

Retailers release flood of tools for mobile devices

November 14 2011, By Shan Li

As shoppers gear up for another mad holiday scramble, smartphones and tablet computers are emerging as Santa's electronic helpers.

And if the big guy up north isn't in touch with the times, shoppers are. Stuck in a humdrum economy and facing continued high rates of unemployment, consumers are increasingly finding that their mobile devices can come in handy. With a gadget in hand, shoppers can compare prices, research gift ideas, redeem [electronic coupons](#) and watch for special deals. Often, they do it right in the store aisle.

Retailers are catching on - just in time for the holiday season, the make-or-break time of year. Once content to simply sell these [electronic devices](#), merchants and mall operators are now recognizing the increasingly important role phones and tablets are playing for shoppers and are eager to tap into this electronic path to consumers' wallets.

In addition to heavy promotions and the extension of store hours, many chains are rolling out shopping apps, mobile-optimized websites and spruced-up social media pages.

"Retailers are looking at phones and tablets as one more channel to get shoppers, to drive [brand loyalty](#) and drive sales," said Jackie Fernandez, a Los Angeles-based retail specialist for accounting firm Deloitte & Touche. "Consumers will be able to benefit from the discounts offered through them, especially around the holiday season."

About 1 in 4 smartphone owners plans to use a mobile device for holiday shopping, according to an annual holiday survey by Deloitte. Of those, 59 percent will use their phones to compare or check prices, 46 percent plan to use them to check product availability and 41 percent will get coupons through their handsets.

Social media, such as Facebook and Foursquare, will also be popular with shoppers, with 44 percent of those surveyed reporting that they will use social networks to find discounts, check out friends' or family members' wish lists and browse products.

Shopping with mobile devices isn't for everyone, especially for folks who prefer to browse through a mall at a leisurely pace looking for gift ideas. Even some fans of online shopping like to stick to their home computers - the screens are bigger, and they don't have to squint to check out a dress or watch.

So whether you totally groove to technology or just recently bought a smartphone or signed up for Facebook, here are a few useful digital tricks for saving some bucks, and perhaps some time, during Christmas.

MOBILE SHOPPING GUIDES: Some big retailers such as Target Corp. and Wal-Mart Stores Inc. offer their own mobile applications for shoppers to individually download to their smartphones or [tablet computers](#).

With these apps, shoppers can often get up-to-the-minute information about sale items, instant bargains, what's located where and what's in stock.

Mobile apps, as well as websites geared for [mobile devices](#), often tweak the online shopping experience to fit smaller screens with fewer items displayed per page and an easy search function. The Amazon.com app

popularized one-click ordering for breezy checkouts without the need to fill in billing and address information over and over again (also upping the likelihood of impulse buying).

Perhaps the most useful apps collect product data from several retailers and sort it so consumers can compare prices side-by-side from local and online merchants to find the best deal. These apps, which include eBay's RedLaser, TheFind and SnapTell, can be downloaded for free and work by simply scanning a product's bar code.

That's a great help to price-conscious people such as Bill Grayson, a 50-year-old engineer who swears by a similar price-comparison app called ShopSavvy. After standing in line at Sears for hours to snag a big-screen TV during Black Friday last year, the San Jose, Calif., resident said he scanned the bar code using the app just to see if the price was better elsewhere. He said he ended up saving \$1,400 by buying it online.

"It helps me spontaneously make a decision whether to buy the product in front of me or wait longer for a sale," Grayson said. "I'm definitely going to use it again this Christmas."

Apps can offer more features than a traditional website. Bluefly Inc., an online fashion retailer that deals in discounted designer goods, sends an alert to your phone when an out-of-stock item you're eyeing becomes available again. Likewise, eBay's auction app will send a notification when you've been outbid at an auction.

Mall giant Westfield recently added a new feature to its app that lets shoppers pinpoint which stores carry a specific item they're seeking. Type in "gold sandals" and the app will list the shops carrying gold sandals.

SOCIAL MEDIA: Retailers have increasingly turned to social media

such as Facebook and Twitter to harness the power of their fans.

Wal-Mart last month launched 3,500 store-specific Facebook pages to alert shoppers to products, "Rollback Alley" deals and events at their local store. Before Black Friday this year, the discount chain will give Facebook fans a sneak peek at planned deals and also post maps clearly marking where to find some discounted items within their local Wal-Mart.

J.C. Penney operates a store within Facebook in which browsers can pick up a sweater or pair of shoes without ever leaving the social network. Shoppers can also sign up via Facebook to receive digital coupons on their phone or "check in" on the location-based network Foursquare to score similar deals. For the holiday season, the retailer is partnering with fashion bloggers who will post their favorite holiday gift ideas chosen from the chain's selection.

"The goal is to have digital initiatives that make shopping easier," said Liz Sweney, executive vice president and general merchandise manager at J.C. Penney. "They'll never replace actually going to stores, but it's all about making it easy and really engaging to find the perfect Christmas gift."

MOBILE COUPONS: Coupons are a holiday favorite as shoppers look for bargains - and mobile sites and apps have plenty. They gather available coupons in one place, eliminating the need to prowl the Web looking for discounts.

Savvy shoppers such as Jackie Chiuchiarelli, who spends more money shopping on her iPad than in bricks-and-mortar stores, say that redeeming digital coupons found on apps such as MobiQpons, Yowza and Coupon Sherpa can save hundreds of dollars.

Strolling through the Grove shopping center in Los Angeles recently, the 26-year-old online marketer said digital deals are so plentiful that she never buys anything via mobile without a coupon or free shipping offer. Mobile shopping is convenient enough that she treks to a mall only to meet friends or return something bought online.

"I plan to do 90 percent of my Christmas shopping on my iPad," Chiuchiarelli said. "I always save at least 10 percent. It also saves time, since I work so many hours."

Other apps, such as Shopkick, reward people for loyalty. Participating retailers including Best Buy, Wet Seal and Crate & Barrel ping shoppers with digital coupons and loyalty points (redeemable for gift cards) for walking into their bricks-and-mortar stores.

ODDS AND ENDS: Google Wallet, an app that essentially turns your phone into a credit card, is having a test run this holiday season at major retailers including American Eagle Outfitters, Guess and Toys R Us. Using Google Wallet, shoppers can pay by waving their phones over digital sensors already installed at participating stores.

Greg Ahearn, chief marketing officer for Toys R Us in the U.S., said that Google Wallet was available in about 200 stores around the country. "We are up and ready for tap-and-go pay," he said.

Macy's and J.C. Penney have launched campaigns incorporating the futuristic bar codes known as QR, or quick response. By scanning a Macy's QR code, shoppers can pull up videos of style stalwarts such as Martha Stewart and Tommy Hilfiger dispensing fashion tips. J.C. Penney has sprinkled QRs throughout its stores and on ads that prompt phones to open the retailer's mobile site.

Parking apps, while not linked to shopping, can help shoppers brave the

cutthroat mall parking lots this [holiday season](#). Parking in Motion, a Santa Monica, Calif.-based company, has an iPhone app that displays on a map nearby parking structures, their current occupancy level and their relative cost. Another app called Parker has a reservation function that helps drivers secure a spot in a lot up to two months in advance.

MORE TO COME: With an estimated half of mobile phone users projected to own a [smartphone](#) by year's end, shoppers will get accustomed to having a phone that also functions as a catalog, store finder, review site and coupon book rolled into one, industry analysts say.

"It's now expected that retailers will have a mobile site designed to look good on phones. That's what shoppers are expecting, and that's what they have to deliver," said Jeffrey Gau, a senior analyst with EMarketer, a New York-based research group.

Gau said the mobile realm is still an area of experimentation for retailers, many of which will be rolling out initiatives in the coming weeks that they hope will capture the attention - and money - of [consumers](#).

Wal-Mart, for example, is testing out ways to integrate social media into the next generation of shopping. Venky Harinarayan, the retailer's senior vice president of global e-commerce, said the company is considering stocking Wal-Mart with products that are generating a buzz on Twitter or suggesting gift ideas to [shoppers](#) based on their Facebook profiles.

"Over time, the difference between shopping online and offline will fade away," Harinarayan predicted. "At the end of the day, people just care about finding the right gift at the right price."

(c)2011 the Los Angeles Times

Distributed by MCT Information Services

Citation: Retailers release flood of tools for mobile devices (2011, November 14) retrieved 16 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2011-11-retailers-tools-mobile-devices.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.