

Santa via Cellphone: Shopping Online Without a Computer

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This holiday season, consumers are beginning to shop and make purchases on their mobile phones. The shift from buying presents in front of the computer at home or work to doing it during bus commutes or while standing in line at cafes is small, but, for the first time, noticeable and even significant.



Juan Arredondo for The New York Times

Tiffany English, who runs an eBay shop, found a gift for her brother at Bed Bath & Beyond, then bought it on Amazon using her phone.

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EBay and other Web sites have made it easier for consumers to shop and buy from cellphones and tablet computers like iPads.



Shopping on cellphones and portable tablet computers like iPads accounted for about 5 percent of online sales in November, while last year mobile shopping sales were too insignificant to measure, according to Coremetrics, an e-commerce measurement service owned by [I.B.M.](#) Many more shoppers are using their phones to [research items and compare prices](#) before making purchases offline or on computers.

“There were early adopters last year, but it’s absolutely real this year,” said Kelly O’Neill, director of industry marketing for ATG, which provides online and mobile commerce technology to retailers like [Best Buy](#) and [J. C. Penney](#). And mobile shoppers are buying high-ticket items like diamond rings and cars, not just virtual goods and ring tones.

On Dec. 12, [eBay](#)’s busiest mobile shopping day of the year, worldwide mobile sales nearly tripled from last year to \$13 million, according to the company, which expects \$1.5 billion in mobile sales this year.

Virtually every product that people buy on computers sells in similar proportion on mobile devices, said Steve Yankovich, eBay’s vice president for mobile. He said shoppers bought an average of four Ferraris a month from their cellphones.

Tiffany English, 30, of Hoboken, N.J., bought her mother's Christmas gift, a painting of a child, when the eBay mobile app alerted her that the auction was about to end while she was out in Greenwich Village. She used eBay's RedLaser app to compare prices on a set of barbecue tools for her brother, and bought the set on her cellphone from Amazon.com while standing in [Bed Bath & Beyond](http://BedBathBeyond.com), where the same item cost more.

"It's saving me time and saving me money," Ms. English said. "I feel like my grandma: 'You can do that with your phone?'"

eBay is so convinced of the future of mobile phone shopping that on Wednesday it acquired Critical Path Software, a mobile phone app developer, to speed its move into this new arena.

At [Blue Nile](http://BlueNile.com), the diamond and jewelry e-commerce site, mobile revenue is up sixfold this month from the period a year ago. The company says a mobile shopper recently bought a ring for more than \$250,000 via a cellphone.

"A year ago, we really didn't know whether mobile would be very impactful for our business, because this is a very considered purchase, a high-ticket luxury item," said Diane Irvine, chief executive of Blue Nile. Now, she said, "we can envision a time when sales from a mobile device will eclipse sales over the desktop Web site."

Most shoppers still use their phones for finding nearby stores or looking up reviews and comparing prices, rather than for buying goods, retailers and analysts say. Still, that type of research increasingly leads to mobile sales, particularly for online retailers that compete heavily on price, like consumer electronics stores, said Sucharita Mulpuru, principal analyst for e-commerce at [Forrester Research](http://Forrester.com).

Perhaps the biggest reason for the spike in mobile shopping is simply that more Web retailers have created mobile Web sites or apps that make it easier to search inventory on a small screen without a mouse, by forgoing fancy Flash graphics and selling a limited number of products on phones.

Mobile apps often have features that Web sites don't. For example, Amazon's app lets people scan bar codes, speak into the phone or take a photo of an item to search for products. [Bluefly](http://Bluefly.com)'s sends a cellphone alert when an item that was out of stock becomes available again.

Just as e-commerce made it possible for people to shop in the office and late at night, mobile phones let them shop anywhere. And because shoppers on cellphones often have a

purchase in mind, they can be more valuable to retailers. “Mobile shoppers are the hunters, and people sitting at their computer are gathering,” said Jill Dvorak, senior consultant for the e-commerce advisory company FitForCommerce.

Tom Keithley, 49, of Monkton, Md., is one of those hunters. He travels often for his job in financial services, and this year he did half his holiday shopping while on the road. From his cellphone he bought a Blue Nile ring for his wife and a eucalyptus wreath from Gump’s, the home décor shop.

“I’m usually in airports and airplanes, so it’s more convenient for me to use the time to do things I might normally do if I were sitting at my desk,” he said.

Mobile shopping is particularly appropriate for customers of [flash sale sites](#) like Gilt. Its limited-time sales start at noon each day and sell out quickly, so people miss out if they are away from their computers. Since Gilt introduced its mobile apps, shoppers have more consistently made purchases at noon, and mobile sales generally account for 10 percent of revenue and close to 20 percent on holidays and weekends, said Carl Sparks, president of the Gilt Groupe.

The [iPad](#) has also helped mobile commerce, but in a different way. While cellphone apps are made to complete transactions as quickly as possible, iPad apps tend to be for shopping as sport. For instance, Amazon’s iPad app, called Windowshop, shows many images and lets people browse and view close-up shots of items.

“It makes it much more visual and fluid and entertaining,” said Sam Hall, director of mobile at Amazon, “something that never could have been done on a smaller-screen device.”