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**Cranky Consumer** / *By Neil Parmar*

## *Buying Eyewear on the Web*

**BRICK-AND-MORTAR** optometrists have a problem: The rise of Web sites that sell eyewear at a steep discount.

A dozen or so Web-only companies including BestBuyEyeglasses.com and GlassesOnWeb.com now offer thousands of designer frames at prices as much as \$75 less than conventional optometrists. While data on this still-small sector are sparse, the sites say sales of eyeglasses online have grown steadily over the past few years, and have recently surged among Americans living abroad and foreigners taking advantage of the weak U.S. dollar.

Meanwhile, sales of eyeglasses at brick-and-mortar shops have slowed, due in part to the growing popularity of contact lenses, 26% of which are purchased online. Some 63.9 million pairs of eyeglasses were sold last year, down more than 2% from 2003, according to Jobson/VCA/VisionWatch.

Getting new eyewear anywhere requires a prescription, and many shoppers remain hesitant about filling theirs online. Some people are turned off by the fact that you can't actually try on the frames. Others like being able to see where the glasses are made when they visit their optometrist.

To address these concerns, most sites now advertise that they're managed by optometrists, who are readily available for phone or email consultations to quell preordering jitters. They often also accept returns if glasses arrive with wrong lenses or don't fit correctly. In addition, most of the sites are experimenting with "change-room" technology that lets you upload a photo of your face then drag different styles of frames over your eyes.

Before we could test any of the sites, we had to provide the sites' opticians with our prescriptions and frame measurements, which we found on the inside arm of our current pair of glasses.

We ran into some technical snafus with the change-room technology. At FramesDirect.com, the email function that should have sent our friends photos of what we looked like wearing various frames didn't

work. The company says it wasn't sure what caused the problem, but has since fixed it.

BestBuyEyeglasses.com advertised a try-on feature to compare frames, but we weren't able to put the frames on the photo. The company says it was testing the technology at the time, and is planning a new version of the feature.

The frames that fit our testers the best came from 39DollarGlasses.com and BestBuyEyeglasses.com. The pair from GlassesOnWeb.com required slight adjustments, which we got done free at a local optical shop, at the suggestion of the optician who answered the phone at GlassesOnWeb.com. The prices of the glasses, which ranged from \$39 for a nondesigner frame from 39DollarGlasses.com to \$297.99 for a Calvin Klein frame and lenses from BestBuyEyeglasses.com, were less than we usually pay for glasses.

The ordering wasn't seamless. The optician on the phone at GlassesOnWeb.com recommended a frame after we emailed him a headshot. But when we said we disliked the style, he suggested we try on frames at a real store before ordering online. We drove to a store, and couldn't find frames that both fit and were sold on his site.

Eyeglass.com, one of the first sites to offer glasses online, didn't offer any try-on features at all. (It does give you option of emailing your photo to a "resident style expert," who then recommends a few frames.)

Most of the sites delivered our glasses within four to seven business days, as advertised. The exception was FramesDirect.com, which says it had to wait for a supplier to send a backordered frame and then had to reorder it because the frame arrived scratched. As of yesterday, we still hadn't received the glasses, though we placed the order more than a month ago. (Our sales rep has called and emailed us with updates.)

—*MaryLu Carnevale, Melanie Trottnan, Jeffrey Ball and Avery Johnson contributed to this article.*