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 from the November 29, 1999 edition

Two ways to buy postage online

David R. Francis, Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

The holiday season has many rituals, including trips to the post office for stamps and to mail off packages.

For some time, the post office has sold stamps via the Web. And most, if not all, overnight-delivery services let you order and pay for shipping over the Internet. But to mail a plain old package, you still had to make that trek.

Such trips are no longer necessary, as long as you own a computer and a postage scale. Four new companies have received permission from the US Post Office to sell postage over the Internet, postage that can be printed onto envelopes or labels with a home ink-jet or laser printer.

The major contenders: stamps.com and e-stamp.com, which offer similar services with one big difference.

Stamps.com requires you to be connected to the Internet when you print a "stamp." Advantage: You can print a stamp from any computer with Internet access. Disadvantage: You may have to wait for an Internet connection.

E-stamp.com uses a special piece of hardware called a dongle to store your postage. This means you can print stamps without being online. But you must bring the dongle to any location from which you wish to print.

With either service, you'll pay a premium for postage. So keep a roll of 33 centers for mundane bill-paying.

Where the services shine is for more exotic fare. You can generate priority- and express-mail postage without needing to stick a dozen stamps on a package.

Some feedback: In reply to our Nov. 15 column on online toy shopping, Fred Klaucke, CEO of World of Science Inc., points out that the prices we paid for a chocolate kit in a local store and online should have been the same, according to company policy. He adds that there are no shipping charges on purchases of \$50 or more on their site, less than what their average customer spends. Online purchases also avoid sales tax.

We were shopping in tax-free New Hampshire and only looking for a single item, so these advantages didn't apply. But his points are well taken.

* James Turner is a computer consultant and avid Web surfer.

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