

# Cosmic shopping

It's not a full sensory retail experience, but online shopping can have its quirky charms BY WENDY WALTERS

**R**emember those treasure machines at local fairs when you were a kid? You'd put a quarter in and then steer a mini crane down into a pile of the most spine-tingling, fabulous, blow-your-mind prizes. There was a jaw breaker the size of a tennis ball, a pink neon watch and the ultimate, Gumby in his sailor uniform. This is kind of what Cosmic shopping feels like. Everything you can possibly imagine in one box, and the crane is at your command.

Web shopping scared me at first. I can't touch it. I can't smell it. I can't shake it around. And I can't really see it more than a couple of inches high on my screen. Plus, what crazed youth is hunched over a laptop right now, trying to get my credit card info? But, if you can imagine yourself as Jane Jetson (OK, but not with the cartoon hair), strap on your battery pack, put "his boy

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Elroy" and "daughter Judy" out to go see the Jet Screamer concert—there is exhilaration at the other end.

I started small, with a book from Amazon.com. Arrived in two days. Good experience. But, please don't try to sell me giftware, travel or music. You're a bookstore. I can't read and listen to music at the same time and I'm not going to buy dishes from you when Pottery Barn is around the virtual corner (and FYI, at the store, they exchange chipped dishes for life—no questions asked).

Next, I went to Umbra.com. I'm looking for an "Oh!" chair. This is a contemporary design that is still on display at the MOMA in New York. It was duplicated by every Gepetto furniture manufacturer on the continent, but Umbra is the company that commissioned the chair some years ago. I found it online in about one minute. While I was there, I nipped into the drapery department and bought all the hardware I needed for new curtains—hit "send" with a feeling of anticipation. I sent an e-mail asking them when I'd get the loot. A number of days later I got an e-mail telling me to call the 1-800 number—why did they ask me to e-mail them if they can't answer the question? OK, fine, I called the number and was greeted by "Melissa." Melissa was a friendly gal, but couldn't help me with any information whatsoever. I wanted a tracking number for my package so I could trace it. She actually asked me to call her in a few days and remind her to check and see if she could get one (sure, Melissa, that will make it to the "to-do" list). Also, for the \$24 they charged me for shipping, I'd like a little more information than "it'll come soon."

Some websites are just so elegant-

ly designed and delightful to navigate, that you start to prefer this experience to bricks and mortar. Interfacefor.com is an example. This is carpet for the brave and creative. The site anticipates your every wish—this is not intuitive, it's ESP. And, for US\$5 they'll ship you eight samples, so you can get the tactile experience they know you need. Brilliant. Or if you need some taps, try HudsonReed in the U.K. Free shipping, fabulous prices, and they call their warranties "no quibble" (how

charming, those Brits).

You can design your home, buy your kids clothes, get a dog, a horse, a car, a lawn mower, a trip, theatre tickets, or a face-lift over the web. There are plenty of hucksters in the Wild, Wild, Web. These usually pop up when you're doing a Google search to try to find a certain item but don't have a website. Chairs are a good example. Google chairs and you'll get 2.8 million possibilities. Trouble is, many of them are guys in their base-

ment on the other side of the planet, trying to see if they can hook you and your credit card (picture yourself in the treasure box and the bad guys have the crane in their control). No return policies, damaged, poorly shipped merchandise, and no customer support.

A friend recently bought an original oil painting from eBay. This was a true art lover find and it arrived beautifully packaged with a certificate of authenticity. Trouble is, when she

had it appraised for insurance, she found it was a very, very, good copy. There's trouble in Dodge City now.

Could I buy a silk blouse, a pair of Seven's or a puppy over the web? Probably not, I can't smell it, feel it or shake it around. Some shopping experiences are meant to stimulate all the senses. However, it is the ultimate in multi-tasking when you can colour your hair, answer e-mails, cook a roast and shop on your laptop, all at the same time—and you get to hunt for treasure. **M**

