

Shoppers' paradise?



Here's everything you need to know about Taobao (but were too afraid to ask!), writes *Kate Farr*.



There's a retail revolution taking place on a computer screen somewhere near you – a shoppers' paradise where every conceivable item can be bought at knock-down prices and shipped straight to your door, often within a day or two. Often described as “the Amazon of China”, internet shopping giant Taobao has changed the way that the PRC shops for ever. But, for many of Hong Kong's non-Chinese speakers, this monolithic website can seem totally impenetrable from the outside. With the help of some seasoned Taobao-ers, we're picking apart China's most talked-about website and watching the bargains roll in.

The basics

First up: the facts. According to web traffic experts Alexa, Taobao Marketplace is now one of the top ten most visited websites in the world, a fact made even more remarkable when you consider that the majority of the products are targeted at just three countries – China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. As of March 2013,

Taobao offered around 760 million individual product listings across just about every imaginable category, including clothing, electronics, home furnishings, cosmetics, baby goods... the list goes on, almost indefinitely.

So, how does it work? Operating somewhere between Amazon and eBay, Taobao sellers list products online, for sale either at a fixed price or by auction. Buyers can view a seller's previous feedback via a points rating that is similar to eBay, and communicate directly with them via the site's own instant messaging service. Once the details of a purchase are agreed upon, payment is made online using Alipay, Taobao's own third-party payment service that operates in a similar way to PayPal, giving an added layer of security to the transaction. The buyer then awaits delivery, and, as the majority of sellers are based in mainland China, shipping may be via China Post or courier, with fees calculated accordingly. Sister website Tmall operates under the Taobao umbrella, offering big brand names such as Nike, Samsung, Nine West and Procter

& Gamble a storefront to sell their goods alongside the individual sellers, making for a one-stop online shopping experience for the buyer.

However, although there are now translated listings available for certain South East Asian countries, English is conspicuous by its absence, and so English speakers wanting a piece of the action need to be creative when it comes to navigating this internet behemoth.

Ask the experts

One way to do this is to employ the services of a Taobao agent – usually, native Chinese speakers who navigate the complexities of the vast website in return for a small fee. Hong Kong-based Jenny Jiang runs a Taobao sourcing service via Facebook (www.facebook.com/groups/taobaobuyer), and helps Hong Kong shoppers with an ever-increasing volume of purchases. “Kids' stuff, bedding and outdoor furniture are all great Taobao buys, with far better prices and quality than in Hong Kong,” she explains. “You can often get at least a 30 per cent discount on items that originate

in China, increasing to 50 per cent and even as much as 90 per cent for some items.”

The benefit of using a Taobao agent for your purchases, says Jenny, is clear. “As there is no charge for sourcing items or answering any questions you may have about a product, you are under no obligation to complete the purchase; so, if you are not happy with either the item or the price, you walk away and pay nothing.”

Busy mum Crystal Chu founded Snappy Shopper (www.snappyshopperasia.com) when she found herself spending more and more time on Taobao sourcing practical items for her family after their move from Hong Kong to Shanghai. “It saves time on sourcing everyday things. Particularly when my son was little, it was almost

impossible for me to shop for all our household needs in one go.” But, with Taobao, she says, “You can unearth virtually anything on there! I once bought a replacement vacuum cleaner tube for just five yuan (HK\$6) in a fraction of the time it would have taken me to go to a hardware store and try to explain which one I needed.” As her Taobao addiction grew, she began to assist non-Chinese speaking friends with their purchases, and launched her business as a “retail facilitator” in 2013. “It’s pretty straightforward to work with a Taobao agent: simply contact them with a description or picture of the item that you have in mind, then they’ll let you know the price and arrange delivery to your designated address. Their service usually costs about ten per cent of

the item you’re purchasing, plus the delivery fee.”

Solo shoppers

But what about going it alone? Shanghai-based American mum Solveig Kettinger has used Taobao agents in the past, but now relies on Google Translate to shop on the site. “Translations range from the useful to the rather goofy, but it gets the job done.” However, she also adds, “It’s very possible that my Google Chrome auto-translation misses some of the finer points that address when an item will be available... I’ve ordered things, thinking they’d arrive imminently, only to have the vendor inform me that they’re delayed because they’re coming directly from the US, for instance.” Solveig lists the advantages of shopping on Taobao as





convenience, range of products and, in particular, the ready availability of imported items. “While I have a pretty good system in place for getting hard-to-find items shipped [from the US], I can often find the same items on Taobao and have them arrive at my home within days, rather than waiting the weeks that it would take for them to arrive from the United States.”

Bargain-hunter Simon Gluyas says that excellent value for money is his main reason for choosing Taobao. He has purchased furniture, electronics, clothes, kids’ toys, food, party items and more. When it comes to finding a convenient solution to delivering all those bargains, Simon explains, “Shipping can be done a number of different ways: for example, you can buy multiple items from different stores and have them sent to a freight forwarder, who will combine them

into one package and then send it to Hong Kong.”

Buyer beware

As for Taobao’s disadvantages, Simon cautions, “You do have to be careful, as there are quite a lot of counterfeit products for sale; however, if you choose sellers with good feedback, then you can generally avoid this risk.” He adds, “It is important to buy from a store where the pictures are of the actual product and not just taken from a brochure or manufacturer’s website. Reputable sellers will provide plenty of details about the product, along with additional pictures on request, and should offer a seven-day return policy as standard.”

Jenny also has the usual caveats for potential Taobao-ers. “As with any other online store, there’s always the risk of ending up with something that isn’t exactly what you have in your mind.

For example, it’s important to remember that any electronics purchased will most likely need a three-pin plug adapter to use in Hong Kong. Also, the majority of instructions and user manuals are in Chinese, so ensure that you can source a translation if you think you’ll need to refer to these regularly.”

Crystal also acknowledges that Taobao shopping is not without its frustrations. “Online translation tools don’t always give a clear description, and can be very misleading. If you are planning on shopping unaided, always check previous buyer feedback for a good idea of product quality and how well the seller communicates.”

The final verdict on Taobao comes from Simon: “I just love knowing that I am getting the exact same product as in the shops for a fifth of the price!” With 1.4 million registered users in Hong Kong alone, our city’s shoppers clearly agree. 🇮🇸