



TEDD CHURCH, GAZETTE

Cornucopia workers have been filling last-minute Christmas orders as they come in over the Internet. Cindy Pellatt, Marisabel Camargo and Nixa Achurra put together gift baskets that are shipped around the world.

Canada warms to E-buying

Orders via Internet jump for Montreal firm's gift baskets

The man from San Diego desperately needed to send a Christmas gift basket to another San Diegan. So, he jumped on the Web and ordered one. A few days later, a courier delivered it.

What the customer and recipient probably didn't know was that the basket began its journey 3,000 kilometres away from sunny California, in the frantic offices of Cornucopia, a small company in north-end Montreal.

"The guy said he couldn't find anybody in San Diego to do it," said Cornucopia's Cindy Pellatt. "He probably could have looked up a local San Diego company in the Yellow Pages, but he called us, so we took the order and shipped it off."

Pellatt, one of the senior elves who has been spent the past month busily taking orders, stuffing baskets and preparing them for shipment across Canada and the U.S., is getting used to orders from far-off places. Clients from as far away as Saudi Arabia ordered Cornucopia Christmas baskets for friends and family in Canada this year.

They sent baskets that typically included egg-nog mix, cranberry cider, cookies and candy, to send to friends, family and business associates.

The holiday season is the busiest time of the year at family-run Cornucopia—and, like many retailers, the company is finding the Internet to be a key customer magnet in 1998.

In the U.S., America Online made headlines last week when it said that in the first two weeks of December, 750,000 of its subscribers had shopped online for the first time, with toys, apparel, books and music attracting the



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most interest. Traffic to its toys and children sections quadrupled, while traffic to apparel areas tripled.

Canadians have been slower to move to electronic commerce. But, though hard figures are hard to come by, anecdotal evidence indicates the online-shopping bug has hit north of the U.S. border, as well.

At Cornucopia, only about 10 per cent of orders come online, but many other customers found the company thanks to its Internet presence, then placed orders using its toll-free numbers, Pellatt said. "People still like a human touch, especially when it comes to giving their credit-card numbers out," she said.

YEAR OF THE NET SHOPPER

Cornucopia clients who don't have catalogues are also referred to the Web site if they want to get an idea of what's available. The response from customers indicates that 1998 has been a watershed year for Net shopping.

"Last year, when we'd tell people they could check the site to get an idea of prices and selection, many didn't have access. This year, most are saying, 'OK, I'll check, then call you back.'"

The company, which normally get five or six orders per week online, got 15 Net orders last weekend alone.

The holiday season accounts for about 80 per cent of Cornucopia's annual revenue, which is in the six-figure range. During the rush, the staff jumps from six to 16. The rest of Cornucopia's product line includes baby gourmet, wine and other types of baskets. Prices start at \$35 and run to over \$200.

The Indigo Books chain joined the electronic-commerce revolution just in time for Christmas, scooping up a majority interest last month in Bookshelf, an online venture built by a Guelph, Ont., independent bookstore and the Sympatico Internet service.

So far, Indigo is happy with the results, said company spokesman Tracy Nesdoly. "We're having an encouraging Christmas," she said. "People are now accustomed to buying online, they like the convenience of shopping from home, especially at Christmas. They can send a book without having to go out, pick it up, wrap it and ship it."

To lure buyers during the prime book-giving season, Indigo isn't charging for shipping and is throwing in free gift-wrapping.

The site is also packed with gift-giving help. It includes hints on buying books as gifts (Hint #2: "Be a spy. Check out their bookshelves and bedside tables.") The site's interactive Gift Centre offers suggestions by age group and by interest (from The Arts Lover to The Wired One). Or users can scan best-seller lists in 33 categories from Arts to Women's Studies.

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