



Tips: Buying Online

By Russell Shaw

From bunker rakes to mulching equipment, it's becoming easier to buy green industry-related supplies online.

The benefits of ordering supplies and services over the Internet are numerous. You can visit any number of sites and get instant pricing information, as well as technical specifications. Since they can be updated in a few minutes, Web sites will likely have more current prices than that product brochure a turf equipment salesperson dropped off in April.

The best e-commerce sites have other useful features, such as frequently asked questions lists about the products they offer; geographically searchable lists of service technicians and contractors authorized to handle products; pages with e-mail, phone and fax numbers of the company representatives in your area; and e-mail links to vendors themselves.

Green industry e-commerce is, of course, only a small example of the worldwide procurement revolution that the Internet is sparking. The worldwide B2B market is forecast to grow from \$145 billion in 1999 to \$7.29 trillion in 2004, according to Stamford, Conn.-based Internet commerce analysis firm Gartner Group. By 2004, B2B e-commerce will represent 7 percent of the forecasted \$105 trillion total global sales transactions.

"The B2B explosion is imminent, fueled by a combustible mixture of investment financing, IT spending and opportunistic euphoria that is being funneled into startups and brick and mor-

tars' e-commerce initiatives," said Leah Knight, principal analyst for Gartner Group's e-Business Intelligence Services.

Most e-commerce experts break e-commerce into four distinct sectors:

- Companies that sell goods or services directly on their own sites.

- Independent "trading exchanges" operated by third parties specific to an industry or group of industries, where merchandise or services are offered for sale from various and sometimes competing vendors. Examples include Golf-sat (www.golfsat.com) and Greentrac.com (www.greentrac.com).

- Auction sites that take competitive bids via e-mail and then verify the transaction after the expiration of the auction period. One example is Auction Equipment.com, which has a section for landscaping supplies.

- Industrywide e-marketplaces, administered by a consortium of companies in a given industry or by a trade association. Although turf management e-commerce has yet to appear in this arena in any meaningful fashion, this is the hottest sector, one which Gartner predicts will be responsible for 37 percent of all B2B online transactional revenue within three years.

How to find supplies

Your most effective strategy to finding supplies online is to use an Internet index or search engine. Indexes, such as Yahoo! (www.yahoo.com), list groupings of Web sites by category. Search engines such as Google (www.google.com) go through much of the Web every few weeks and construct giant indexes of

Web pages. By entering two search terms, say "sod" and "buy online," you'll see a specially created search results page with listings of, and links to, sod vendors that let you buy over their sites.

Is ordering safe?

Despite the sensational headlines that erupt when sites are "hacked," most online ordering is safe. Most sites that take credit card numbers are encrypted, which means the information you type into an order form is given a unique code by your browser that only the merchant's or site's e-commerce processing software can decipher.

Just as your bull detector goes off when you meet a bunk-artist salesperson in the real world, there are standards you can use to verify if a Web site you're thinking about buying from is legit. After all, in the real world, a face-to-face meeting, a handshake, a hand-signed contract all help foster trust. Yet in e-commerce, you don't get to see your seller's face — just its Web site.

Just in case you have even a little doubt, the Better Business Bureau suggests you avoid doing business with sites that can't be checked. "If a site will not divulge a street address and telephone number, something fishy is probably going on," the BBB says.

Fortunately, these incidents are rare. If they weren't, businesses wouldn't be flocking to Web-based purchasing. ■

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