

EU vows to free online shopping

BRUSSELS, BELGIUM: It's the bane of online shoppers' lives, searches dangling coveted brand-name gadgets, gear or gifts cheaper on websites from another country, but not being able to buy them.

Help may, however, be at hand, if European Commission proposals seeking to strip away national barriers to cross-border online shopping are taken seriously and not watered down by governments wanting to protect tax takes.

Brussels on Thursday said online shopping was its battering-ram for a "re-launch" of the European Union's (EU's) single market, urging national leaders fretting over debts, treaties and global warming to make it a "top priority."

Researchers placing 11,000 test orders showed that three out of every five attempts at buying products from websites in other EU countries failed.

"The trader did not ship the product to their country or did not offer adequate means for cross border payment," commission results said.

Among the biggest frustrations for eager buyers of everything from music to clothes is the time wasted on seemingly welcoming sites finding that out.

"At some point during the ordering process, websites will terminate the transaction," the report underlined.

Belgium, Bulgaria, Latvia and Romania were the hardest countries from which to access cross-border online products, countries where established cross-border retailers struggle to offer their wares.

The home of the EU was also named as a country where more than half of the products sought, everything from books to washing machines, were not available online from Belgian retailers.

Other online retail blackspots included Cyprus, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta and Portugal.

Potential savings for consumers across the board, after delivery costs, were pegged at 10% based on real offers elsewhere.

"We now have concrete facts and figures showing the extent to which the European single market for consumers is just not happening in online retail," said consumer affairs commissioner Meglena Kuneva.

Insisting better deals should be "just a click of a mouse away," she warned that "Europe's consumers are being denied better choice and value for money. They deserve better."

Viviane Reding, the EU's Commissioner for Information Society and Media, added: "Achieving a digital single market is a top priority for Europe...top of the list of all policy initiatives to re-launch the single market project."

Brussels estimates the European e-commerce market was worth €106-billion in 2006, figures which are way out of date and which do not take into account fears over an explosion in counterfeit goods.

Market watchers say it will be a third as big again this year and triple in size within five years.

Britain, Germany and France currently account for some 70% of Europe's online sales.

However, only one in five traders sell across borders.

Proposed changes include an updated consumer rights charter and more Internet sweeps, "to stamp out illegal practices and boost consumer confidence in cross-border shopping."

Countries should also agree simplified cross-border rules for retailers on value-added tax, recycling fees for electronic goods and copyright levies.

An existing requirement for dealers to have "a brick and mortar shop" could also be removed.

However, the commission warns that "progress on all is required before the potential of cross-border e-commerce can be unlocked."

Source: AFP

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