

## Many Happy Returns - If You're Lucky

Written by Robert Jackson Jr.

Tuesday, 19 December 2000 18:00

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Like many of you, I'm still buying last-minute gifts and re-wrapping presents I don't really want given by people I don't really like. Which means that if you're on my Christmas list, there might very well be a Mr. T. Chia Pet somewhere in your future.

Like a growing number of people, I'm doing a lot of my holiday shopping via the Internet. According to Internet research firm The Gardner Group, more than \$19.5 billion will be spent worldwide on holiday online gift-buying this season, up 85 percent from last year. And it seems that some of the problems that sites had last year have been addressed – somewhat.

Sites like toysrus.com, amazon.com, and etoys.com were unprepared for the avalanche of online shoppers last year and experienced site crashes, orders that were not processed, inventory shortages, and customer-service problems. Pretty soon, mainstream media outlets trumpeted online-shopping woes on a seemingly daily basis. Yet the Gardner Group found that both traditional and online retailers were 95 percent reliable in having the products that they promised customers in-stock, and that service is also improving.

That's great news for pre-holiday shopping, but the after-Christmas season is almost as busy for two reasons – post-Christmas sales and gift returns.

Some online businesses treat their return policies – if they have them at all – as afterthoughts. And for that reason, we as consumers must think about our return strategy before we make any online purchases this year.

The first thing we should do before we buy is to check the site's return policy. If it has one, it should be easily accessible from the home page. Check below and above the navigational bars. Most navigational bars are located on top, at the bottom, or sometimes on the left-hand side of the page. If you don't see a link to a return policy, go to another site. Quickly. Believe me, it'll save you time in the long run.

There are essentially three things that online stores can return – the cost of the product, the

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cost of shipping, and the cost of return shipping. Most companies will only refund the first two, so you'll be on the hook for the cost of return shipping. Be sure to review the site's policy. But keep in mind that sometimes sites will pay for cost of return shipping if you're a frequent shopper or if you ask – even if they don't express this in their return policies.

Offline, everyone saves invoices. Online, people don't always do this. Before you complete an order, you should print the page that shows what you've purchased. Also, you should find out if the site has a policy with which it sends you an e-mail notification that your order was consummated. If the company does, your order-confirmation number should be included with any e-mail. If the e-tailer doesn't provide this, be sure to print the order-confirmation page. Also, as soon as you purchase the item, send an e-mail to the site's customer-service department detailing your order and send a bcc ("blind carbon copy") or cc ("carbon copy") to yourself. This might prove useful if you ever need proof for your credit-card company.

Immediately after the product has arrived, check the box for content. If you're not satisfied with the purchase, or if the purchase has been damaged in any way, shoot an e-mail to the customer-service department. If you're lucky, the Web site will not have gone belly-up like a lot of other dot-coms. If you're really lucky, the site will not only have an e-mail address for its customer-service department, but a toll-free number. Have all the pertinent information available – the date of your purchase, the confirmation number, and your name and e-mail address.

Of course, if you get a Mr. T Chia pet from me for Christmas, don't bother with any of the return suggestions you've read here.

Good luck, and many happy returns.

Robert Jackson, Jr., is president of Deep River Media, a consulting firm dedicated to providing strategic business guidance to corporations that hope to take advantage of Internet e-business opportunities. His Internet address is (<http://www.deeprivermedia.com>).