



HEY, BIG SPENDER

Online shopping is booming, but are the wheels about to fall off the trolley?

While figures released by Visa show that UK cardholders spent more than £2.4 billion on the internet in the first three months of 2004, a report has lambasted online stores for failing to maintain reliable sites, labelling them “shocking and unacceptable”.

Their figures revealed that spending in the first quarter of 2004 increased by 123% over the same period last year. The amount is more than double that spent in the same period in 2003 and reflects a growing confidence among consumers in paying bills and shopping online. Food and drink sales trebled, while books and music rose by 116%.

But as the number of people who

turn to the internet to replace the weekly slog to the supermarket rises, the virtual trolleys in which purchases are placed are proving to be as equally wobbly as their real-world counterparts. A fifth of the virtual shopping carts, trolleys and baskets that are used by online shops to hold customers' potential purchases were malfunctioning for at least 12 hours during a four-week period. More than three quarters of the sites failed to meet the expected 99.9% availability of shopping trolleys, leaving visitors to the site unable to order products.

“Twenty million UK shoppers are expected to spend £17 billion online this year,” said James Roper, the CEO of the Interactive Media in Retail Group. “Many UK e-tailers have made significant strides in improving [the] consumer experience... but the appalling state of other retailers' web services is both shocking and unacceptable; it blights our industry.”

Deri Jones, the CEO of SciVisum, was no less scathing. “UK ecommerce sites are slapping customers in the face, rather than shaking them by the hand,” he said.