

HOW TO BE A **SMARTER SHOPPER** RIGHT NOW

We're heading back to stores but we're also buying online more than ever. While shortages, price spikes, and delays can be frustrating, there are easy ways to find what you need for the right price ... and even have fun while you're at it.

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If you're in the mood to spend, you're not alone.

“In the first half of 2021, we saw a return of optimism and spending,” says Tamara Charm, who works for the global management consulting firm McKinsey as an agile consumer insights leader.

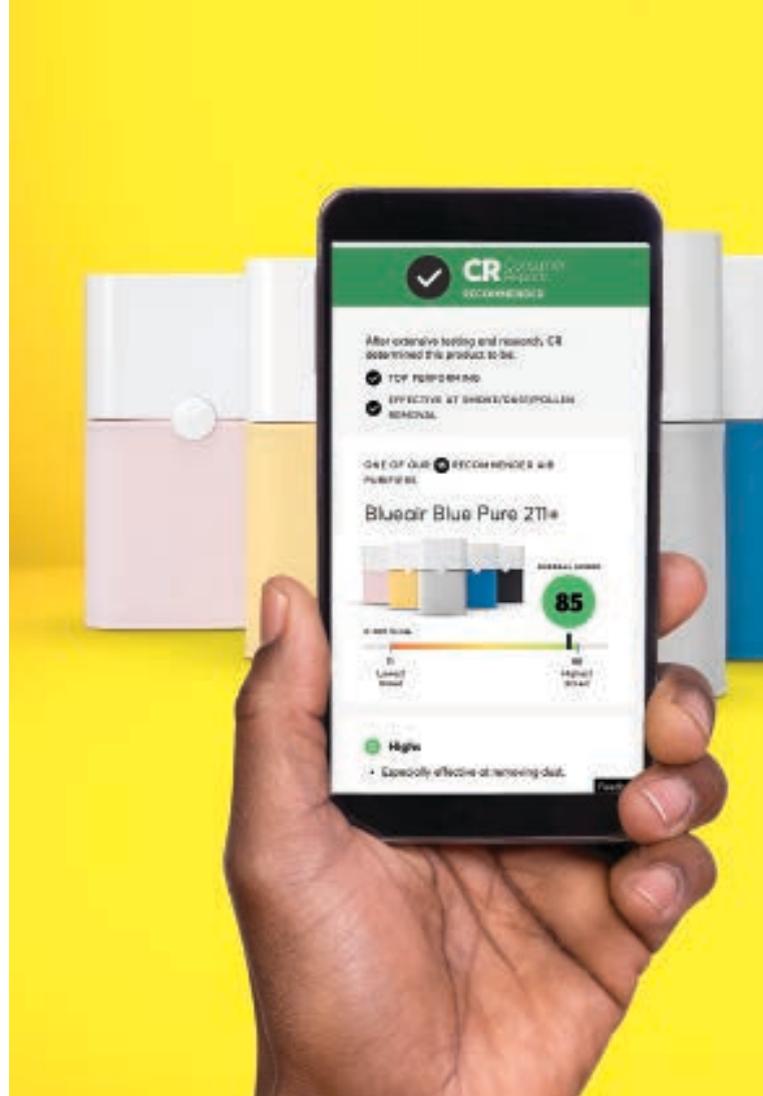
And yet the way we're buying reflects the many long-term changes brought on by the pandemic. E-commerce sales (long on the upswing) jumped 32 percent in 2020, more than double the growth rate in 2019, according to the market research firm Mintel. Even as shoppers venture back into walk-in stores now that vaccines have eased restrictions, online sales remain strong. The experience of having nearly everything delivered to one's door has probably changed some shopping habits for good.

In a February 2021 Consumer Reports nationally representative survey of more than 2,500 Americans, more than three-quarters (76 percent) said that “shopping is a better experience today because the internet makes it easier to get whatever I want, whenever I want it.”

It's hard to argue with convenience. “People are generally still working from home at least part of the time, and have more flexibility to order online and be home for deliveries,” says Greg Daco, chief U.S. economist at Oxford Economics.

But despite the convenience factor—or the enthusiasm for going into stores again—the process of shopping, whether it's for a Halloween costume or an outdoor fire pit, comes with new complications due to price inflation, product shortages, and shipping delays. Plus, the endless options available online can make it difficult to find just what you need.

The best way to shop today depends on what you're buying, what you want to spend, and when you need it. Read on for our expert guide to get the right stuff at the right price.



BEFORE YOU START SHOPPING, ASK THIS...



What Do You Want?

Follow the path that Samantha Gordon, CR's deals editor, recently took when she moved into a new house and needed, well, everything. “I searched online for things like ‘best coffee maker,’” she says.

When you do that, your search engine will come up with links to online content offering reviews and opinions on products (for example, CR's own “Best Coffee Makers of 2021”), as well as listings from retailers. Use the articles to learn about the types of products available—say, drip vs. pod-style machines. Then you can drill down to specific ones from there.

How CR Can Help

Shop on CR.org: Shop and compare prices at a wide variety of carefully selected retailers.

Shopping newsletters: Get the latest shopping tips and deals delivered straight to your inbox. Sign up at [CR.org/newsletters](https://www.crisp.com/newsletters).

CR Recommended: Look for the CR Recommended mark as you shop in stores and online to immediately know which products have earned our top ratings.

Get advice 24/7: As a print member, you can upgrade to an All Access membership with digital access to 8,500+ ratings and reviews, CR Savings deals and discounts, and personalized buying advice for the special rate of \$25. Go to [CR.org/specialoffer](https://www.crisp.com/specialoffer).



Shop In-Store or Online?

Nearly half of consumers said they missed the ability to touch and try products on the spot during lockdowns, and 35 percent said they missed the social aspect of shopping, according to a study by Mood Media in June. For more reasons you might want to go to a store, see page 32. And consider:

1 | Size. The bigger the item, the more important it might be to see it in person—and to check the return policy, says Julie Ramhold, a consumer analyst at the shopping comparison site DealNews. “The only thing worse than getting stuck with an item you can’t use is getting stuck with one that’s also heavy and awkward, and has to be removed by someone else.”

2 | Price. If you know what you want and you’re just looking for a good deal, go online. Take pet food: You’ll find enticing discounts from online retailers, and you can get even better prices through loyalty programs. Plus, there’s no lugging heavy bags of chow to and from your car.

Does It Fit Your Needs?

Set a budget for yourself and eliminate anything outside its limits. By reading multiple reviews, you’ll get a sense of price ranges and which brands are best. Keep in mind, however, that not all reviews are authentic. (A study by the review analysis

site Fakespot pegged the percentage of fake reviews on Amazon at about 30 percent.) If you’re not familiar with a brand, read the comments about it in social media posts, where people might talk about quality and customer service. And check the return policy so that you don’t get stuck with a stinker.

STICKY SITUATION

I found a set of cookware online that I like. But I’ve never heard of the brand and I’m afraid the great reviews are fake. Is it safe to buy?

An influx of overly positive or negative reviews posted within a week or two could mean they’re not legit, says Saoud Khalifah, founder of the review analysis site Fakespot. Other red flags include spelling errors and repetitive language in multiple reviews. See if you can find video reviews; they tend to be harder to fake, says Khalifah and CR’s deals editor, Samantha Gordon.



BUY IT BETTER

Mattresses

SHOP SMART If you can, head to a store to lie down on mattresses for 5 to 10 minutes in each position you sleep in. If you’re shopping online, that may not be an option. In that case, be sure to check the return policy before you buy.

GET A DEAL Mattress prices have risen. Still, there’s a holiday sale around every corner (like Black Friday in November), says Kelly Moomey, a CR market analyst.



INNERSPRING MATTRESS
\$ DENVER CHOICE DOCTOR’S CHOICE PLUSH \$750

82 OVERALL SCORE

TVs

SHOP SMART When it comes to judging picture quality, in-store lighting and settings can be misleading. Instead, shop online using CR’s ratings to guide you. Use them even if you’re buying in a store so that you can get a new set on the same day, or if you want to make sure the set you want isn’t too big (or small) for your needs.

GET A DEAL Sale season starts in September. If you can wait, you might score a Black Friday deal.



65" TELEVISION
✓ LG 65NANO90UPA \$1,350

71 OVERALL SCORE



BUY IT BETTER

Lawn Tools

SHOP SMART Holding a leaf blower or string trimmer can give you a sense of its weight and maneuverability. But because they're sold indoors, you won't be able to feel the vibration or hear their roar when powered up. You'll find more options and a wider range of prices online.

GET A DEAL Leaf blowers go on sale in September and October. You'll find the best string-trimmer prices starting in March.



PLUG-IN ELECTRIC HANDHELD LEAF BLOWER

TORO 51624 LEAF BLOWER \$55

81 OVERALL SCORE

Appliances

SHOP SMART Browse online and be flexible. (Many stores still have limited stock and probably will into 2022.) Pick a reliable brand, and then focus on the most important functions and performance, not the exact model, CR's analysts say.

GET A DEAL Prices are higher now for many appliances. Experts suggest shopping at independent retailers; they often can match the prices of big-box stores.



24" DISHWASHER

BOSCH 300 DLX SERIES SHS863WD5N \$770

85 OVERALL SCORE

SET YOURSELF UP TO SAVE



What's Different

When McKinsey asked consumers about what they planned to splurge on this year, Tamara Charm expected them to say travel and dining. They did say that, but also that they looked forward to buying electronics, home goods, cosmetics, and more. "Folks are excited to spend as life gets back to normal," she says.

But when it comes to the cost of consumer goods, things aren't exactly normal. A combination of high demand for everything from lumber to outdoor furniture—and supply-chain shortages for those very same products—has driven prices up and available deals down. Appliance retailers, for one, are offering smaller discounts and fewer promotions, industry experts say.

Still, stores are angling

for your business, and online tools make it easier to compare prices, so you're not doomed to overpay as long as you shop carefully.



Save More In-Store

Because so many walk-in stores also have websites (or compete with e-commerce stores), the internet is your key to getting in-person deals. So check the online price of anything you're considering buying in a store, and ask the retailer to match it. (In CR's member surveys, most shoppers who try to negotiate say they're successful.) If you can't get a better price, ask for something else—delivery or assembly thrown in free, for example. Some retailers, such as Petco, Kohl's, and Walmart, are offering discounts, rebates, or incentives to shoppers who "buy online, pick up in store" (also called BOPUS).

Find the Best Deals Online

1 | Use sites to save. Search Google Shopping, PriceGrabber, or Shopzilla as well as CR.org to see



STICKY SITUATION

I saw the smartphone I wanted at a great price, but it's refurbished, not new. Should I go for it? The savings can be significant. On Apple's website, for example, we recently found a refurbished iPhone XR with 128 gigabytes of storage for \$469. And you're likely to be happy with your buy. In CR's Spring 2018 survey of over 3,000 members with refurbished smartphones, a majority told us they were highly satisfied with theirs. Look for a certified pre-owned phone—with a warranty—that you can return.





BUY NOW

prices across retailers. CR's shopping pros also look for deals at websites like DealNews, GottaDeal, and DealsPlus, where you can sign up for alerts for products you're interested in, often by category.

2 | Add to your cart. If you're signed in at a website and leave an item in your cart without checking out, some retailers might send you an email with a discount code to encourage you to buy.

3 | Join a loyalty program. Signing up for one may get you early access to coupons, sales, and promotions, plus rewards on what you buy.

4 | Get social. Retailers often post exclusive promotions on their Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter feeds, and reward customers who "like" or follow them with alerts for discounts, incentives, and giveaways.

Be Smart About Secondhand



If you've ever wandered through a flea market, you've already dipped your toe into the secondhand marketplace.

The used-clothing market alone could more than double by 2025, growing at a rate 11 times faster than the broader retail clothing sector, according to the secondhand fashion retailer ThredUp.

New online options like Depop and Tradesy have joined stalwarts like Facebook Marketplace and eBay. And traditional retailers have gotten into the game, too, with companies like Macy's and Patagonia offering pre-owned items, and others like Apple and KitchenAid selling returned products they refurbish to work like new.

"In the past, buying secondhand was looked down upon as something people did when they didn't have money to shop new, but now it's seen as trendy," says Elizabeth Basa, owner of Family Tree Resale, a Chicago-based store that also offers online thrift shopping. It's also good for the planet, not to mention your wallet. You can save about 80 percent by buying used, she says. Try these tips for savvy shopping:

Think "local" for large items. Basa suggests looking at local thrift stores and sites like Facebook Marketplace for furniture and appliances so that you don't have to ship them.

Shop sites that authenticate. Browsing for designer clothing? Sites like Poshmark and The RealReal authenticate items, so you can be confident you're not buying a fake.

Check seller reviews and policies. For higher-end purchases, buy only from online sellers who have a substantial record of positive feedback and reviews. And check their return policies; some are very strict.

HEADING OUT TO A STORE

What's Different

Walk-in stores today don't look quite the same as they did in 2019. Thousands didn't make it through the pandemic. At those that have survived, you can expect not only ubiquitous hand-sanitizing stations but also potentially fewer salespeople due to a post-pandemic labor crunch.

"The service that you find in a store right now might not be what you were accustomed to pre-pandemic," says Audrey Guskey, PhD, an associate professor of marketing at Duquesne University and an expert on consumer trends.

Depending on what you're purchasing, you might also find less available stock. Supply-chain shortages in semiconductors, electronics, lumber, and foam affect many categories, including laptops and furniture.



Shop In-Store Strategically

Beyond the appeal of retail therapy—an afternoon spent with a friend hitting favorite shops and coffee spots at the mall or strolling down Main Street—there are certain times when a physical store



STICKY SITUATION

Stores often offer a discount on your first purchase if you sign up for their credit card at checkout. Is that a good way to save?

It can be. Just know that retail cards also typically have higher interest rates, lower credit limits, and lower rewards than general interest cards, says Kimberly Palmer, a personal finance expert with NerdWallet. Before you sign up, do the math to see if the discount is worth it. Also: Applying will typically generate a "hard inquiry" on your credit report, which can temporarily hurt your credit score.

is the best place to find what you need.

1 | When comfort is key. If you'll spend a lot of time sitting or lying on a piece of furniture—like a sofa or mattress—it's worth heading to a store to try before you buy. Ditto for anything

where ergonomics are important, like a keyboard, fitness equipment, and musical instruments.

With clothing, it's an "it depends" situation. You can find just about anything online and it's usually easy to return. But if fit is really important—say, for running shoes or evening wear—you might want the help of a store associate or the convenience of in-house tailoring.

2 | If color or scale really matter. Computer screens and photography can distort the way colors appear and make it difficult to judge size. So if you really want to

make sure a new rug will match your curtains or that a new chair doesn't dwarf your side table, you might want to see it in person, especially if it's something large and difficult to return. And measure your space and existing furnishings before you go.

3 | Because you want a curated selection. Going to a store with a limited number of carefully chosen options can help simplify your choices. And the owner or an experienced salesperson of a specialty shop may be able to offer advice for your specific needs.



PHOTOS, TOP LEFT TO RIGHT: SHUTTERSTOCK; FREDRIK BROKEN



STICKY

SITUATION

I saw the TV I want at an electronics store in the mall, but I found it for less online from a different retailer. Is it a no-brainer to order it online?

First, check that lower online price. Note the shipping costs and return policy, and see what's included, like unboxing or basic setup. Then ask the store if it can match the online price. If it can't, you'll have to weigh price vs. supporting an independent retailer that may offer benefits like individual advice and a curated selection—if not rock-bottom prices.



BUY IT BETTER

Laptops

SHOP SMART Avoid a return by shopping in person so that you can evaluate the comfort of the keyboard—both its size and how well you like the “clickiness,” CR’s tech pros say.

GET A DEAL Save with a model that’s a year or two old, a particularly good idea if your needs barely exceed browsing the web, using Microsoft Office, and making video calls, none of which require the latest and greatest processors.



15"-16" LAPTOP

\$ LENOVO IDEAPAD 5 15ITL05 \$550

73 OVERALL SCORE

Headphones

SHOP SMART A bad fit can affect performance and comfort. Some stores let you try on headphones. That’s usually not true for in-ear models though, so buy from a retailer with a good return policy.

GET A DEAL Look beyond the big names. We’ve found superb low-priced models from lesser-known companies such as 1More and Monoprice. Or save big with refurbished headphones from Amazon, Best Buy, or Walmart.



NOISE-CANCELING OVER-EAR HEADPHONES

\$ MONOPRICE BT-300ANC \$45

74 OVERALL SCORE



Use Your Time Wisely

It’s still a good practice to limit your time in public places, where you may be more likely to be exposed to COVID-19. Before you head to a store:

CHECK INVENTORY ONLINE

With many retailers, you can look online to see whether an item is in stock at your local store. If a store doesn’t offer this option, call ahead to check. If you’ll need help once you’re there, ask for an appointment to avoid a wait.

DOWNLOAD THE RETAILER’S APP

Target’s app, for example, can direct you to the right aisle to find a product in the store. Walmart’s app allows you to scan items while you’re shopping and then check yourself out, avoiding potentially long lines at registers.



BUY IT BETTER

Exercise Equipment

SHOP SMART Test it in person to evaluate the fit, construction quality, and controls.

GET A DEAL Save by buying used, but not from a commercial gym (the machines get too much use). Inspect a treadmill belt for wear; try all the speeds and the incline. Check the warranty and that there's no safety recall for the model.



FOLDING
TREADMILL

**HORIZON 7.0AT
TREADMILL \$1,000**

85 OVERALL
SCORE

Furniture

SHOP SMART Check CR's ratings of furniture retailers ([CR.org/furniture1021](https://www.consumerreports.org/furniture1021)) to pick one with the best combination of selection, price, and service. Shortages mean shipping times are longer than usual at some retailers.

GET A DEAL Browse the secondhand marketplace for steals on nearly new furniture. Try to see any used upholstered items in person to be sure they're intact and don't have smoke or pet odors.



**ROOM & BOARD
BODEN CHAIR
\$1,299 AND UP**

93 OVERALL
SCORE*

*Overall Score is for Room & Board based on results from our Spring 2020 survey, in which CR members rated their satisfaction with purchases made at walk-in furniture retailers in the past two years.

SHOPPING ONLINE



What's Different

Retail giants like Amazon, Kmart, and Walmart now host third-party or "marketplace" sellers, independent retailers who often have their own shipping and return policies that may differ from those of the main platform. Fake reviews have proliferated

everywhere. And even the search process has become less than straightforward.

Keep in mind that items labeled "sponsored" mean that a company paid to get its products listed at the top of the results page. And the "Amazon's Choice" label, another example, doesn't mean that someone from Amazon reviewed it, but rather that an algorithm found it ranked well in terms of reviews, pricing, and availability to ship quickly.



Find It Faster

1 | Use your tabs. Try what Julie Ramhold, a consumer analyst, does: Type an item into your search engine, then click through to one of the retailers that comes up. Find the product you like best and keep that page open. Go to a new tab and repeat the



process at another retailer. That way, you can compare.

2 | Filter for your needs.

Retailers typically have a side or top panel where you can choose to limit your search by factors like brand, size, color, and average customer review rating.

3 | **Set a timer.** If you're prone to decision paralysis, Bob Sullivan, author of "Gotcha Capitalism" (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2018) suggests setting a timer to go off a few minutes after you've started searching. "Just stopping and doing something else can help you make a choice," he says.



Coping With Customer Service

Many retailers now use artificial intelligence customer service "chatbots" (essentially, robots with whom you can instant message for assistance). If you'd rather talk to a person, ask the chatbot for a phone number you can call. Or check the website GetHuman, an online directory with customer service guides and phone numbers for thousands of national and international companies.

If that's not getting you anywhere, switch to social media—but that doesn't mean publicly airing your grievance. Direct messaging a company's social media account is often the quickest path to a response.

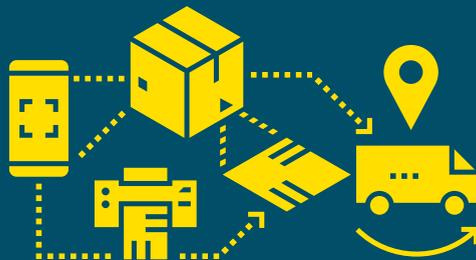
Always be sure you understand the shipping and return policies before you buy, including the return window, whether you need a receipt or proof of purchase, and if you'll have to pay a restocking fee.

Don't assume that third-party sellers have the same return and shipping policies as the main site. Look for the "sold by" label on the item you're buying and click through to the seller's storefront to check its policies. Also read customer reviews for the seller and the products it offers. Tread carefully if there's a lot of negative feedback.

STICKY SITUATION

I need a new kitchen range. I don't want to buy the wrong thing, but I'm worried about COVID-19 and I'm limiting time in stores. Should I buy a new one online? If you're picking a similar model from a reliable brand (see our ratings at [CR.org/ranges1021](https://www.consumerreports.org/ranges1021)), buying online makes sense. If you're considering a new type—say, an induction model when you've always had gas—you might want to see it and get personal advice. Some independent retailers also offer repair service, which could help down the line.

Happier Returns



FLEXIBLE RETURN POLICIES

Amazon You have 30 days to return most new, unopened items. Amazon provides shipping labels for mail-in returns, or you can take items to tens of thousands of drop-off locations.

Costco There's no time limit on most returns, but electronics and major appliances must be returned within 90 days of receipt.

Home Depot Return most new, unopened items within 90 days. No receipt? Bring the item and your ID to a store within 30 days. The company can look up your purchase if you paid with a debit or credit card or by check.

Target You have up to 90 days to return most items. Return shipping is free, or bring online purchases to any store. Target may deny returns that have been opened or damaged, or those without a receipt.

STRICTER RETURN POLICIES

Apple It gives you just 14 days to return an item or get a refund, whether it's purchased through Apple online or in an Apple store.

Best Buy It has a meager 15-day window for returning most items, requires proof of purchase, and has a 15 percent restocking fee on certain items.

Kmart You have 30 days for most returns with a receipt but just seven for upholstered furniture, mattresses, and bed frames. Seasonal holiday items can't be returned once the holiday has passed, and there are no extended return windows for holiday gifts.