

Online retailers take on the high street

The internet has become one of the most useful resources on earth, making it much easier to keep in touch with friends that are scattered across the globe, as well as to apply for jobs and conduct research, to name just a few possibilities. The younger generation is most likely perplexed as to how life ever existed without the all-encompassing influence of the World Wide Web.

Online retail has also become an indispensable tool. Customers can now buy almost anything they desire without even leaving the house and many who originally had doubts about the safety and practicality of buying goods online are starting to gain confidence. The footwear sector is beginning to recognise the demand for online services and most companies now offer efficient sales websites to complement their in-store offerings. Others have gone one step further, seeing the high street as a diminishing sales platform and are either exclusively selling their shoes online, or ploughing much more time and money into their internet businesses.

Whatever the weather

There are many reasons why internet shoe sales have picked up in recent years. Busy lifestyles can make shopping a rare luxury, and many people feel that the high street simply doesn't offer enough choice, particularly if they have unique requirements or are looking to buy a shoe out of season. One of the main influences is weather, particularly in areas where persistent rain or cold conditions act as a shopping deterrent, as can sometimes be the case in the UK.

According to figures from the British Retail Consortium, high street sales in the UK fell 0.9% in July compared with June. However, the Capgemini e-Retail Sales Index shows that consumers in the UK spent more than £4.8 billion online in July, a monthly increase of 11.3%. It also showed that online footwear, clothing and accessories sales rose by an impressive 23% month-on-month. Despite the disappointing summer, UK consumers clearly did not let bad weather dampen appetites for the latest shoes and accessories.



High street sales are suffering in some areas, while online sales appear to be on the rise.

Filling the gap

Online shoe shopping site Zappos.com was founded by Nick Swinmurn following an unsuccessful shoe shopping excursion in San Francisco. He found that while one store had the right size but the wrong colour, other stores offered the reverse. After several hours of looking, he returned home empty-handed. Turning to the internet, Mr Swinmurn was again disappointed by the lack of availability. Realising there was a huge gap in the market for an online footwear retailer, he left his job and established Zappos.com, which is now reportedly the largest internet shoe store in the world.

Customers can choose to search the site in many different ways including by department, for example 'men's casual shoes' and 'women's dress shoes', or by lifestyle type, for example 'skate park' or 'retro'. The site offers shoes from more than 1,000 brands as well as selling complementary items such as handbags, clothing and accessories. Visitors can also read reviews from other customers before they buy and post their own comments after they make a purchase, giving the site an 'open community' feel.

Mr Swinmurn has stated on several occasions that he believes 30% of all US retail transactions will eventually be carried out online and that good customer service is key to making an internet business successful, not least for shoe businesses. One of the company's major focuses is ensuring that the product is delivered to the customer as quickly as possible.

Shoe shoppers can track the status of their delivery and credit card purchases are covered by the firm's Safe Shopping Guarantee. Meanwhile, purchases can be returned for a full refund for up to 365 days from the purchase date. So with shoes arriving swiftly, payments secure and returns possible, many of the existing hang-ups about buying shoes online are being swept aside. The company is expecting sales to exceed \$1 billion this year.



A major benefit of high street shopping is the ability to touch and try on the shoes.

Simplicity sells

Shoebuy.com is another major online shoe and apparel vendor. It partners with more than 600 manufacturers and sells more than 700,000 products from well-known brands such as adidas, Crocs, ECCO, Hush Puppies, Mephisto and Timberland. According to Hitwise, it is one of the internet's top ten most visited apparel and accessory shopping and classified sites.

The site made headlines in January having reportedly attracted approximately five million visitors in December, an annual traffic increase

of 65%. Last year's "Cyber Monday" (the first Monday after the US Thanksgiving holiday) recorded an 80% rise in traffic year-on-year, with more than 250,000 visitors that day alone. It will be interesting to see how the corresponding day in November will compare this year.

The reason behind these traffic increases is simplicity, according to Shoebuy.com. Using this as its "guiding principle", it has, like Zappos, arranged its wares into category, for example separating men's and women's shoes, and organising shoes by brand. Its advanced search facility, which

includes size, width, colour and price, allows customers to find the perfect pair without spending hours searching through the thousands of shoes on the site. Offering more than 4,000 boot styles, 5,000 sandal types, 1,000 wedding shoe models and 2,500 children's styles, customers cannot complain about the lack of choice.

Internet versus high street

So why doesn't everyone buy their shoes on the web if it is so quick and easy? For many the major downside is simply the inability to touch the shoe and to try it on for size. This traditional method of trial and error is one that is often hard to leave behind. While many of the leading online footwear firms offer a free returns service, trying on 10 pairs of shoes from an internet site can require more effort than picking 10 pairs off the shelf. The satisfaction of making a purchase and then having to wait days or weeks to wear it can also be off-putting.

However, the pros are also worth noting. Those with broadband will appreciate the benefits of being able to search for hundreds of pairs of shoes in a matter of seconds. It is easier to make price comparisons online and if one site does not have what you want, the next is only a click or two away. Those with children will appreciate being able to browse online while their little cherubs play quietly at home rather than dragging screaming children through the busy aisles. Queuing does not exist on the net and delivery can be arranged to suit the buyer – whether they want to receive the shoes at home or at work, or even if they are looking to send a gift to someone overseas.

Weighing it up

Managing director at Shoes.co.uk, Nigel Carr, weighs up the pros and cons of shopping online for shoes. Among the benefits he lists having much more choice, and being able to buy harder-to-find brands and less common shoe sizes. Accessibility is another major plus according to Mr Carr. "You can buy from the comfort of



Many people prefer to shop for shoes from the comfort of their own homes.

your own front room or office saving the chore of driving to the shops, paying the petrol, parking and trudging around looking for what you want," he says.

The negatives included not being able to try shoes on before buying and having to send shoes back if they are not right, at the customer's own cost on some sites. However, he points out that, not only do most online shoe stores now offer free 48-hour delivery, online customers have a better chance of finding lower priced shoes.

"It's actually cheaper to shop on the internet," he says, adding that there is "no chasing to the shops only to find your favourite retailer has closed for the day. I believe that certain online shoe retailers will grow so quickly that they will start to have a real

impact on traditional high street shops. I don't believe that overall, internet shoe retailing will ever be higher than high street sales but a few of us are having a very good go at making a sizeable dent!"

Shopping centres and high street stores are unlikely to become an endangered species, for the time being at least. However, online shoe shopping certainly provides a handy alternative. Internet retail sites are pulling out all the stops to offer advanced search and return facilities, secure payments, low prices and, most of all, choice.

Consumers can now decide whether to wear out the shoe leather on the shop floor, or stick their feet up and let their computers do the searching for them. 