

Are high gas prices boosting online shopping?

Brad Tuttle

For years now, consumers have grown increasingly comfortable with the idea of doing a fair amount of their shopping online. Over the most recent winter holiday season, e-commerce revenues increased an impressive 15%, compared to a 4% rise in brick-and-mortar shopping. By some account, though, there has been an especially sharp rise in online shopping during the first couple of months in 2012—a time period that just so happens to coincide with an unusual spike in gas prices.

One of the obvious upsides of online shopping is that buying via the Internet saves one from having to make a trip to the store, which saves one from having to gas up the car quite as often. At a time when a gallon of regular costs \$4 in some states and could hit \$5 soon, the incentive to shop from home without using a single drop of gasoline is stronger than usual.

Bolstering the argument for online shopping: Free shipping offers are plentiful, websites are loaded with deals you won't find in stores, and many online shoppers never pay sales tax on their purchases. Add in the rising cost of gasoline, and it seems cheaper and cheaper every day to shop online rather than heading to a traditional brick-and-mortar store.

Is that what consumers are actually doing? Have they shifted more to online shopping of late? And is that shift related to higher gas prices? According to Ebates.com, a portal that offers cash back for shopping at hundreds of major retailer websites such as Walmart.com, Lowes.com, and Staples.com, it seems that, indeed, the amount of consumer spending online has risen sharply in recent months, hand in hand with soaring gas prices.

"Ebates has seen an increase in the total order amount of all shoppers by 27% in January and 34% in February compared to last year," says Rob Smahl, the company's chief marketing officer.

While these increases are significant, they don't necessarily represent a cause and effect. The rise could be attributable to Ebates becoming more popular with consumers, and/or it could be related to consumers becoming increasingly more comfortable of late with making all sorts of purchases via the Web. The increase in online shopping via Ebates is not necessarily coming as a result of higher gas prices.

Higher gas prices seem to play some role in this increase, though. Data collected last spring and late summer indicate that shoppers turn to browsing and making more purchases online when gas prices rise.

A Slate post, meanwhile, indicates that Americans have been driving less for several years now, and one reason why this is so is that online shopping makes it easy to scale back on hitting the stores in person. From 1980 to the mid-2000s, the number of vehicle miles traveled (VMT) by all Americans rose steadily, according to a graph in the post. But during the recession era, our overall VMT has stalled. That's surely due, partly, to rising unemployment and less disposable income to go around. But another graph shows that from mid-2009 up through 2012, there has been a steady rise in online shopping expenditures, while overall retail figures have plateaued. "A certain amount of pre-recession car trips," then, according to the post, "have been permanently replaced by the Internet.

It's hard to tell to what degree the increase in online shopping comes as a result of increasing gas prices. But as gas prices continue to soar, shopping in front of a screen without paying a dime for gas makes more and more financial sense.

Fonte: Time, 8 Mar. 2012. Disponível em: <<http://www.time.com>>. Acesso em: 9 Mar. 2012. On-line.