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Archive

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Online grocers try to extend their shelf life

James Turner

For some families, online-grocery services have been one of the most useful applications to hit the Web.

For people who are disabled, have a hectic schedule, or just dislike the idea of lugging groceries, paying someone else a few dollars to do the shopping seems attractive.

What no one really knows yet is whether it's possible to make a living doing it. HomeGrocer.com bit the bullet last year and was acquired by Webvan.com, which isn't looking too healthy itself as its stock trades in the 50-cents-a-share range (down from a high of \$18). Peapod is also trading below a dollar per share.

Still, demand exists for the service. Peapod.com, for example (it operates in a few cities, including Boston, Chicago, and San Francisco) has 120,000 customers.

Web grocers can be broken down into three main categories:

Specialty/niche retailers. These retailers offer unique products. They charge more than most grocery services because special packaging is often used to keep perishables fresh during cross-country deliveries. If you ever need a 30-pound leg of venison to feed 120 of your closest friends, I highly recommend the Old World Venison Company in Randall, Minn. (www.upstel.net/~pbingham/venison.html). By the way, allow three days for it to thaw.

Nationwide services. This group uses express shippers like FedEx. One example is NetGrocer.com, which ships nonperishable grocery orders anywhere in the continental US. The key word here is nonperishable. If you want milk, get used to thermo-stabilized Parmalat. If you want fruits and vegetables, you're out of luck. And forget placing an order for a last-minute dinner party. An order placed Monday can take until Thursday to reach some locations in the Midwest.

Local services. For the ultimate in convenience, you need to live in an area served by services like HomeRuns.com, Peapod, or Webvan. But smaller players are appearing in markets outside the major cities. TimeGrocer.com, for example, serves the greater Manchester, N.H., area.

There are a few points to remember with these services. If you want something specific (a certain cut of meat, or quality of fruit), give explicit instructions, and indicate whether you are willing to accept substitutions. (My wife was peeved to find a substitute spaghetti brand in her TimeGrocer order.)

You'll also need to be home during the time window that you specified for delivery, typically two hours. In Florida, Internet Home Delivery (internethomedelivery.com) lets you avoid the wait if you give the service a key to your home.

FOR ALL THEIR QUIRKS, these services can save both time and aggravation. There's nothing quite as hedonistic as sitting inside a warm house on a blustery winter day while someone else hauls in your groceries.

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While most grocery services focus on home delivery, they can also deal with larger orders. For example, when recently faced with catering a large party at a convention, I had HomeRuns deliver a \$1,100 order to a Boston hotel. Dave and Dave, the delivery guys HomeRuns sent, managed to shepherd the 10 deli platters, 30 pounds of frozen shrimp, and countless bottles of soda to our room, and even left the packing containers with us until after the party set-up was complete so the food would stay cold.

The order was handled with efficiency and professionalism, although they still owe me five bottles of cocktail sauce and my complimentary pineapple.

James Turner is a computer consultant and avid Web surfer.

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