



The changing face of browsing: from stores to the Web

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Gone are the days when Cassie Lepsche would spend hours wandering a mall to see what caught her eye.

Now the 28-year-old Minneapolis resident arrives at malls armed with a list of stores to visit. She's already checked out their websites, studied their sales and read reviews of items she wants to buy. And if she doesn't see anything that sparks her interest online, she skips that store at the mall.

"It's really rare that I go in just to browse," Lepsche said. "I don't want to waste my time in a store if they're not going to have anything I want."

Browsing a store used to be an integral part of the shopping experience. But like many things, browsing has shifted online.

"Window shopping, that's a term that's dying," said Bill Martin, founder of ShopperTrak, a firm that measures store traffic. He said smartphones allow "virtual window shopping 24 hours a day."

There's even a term for the phenomenon: "webrooming." It refers to the way consumers use websites as a showroom floor and, once they figure out what they want, go to the store to buy it.

It's the opposite of "showrooming," in which customers would look over a product in a store, check prices online and buy it somewhere else for less. In response to showrooming, many retailers instituted price-matching policies.

A recent survey by Deloitte found that while 49 percent of shoppers said they were likely to showroom this holiday season, 68 percent were planning to webroom. That's overall good news for traditional brick-and-mortar retailers, showing that consumers still place a premium on the store experience.

Six in 10 shoppers who planned to use a smartphone to research a product over the holidays said they would buy it in a store because they want to touch and feel it, they didn't want to pay for shipping, and they wanted instant gratification, according to a survey for the International Council of Shopping Centers.

"The consumer has changed because of all of this technology," said Martin. "But we still love the store. We like the sights, we like the sounds. We like to satisfy the five senses."

But webrooming also presents challenges to retailers. Shoppers are visiting fewer stores because of it, sending overall store traffic lower. That means stores have fewer people to entice shoppers into buying other things. Meanwhile, those



To save on shipping fees, some shoppers buy online and pick up in store, like Andrew Murray of Minneapolis, at a Best Buy recently.

JIM GEHRZ,



More people are finding what they want online before going to a store. Ben Bradford, of Bloomington, picked up a TV at Best Buy.

JIM GEHRZ,

shoppers stray little from the things they already researched online.

On top of that, consumers aren't as likely to make spontaneous purchases online. About 45 percent of sales in a store are impulse purchases compared with 25 percent online, says Marshal Cohen, an analyst with the NPD Group. "The stores not only want you in the store, they need you in the store," he said.

And then there is the hurdle of making sure your store makes the shopper's list. The Web opens up consumers to a much wider universe of retailers, said Carol Spieckerman, president of newmarketbuilders, a retail consulting firm.

"When shoppers start their journey in the digital world, the chances of that journey landing on one of their banners is exponentially less than it would be if a shopper were driving down a street looking for a place to shop," she said.

Mary Van Note and Beth Perro-Jarvis, retail brand consultants who run Twin Cities-based Ginger Consulting, have noticed a shift in their focus groups in the last few years. While shoppers used to complain about search functionality on websites, now they are increasingly taken by sites that allow them to examine pictures of handbags and jeans from all angles.

"You know how you used to take your catalogs to bed and would dreamily look at them?" said Perro-Jarvis. "Now they do that with their iPads."

But when you're shopping online, you miss out on some of those fun gift ideas that make eye-popping displays in the stores, especially around the holidays, she said.

"Online works well with precision shopping, a brand of jeans at a certain price," said Van Note. "But the more you get to the emotional needs of shopping — I'm looking for fun gifts — the in-store shopping shines in that area."

GameStop President Tony Bartel recently noted that more than 60 percent of the people who walk into one of the chain's 6,600 stores have visited its website first.

While store traffic has been declining, Best Buy CEO Hubert Joly has said the percentage of people who buy something once in the store has been on the rise, since many do research before they step in the store.

The Richfield-based electronics chain has been sprucing up its website in recent months, adding more online buying guides, sharper visuals and more detailed information about hot product categories.

Target's newly revamped iPad app highlights what products are trending on Pinterest and Instagram. The retailer reconfigured the app after realizing that people often use tablets for browsing and inspiration. "It's more about discovery," said Jason Goldberger, a Target.com and mobile executive for the retailer.

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