Online consumers’ responses in questionnaires about their shopping habits are not wholly reliable nor do they correspond completely to reality

One of the most popular methods of measuring the level of development of electronic commerce in relation to the consumer is the classification of the highest selling products or categories on the Internet. These are periodically supplied by measurement agencies and market research companies. Whatever the ranking list consulted, the top places are always taken, though in different orders, by books, music, travel, computing, electronics, subscriptions and domestic shopping. Some companies have already started to include content for adults in their studies, although, at the cost of their previous ranking lists. Pornographic pages enjoyed the limelight for several years until the online sales of some more traditional companies, like Iberia or El Corte Inglés, started to push them more into the shade. And so, is it possible to trust the ranking lists that are published? On the one hand it is because they supply a global vision of the type of articles that are successful on the Net and so we can better understand the differences between the virtual and the offline world. However, the majority of them are carried out through questionnaires, with which, intentionally or not, the results are based on what the user says that he or she does and not on what he or she actually does. Moreover, the consumer will not remember categories whose proportion is small in their purchases as a whole. On the other hand, it is difficult to get answers about more intimate categories, no matter how anonymous the questionnaires are. When interviews to discover what the consumer buys the most on the Internet are carried out directly in companies the ranking lists are even less credible, as they include telephone sales and transactions carried out between companies (B2B).

The extent of product supply on the Internet contrasts with a demand that is way below the expectations of the sector. According to data from CMT, in relation to the volume of purchases made by card (credit, debit and private) in 2001, it can be seen that in that year Spanish consumers spent 174 million euros on the Internet. For their part, Spanish companies turned over 138 million euros in the same year. It can be deduced from this that Spanish online spending outside Spain is greater than the revenue of Spanish companies gained from foreign visits. Whether it is because of greater supply, better prices or greater Internet skills, Spanish consumers devote a good part of their budget to shopping abroad. Fortunately, users obtain some additional benefits on the Internet: the possibility of managing their current account, taking out a bank deposit, revising the telephone bill, modifying data in insurance policies, doing their tax returns and reading the newspaper. The web allows all types of information to be obtained and to be used to
carry out shopping offline in shops, from finding out the address of a company to the
receiving of an offer to visit and perhaps buy a house, passing through the use of agents
who compare the prices of products that can not be bought online. All of this is turning
the Internet into a big shopping support channel and evidence, once again, that the
hybrid model has more options than start-ups to take advantage of the opportunities that
the medium offers.
However, these opportunities are limited as much by some as by others. It has to be
taken into account that not everything can be sold on the Internet.

Products
The characteristics and form of distribution of some products make them more prone to
be commercialised online. In this sense, the products that have the advantage are those
in which direct sales have traditionally had a higher quota. Such is the case with
financial services, products that can be digitalised, that can be transmitted via the
computer, like travel; those that have the moral obligation of using these media, like
software or hardware, those that are very different and difficult to access offline in
traditional shops, like works of art, the products and services that are most comfortably
consumed in an intimate way like content for adults and, finally, products that belong to
categories that are badly treated in the world of the traditional shop, like books and
records that have been permanently taken off the catalogue and badly classified. The
categories mentioned above make up a good part of the supply range that, apart from
travel, content for adults and some other commodity, do not reach very significant
levels.

Is it possible to sell any product on the Internet?

The consumer has the last word
David Bardolet, IESE Professor
In theory perhaps it is, though it is difficult to imagine how the experience of having a
café con leche (white coffee) and croissant in the morning in the bar on the corner could
be moved to the Internet. And examples like this, without being the majority, are
numerous. Even some products, that technically could be sold online, seem to have their
natural sales point in another place (for example, a house). Nowadays, there exist clear
differences between products in terms of their adaptability to online sales. To a great
extent this adaptability is determined by consumers’ shopping habits. For example,
there are products that have to be touched when buying, like clothes, and to supply this
process on the Internet appears to be complicated. However, information products
(newspapers, data bases) appear to have found their ideal channel in the Internet. To
sum up, the consumer and not technology will dictate what can be sold on the Internet
and, for the moment, online bars are completely empty.

Not all products can be adapted to the net
Juan Pérez Vilaplana, Director of Technology, PwC
It is possible to sell any product on the net. However, if one analyses in detail what
selling on the Internet means, it is possible to work out the finer points of what this
affirmation means.
If selling is only receiving an order via the Internet based on the presentation of a catalogue, then yes one could sell any product. But if selling implies presenting a product catalogue, the capacity of selection and personalised design, the option of multi-purchasing including gifts and promotions, the acceptance of electronic payment, the management of the delivery of the product within a specified time, and continuous information about the state of the order, it is obvious that one can not sell any product. The capacities of process integration and the quality of added service to the product are key factors in bringing added value to a sale via the Internet and in obtaining business success in a heterogeneous and highly competitive global market.