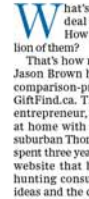
COMMENT

The '500-pound gorilla' doesn't scare Giftfind

Room for lots of comparative shopping sites



Rick Spence
Growth Curve

What's better than a deal at Christmas? How about 300 million of them?

That's how many products Jason Brown has on his new comparison-pricing website, GiftFind.ca. The 26-year-old entrepreneur, who still lives at home with his parents in suburban Thornhill, Ont., has spent three years building the website that helps bargain-hunting consumers find gift ideas and the cheapest prices from more than 500 online retailers in Canada and the U.S.

If that sounds like an idea straight out of 1999, you're half right. Enthusiasm for price-comparison sites has ebbed and flowed since then, with many U.S. or international services half-heartedly setting up shop here, including Google, whose Google Shopping has become the 500-pound gorilla of the U.S. market, but has scant presence in Canada.

But with 84 per cent of Canadians who are connected to the Internet having shopped online in the past year, there's good reason for Brown to try

> Can it really compete if Google or others decide to beef up their Canadian services?

to build Canada's leading comparison-shopping site. He gets a commission of between one and eight per cent on every sale, although it's usually closer to the low end.

Brown says his dissatisfaction with existing sites such as Shopbot.ca and Shoptolt.ca got him into the business. Some comparison services miss key retailers, others are poorly designed, and few offer background information or shopping tips.

His site aims to offer both price and advice. On GiftFind, if you don't know exactly what you're looking for, you can browse first by feeding general terms into the search box. When I typed "gift for nine-year-old girl" into the GiftFind engine, I got 5,842 suggestions, ranging from American Girl dolls to a badminton set and a pastel-coloured microscope.

On rival Shop.bot, the same search found just five products, plus the warning, "No exact matches for your request." PriceGrabber.ca offered the simple response, "We are unable to find the product you're searching for."

Brown is GiftFind's sole employee. The rest are outsourced: a development team in Sri Lanka, web designers in India, and a search optimization expert in Toronto. Since its official launch last month, the site has been attracting 500 visitors a day. His goal: one million users a month by the end of 2016.

One way he's trying to reach that goal is to offer Canada's largest product selection. To get there, in addition to the large retailers that share their product lists with him, he's wooing smaller retailers by offering to list their products for free. He says the commission will come once he can prove GiftFind works. "I want to give retailers the ability to try this out. Then we can all grow together."

Brown has invested $10,000 of his money in marketing, mainly for pay-per-click ads and search-engine optimization. To achieve his 2016 objective, however, it's clear GiftFind will need a bigger marketing budget.

"I'm shopping this around to VCs. I'm not a fan of giving equity away early on in a startup. But next year we'll have an ad budget."

Like any millennial worth his salt, Brown has been creating up dog droppings in people's backyards. At 19, before heading to Ryerson University in Toronto to study business, Brown spent a year running a third-party logistics business (co-owned by his uncle) that warehoused colognes and beauty products for Sears and other major retailers.

Consumers will notice some rough spots, though. To start, Google may have trouble finding the site with the search term "giftfind." Once you reach it, you'll find a design that's cleaner looking than that of most competitors', but its blocky, primary-coloured logo looks like it was designed by a recent business graduate.

Above all, GiftFind fails to solve a problem that has plagued Canadian retailers: its search includes U.S. retailers that ship to Canada, but it fails to identify the currency. Whether you search for a tablet, a table or a toy, there's a good chance your lowest-price choices will be priced in U.S. dollars, which may be more expensive once you take the exchange rate into account (not to mention extra shipping charges and potential duties and taxes).

You may also get a shock when you see side-by-side price comparisons of identical goods sold on Amazon.com and Amazon.ca; the U.S. prices are often much less than half the Canadian price, which hardly encourages online shopping.

But Brown has his eye on bigger challenges — building a mobile site. A recent Ipsos survey found 55 per cent of Canadians use their smartphones to comparison shop in-store; GiftFind's busy pages with dozens of thumbnail images don't work well on the small screen. He also hopes to introduce a U.S. version of the site.

It's heartening to see an entrepreneur challenging established players in a mass-consumer industry. But can GiftFind really compete if Google or other competitors decide to beef up their Canadian services? "I'm not worried," he says.

"Smart shoppers should always use more than one price-comparison site. No one site is always going to find you all the best deals."

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Rick Spence is a writer, consultant and speaker specializing in entrepreneurship.
rick@rickspence.ca
Twitter.com/RickSpence