

How to Shop Online

Without question, online shopping is big business. Holiday retail sales are forecast to be 18 percent higher this year as 114 million uses shop online.

What makes shopping online so appealing? You don't have to fight traffic or spend time searching for a parking space or deal with noisy crowds and rude salespeople, and you can compare prices quickly and easily while relaxing in your bathrobe. You can order products that aren't available at your local mall. And you don't have to worry about driving all the way to the store, only to discover that the gift you're looking for is sold out.

But experts advise caution when shopping online. The internet may offer convenient shopping options, but it also can expose you to a universe of fraudulent practices and identity theft. When visiting a retailer's Web site, check for the padlock symbol at the bottom right corner of your Web browser. That symbol along with an address that begins with https, is your assurance that the site is secure.

Use the Internet to your advantage. Conduct a simple search on the company you're considering to see whether there have been any claims of fraud, problems with customer service or glitches with ordering and shipping. Reputable e-commerce sites have a history. Visit the Better Business Bureau (www.bbbonline.org) or the National Association of Attorneys General (www.naag.org) to check whether any complaints have been filed against the business. For customer-generated reviews, visit Ripoffreport.com, or bargain shopper portals such as Pricegrabber.com and Shopzilla.com.

Don't use debit cards to pay for an order—they don't offer the same protection as credit cards. Because they're linked directly to your bank account, you may be liable for any funds drained by fraudulent merchants. Find out what kind of fraud protection your credit-card company offers before you buy anything online.

Although keeping track of passwords can often be a chore, experts advise creating unique, secure passwords for each site to fully protect yourself. A secure password is one that has more than seven characters and is a mix of numbers and letters, experts say.

Be wary of any e-mail asking for information. Many thieves go to great lengths to create e-mails that look like they are from a reputable vendor. They may report some sort of problem and ask for your password, credit card number, bank account number or personal information such as a Social Security number. These e-mails can be very convincing. Don't respond. Instead, just ignore them or contact the company from which you ordered the product to see whether the e-mail is legitimate.

Finally, follow your common sense. The age-old wisdom, "Let the buyer beware," holds true in the online shopping environment. If a price seems too good to be true, it probably is. Common schemes include offering high-value items such as jewelry or electronic equipment at a remarkably low price. What is shipped to the buyer—if anything is sent at all—is often a counterfeit item or sometimes an empty box or photograph of the item. Beware hidden fees. And be sure to check a company's return policy. Like millions of shoppers, you can securely take advantage of the Internet's convenient options.