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## 'That Looks Great on You': Online Salespeople Get Pushy

As Web Retailers Ramp Up Live Help to Boost Sales, Customers Start to Grumble

By VAUHINI VARA

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It turns out that salespeople can be as annoying and unhelpful online as they are in the real world.

Consider Darrell Schulte's go-round with "Galvin" of **Overstock.com** Inc. Mr. Schulte, a 34-year-old Web designer in North Branch, Minn., was shopping for a DVD of the movie "Cars" and spotted a promise for free shipping on the Overstock site. But at checkout he was hit with a \$2.80 shipping charge. An online chat session ensued with Galvin, a sales representative for the site, who said free shipping applies only to "non-media" purchases. Galvin asked Mr. Schulte to check the fine print. Mr. Schulte found the disclaimer at the bottom of the Web page and asked to cancel the order. Galvin said the company doesn't reverse transactions. But because Mr. Schulte was "an important customer," he said he would make a "one-time exception."



Chris Gash

"That's the worst scripted answer I have ever read," Mr. Schulte told Galvin. An Overstock spokesman says the company's representative "should have shown better judgment and been more helpful in resolving the issue" and that its representatives don't use scripted answers.

To spur consumers to buy more instead of engaging in the cyber equivalent of window-shopping, online retailers are intensifying their sales efforts with a host of tactics. Some have added online dressing rooms, where consumers assemble outfits, real-time communication with salespeople and online showrooms that display possible furniture combinations -- so you'll be tempted to buy not just the chair but the ottoman and end table too. Though some of these features have been around for a while, they are becoming increasingly prevalent and pointed. The push in some cases is sparking a consumer backlash, as shoppers recoil at some of the more aggressive sales pitches that are migrating online.

Leigh-Ann Gerow, a freelance writer and Web designer in Las Vegas, tried a live online chat at **Dell Inc.**'s site a few weeks ago. She hadn't received a confirmation email after ordering a new computer and wanted to find out whether her order had gone through. She chatted with two salespeople, but neither could solve her problem. The most annoying part: They kept using what Ms. Gerow describes as "psychology-speak" -- phrases like, "I understand how frustrated you must feel," "I understand that this is an inconvenience for you," and "I'm sorry this is taking your valuable time." Ms. Gerow, 40, finally gave up and called Dell's phone number for customer service.

"Dell acknowledges that we need to do a better job of serving our customers," a Dell spokesman says. Dell says it invested \$150 million in 2006 to boost its customer service by improving training, hiring more people and offering new tools like DellConnect, which lets Dell's customer-support employees troubleshoot technical issues remotely.

Then there is the online equivalent of the salesperson who insists those jeans really look great, even if you're not so sure. Charles Sporn, a 15-year-old in New York, recently encountered one of those. In a Web chat session with an **Apple Computer Inc.** salesman, Mr. Sporn posed as his dad and mentioned that he was considering buying a MacBook Pro, Apple's high-end laptop. The salesman replied: "Very good taste."

Mr. Sporn remembers appreciating the compliment but being suspicious that it came so promptly. (He says he couldn't help but wonder: Did it have something to do with the fact that the MacBook Pro is among Apple's most expensive computers? He also wondered if Apple uses automated robots instead of humans in its sales chats. An Apple spokesman says the company uses real salespeople, not robots, but declined to comment beyond that.)

Later in the chat, Mr. Sporn mentioned that "his son" uses Apple's Aperture software for photographers and found that it runs too slowly on his old PowerBook. The salesman's response: "Then you are definitely looking in the right spot. I wouldn't recommend anything else if you were to use something like Aperture." Mr. Sporn didn't buy the computer. If he does, he'll probably just take the bus to the Apple store and get

### Sales Assistance

Retailers have added new features to their Web sites to make consumers feel more comfortable purchasing online.

RETAILER/WEB SITE	SHOPPING FEATURES
<b>Wal-Mart</b> www.walmart.com	Site shows how items fit together.
<b>American Eagle Outfitters</b> www.ae.com	Live helpers who help confused customers finish Web orders for in real time.
<b>Coach</b> www.coach.com	Allows shoppers to "try on" purses, by choosing a height and weight, then seeing how the bag would appear on their frame.
<b>Rampage</b> www.rampage.com	Lets shoppers "try on" its clothes in a virtual dressing room and invite friends, via email, to visit and give advice.
<b>Best Buy</b> www.bestbuy.com	Virtual "blue shirt" videos with customer service reps who demonstrate how products work.
<b>H-P and Staples</b> www.hp.com, www.staples.com	Remind customers via email to stock up on products that may have run out.

it in person, he says.

**To be sure, some of the tactics retailers are using to boost online sales have turned out to be hits.** Iconix Brand Group Inc.'s Rampage brand is letting Web shoppers "try on" its clothes in a virtual dressing room built by a third-party Web designer called **A Far Site Better LLC**. The site also invites a shopper's friends, via email, to offer advice.

That has worked for Shawna Fry, a 16-year-old in Moravia, Iowa. Ms. Fry builds outfits in the Rampage dressing room whenever she has some spare time. She has saved about 10 outfits, and though she hasn't bought anything yet, she plans to email her favorite outfits to her aunt and uncle so that they'll take the hint and get her a gift.

Jill Reese, a 26-year-old event planner in Houston, is another consumer being lured by such efforts. Ms. Reese recently logged on to the site of Buy.com Inc., which was giving shoppers a \$20 refund when they spent \$50 or more and used **Google Inc.**'s new Google Checkout payment service. That spurred Ms. Reese to throw an extra classical-music CD in her shopping cart, along with the camera accessories she had planned to buy.

Some online retailers are also adding features and information guides, meant to keep shoppers on a site for longer periods and draw them back more often -- which translates into more loyal customers who are likelier to spend large sums. At **QVC Inc.**'s QVC.com, the accessories-and-shoes group realized many customers were returning purses because they were misjudging from the Web site how a bag would fit them. So QVC added a "See How It Fits" tool that superimposes a crude image of the purse on a silhouetted model. Now, QVC says fewer buyers send back their purses.

Still, all this online help isn't always welcome. "If I just bought a digital camera, I don't need to buy a new computer to use with it, even if they are giving me 50% off on it," says Vicky Abrams, 22, a legal assistant in Brooklyn.

For the holidays, **Best Buy Co.** posted on its Web site videos of its sales representatives dressed in bright blue and demonstrating products. Best Buy posted the videos after successfully experimenting with videos around other holidays like Mother's Day and Father's Day.

John Thompson, senior vice president for BestBuy.com, says the videos are meant to give customers useful information while they're at home on the Web. But Ralph Fornoles, a 25-year-old J. Crew Group Inc. salesman in Freeport, N.Y., has watched the videos on how digital cameras work, and has a different take: "They're kind of corny."