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Web toys: Is convenience worth cost?

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Thinking of using a little e-commerce in your holiday toy shopping this year?

Plenty of sites will help you check off those presents from your list, but you may not get much of a bargain in the process.

As an experiment, we checked Web prices on a few toys before trudging down to the local stores to comparison shop.

What we found was that the convenience of point-and-click purchasing still comes with a price.

For example, we started with three basic Lite Brite sets.

The best price we could get from the big Web toy sites - Toys 'R' Us (www.toysrus.com) and eToys (www.etoys.com) - was \$14.99. That same week, a local department store offered them for \$9.99.

In addition, although Toys 'R' Us offered free shipping, eToys would have tacked another \$3.95 for shipping.

The pricing disparities aren't restricted to megastores. Specialty retailer World of Science asks \$11.99 for a Gourmet Chocolate Factory kit on its Web site (www.worldofscience.com), with additional shipping charges. The same kit in a local branch of World of Science ran \$10.99.

So if Web stores don't offer big discounts, what's the incentive to use them?

Well, to begin with, you beat the crowds. While the masses flock to the mall and battle for parking spaces, you can sit at home sipping cocoa in front of your PC.

Also, while local stores may be out of your child's favorite Pokmon character, Web-based orders tend to be filled straight from the warehouse, so you may have a better opportunity to get what you want via the Web.

You can also cruise several sites looking for that hard-to-find gift rather than drive from store to store.

And, some items aren't available at all from local retailers.

If your niece's heart is set on a Molly doll from the American Girl's collection, you won't find it at any of the major toy stores. But it is available directly from the Pleasant Company's American Girl Web site (www.americangirl.com).

It also makes sense to shop online when you plan to send a present to someone. Since Web stores ship in volume, they sometimes offer less expensive rates than UPS or the post office. And, of course, you won't end up with tape stuck in your hair.


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