

Not just another Cyber Monday

Buyer beware: many of today's 'deals' will be bogus and consumers can easily find products selling cheaper at other times



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It's just another Cyber Monday. Or is it? With more Irish people shopping online than at any point in our retail history, it almost seems like every day is Cyber Monday. And yes, we are now finished with the 1980s song references, at least for today.

Every year for more than a decade, this Monday of the year has marked the day when newspapers and websites all over the world – including this very small part of it – have written about the amazing deals to be found on websites as far apart as San Francisco, Shanghai and Sligo.

The relentless coverage of Cyber Monday has almost made it seem like it is a real thing.

But it isn't – or at least not really. For a start, many of the deals which will be promoted today will be bogus and a canny consumer could easily find the products selling cheaper in the weeks and months before or after the big day.

And it's not like today even marks the busiest day of the year for online shopping, unlike when the term Cyber Monday was first coined in 2005.

That was the year when a website in the United States called shop.org issued a press release that read: "While traditional retailers will be monitoring store traffic and sales on Black Friday, online retailers have set their sights on something different: Cyber Monday, the Monday after Thanksgiving, which is quickly becoming one of the biggest online shopping days of the year."

Binge-shop

The website sent out its release in response to a trend which had seen a dramatic spike in shopping on the Monday after Thanksgiving among people going back to

work after the extended holiday and using office broadband to binge-shop. The notion quickly moved across the Atlantic and it now seems that it is here to stay or at least until the next retail wheeze comes along.

But are the bargains real and what should we be looking out for? The people at the European Consumer Centre (ECC) have been focusing on Cyber Monday in recent days and they suggest that to make sure people get the best deals available they should have their wits about them.

"We've all seen examples of 'deals' where retailers simply inflate the prices before reducing them down again in order to give customers the impression of getting 'a huge discount', so it's advisable to track the price of your chosen product to see if the end price represents a genuine net reduction after tax and shipping added in," a spokeswoman says.

It might be a bit late for that now but something you could do today is Google the product, which a company is claiming to sell at a substantial discount, and see where else it is being sold and for how much. It will also be worth noting whether or not other retailers selling it at the same price are claiming it is discounted.

The ECC also says people should never forget that Cyber Monday – and Black Friday before it – is a way for retailers to shift surplus summer stock and may be an opportunity to clear some warehouse space for Christmas stock, "so the selection of reduced items are not what you may expect or, indeed, worth buying even with the reduction in price".

The spokeswoman says businesses must also ensure that the terms and time limits of a deal are clear and that they can supply the on-sale products for the increased demand generated by the promotional campaigns.

That is why customers should carefully consider "while stocks last" claims as it may be that only a small number of a particular product is available, meaning it could be an end-of-line product that will sell out very quickly.

Advantage

And sometimes substantial discounts may

not, in the end, be available to most consumers. This happens when businesses fail to ensure enough consumers can take advantage of products sold at the highest discount point stated rather than many products at the lowest end.

So don't be disappointed that by the time you get to the sale page the largest discounts are gone.

The ECC warns against letting the lure of a huge discount make you buy what is ultimately a poor-value product. "Think of

the discounted price as a bonus rather than using it as your starting point for your purchase."

It warns against falling for old news. Cyber Monday is great for high-end tech products and entertainment gadgets, the spokeswoman says. "But remember that the sales are also a way for shops to shift old stock quickly before it becomes obsolete. While you might get a great price, you inadvertently might be buying old technology which comes with limited features and compatibility issues that are outside warranty and/or are no longer supported by the manufacturer."

Finally, the ECC says people should always check the small print: "The rules that govern special offers and flash sales can be vague. Marketing tactics can make offers look better than they are. You may find that shops advertise 'X% Off Everything!*' followed by '*exclusions apply'. So make sure you are getting the product you want, at the right price."



■ People should never forget that Cyber Monday – and Black Friday before it – is a way for retailers to shift surplus summer stock. PHOTOGRAPH: ISTOCK