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Attention Bargain Hunters: New Sites for Comparison Shopping

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FINDING the lowest prices for goods sold online may seem an easy feat for Web shoppers. Yet how can people be certain they have found the best price, given the ever-expanding universe of Web stores, auction sites and online classified sites?

To help shoppers keep tabs on the rising tide of e-commerce, new comparison-shopping engines are adding secondary markets, niche categories and in-browser search tools for more thorough bargain hunting - even including security features that offer warnings about deals too good to be true.

One new service, the SquareTrade Sidebar, uses a bit of all these strategies for comparison shopping. The program hides in Internet Explorer, and when it detects that a user is shopping online, it displays a list of

alternative prices for the product being searched. SquareTrade presents results from affiliate merchants' sites as well as from sites like [eBay](#) and Craigslist, where secondhand items may fetch less.

For example, during a search for the Canon D50 digital camera, \$800 at CompUSA's Web site, SquareTrade's sidebar popped up to offer comparison pricing from 40 different merchants online and on eBay, showing it was available for as little as \$654.

Users can also type product searches directly into the sidebar - a frame within a browser window - but because the engine's search technology favors comparisons drawn from actual pages, general queries sometimes fall short: where "[iPod Nano](#)" yields no results, "iPod Nano black" does.

SquareTrade's main business is verifying eBay merchants and arbitrating disputes, so the toolbar takes precautions against fraud. If a phishing link turns up, an alert offers a warning.

"We get a lot of consumers coming to us who've been sent fake sites," said SquareTrade's chief executive, Steve Abernethy. "Even though things are implausible, it happens. It's tough to turn down a good deal."

SquareTrade is not alone in its methods; [Nextag.com](#), like other larger services, has also recently turned to toolbars for on-demand price matching, although its toolbar searches only companies it has deals with.

Vendio's new Dealio toolbar ([www.dealio.com](#)) will flash its best price for an item when someone visits a product page. People can disregard the box or click to see competing offers, sorted by price.

Yet the companies are aware that pop-ups - whether advertisements or helpful toolbars - are a sore point for many Web users, who are inundated by such annoyances. "People hate pop-ups," said Vendio's chief executive, Rodrigo Sales. Because the sidebar appears only when the user wants it to, Mr. Sales said he considered the toolbar a calculated balance between convenience and discretion.

Vendio, a manager of smaller businesses' online auctions, expects to add thousands of eBay customers to the Dealio roster of about 100 consumer electronics merchants.

While many comparison sites stick to popular categories like electronics, others, including several newcomers, are finding opportunities in niche categories.

[LowerMyBills.com](#) compares expenses like phone services, car loans, credit cards and insurance quotes; [Simplyhired.com](#) shows job hunters opportunities from newspapers, job boards and corporate Web sites; and the new Grocery Saver feature at [Cairo.com](#) builds custom shopping lists from sales at neighborhood markets.

[Fatlens.com](#), introduced last month, offers comparison shopping for shows and sporting events among traditional ticket agencies, online brokers and individuals on auction sites, and recently expanded into clothing, shoes and jewelry.

A recent search for a sold-out U2 concert at Madison Square Garden, for instance, brought up more than 4,000 available tickets, from a \$130 rafters seat on eBay to a \$4,200 loge seat at TicketsGuaranteed.com.

While many comparison engines cull search results only from their retail partners, who pay for the privilege, Fatlens.com is among the few services trolling the Web for results. Pulling key terms like seat number and ticket price from Web pages with different formats presented a programming challenge for Fatlens. "It's a complex math problem," said Siva Kumar, the chief executive. "It's not about the cheapest ticket; it's about the best deals on where I want to sit."

Comparison engines that increase selections by tapping into unconventional sales forums like eBay and Craigslist, however, may end up raising some shoppers' concerns about buying from unknown sellers.

"It's giving more exposure to consumer-to-consumer commerce," said Patti Freeman Evans, an analyst for Jupiter Communications. "But consumers like to shop where they trust, and lowest price is not always the most important thing."

Ms. Evans said the number of online retailers was increasing at twice the rate of Web sites over all, making it even harder for customers to choose where to buy. Meanwhile, pop-up windows and niche categories will not necessarily drive sales for smaller merchants, who must compete with the reliability and recognition of bigger retailers.

"An offer from someone you don't know is not necessarily a value to the consumer," Ms. Evans said.

Some companies, like BuySafe, are trying to improve their small-business customers' reputations through comparison searching. BuySafe, which bonds merchants that provide goods and services to help them earn trust, now offers a searchable index of its retailers at buysafeshopping.com.

"Not everyone feels secure online, especially when working with medium-size retailers," said Jeff Grass, the chief executive at BuySafe. "There are lots of merchants people have never heard of, and you don't know if they're going to treat you right. It's trying to eliminate concerns and fears."

Chris Sherman, an editor of the industry newsletter SearchEngineWatch.com, sees a progression from all-in-one bargain bazaars like Shopping.com to specialized outlets. "The first generation tended to be straightforward, an aggregation of deals," he said. "The newer agents are more interested in finding the best product for your needs."

Mr. Sherman said that the increased selection of both products and comparison engines could be perplexing.

"We're in this phase of online shopping where we have so many choices that confusion may be a problem," he said. "As we learn more about what's available, we'll have a better sense of what our choices are."

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