	3.3	3.1	0.3	.000
Not tiring	3.1	3.2	-0.1	.099
More interesting	2.4	2.3	0.1	.381

5-Point scale labeled 1 = "No Benefit" and 5 = "Major Benefit"

Just 5 of the 15 mean online benefit item ratings differed significantly between men and women, but 4 of the 5 were statistically significant at or beyond the .001 level of probability. Men rated the speed of online shopping and the ability to make price comparisons and wider selection offered as more important than women rated them. Women's mean ratings exceeded those of men on two benefits: Online purchases delivered and do not require the buyer to carry the goods home, and shopping can be done without regard for one's appearance.

Table 4
Perceptions of Online Shopping Problems by Age Group

Problem	< 35	35 - 50	> 50	Prob.
Sell mailing lists* ----------	4.0	4.2	4.2	.041
Credit card insecure --------	3.9	3.9	4.0	.184
Pop-ups, banners -----------	3.8	3.8	3.7	.521
Can't handle goods ---------	3.9	3.7	3.7	.080
May get spam ---------------	3.7	3.6	3.7	.596
Shipping costly -------------	3.5	3.5	3.4	.331
Sellers seek info***--------	3.1	3.1	3.4	.001
Slow downloads ------------	2.9	3.1	3.1	.080
Descriptions sketchy -------	2.8	2.8	2.9	.506
Buying records saved ------	2.6	2.6	2.9	.006
Ordering too slow***------	2.4	2.5	2.8	.000
Delivery too slow**--------	2.7	2.4	2.6	.010
Search too slow*** --------	2.4	2.6	2.9	.000
Boring, no fun --------------	2.4	2.5	2.7	.057
Lonely, no company -------	2.2	2.0	2.2	.070

5-Point scale labeled 1 = "No Problem" and 5 = "Major Problem"

Rating of Problems by Age Group

The responding sample was divided into three groups: Under 35, 35 to 50, and over 50 years of age. The breakdown of mean ratings is shown in Table 4. Six of the 15 problem items received significantly different mean ratings by age group. In every significant case, save one, the eldest group regarded the problem as more serious than did their juniors. The one exception was the item indicating that delivery of online purchases takes too long. In that case, the under 35 group rated it as most serious and the middle age group least serious, suggesting, perhaps, the purported impatience of youth.

Table 5
Perceptions of Online Shopping Benefits by Age Group

Benefit	< 35	35 - 50	> 50	Prob.
Shop anywhere*** ---------	4.5	4.3	4.2	.000
Shop any time*** ----------	4.3	4.2	4.0	.001
Can read ratings** ---------	3.7	3.6	3.4	.016
Easier, less effort -----------	3.6	3.7	3.6	.423
Online is quicker -----------	3.6	3.7	3.6	.222
No travel needed**---------	3.4	3.7	3.6	.010
Easy price comparing* ----	3.6	3.5	3.4	.012
More tech info --------------	3.3	3.5	3.4	.116
Shop little at a time---------	3.4	3.5	3.4	.456
Easier searching ------------	3.3	3.4	3.3	.154
Good delivered*** ---------	2.9	3.3	3.4	.000
Appearance irrelevant* ----	3.1	3.4	3.3	.043
Greater selection------------	3.3	3.2	3.1	.062
Not tiring --------------------	3.0	3.1	3.2	.084
More interesting***--------	2.2	2.5	2.4	.001

5-Point scale labeled 1 = "No Problem" and 5 = "Major Problem"

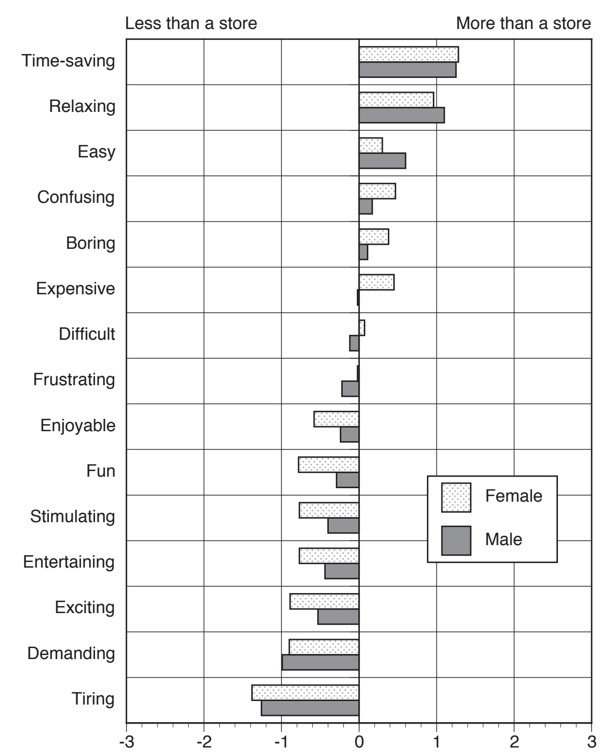
Rating of Benefits by Age Group

Table 5 contains the mean ratings by age group of the potential benefits of online shopping. Of the 15 items, 8 resulted in statistically significant ratings by age. The four items dealing with the ability to shop online any time and anywhere, to read product ratings and comments and to make price comparisons online were regarded as less important by the senior-most group, compared to the younger two groups. Freedom from the need for a means of transportation, from having to carry online purchases and the ability to shop without regard for personal appearance were least important for the under 35 group. The item stating that shopping online is more interesting or entertaining than store shopping received low ratings by all age groups, but the under 35 group provided significantly lower ratings than the other two age groups.

Comparative Scale Ratings by Sex

Figure 1 displays the mean ratings of online shopping compared to store shopping for men and women respondents. The two vectors—male versus female respondent ratings—proved to differ significantly beyond the .001 level of probability.

Figure 1
Online Shopping Image Ratings by Sex



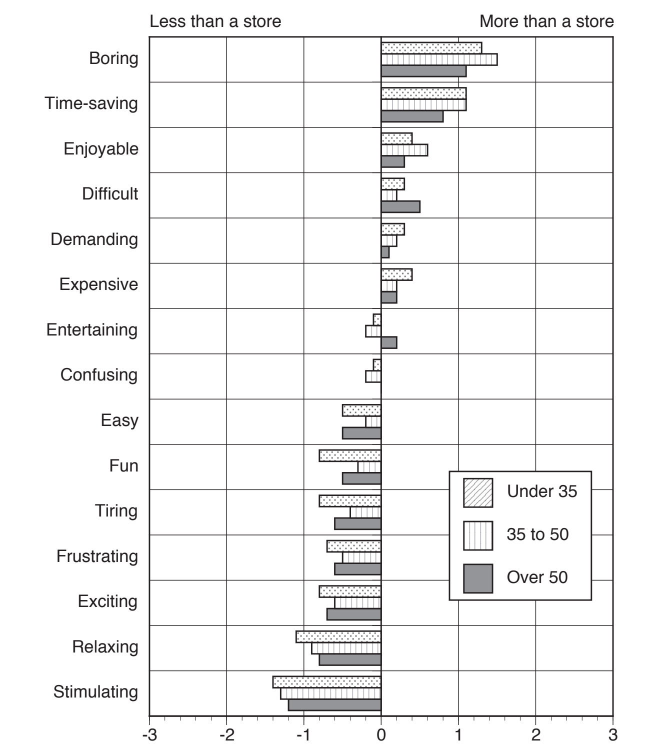
For the entire responding sample, online shopping was seen as substantially time-saving, relaxing and easy in comparison with store shopping, but also slightly more confusing and boring. Online shopping was also considerably less tiring in the eyes of the whole responding sample, as well as somewhat less demanding, exciting, entertaining, stimulating, fun and enjoyable. Both men and women viewed store and online shopping as almost equally difficult and frustrating.

Inspection of the dimensions on the lower portion of Figure 1; traits that both men and women felt were *less* typical of online shopping than store shopping reveal women's attachment to store shopping by comparison with men. Thus, they found online shopping to be markedly *less* enjoyable, fun, stimulating, entertaining, and exciting than did their male counterparts. By contrast, in comparison to store shopping, men found online shopping to be more relaxing and easier than did the women respondents. Taken as a whole, the results indicate men's comparisons of online and store shopping are markedly more favorable toward online channels, but it is uncertain whether this is because they like online shopping more than women or dislike store shopping more than women do.

Comparative Scale Ratings by Age Group

Figure 2 contains the graph of mean comparative scale ratings form those under 35, 35 to 50, and over 50 years of age. The differences among all three vectors proved to be significant beyond the .01 level of probability, however post hoc measures of differences between pairs of vectors revealed the vectors of ratings for the younger and older group did not differ significantly from one another, although both differed significantly from the middle-aged group. Thus, the results were somewhat more ambiguous than those for ratings by the two sexes.

Figure 2
Online Shopping Image Ratings by Age Group



Compared to store shopping, the mid-age group found online shopping to be more boring, time-saving, and enjoyable than their younger and older counterparts. Those in the younger group viewed online shopping to be less fun, tiring, frustrating, exciting, relaxing and stimulating than store shopping to a greater degree than did the two senior groups.

CONCLUSIONS

Gender Effects on Reactions

The differences between men and women in their responses to online shopping problems and concerns, to benefits and advantages, and among direct comparisons with store shopping were often statistically significant but never dramatically different. Yet there were some distinctions worth noting: Perhaps the most noteworthy difference between men's and women's ratings were for the statement, *"Online shopping is more boring and less fun than store shopping."* Women's enjoyment of store shopping is evident in their higher rating of that online shopping problem statement. Women were also more concerned than their male counterparts about the time and effort required to find what they want online. From a marketers point of view, and especially from an online marketers frame of reference, it would appear obvious that shopping online is quicker and easier than a trip to the store; however, this apparent contradiction is resolved if one finds store shopping to be fun and entertaining while that is not so for online shopping.

Differences between men's and women's reactions were also discernable in response to items about online shopping benefits and advantages. Men's ratings equaled or exceeded those of women for all but 3 of the 15 statements, but those three exceptions are noteworthy:

"Online purchases are delivered so I don't have to carry them."

"I can shop online without concern for my appearance."

"I can shop online as long as I want without getting tired."

Taken in conjunction with the ratings of shopping problems, the message from women seems to be that store shopping is more fun but online shopping is easier. By contrast, men appear to feel that online shopping is an effective way to avoid the hassle of store shopping.

When making direct comparisons between store and online shopping, on average, both sexes found online shopping to be less tiring, demanding, exciting, entertaining, stimulating, fun, and enjoyable; however, men saw store and online shopping to be more similar on all these dimensions than women did, except one: *demanding*. It should also be noted that on average, men viewed both shopping venues as about equally expensive, while women perceived online shopping as substantially more expensive than store shopping.

Age Effects on Reactions

The most senior group of respondents were more concerned than their juniors about problems of information security and about difficulty and complexity of online shopping. While the younger group was least concerned about sale of mailing lists, that and credit card information security were the two top concerns for all three age groups.

Among the items identifying potential online shopping benefits, the senior group's average ratings exceeded those of the others on only two items:

"Online purchases are delivered so I don't have to carry them."

"I can shop online without concern for my appearance"

The majority of items yielding the highest mean ratings were provided by those in the 35 to 50 age group. The topics of these items included online shopping being quick and easy, and a ready source of technical information. They also valued the ability to search for particular items online.

The direct comparisons between store and online shopping by the three age groups indicated that the younger group found online shopping to be less stimulating, relaxing, fun, and exciting, but also less tiring, and frustrating than did their older counterparts. The three items where online shopping was rated most superior to store shopping were all rated higher by the 35 to 50 age group than by the older and younger group. The mid-age group found online shopping to be markedly more boring than did their juniors or seniors.

Implications

Privacy

This study indicates that issues and concerns regarding information privacy and online security are paramount among both sexes and all ages. It would online marketers to be especially eager to take whatever steps are necessary to make self-regulation and self-governance in the matter of privacy and security effective. Online and database marketers would be well advised to cooperate enthusiastically when regulation or legislation is proposed in order to avoid over-regulation and binding requirements and prohibitions.

Individual online marketers would benefit by adopting and promoting buyer-friendly online security, as well as confidence-building data collection and retention procedures. Such features as obscure opt-out options and verbose, fine-print statements of privacy policies, written largely in legalese, should be replaced by clear, open, easily understandable disclosure of the firm's or site's policies, practices, and security measures.

Convenience

The "any time, anywhere" capability of online shopping was clearly welcomed by respondents of both sexes and all age groups. It is highly unlikely that people will find more free time for shopping in the future. Probably the pressure on their time and demands for their attention will increase, rather than abate. As that happens, the convenience of online shopping and buying will become an ever more important factor.

Entertainment

Casual observation suggests that consumers tend to fall into two broad groups with regard to their attitudes toward store shopping: Some see it is as enjoyable, stimulating and sufficiently rewarding to be worth the effort. Others find it a chore, a drag, a hassle at best and something of a necessary evil. Online shopping is a natural alternative for the latter group. For the former, those who associate fun, excitement, entertainment, stimulation, and social companionship with a shopping trip, online shopping may well be a poor substitute. The challenge for online marketers is to increase the sensory stimulation and shopper participation without increasing the complexity or effort required of the consumer. To attain that, both advanced technology and great creativity will be required.

Online & In Store

In the past, online and store marketing have often been seen as competitive. That may still be the case, but it need not always be so. Over time, they are likely to become increasingly *complementary* to one another, both from the marketer's and the consumer's point of view. Online shopping is quick, easy, and extremely convenient. It is not very demanding and it readily enables search and comparison. Store marketing is more entertaining and stimulating. Shoppers can handle and examine the goods in person before purchase. Given these sets of characteristics, store marketers may wish to increase their devotion to their online facilities, while exclusively online marketers may consider affiliation with those who have a physical, rather than an electronic presence in the consumer marketplace.

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