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## Why Is Shopping Online in Canada So Difficult?

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I hate shopping! I hate everything about it. The traffic, the parking, the lines, the loud music that's deliberately programmed to make customers move faster and buy more, the slow clerks, all the unnecessary tissue paper and packaging. On those rare occasions when I'm forced to enter a department store, I march through like a drill sergeant, wary of making eye contact for fear a sales clerk will slow me down. My goal is to pick up what I need in 15 minutes, and get in and out, pausing only to check the hundreds of messages pouring into my BlackBerry, all of them anxiously awaiting a reply.

Having moved from Washington, DC to Toronto four years ago I am constantly baffled by how inefficient this country I now call home is. Don't get me wrong. I love our life here: our community, our work, the civility and the peacefulness of the society. But when it comes to retail, it's a different story altogether.

While inconveniences like the lack of postal service on Saturdays and not being able to schedule your own doctors appointments irk me and seem like throwbacks to the era of horses and carriages, they are not a deal breaker. The real kicker for me is the lack of e-commerce. I might have starved to death were it not for Grocery Gateway, but Canada lacks so many other essential online retailers.

When I lived in Washington, DC, I wasted hours stuck in horrendous traffic on the beltway every day. But I could make up for the lost time by handling most of my errands online. I ordered every staple from the comfort of my sofa, from candles and envelopes and hair products, to sunscreen and toothpaste. I have 10 nieces and nephews who would not have received birthday presents from their favorite aunt were it not for the ease of e-commerce.

Why can't I do that here? Why haven't high-end Canadian retailers, such as Holt Rentfrew, The Room at the Bay, and David's Shoes, followed the U.S.'s Saks, Neimans, Barneys, and Bergdorfs into cyberspace? Why haven't mid-range retailers such as TNT and Nyla joined J. Crew and Intermix on the web? Some Canadian-founded companies such as Roots and MAC have got it right, but they seem to have had no effect on other Canadian retailers.

Thanks to the likes of Crateandbarrel.com, Williams-sonoma.com, and Allmodern.com, our home in Washington, DC was stocked with pots, pans, wine glasses, dishes and more before we

even moved in. The lack of e-commerce for home furnishings here forces busy people to hire expensive designers. This past spring when I was on a business trip in London, I tried to get a jump start on summer by ordering outdoor accessories from CB2 and Crateandbarrel.ca. The delivery charge turned out to be more than double the cost of the order! No reasonable explanation could be given and I was advised to call my local store directly. Who has time for the phone? After reluctantly placing my order over the phone with Crate and Barrel in Yorkdale Mall, begging them to set up delivery straight to my home was like asking them to part with their youngest child. It all came to a head when I asked them to waive the signature and leave the package at the front door, since I am forever on airplanes. It was as if I was trying to get away with murder. If I couldn't stay home all day to sign for the package, they said, then they couldn't accept the order. Who has that kind of time on their hands?! Needless to say, they lost the sale. But no one seemed to care except for me.

Whatever you desire can be bought online and shipped for little cost in the States, including prescription drugs and toiletries. I can place wine orders online at any corner wine shop in the U.S. and they will deliver it right to the door. In Canada, you'll be lucky if the LCBO wine clerk helps you to your car.

Amazon.ca -- forget about it! It's like being a kid in a candy store with barbed wire in front of all the good candy. Amazon.com has a full retail selection while the Canadian version is limited to a few CDs and books.

If you want to fix up your home in the States, you can buy everything you need at Design Within Reach, Unica Home, Room & Board, Z Gallerie, west elm and Pottery Barn online. Why isn't Canadian Tire online like Home Depot? Why isn't ELTE online like William Sonoma? Or studio b like All Modern?

The online shoe retailer Zappos.com thought it would be easy to expand its behemoth sales operation into Canada. But quickly after launching, they pulled the plug. They posted this [message online](#) to their customers:

"We have made the difficult decision to shut down the canada.zappos.com site and stop shipping to Canada. One of our core values is to "deliver WOW through service." That means the best selection of brands and products that can meet just about every individual's needs as well as fast, free shipping and free returns, all at competitive pricing. Our Canadian customers know that we have not lived up to these service levels.

Product selection on canada.zappos.com is limited due to distribution agreements with the brands we sell in the United States. In addition, we have struggled with general uncertainty and unpredictability of delivering orders to our Canadian customers given customs and other logistics constraints."

I constantly agonize not only about the inefficiency, slowness and waste of productive time, but about the mystery of it all. Why aren't Canadian retailers trying to maximize their revenues? Why are they satisfied with just good enough? Don't they want to be better, faster, and richer? According to the U.S. Census Bureau, online sales accounted for almost \$300 billion in 2008, which was almost 50 per cent of total retail spending.

When I asked Roger Martin, the Dean of the Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto, why Canada is so limited on e-commerce, he matter of factly replied, "There is a bit of a chicken and egg problem. Canadian businesses that are exposed to vigorous competition are highly innovative and make competition even more intense. However, Canadian businesses that aren't exposed to intense competition can be pretty darn complacent."

Don Tapscott, a Canadian who is arguably the world's leading thinker in the digital age, says with frustration, "American companies like J. Crew know how backward Canada is, and they can get away with charging huge premiums to Canadian customers. If you don't have a U.S. relative and mailing address you're going to pay a third more for many things."

The Friday after Thanksgiving used to be the busiest shopping day of the year in the U.S., since most Americans had the day off and spent the afternoon getting a jump on their Christmas shopping in the malls. But as of 2010, Black Friday was eclipsed by Cyber Monday, with an astounding \$1.028 billion in sales, up 16 per cent from 2009 (comScore). The future is online. Really.

So this is my last plea, Canadian merchants. Not only will you make my life so much better, but you will be more competitive and increase your bottom line. Maybe all it will take to change you is an obnoxious American lighting a fire under you -- or maybe you will crash and burn when a younger, web-savvy retailer at long last comes along and snatches away all your business. Hopefully it will be the first!

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