

## *e-shopping needs human help*

Since the dawn of the connected information age one of those really “killer” applications has been home shopping. Just like robotics was going to take all the drudgery out of household chores, home-shopping would likewise release so much time to leisure...

Over the years, and it has taken years, the process of buying-on-line has become easier and more commonplace. Probably the best known example is Amazon the book store. Almost all the books I buy now are procured on-line. But not ALL of them – I still enjoy the experience of walking into the bookstore and just smelling those tomes.

Eventually one starts buying other things on-line, such as CDs. Especially useful if the one you want is an obscure American “pressing”. You can conveniently browse, see and now often listen to a sample to ensure that it is the one that you require.

Recently I found a series of web-sites from 1996 (almost pre-history in this type of technology) and compared them to their current equivalents... The comparison was surprising. Argos was one of the first shopping pages – a white screen with a listing of 100 items or so. Now it is full colour dynamically searchable by multiple metrics, photographs big enough for you to actually see the products etc. The Eurostar page has progressed from simple timetable and a phone number (or address) to actually purchase the tickets to full electronic paperless ticketing with complete choice of seats... And Tesco's, arguably the most commercially sound on-line page, now offers full store merchandising.

“Hurray!” you might say, but with the added opportunities come the added complexity and the uncertainty of exactly what and where do I find things. It is at this point that I think we need to start reverting to the electronic equivalent of the old fashioned wooden counter and the human assistant. I would never want to buy a suit on-line, I always want to walk into the gents-outfitter and be greeted by the human assistant “Good morning sir, a suit? A 44 regular I believe – which colour is sir thinking about this time?” brings a certain amount of comfort.

On a number of Internet pages “Call Me” buttons have started appearing. Once you have browsed sufficiently (or to the level of your incompetence – depending on how you view your capabilities) you can summon human assistance. But the thing most people find surprising is that the screen asks for your telephone number AND when you wish to be called. This is because these days most people browse down their phone line so it is impossible to talk to them whilst they are browsing. They must disconnect and stand by their phone and wait for it to ring before the old fashioned person-to-person voice communication can start.

## *Looking at the Future Slightly Differently*

Just imagine in the new world of “Always Connected Always On” networks – where voice, vision and data are not three things on three separate networks – but one thing on one network, and as you press that button the voice instantly comes out of the screen saying, “I see that you are looking at the red one, could I show you the other colours and sizes. Just like that old fashioned counter.

But lets go one stage further. In the IP world, with complete convergence of voice vision and data, not only will you be able to talk as you browse but you will be able to see the person at the far end. You will be able to try clothes on – well at least on a virtual manikin which will take your size from your personal SmartCard identifier.

This is exactly the sort of facilities that are being offered in the new Microsoft XP operating system – as always it will start in the office but like everything else (phone. Fax, mobile) it will quickly migrate into the home.

So instead of being a lonely silent world, the on-line shop of the future will be a dynamic bustling arcade.