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## Canadians: Smart, Not Scared—As Usual

by Sarah Welstead

The other day, someone gave me yet another statistic that suggests Canadians are somehow behind the curve: We apparently rank 8th in the world for online shopping, and this is attributed to Canadians' concerns about "online security."

Once again, Canadians are portrayed as the Nervous Nellies of the industrialized world—surprising in a country that is consistently ranked #1 for high-speed internet access.

But how can we be #1 in internet access, and #8 in online shopping? If we were really all that scared, we'd disconnect our modems instead of leaving our IP addresses behind us all over the web.

The truth is simply that online shopping is not yet efficient or economical for Canadians, and Canadians' aversion to online shopping comes more from historical buying behaviour than with any disproportionate concerns about security.

We have not been weaned on catalogue or buy-by-mail shopping the way, say Americans were: Before "the internet," Americans bought more stuff by mail. Lands End, Victoria's Secret, Spiegel, Neiman-Marcus—all of these companies had the mail-order shopping thing wrapped up long ago.

But Canadians have grown up with "Not available in Canada" and "Prices slightly higher in Canada" and "Sorry, your shipment got stuck at customs," so we're used to bypassing the catalogue route entirely. Practically every woman I know under the age of 40 gets the Victoria's Secret catalogue, but no one ever orders from it. By the time you've calculated shipping, handling, customs, taxes, currency exchange and dealt with the fact that the company doesn't know how to expedite your shipment at the border, that \$25 nightgown ends up costing \$50 or more (USD). So it's easier and more economical to wait until you go over the border for the weekend to make the purchases, instead of making them online or by mail.

A perfect example of this is Restoration Hardware. They've just opened a couple of stores in Canada, but the catalogue I get has a big sticker on it that says "All prices in US dollars." (Which is depressing enough.) The prices on the website are in US dollars as well.

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**The truth is simply that online shopping is not yet efficient or economical for Canadians, and Canadians' aversion to online shopping comes more from historical buying behaviour than with any disproportionate concerns about security.**

Restoration Hardware has a direct and online marketing and fulfillment engine that's fully operational—except it scares me to death. The lamp that is \$69.99 USD on the website could turn out to cost me \$150 by mail, while if I just visit the store at Yonge and Eglinton, I'll probably get a better deal. Heck, I'd be happy if the website could even quote me prices in Canadian dollars—as it is, I'm playing Exchange Rate Roulette and don't really know how much I'm spending until it turns up on my credit card bill.

It's the not knowing how much I'm spending, combined with the potential headache of getting the stuff over the border and into my house without waiting for 2 months, that makes me nervous. The security of my credit card number is a much smaller concern. Do I buy stuff online? Yes, mostly from Canadian websites. Do I read the Restoration Hardware catalogue? Yes. Do I visit their website regularly? Yes. Have I considered buying something from them by mail or online? Yes. The only problem is that I know I'll probably pay much more for it if I buy it online. Most Canadians who are the best potential online purchasers know it, too.

Until there are more companies that offer Canadian pricing, Canadian-based distribution, and a recognition that Canada is not, in fact, the 51st state, Canadians will continue to look online but shop offline.



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### Sarah Welstead

After several years in advertising agencies and internet consulting firms, Sarah started her own ad agency, StayAwake, last year. A member of DigitalEve since 2001, Sarah has written white papers and articles on user experience and networked communications for a number of publications, including Broken Pencil and Harcourt Canada.

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