

Is what I e-see what I e-get?



By [Tim Wyatt-Gunning](#)

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Many of you will have been gorging yourselves on e-commerce services for a while, downloading all the music, movies, TV series and news services that you desire. A few of you might even have paid for some of them. It's brilliant, isn't it?

On Sunday, with only lifting a finger, I read one South African newspaper, one UK newspaper, I watched (the soporific start of) the Life of Pi which clearly reminded my simple mind of Psy so I streamed his new Gentleman video which was so similar to his Gangnam one that I streamed that too just to check.

We all love our easy online cocooned world except for my wife who still 'likes to get the kids out of the house', give some loose change to the newspaper vendor at the lights on Buitengracht Street whilst furtively listening to some sakkie-sakkie CD in her car before returning home with four DVDs rented to suit several generations worth of tastes. For her, the immediacy of all things internet merely adds to the burden of consuming time before the kids go to bed.

The shopping mall DVD shop is terminally ill, the CD shop has emigrated to an unknown piracy-free land of Nod (read more about the [demise of CD and DVD shops here](#)) and the newspaper can't afford the paper to print the story about their demise. But it's got me thinking...What wouldn't I buy online?

What is a step too far for you? When we move from services into buying physical products online, for me at least, it gets a lot harder to make the jump into the digital world. Apart from a few books and CDs years ago on Amazon, I made my first online purchase of physical goods last week. What a positively painless exercise, thank you Takealot. That might be a sad admission for someone with my job, but I suffer from ROPO (research online, purchase offline) syndrome and I'm happy with that.

So tell me, where does your limit lie?

Would you buy flowers online?

Would you buy a TV online?

Would you buy paint online?

Would you buy a painting online?

Would you buy groceries online?

Would you buy a birthday cake online?

Would you buy clothes online?

Would you buy a sofa online?

Would you buy a car online? A house?

Would you buy a puppy online?

Yes, no or maybe - all feature for me, and to some questions I am gobsmacked by my own answers. Until now I didn't realise that I have never bought groceries online but I have bought a puppy. How does that work, when I think the biggest determining factor in answering these questions is whether I can trust that "what's in the packet is what's on the label?" It's this weird relationship between "I know it's available in a shop just down the road so I will go and check it out rather than take the risk of buying blind from those online thieves" versus "it's the only one in the world and I want it so, what the hell, I'm going to have it. It describes clearly what it is so it must be so". That's how I felt about the puppy born 1,300 km further than my drive-to-view parameters.

But a painting? No way on Earth I'm going to buy that online. How big is it in real life? What's its texture? Why is it available online, I want only me to find it in an unintended discovery of an unknown artist in a grungy part of town. "It popped up in an online search" simply doesn't cut it with art.

And that shirt? It says it's Egyptian cotton and I know I'm supposed to like it but do I really? I've got lots of shirts but how can I spot the Egyptian ones? If only I could touch it first. Is that an American or a European size and should I care because I am in neither America nor Europe.

Last time I went to a shoe shop I was informed that the shoe on my foot was 'a big fitting size 11', so I can barely imagine the capacity for distortion when it's just 'on' the internet. But then again Zappos got it right (or at least I think it did but I'm not American so I can't get on their website. I wonder if Zando did?). I know I could send it back if it doesn't fit but it was so much hassle to get it here in the first place and, besides, in 25 years of decreasingly active high street shopping the only items I've ever sent back are festering mussels and a few bottles of wine which tasted like they had already met the mussels.

And you, in Joburg, yes you, understand this: I might have bought a beautiful puppy from you on Gumtree last year but you're having a laugh if you think for one minute that I am fool enough to go anywhere near that 2006 Corolla you're selling.

Our beautiful internet. Early days!

ABOUT TIM WYATT-GUNNING

Tim graduated from Cambridge in 1992, was a banker in London for 4 years, before getting involved in the European telecommunications industry in 1996 with LDL. In 1999, he moved to South Africa to set up Storm Telecom. For 9 years Tim co-ran Storm, driving it to revenues of over R250m with over 6000 business customers across the country, until it was bought by Vox Telecom in January 2008 for R360m. Tim joined Webafrica as CEO in October 2011.

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