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from the May 22, 2000 edition

## A scavenger hunt before summer vacation

James Turner

The tape recorder and manila envelope were sitting on my desk when I returned from lunch.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Turner. In the envelope you will find a list of items for a summer vacation. Your mission, should you decide to accept it, is to compare the cost of these items bought online with the same ones bought conventionally. This tape will now melt."

I took a peek at the items I was to purchase. I already knew what my biggest foe would be: shipping. Sure, I'd be able to find bargains online, but on the relatively low-ticket items specified, I'd get nailed by shipping charges unless I could find an angle.

Right at the beginning, I was dealt a blow: The last item on the list, a Trek mountain bike, was not to be had on the Net for any price. Trek has a policy of not selling bikes online, preferring customers buy them from local dealers to ensure proper selection. The best I could have done is find a new Trek bike on eBay, not really a fair comparison.

I redoubled my efforts on the rest of the items. I immediately noticed a cluster of sporting goods items. If I could score them all at the same site, I could reduce the overall shipping charges.

I struck gold at sports supersite Fogdog.com. A Speedo Women's Solid Ultraback swimsuit (size 6, black), Teva Youth Storm sandals (size 11), a can of Penn Championship tennis balls, a box of Titleist DT Spin 100 golf balls, and a Nike Swoosh II cap cost only \$123.79, including the \$3.99 for shipping. Five items down, five to go.

A pair of Ray-Ban Outdoorsman sunglasses from DiscountBlvd.com added \$89.02 to my bill, with a \$5.08 UPS charge included. A pair of DKNY cargo shorts size 32 (in my dreams) ran \$47.99 at savishopper.com with (yes!) free shipping. A Thule Hitching Post bicycle car rack from PennCycle.com pedaled off with \$135.99 on my credit card. Add another \$12.00 in shipping.

On the last small items on the list, the going got tough. A 4-oz. bottle of Coppertone SPF 15 sunblock was \$6.99 at drugstore.com, but the \$3.95 shipping ran the total cost up to \$10.94. A copy of "The Brethren" by John Grisham was only \$13.98 at Amazon.com, but the site hit me with another \$3.99 in shipping.

After a busy evening of comparison surfing, I racked up \$437.70.

The next morning, I started calling stores. Most of the shopping was done in "tax-free" New Hampshire. But a few items were hard to find in the Granite State, so I priced them out in Boston, where sales taxes run 5 percent.

I first "picked up" the Speedo and tennis balls at MVP Sports in Manchester N.H. for \$42.18. Bob's Stores in Nashua, N.H., ran a sale on Teva sandals for just \$29.99. Golf Day in Nashua offered the golf balls for \$25.95. Eye Look Optical & Sunglass Station in Portsmouth, N.H., said it could order the Ray-Bans for \$119. CVS in Manchester had the sun block for \$8.99 and Barnes & Noble (also in Manchester) had the

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novel for \$16.50.

In Boston, The DKNY store offered the cargo shorts for \$59.50. While The Athlete's Foot was out of Swoosh II caps, a salesperson said that they ran for "about \$20." (We'll give them the benefit of the doubt and say \$19.) Coming into the home stretch, Ski Market had the Thule bike carrier for \$149.99.

Taking just a moment to blow the smoke off my fingertips from all the dialing, I totalled up the damage. Bought conventionally, I had blown \$471.10 (not including sales taxes).

Before I'm accused of stacking the odds, I'll inform you that I made no special effort to find the best bargains online beyond picking the best price (for brand-specified goods, as assigned) offered by sites like Yahoo! and Amazon.

It took me about an hour to find the items online, compared with two hours of phone calls to find them in stores. It would have taken at least a full day to go to all the stores and purchase them.

My verdict: The Web is the way to go.

Of course, there's no way you'd ever catch me buying most of these items. (My editors evidently have a less sedentary lifestyle than I do.) Expect another report pricing Twinkies, science-fiction DVDs, and cruise tickets.

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

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