

Use Google to shop? Here's what you should know after the big EU fine

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Google was levied a record \$2.7 billion fine by the European Commission for allegedly favoring its Google Shopping results over other comparison shopping services.

So what does that mean to you? Not much. Any changes that Google makes to Google Shopping will be in Europe, not in the U.S.

But the European Union complaint does cast a bright light on how Google displays [shopping](#) results—and how that's different from regular [search results](#).

Google Shopping is the list of paid [search ads](#) that appears at the top or at the right hand side of the page when you [search](#) on Google for a product.

In Google Shopping search, the product listing ads show pictures, descriptions and prices from thousands of merchants who have paid to have their offerings included in the results. These ads are popular and account for a big chunk of Google search ad spending. Unpaid search results, so-called organic search results, are farther down the screen, whether on desktop computers or mobile devices.

This is different than it used to be. Google Product Search results used to steer traffic to Amazon.com and eBay as well as smaller merchants for free. Google made money by running paid product search ads alongside the product search results.

Then in 2012 Google made a major change. It renamed the service Google Shopping, and only merchants who took out paid ads were included in search results.

It was a big boost in revenue for Google. And it provided the Internet giant with a way to combat the growing footprint of Amazon.com in shopping search.

Google says the shopping ads help smaller merchants compete against Amazon and other behemoths. More than half of U.S. consumers start their online shopping searches on Amazon.com. Less than a third, 28%, start searching for a product on the Web, according to Internet marketing firm BloomReach.

The challenge for consumers: Understanding the difference between paid search ads and organic search results, says search expert Danny Sullivan.

"If people are using Google Shopping and thinking they are getting comprehensive results, they are not," said Sullivan, founding editor of SearchEngineLand.com. "Google Shopping is a good way to find products from a variety of merchants on the Web. But those merchants all pay to be on Google Shopping and you might miss the merchants who are not paying to be on Google Shopping."

His recommendation: Comparison shop in a variety of places including on Amazon.com and through Google organic searches.

"If you are a consumer, it pays to understand that none of these shopping services are unbiased or perfect. They can all skew in various ways," he said. "Just as you might check the price of an item at two or three stores, you might want to check the price of that item at two or three online shopping services."

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