

Pleasures and perils of shopping online

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For some people, instant gratification is not fast enough. That's why there is shopping online.

(A boon to insomniacs, shopping online is not cheesy like those unctuous late-night infomercials.)

At wheredidyougetthat.ca, a Toronto-based online shopping boutique featuring unique items in jewellery, apparel, accessories and home decor as scouted out by founder Dawn Perlmutter, your goodies are shipped UPS and the turnaround is usually three days.

The site also offers free shipping across North America.

Americans are more online-shopping savvy, says Perlmutter.

"Canadians are more scared, though there are a lot of orders from Western Canada from towns I have never heard of. Merchandise is not so readily available there."

Each item on the site lists "Where We Got It" and "Why We Love It."

"I source it and it's like a treasure hunt," she says. "I shop gift shows and stores and find distributors. I Google: There hasn't been anything I haven't been able to find."

The site has been in business since October 2008 and Perlmutter has had only one return – and that was a size issue.

"We try on everything at the gift shows so we know the fitting. Sometimes I tell people to order a size up."

Perlmutter, a stay-at-home mom of three boys, was an English major at York University with a minor in shopping.

"I had a mom who liked shopping," she allows.

She'd planned to go to law school but took a year off to work as a buyer for Beaver Canoe, where she met her husband Lloyd, who was the president.

"He says he hired me, fired me and married me," she laughs. "It's not true. I quit before he fired me. He worked for Gap (where he became president of Gap Inc. Canada) and we travelled and I shopped. So many people asked me where did I get things – like the bracelet I found in New York made from Venetian glass in Italy. I started going to trade shows.

"This shawl I am wearing is hand-made in Scotland. I saw it in Barney's and found the supplier. I test drive everything. We don't buy anything for the site that I don't love."

Store Gazing test drove the Room It Up Lap Desk, a portable desk tray for a laptop computer sourced from Stuart, Fla. It features a built-in cup holder and the polystyrene bean-bag filler in the bottom ensures comfort and steadiness so you can even work in bed. It is available for \$35 in black and white floral or stripes.

There is women's wear only – though men shop the site for gift buying – but some items like the \$12 equestrian stay-put boot sock from Palisades Park, N.J. could be unisex.

A '50s style apron cut to look like a halter dress is totally Mrs. Cleaver meets *Mad Men*.

"One of my friends wore it for Valentine's Day with nothing under it," Perlmutter says.

Dinner was late.

The price points are reasonable: A sweater shouldn't cost more than a flight to Rome.

Their most expensive sweater is \$375 and the ceiling for jewellery, some of which is specially made for the site, is \$300. Giftware starts at \$20.

"We package the jewellery in a gift box with brown and pink tissue. We want you to feel like you

are getting a present. If you are not going to shop in a store, you want a great experience.

"It's like Christmas every day."

Wheredidyougetthat.ca ships free of charge but Barry Boone, founder of CurrentCodes.com, which offers online coupons to big U.S. retailers like Neiman Marcus, Nordstrom, ShopBop.com and Saks and Canadian sites like Air France Canada, Amazon.ca, chapters.indigo.ca, WeightWatchers.ca and eBay, cautions consumers to pay attention to shipping charges because some retailers pad their shipping.

CurrentCodes.com, based in Tulsa, Okla., has been up and running for 10 years.

"We collect coupons to 2,000 stores and some, like Dell Canada computers, are based in Canada," Boone says.

"The stores send out a newsletter, catalogue or email list to try and entice customers back (for repeat business) and we step in and collect them and make them available to everyone. Or visitors to the site will find coupons and put them on the site. We have 10,000 coupons at any given time."

Coupon discounts are usually from 10 to 50 per cent, but Boone has seen them as high as 80 per cent off.

"Because of the recession, there is a spike in overall traffic," he says. "People are more cost conscious."

Boone has tips on how to save money shopping online, coupons or no coupons.

"You have to look for the coupon or promotional code when you check out your shopping cart online. It is usually a word or a letter or numbers that you click to apply and you get 10 per cent or more off the order."

The merchant doesn't make it easy for you.

"They would prefer you spend the full price but they want to motivate people to shop with them," he explains. "If you don't find the coupon, you might go to their competitor. It is a valuable way to get to bargain shoppers."

Be a comparison shopper.

"Always compare different merchants with respect to tax rules. Make sure you read the privacy policy so you don't have your information shared with anybody.

"Comparison shop multiple retailers. If you go to our site and check under 'shoes', you can tell at a glance which ones have coupons."

Be sure you have it in writing.

"At the final checkout screen, make sure the discounts are showing. An inexperienced shopper may not have done something quite right. If you have an issue, bypass customer service and go higher up the chain."

Use a credit card over a debit card to purchase online.

"If there is a mistake with a debit card, it comes directly out of your account," Boone says. "If it's a credit card, you play with the bank's money."