

COMMENTARY

By Olga Kharif

Shopping Without Dropping

As the Christmas clock counts down, here are some tips to make even last-minute gift hunting easier, especially online

Author Michael Miller promised his 14-year-old nephew that he would buy him a Dell DJ 20 digital jukebox for Christmas. Then Miller found out that the gadget was so popular, new orders won't be filled through Dell.com (DELL) until February, 2005. Advertisement

Fortunately, Miller is an online shopping whiz whose books include Bargain Hunter's Secrets to Online Shopping, from Que Publishing. He put those skills to work, and the DJ 20 is already wrapped and sitting under his nephew's Christmas tree. But how can the rest of us get that hard-to-find item or unique gift in time for Dec. 25? Just follow these seven steps from some shopping experts and you might even have time to enjoy the holiday.

1. Start here. A good place to start, Miller says, is a general shopping search engine like www.Shopping.com (SHOP). The site allows you to compare prices on items from more than 50,000 merchants. It also offers product reviews and tells you if merchant sites says the item is in stock.

Dan Ciporin, chairman and CEO of Shopping.com, points out that the first three items that pop up in your search results are paid listings. Listing No. 4 will probably offer the best price and be a good bet all-around.

2. Search around. No luck? Try a few other search engines. Yahoo's (YHOO) shopping.yahoo.com offers products from lots of smaller retailers that might not have made it into Shopping.com. And Froogle.google.com, a property of general search engine Google (GOOG), lets you search not just a specific set of merchants' offerings but the whole Web.

3. Go retail. Next, try retail sites where you can buy both new and used items such as the Marketplace section of Amazon.com (AMZN) or Half.com, owned by auction heavyweight eBay (EBAY). You can usually find products on these sites for less than you would pay on eBay, says Miller.

4. Last-minute bid. When all else fails, go to an auction site. If you're looking for, say, a specific antique, you may want to try a specialized auction site first, suggests Dan Butler, vice-president for retail operations at the National Retail Federation, the world's largest association of retailers, based in Washington, D.C. For instance, check out AuctionBeads.com for handmade jewelry.

Or simply jump to the biggest game in town: eBay. That's where Miller finally found the Dell jukebox. The site should be your last resort, though, as it can be pricey: Miller says he ended up paying about \$50 over the gadget's \$249 list price.

If you do wind up on eBay, don't wait around for an auction that ends in seven days. Sort the listings by "Time: Ending soonest," and bid on items going today. Or look for those items with the "Buy It Now" option, suggests Miller.

To speed things up, search for auctions where the seller lets you pay immediately with a credit card or through payment service PayPal. Also, check for sellers who offer speedy shipping.

5. Is it out? If you can't find it even on eBay, maybe the product hasn't shipped yet. Check with the manufacturer. The item's maker should provide you with information on when the product will become available, who will sell it, and how to pre-order.

6. Get help. Don't have time to go through all this? Try a personal shopper. You can find them in the Yellow Pages or online. Personal shoppers' gift-buying services run from \$25 to \$150-plus an hour, according to Emily Lumpkin, author of *Get Paid to Shop: Be a Personal Shopper for Corporate America* from Forte Publishing.

A personal shopper can take your gift list, buy all the items, wrap them, and even deliver them. They will also take care of all returns. But best of all is that personal shoppers often have personal connections with retail store managers so they may have access to those hard-to-find items before the rest of us, says Michelle Sterling, founder of personal image consultancy Global Image Group. Finally, a personal shopper can probably suggest a suitable gift for that father-in-law who has everything.

7. Unlikely ideas. If you're struggling to find that special gift but don't have the budget for a personal shopper, check out FindGift.com. The site, which offers more than 18,000 products from more than 600 retailers, "helps people think of things that they wouldn't have thought of themselves," says Bob Zakrzewski, co-founder of FindGift.com in Kennesaw, Ga.

Here, you can enter criteria, such as the intended gift recipient's age, hobbies, and likes and dislikes, into a search engine, which will then offer some gift suggestions. Among the consumers' favorites are buying a share in Google, through giveashare.com, or an acre of land on the moon.

And here's a final bit of advice: Start shopping earlier next year.

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