

Comparison-Shopping Web Sites

By Jessica E. Vascellaro, *The Wall Street Journal* - 5/4/06

Comparison-shopping Web sites have been around for a while, but users have often complained about their limited product selection and sometimes outdated prices and offers. Now, a new generation of services aims to solve those problems and make the overall search for bargains easier. But the programs can take time to install and their steady stream of alerts can be distracting.

The biggest innovation is that some of the new services, including Mezi Media Inc.'s Smarter Companion and IAC/InterActiveCorp.'s Pronto, do most of the work themselves. While older sites require users to type the name of a desired product and scroll through a list of results, these programs shadow you as you shop. If you're at a site checking out a pair of pink sandals, for example, the services will shoot you (via a separate window on your computer screen) available coupons on that same item, or will suggest similar shoes that are available at lower prices. Smarter Companion, which is expected to be released today, also saves shoppers the trouble of remembering the cryptic coupon codes required with some offers by applying them automatically at checkout.

Another service, the soon-to-be launched Zimini Inc. works differently: It has users fill out a survey about their interests and then sends them personalized offers from partner companies.

The new services also address privacy concerns: Smarter Companion, which includes an option to automatically fill in your profile and credit-card information at the checkout page, stores the details on your computer, not a remote sever. To use Zimini, you don't even need to provide your email.

But the early versions of these applications can still be clunky, requiring users to download and set up sometimes finicky software. And the offers aren't always useful. Smarter Companion, for example, often popped up offers that were identical to those the retailer was already advertising on its home page.

Software/Company: Pronto/ IAC/InterActiveCorp.

How to get it: Download software off Pronto.com. Users register with an email, password and ZIP Code.

How it works: Program searches the Web for products from some 50,000 retailers. A window on the bottom right of the screen flags when the item being shopped for is available at other merchants for less and links to a screen that displays alternative prices and retailers. The service also directs shoppers to similar sites to help broaden their hunt.

Comment: We found pricing information and offers for everything from books to a silver necklace. But a feature that recommends similar products took us to some men's shirts while we were looking at a sundress.

Software/Company: Smarter Companion/Mezi Media Inc.

How to get it: Software can be downloaded through Smarter.com/companion. Initial sign-up requires just an email and password.

How it works: Greets shoppers with available offers (15% off Mothers Day bouquets from 1800Flowers.com, for example) when they log on to some retailers' home pages. Price comparison information was available for some items like a 20 gigabyte Apple iPod from Amazon.com.

Comment: In some instances, we had trouble selecting a particular offer to redeem. If we failed to select an offer when it first appeared, we had trouble recalling the screen again.

Software/Company: Zimini/Zimini Inc.

How to get it: Download the software off Zimini.com and create a user name and password.

How it works: Shoppers enter personal information about themselves such as sports they like to watch, hobbies and favorite styles of ethnic food. Zimini then sends them offers from businesses -- both online and offline -- that match their interests. Offers can be redeemed physically by printing out a coupon or online by entering a code.

Comment: Application was straightforward to use and sensitive to privacy concerns.