



Which Shopping Site Is Best?

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SHOPPING COMPARISON WEB SITES are a must for any online shopper. In a matter of seconds they allow you to see which online vendor is offering the best price.

But which ones are the best? To find out, we put seven of the big names to a test, looking up the lowest prices for four items: an Apple 4GB iPod Nano, an Empire Red KitchenAid Artisan stand mixer, a paperback copy of "The Da Vinci Code" and a Canon EOS 30D digital camera with an 18-55mm lens.

Testing the sites was a little draining. Not hitting-the-mall-the-day-after-Thanksgiving draining — more like hitting the mall on a rainy Saturday afternoon. One of our first discoveries was that you often need to fiddle with your search request a bit to get a listing of what you really want.

But in the end we had our picks. NexTag¹ was our favorite, as it was easy to use and consistently delivered the lowest prices. Tied for a close second were Shopping.com² and PriceGrabber³. Both had their hits and misses, but each performed well overall.

For specific reviews of each site, see the table below. But first, here's what we lessons learned:

Be skeptical. Be sure to follow through to the retailers' site and see if the price listed on the search engine is correct. If a retailer is noted to offer no sales tax⁴ (a big cost saver that many online retailers offer), make a quick phone call, or go through the motions of buying the item to see if that holds true at checkout. PriceRunner, for example, had listed Prestige Camera as the best deal for our digital camera, noting that the company doesn't charge sales tax. That threw us — we'd noticed other searches that said the company did. A quick phone call to Prestige Camera's customer service cleared things up: They do charge sales tax. And on a camera that retails for \$1,500, that's no small chunk of change.

Get specific. Starting narrow may return "no results" at first, but it's better than slogging through listing after listing for items you don't want. Searching for "The Da Vinci Code" pulled up everything from videogames and soundtracks to other tomes written about this fiction bestseller. So if you want, say, the paperback version, type that in specifically.

But not too specific. Let's say you have your heart set on a very particular item. In our case, we didn't want just any KitchenAid mixer: We wanted the Artisan in Empire Red. Most search engines took some tweaking to get that color specifically, while Shopping.com ignored the color distinction altogether.

Go beyond the initial search. Many sites allow retailers to pay their way to the top of the list so that their listing is the first you encounter, even if they aren't offering the cheapest price. You'll usually see them billed as "top" or "favorite" merchants. Getting past them is simple: Use the site's sorting tools to look for the lowest item price, or the lowest total price.

Use multiple search sites. It only takes a few seconds, so why not? For our test we found that sometimes the price differentials from site to site were in the pennies — while in other cases it was substantial.

Here are the competitors, ranked from best to worst:

Search site	What we liked	Performance
NexTag ⁵	Price History feature tells you the number of sellers carrying an item, and how its price has changed. Nice way to spot	Excellent. Beat out other search engines to find the lowest price for the book (a tie with Shopping.com) and digital camera tests, and was a close second for

	items on the discount.	the iPod.
PriceGrabber.com ⁶	Many retailers offer so-called shopping cart sales. The listed price is one amount, but when you add an item to your cart, you'll get an additional discount. PriceGrabber picks up on this with "Get a Better Price" notes in its listings.	Great. Beat out other search engines when we searched for the iPod, and returned competitively low prices for the others.
Shopping.com ⁷ (Partner DealTime.com ⁸ offers identical results.)	Extensive customer reviews and ratings help you figure out if the price is right for the item quality.	Great. It beat out other search engines for the book test (a tie with NexTag), and had consistently competitive prices for the others. It isn't always attentive to details. In our mixer test, it initially seemed to have the lowest price — except it applied to a melon-colored mixer. The Empire Red one from the same site cost \$15 more.
ShopZilla ⁹ (Partner BizRate Shopping Search ¹⁰ , offers identical results.)	"Smart Choice" box highlights the lowest price from a reputable retailer, making it easy to skip past retailers who didn't have many customer reviews or were otherwise questionable.	Good. Its prices were always among the lowest, but it isn't always attentive to details. In our search for the Canon digital camera, it failed to make the distinction between cameras sold with or without the lens.
Froogle ¹¹	Mapping feature allows you to search for mixers in stores near you, thus avoiding the trap of shipping fees.	Hit or miss. Froogle is one of the few sites that lists only the base price rather than the total price, which incorporates shipping and sales tax. That means more work for the consumer. Google did not respond to requests for comment.
Yahoo! Shopping ¹²	Available web site coupons are noted along with the base price. During our KitchenAid search, for example, the engine found that Sears is offering a free shipping promotion through May 7, and Etronics.com is giving away free gifts with purchases of \$50 or more.	So-so. Yahoo returned competitive prices, but required more work from the consumer. Only a few listings offered sales tax and shipping information, while most had "Check Store" notes. Yahoo Shopping did not respond to requests for comment.
PriceRunner.com ¹³	View buying advice for technical items, say, televisions or digital cameras.	Skip it. Some information was flat-out wrong (see "Be Skeptical" section above). Other search results were woefully slim, with only one or two retailers listed. Martin Andersen, general manager for the site, says that's because PriceRunner has been slowly building since its summer 2005 debut. More sections and items are being added over time.

Links in this article:

¹<http://www.nextag.com/>²<http://www.shopping.com/>³<http://www.pricegrabber.com/>⁴<http://www.smartmoney.com/dealoftheday/index.cfm?story=20050914>⁵<http://www.nextag.com/>⁶<http://www.pricegrabber.com/>⁷<http://www.shopping.com/>⁸<http://www.dealtime.com/>⁹<http://www.shopzilla.com/>¹⁰<http://www.bizrate.com/>¹¹<http://froogle.google.com/>¹²<http://shopping.yahoo.com/>¹³<http://www.pricerunner.com/>

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