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Students hit the Web for better book deals

BY MARISA SPYKER

My first semester in college I learned something: college really is that expensive.

It didn't hit me until I went to the campus bookstore my freshman year, feeling totally prepared with my required and recommended materials for class in hand. Then I saw my total: \$500.

My wallet hadn't seen a purchase larger than the \$7 12-pack of be. . .I mean, soda I had purchased earlier that week. I could only pray that next semester there would be a surplus of textbooks and prices would be slashed in half.

But according to the National Association of College Stores, textbook prices have only crept higher. In fact, a study conducted by the Government Accountability Office found that textbook prices rose at twice the rate of annual inflation over the last two decades.

Luckily for students in the 21st century, as prices are increasing, so is technology.

Websites such as AbeBooks.com, eBay's Half.com and textbooks.com are among the hundreds of sites where students can do all of their textbook shopping online, sometimes spending less than half of what they would in a campus bookstore.

ONLINE ADVANTAGES

The benefit to shopping online is a lower cost and higher availability of a textbook, said Anirvan Chatterjee, the founder of Bookfinder.com, a site that searches more than 125 million books from more than 80 textbook retailer sites.

Chatterjee started the site in 1997 in response to the high prices he was paying for his textbooks as a student at the University of California-Berkeley.

"Cost is a huge issue for students, and with textbook prices rising, it isn't getting any better," Chatterjee said.

Bookfinder.com allows students to search for textbooks by author, title or International Standard Book Number (ISBN). It searches for the matching results on several textbook-purchasing sites, sorting them from the cheapest to the most expensive. An added perk to the site is that the price shown includes shipping and handling, so students will know exactly what they have to spend to purchase the book.

SAVING MONEY

Jared Motola, a senior at the University of Florida, has been an avid online textbook customer since his second semester in college. He said he has probably saved about half of what he would have spent throughout college in a campus bookstore.

"After my first semester, I realized how much money I paid," Motola said. ``Then I started looking online and found that you can usually find the exact same book for a lot cheaper."

Motola has learned some techniques along the way as well. Many sites, he said, will offer ratings on the book seller, which can give you a hint as to whether buying the book is a safe bet.

"You always have to double check on who you're buying your book from," Motola said. ``If their number of sales is high, then they're probably trustworthy."

Descriptions of the book itself can also be very useful, said Jordana Hass, a senior at Florida Atlantic University. A textbook description can tell you everything from the condition of the book to essential facts about the book, like if it's a different edition.

"Sometimes you will look up a certain book and then in the comments it will say that it's an old edition or that it's not in hardback," Hass said. ``And if the description doesn't say enough detail about a book then it's your responsibility to contact the seller and find out more about it."

Chatterjee suggests always sticking with textbooks that offer the most description.

"Make sure you know what you're buying," he said.

Unfortunately, as with any online purchase, there is always a risk, which is what Wesley Whisner, a senior at the University of Central Florida, found out last year when a textbook he purchased online never showed up.

"I finally got some of the money back about 10 months later, but now I'll probably never buy another book online," Whisner said.

STORE ADVANTAGES

Gary Spearow, the store director at the University of Miami Bookstore, recommends all students avoid the gamble of online shopping and go directly to the university bookstore.

"Sometimes we're finding out about books minutes to hours to days before classes," he said. ``So the university bookstore may be the only bookstore that can provide you with the correct materials for class."

Spearow also recommends students order their textbooks online through the university -- an option many universities offer -- and pick them up at the bookstore at their convenience. This saves money on shipping and allows for students to be sure they are purchasing the correct materials, he said.

If you decide to join the growing number of students who do their textbook shopping online, Bookfinder.com's Chatterjee suggests starting slow, perhaps by purchasing only a couple of books online in your first semester.

"I think it's a good idea to at least buy the most expensive books online because you're ultimately going to save a lot more," Chatterjee said.

My best advice, as a senior in college, is to purchase online with caution. Make sure you purchase the right textbook (your best bet is by punching the book's ISBN into the search engine), because often it is non-refundable.