

online to BigBoyToys.net to get you that remote control car set you wanted 15 years ago, break out the comfortable chair. In all of the reports about the boom of online shopping this holiday season, one issue has not been discussed. How convenient will online brochures, automated transaction processes, and FAQ's be when you want to return something?

According to one retailing online expert, e-commerce is moving in the right direction, but that e-tailing still faces many challenges, specifically in the area of customer service. Online Christmas returns once again will put the system to the test. Current trend reports are indicating that millions of people were planning to shop online this holiday season. Internet retailers, just like local store merchants in the Wawarsing-Ellenville area, are being forced to look beyond this initial frenzy and concentrate on creating an enjoyable, effective sales environment. With a bad experience, shoppers might not be so anxious to come back, in person or online.

If you shop online, returns also can be a lot easier if you can take gifts back to a store. Many sites, including gap.com and CircuitCity.com, will let you do that. This saves having to pack up the item and pay for the price of shipping it back. While Victoria's Secret stores, for instance, won't take back anything bought on the company's Web site, Wal-Mart's Web site offers a different approach. When you buy online from Wal-Mart, you get a postage-paid shipping label, so if you want to return the item, there is no shipping cost. At Amazon.com, most items can be returned within 30 days of delivery for a refund, but there are no exchanges unless it was damaged, or the company shipped the wrong merchandise.

However, many happy returns are no longer a given. Mr. and Mrs. Claus are not the only people checking who's been naughty and nice all year round. Big chain

stores are keeping tabs on who is returning what – and how often.

More than 200 stores in the New York area are barring customers who have landed on "a secret list" from returning holiday gifts, according to Sen. Chuck Schumer (D-NY) in a recent report. Stores, including The Sports Authority, Express and KB Toys – along with some smaller retailers – have a new policy barring customers with a chronic history from returning merchandise.

"Each one of us has had the experience of buying a gift for someone, and seeing by the look in their eyes that it's not what they wanted," said Schumer. "The consolation has always been, 'Well, I can always return it.'"

Shoppers may not even know they are on the list, which is not public and held by retailers that subscribe to the new databases, such as The Return Exchange, that track return histories. If nothing seems to be working, experts suggest resorting to the basics. "If you're extremely nice, maybe they'll give you some sympathy," says at online editor for Consumerreports.org. 



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