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'Group buying': bogus bargains?

James Turner

Do you ever run into people who, regardless of whether they are actually in possession of the correct answer, try to carry an argument just by hammering away at you with volumes of information?

Well, I've discovered the Internet-marketing equivalent: Web sites that claim to offer a great deal through "group buying."

The two best-known (or at least best-advertised) sites are mobshop.com and mercata.com.

Unfortunately, as much as they promote the great deals you can get if enough people buy the same product, the deep discounts they claim to offer turn out to be somewhat more elusive.

While you might be able to find a good deal on certain items, you still need to comparison-shop on the rest of the Internet to get the best bargains.

For example, on the day that I compared prices, mob-shop.com featured a deal on a Diamond Rio PMP500 portable music player for just \$200 - if a mere 329 people or more purchased one.

So, off I scurried around the Net to see what kind of deals I could find on my own. Using one of my favorite sites, pricewatch.com, I was able to find several dealers who would be happy to sell me the same player for \$200 or less.

Pricewatch was the only buyer's guide that found competitive prices. (The typical street price was running about \$10 more, with some pricing guides offering a ludicrous "best buy" of \$270.)

With Mercata, it is even more difficult to tell if you're getting a good deal. For one thing, the site doesn't let you know the lowest possible price, so there's no way to tell if the price will end up significantly lower than the current one.

And, once again, the quality of the "bargains" is mixed. Their "powerbuy" on a JVC DVD player - \$355 - was nearly \$80 more than the comparable street price.

In short, it seems that the only real power being generated from these group-buying sites is the psychological power they wield, which makes you feel like you're getting some kind of deal.

Still, do keep an eye out for promotional prices. Mobshop recently offered \$50 gas cards for \$30.

And one area where both sites truly shine is free shipping, something that can definitely be an important consideration, especially with heavier items.

You'll have to factor that into the price when comparing group-buying sites with more-traditional online retailers.

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