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No potential gift too obscure for Web's searches

By Maria Puente, USA TODAY

Once upon a time — say, before 1995 — you really had to make an effort to find something that was hard to find. Now the Internet has made the hard-to-find easy-to-find. Type in the object you desire into a search engine and a nanosecond later —*voilà*.



Even the impossible just takes a little longer.

Before, it was serendipity if you managed to track down a treasured toy that stopped being made when you were 3, or a favorite *Nancy Drew* mystery no longer in print, or a prized recording of the Amsterdam Baroque Orchestra's complete Handel's *Messiah*. Maybe you ran out of Donna Karan's discontinued Chaos perfume. Maybe you broke something in the set of china you inherited from Granny. Maybe your favorite sneakers have finally gone to wherever sneakers go when they die.

Before, you had to hunt through antique stores, old-book shops, used-record stores or secondhand clothing stores. That could be fun, but it was time-consuming and usually unsuccessful, and you could check only the stores in your area.

Now the Internet brings most of it to your desk — and not just the valuable collectors' items that always attract buyers. The Internet opens up the world for people in search of long-lost stuff that doesn't have a lot of financial value but can be of immeasurable individual and emotional value.

"If a book exists and someone has it for sale, there's an 80% chance you'll find it



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online," says Marci Crossan of Abebooks.com, the largest online network of used and rare book dealers, with the largest number of book listings on any Web site. (It just listed its 50 millionth book.) "But for the other 20%, there's the excitement of knowing it's out there somewhere — in someone's attic or at some flea market — and at some point it will make itself known online."

In the Internet era, consumers are demanding, sophisticated and willing to pay. "They want more and more rare and hard-to-find of everything, but they have less and less time to look for it," says Jason Goldberger, manager of Amazon.com's new Gourmet Food site. "If you can't get good gumbo in Seattle, you can get it from Louisiana, and if you want lobster from Maine that was in the ocean 24 hours ago, you can get it."

The Web is especially conducive to finding items in certain categories, such as books, CDs and records, toys, shoes, exotic food items and replacement china and flatware. But always check eBay first. There are countless Web sites to help you find specific items, but eBay is the one-shop first stop, if for nothing else to get an idea of the going rate for whatever rare item you're searching for. Also, remember that not everything up for auction on eBay is used; thousands of sellers make their living selling new or never-used goods on the planet-sized site.

Suppose you want a copy of J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*. Go to a new-books site, such as Amazon, or any used-book site, such as Abebooks.com, Alibris.com or AddALL.com, and you'll find hundreds of copies, for as little as \$1 for a paperback. But you want a signed copy, a much rarer item given Salinger's cranky recluse act for the past half-century. You could haunt old bookstores and auction houses looking for one — but you also could just click on the "signed" box on any book search engine. Instantly, there it is: a signed *Catcher* for (gulp) \$35,000, offered by a first-edition book dealer in Hadley, Mass.

It's fair to say the Internet has saved independent bookstores and dealers, or at least extended their lives. Dealers who otherwise would have been squeezed out by the big chains (Barnes & Noble) and big-box retailers (Wal-Mart) now thrive selling their specialty books to avid buyers via a half-dozen book sites.

FOUND: A BELOVED BOOK

Nearly everyone has an influential book from childhood. Mine was *A Child's History of the World* and its companion, *A Child's Geography of the World*. At some point during a half-dozen moves, they disappeared from the family library.

For years after that, I looked in old bookstores but never found them. It didn't help that I couldn't remember the name of the author. Then I discovered Abebooks.com in the mid-1990s. I typed *A Child's History of the World* into its search engine and dozens of copies popped up, ranging from \$10 to \$100. (Nowadays, a 1951 edition will cost as much as \$330.)

I was thrilled and astounded. Besides details about the condition of the books, some dealers also provided all the things I had forgotten — how the books were written by Virgil Hillyer, headmaster of a private school in Baltimore, and how they won praise for a breezy storytelling style for kids ages 10 to 12, which is when I read them.

But I also realized how wonderful (and dangerous to my bank account) this site, and indeed the entire Internet, could be. I started buying scads of books. I was e-mailing dealers all over the country and Canada, sending checks hither and yon.

My greatest find: a four-volume set of art books

"Our tag line is 'Books you thought you'd never find,' but today there's almost no such thing," says Marty Manley, CEO and president of Alibris, which has 5,000 listed dealers in 50 countries. "Rare books are getting rarer in the Internet age."

Book collecting has been a passion long before the Internet, but now nostalgic baby boomers have joined the chase. "We've seen the price of *Hardy Boys* and *Nancy Drew* mysteries go up 300% in the last year," Crossan says. "It's the boomer group who want to own a piece of their youth, when every mystery could be solved."

Abebooks recently launched a discussion board called Book-Sleuth to respond to the huge number of people searching for books or details about books to help find them. Now the board gets 400 posts a day.

Amazon.com also has just launched a feature, Search Inside the Book, which makes the text of 120,000 books — more than 30 million pages — searchable at no charge. So if you can remember part of a poem but not the name of the book, you can search this site and possibly find it. It beats digging through a library for days.

about turn-of-the-century French photographer Eugene Atget, published by the Museum of Modern Art in 1981. By the mid-1990s, the sets were going for as much as \$800. But I found a library on Abebooks.com selling them for about \$40 a book — a fraction of their original price — and I grabbed them.

As for my old children's history book, lots of other boomers were looking for it, and some were willing to pay through the nose. I ended up buying a copy for \$40. I gave it to my nieces and nephews.

Sadly, they did not appreciate it as much as I had. —*Maria Puente*

with a click and a credit card.

There are problems with classical music: Scores of recordings — 60,000 titles in print, not counting the thousands more that are out of print — are spread all over the country and the world. And there's a small, shrinking and aging audience. Classical music is about 3% of the total market for prerecorded music.

"The only way to efficiently reach them is through the Internet," says Eric Feidner, president of ArkivMusic.com, which has collected scores of effusive testimonials from music lovers. "Like finding the Holy Grail" is a common theme of customers who e-mail their thanks to the site.

Indeed, if not for Internet sales of classical CDs, he says, recording labels would be closing their classical catalogs entirely or going out of business, musicians would be losing their jobs, and fewer people would be exposed to this important element of Western culture.

"We're saving it for people who want it today; the next challenge is keeping it alive for people in the next generation," Feidner says.

Let's say you broke a couple of dishes in the dinnerware you inherited. It was made by Stangl, a company in Trenton, N.J., that closed in 1978, and the pattern is called "Mediterranean," an indigo blue with green splatter. Your first stop would be eBay, where on a recent day there were two auctions going for the Mediterranean pattern. But those are not what you're looking for. So your next stop would be one of the replacement Web sites. The best known is Replacements.com, where there are 200 Stangl styles in stock, including dozens of pieces of your pattern (which Replacements incorrectly spells Mediterranean).

"It's like Christmas every day around here when you can help people find items they thought they would never find," says Liam Sullivan of Replacements, which had \$70 million in sales last year.

Replacements started 20 years ago with a box of index cards with lists and drawings of pottery, crystal and flatware patterns that people sent in. Today, customers can search 180,000 pattern images online, just some of the 200,000 patterns and 10 million pieces of pottery the company has in stock in a warehouse in Greensboro, N.C.

"The Internet has totally revolutionized our business," Sullivan says. "For years, our typical customer was an older female. But now we're seeing a lot of brides, men buying for their wives, men buying for themselves and people who wouldn't pick up a copy of a magazine and see our ad."

This is another category driven by baby boomers on the hunt for toys from childhood. Moms want to give their daughters not just any toy kitchen, and not just the Little Tikes kitchen on sale at the local Toys R Us, but the Little Tikes kitchen they had themselves 20 years ago. And they're willing to pay: Something that might have sold for \$20 in its heyday could sell for 10 times that on eBay.

Meanwhile, classical music recordings, which have been disappearing from major retail outlets, are selling briskly via several sites, such as ArkivMusic.com and GEMM.com. Compare them with the old-fashioned record clubs and search services, which were expensive and often took weeks or months to find something, let alone get it to the customer.

If you're looking for, say, a pristine Bizet's *Symphonie in C* by the Montreal Symphony conducted by Charles Dutoit, it's not available anywhere in the USA. No problem: There's one copy left in a record store in Buenos Aires, and it can be yours

"There's definitely a baby-boomer mentality looking for authenticity," says Brian Kirkendall, marketing vice president for Hudson, Ohio-based Little Tikes, which has discontinued thousands of toys since 1970. "They want to remember the time they spent with their mom playing with that kitchen. It's a way to reconnect with something they don't have anymore."

Little Tikes gets hundreds of calls a year from people looking for hard-to-find items. The company can't help on discontinued items, but they will tell a caller where to buy an item if it is still in production. Most retailers don't carry the full line of 250 active items, especially the big backyard items.

Take the alligator teeter-totter: It's still in production, but not all retailers carry it. If you have \$40, you can buy it at fstoys.com, a Long Island-based company that sells hard-to-find Little Tikes. Another site for discontinued items is littletikecentral.com.

"We've noticed that a lot of people buy from us and then turn around and auction it on eBay for more," fstoys.com co-owner Tim Timko says. "Some *used* items (on eBay) sell for more than the new items I sell."

People are remarkably attached to their sneakers. That's why your teenager can't bear to give up her Adidas Beta sneakers, even though they're shredded from years of use. So you're on a mission to find a replacement pair — and not the current Beta II, which your daughter rejects. adidas.com is no help; they stopped making Betas years ago. But you can explore scores of sites that sell hard-to-find shoes, such as Shoegypsy.com, Zappos.com and Shoesonthenet.com.

"It's insane how many people are looking for these old-school sneakers from the '70s and '80s that have been out of production for 10 years," says Ryan Walker, owner of Shoegypsy, based in Oklahoma City.

His site is filled with obscure shoe brands from as far away as Japan and Australia, such as KangaROOs and Tsubo. He says some shoes were brought back into production because demand soared after the shoes were seen on retro sitcoms such as *That '70s Show*. But they're impossible to get at your local shoe emporium.

"It's just too hard to do by phone or driving around or calling," Walker says. "On the Internet, you can just see everything. I can't tell you how important it is for us."

Alas, no Betas. Your mission for your daughter is not accomplished, at least not today. But there's always next week.

Again, baby boomers rule here, especially if you're talking about childhood favorites such as My-T-Fine Pudding, Maypo instant cereal, Jiffy Pop and Nehi grape soda. Hometownfavorites.com is the place to go to find these regional specialties or limited-production products dating from the '50s to the '80s.

"It's the perfect business for the Internet. We've doubled our business in the last three years," says Colleen Chapin, founder of the Virginia Beach-based Hometown Favorites, which has about 2,000 items online and another 1,000 on the "Things to Find" list.

"If it's still made, we'll get it for you."

Over at Internet giant Amazon.com, finding the hard-to-find is becoming one of the site's mottos. CDs, toys, cookware, VHS tapes, vinyl records — there's a long list of links and pages where people can look for elusive stuff. Gourmet Food, the newest addition, has 300 sellers offering more than 30,000 rare and hard-to-find food items.

You want tomatoes grown by a monastery for the Vatican? They're \$8 for a 16-ounce jar. Beluga caviar from Iran? Dean & DeLuca sells 2.2 pounds for \$4,500.

"With Amazon's combined checkout, you can purchase a new cookbook by The Barefoot Contessa, steaks from Omaha Steaks and the cookware to cook the meal," Goldberger says. Not to mention the classical CD playing in the background, a dress

for your party and maybe some perfume.

Ah, perfume. It's one of the most irritating aspects of the fragrance industry: Perfumeries stop making your favorites. Lately, Donna Karan's Chaos is the hot hard-to-find scent; on eBay recently, someone was selling a 3.4-ounce bottle of eau de parfum for a minimum bid of \$165 — and it was *used*.

Alas, the Internet may not be the best way to find a discontinued or hard-to-find perfume. There are scores of perfume Web sites, but they don't always have products in stock. For example, on PerfumeMart.com, all the listings for Chaos are either sold out or on a wait list.

It may be that the low-tech solution is the best way. The Perfume Detective, Anitra Earle of Yonkers, N.Y., has been in the business of finding the hard-to-find for 18 years, and has compiled a database of more than 2,000 fragrances and 15,000 requests.



"At any one time, I've got a thousand requests for Woodhue by Faberge, which was most popular in the '50s, was made in France and sold in incredibly marvelous bottles," she says. "The fragrance lasts forever. I've smelled only two that had gone bad in all these years."

But you're not going to find The Perfume Detective on the Internet. She's not there, and isn't going to be anytime soon. And don't try to call her; she only does business through snail mail. In fact, Earle doesn't quite approve of the Internet. "People are being scalped terribly on the Internet," she frets. "They're paying hundreds of dollars for a small bottle of cologne, and you don't even know it's real."

You want to talk to Earle? Shut down your computer and send a letter to 615 Warburton Ave., Suite 7J, Yonkers, NY 10701.

Don't forget the stamp.

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