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Learning Objectives

Upon completion of this chapter, you will be able to:

1. Describe the major electronic commerce (EC) activities and processes and the mechanisms that support them.
2. Define e-marketplaces and list their components.
3. List the major types of e-marketplaces and describe their features.
4. Describe electronic catalogs, search engines, and shopping carts.
5. Describe the major types of auctions and list their characteristics.
6. Discuss the benefits and limitations of e-auctions.
7. Describe bartering and negotiating online.
8. Describe virtual communities.
9. Describe social networks as EC mechanisms.
10. Describe the emerging technologies of augmented reality and crowdsourcing.
11. Describe Web 3.0 and define Web 4.0 and Web 5.0.

OPENING CASE PINTEREST A NEW KID ON THE E-COMMERCE BLOCK

An e-commerce site that talked about a great deal since 2011 is Pinterest.

The Opportunity

Pinterest is a social bookmarking website where users “pin” images on a virtual “pinboard.” The social bookmarking of images has been practiced on the Internet all over the world, for several years. The company’s founders saw the business potential and the success of similar companies in Brazil and China. Furthermore, they succeeded in attracting initial venture capital to expand the business. For a guide, see Ahmad (2016) or Kissmetrics (2015), and for statistics, see Smith (2016).

The Solution

Pinterest is a company that provides virtual pinboards that allow users to organize and share images found on the Web (referred to as “pins”). The pinned images (“boards”) are organized by any category the user wants and placed on a virtual pinboard, just like on a real bulletin board. For example, one can collect pictures of sailboats and pin them on one pinboard, with appropriate text explanation. You can collect decorations for your home on another pinboard, while you collect Chinese recipes on a third pinboard. Millions of people create pinboards, and anyone can search and view them. You can also add friends to your account and “follow” them. According to their website, “Pinterest is a tool for collecting and organizing the things that inspire you” (see about.pinterest.com). For more about what Pinterest is and how it works, see makeuseof.com/tag/your-guide-to-pinterest.

Having many visitors and a rapid growth rate are necessary but not sufficient for EC success. Viable business and revenue models are also needed.

The Business and Revenue Models

Pinterest is privately held, and it does not have to report its business or revenue models to the public. But analysts are able to evaluate the company’s actions, and it appears that the company’s current priority is user growth and experimentation with advertising methods (Tarver 2015). Many people speculate about (or suggest) revenue opportunities for the company, some of which are provided next.

Marketing Models

With several marketing models available, it appears that Pinterest’s current focus is on both “cost-per-engagement” (CPE) and “cost-per-action” (CPA) models (D’Onfro 2015). Under these systems, advertisers only pay the site when users are actively engaging in promoted content. This is designed to shift the risk to Pinterest, ensuring that they efficiently target promoted content to users.

Selling Data for Market Research and Analysis

Several experts suggested selling customer data available on Pinterest to retailers who can use analytics, including data mining, to conduct market research using this data. Customer data may reveal important statistical associations and relationships between consumer behavior, content (e.g., product recommendations, personalization, ads), and services and products provided.

Other Suggestions for Doing Business on Pinterest

- Hootsuite provides a comprehensive listing of methods to use Pinterest for business marketing at blog.hootsuite.com/how-to-use-pinterest-for-business.
- Hub Spot (hubspot.com) offers a free e-book titled “How to Use Pinterest for Business” (offers.hubspot.com/how-to-use-pinterest-for-business). It includes information such as how to create a Pinterest business account and how Pinterest works.
- Wikipedia lists several potential revenue sources at en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pinterest.
- For more suggestions, see business.pinterest.com/en/pinterest-guides.

Using Pinterest for Advertising and Marketing

Most of the suggestions cited above, as well as suggestions by others, concentrate on advertising and marketing opportunities. For comprehensive coverage, see McDonald (2015) and Cario (2013).

Results and Managerial Issues

Pinterest is one of the fastest growing social network ever. As of March 2016, the total number of monthly Pinterest users worldwide was 110 million linkedin.com/pulse/pinterest-2016-statistics-110million-monthly-users-ivonne-teoh).

Similar reports on this amazing growth rate and popularity are provided by comScore and other reporting companies. Some leaked financial reports in 2015 indicated that the company would have \$169 million in total revenue in 2015 and a projected \$2.8 billion in annual revenue by 2018 (Roof 2015).

In October 2014, the valuation of Pinterest was \$11 billion. If the company can continue to add users and generate significant revenue, it probably will go to the IPO route, in which case the valuation may be much higher (Mangalindan 2016). Let us look now at some managerial issues facing the company. Representative managerial issues are:

Legal Concerns

Many people collect images from the Internet to build their pinboards (and possibly a brand) without asking permission from the content creators, giving them an attribute, or compensating them. Some of the collected material is formally copyrighted; other material may be considered copyrighted. A similar problem exists with material used on Facebook or by bloggers. According to Pinterest's "Terms of Use," members are "solely responsible for what they pin and repin." Furthermore, users must have explicit permission from the owners of contents to post them. Note that Pinterest places all blame and potential legal fees on its users (who may have to pay the legal fees incurred by Pinterest also). Pinterest has taken several steps to alleviate the legal concerns of users. The company is continuously adding measures to minimize the legal problems. For example, in May 2012, the company added a feature that facilitates the attribution of credit to content creators. Finally, legal concerns may include dealing with the spammers who are busy on the site. But even with these features, users are still counseled to ensure that their pins meet copyright guidelines (see turbofuture.com/internet/how-to-use-pinterest-copyright-legally).

The Competition

The popularity of Pinterest has resulted in many attempts to clone the company. Since the core concept is basically image sharing, it may not be patentable; therefore, competitors try to jump into niche markets. For example, Juxtapost (juxtapost.com) is similar in function to Pinterest, but focuses more on photography. Foodgawker (foodgawker.com) focuses on cooking and dining, while Liquorious (liquorious.com) focuses on drinks. We Heart It (weheartit.com) is a Brazilian company (operating in the United States) that is very similar to Pinterest. An emerging competitor is Fancy (fancy.com), which partnered with Google + in 2013. Companies such as Facebook and Google may initiate a competitive service. Some believe that Pinterest may take business away from both Facebook and Twitter due to its better match with the business world.

Conclusion

Pinterest is more business oriented than Facebook or Twitter and visitors tend to buy more from there, although the latter companies drive more visitors to their sites. It seems that Pinterest has some potential benefits for small businesses (e.g., designers). Many companies already use Pinterest to derive benefits. However, these applications do not currently provide any revenue to Pinterest. The success of Pinterest will be determined by its revenue model and the company's profitability.

Sources: Based on Mangalindan (2016), McDonald (2015), Roof (2015), and Tarver (2015).

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE CASE

Pinterest is a social network that connects people who find interesting images on the Web and organized them on virtual boards. At the same time, Pinterest is a platform on which several activities of EC can be supported. For example, companies can build pinboards that promote their brands. Pinterest can be used as a platform for facilitating innovations via idea generation and sharing.

2.1 ELECTRONIC COMMERCE MECHANISMS: AN OVERVIEW

The many EC models and types of transactions presented in Chap. 1 are enabled by several mechanisms. To begin with, most applications are conducted on the Internet. In addition, the generic enablers of any information system including databases, networks, security, software and server software, operating systems, hardware (Web servers), and hosting services need to be established. Added to the above are the specific EC mechanisms presented in this chapter, such as electronic markets, shopping carts, e-catalogs, and support services such as payment and order fulfillment. In addition to all of the above, there are different methods for executing EC, such as buying at a fixed price or at an auction, and each method has a different support mechanism. Finally, there are the Web 2.0-based collaboration and communication mechanisms (e.g., Twitter) and special platforms such as the one used by Pinterest. In this chapter, we describe the major EC and social commerce mechanisms so that you will be able to understand their uses in the forthcoming chapters.

EC Activities and Support Mechanisms

EC activities are divided here into six categories, which are listed on the left side of Fig. 2.1. Each activity is supported by one or more EC mechanisms, which are shown on the right side of Fig. 2.1, along with the section number in this chapter where they are presented. Additional mechanisms exist for special activities, such as payment and order fulfillment and security.

In the next section, we describe online markets. Before we do this, however, we will describe what happens during a typical purchasing process.

The Online Purchasing Process

Customers buy goods online in different ways. The most common is purchasing from e-catalogs at fixed prices. Sometimes prices may be negotiated or discounted. Another way to determine price is *dynamic pricing*, which refers to non-fixed prices such as those in auctions or stock (commodity) exchanges.

The process starts with a buyer logging on to a seller's website, registering (if needed), and entering an online catalog or the buyer's "My Account." E-catalogs can be very large, so using a search engine may be useful. Buyers usually like to compare prices; therefore, an online price comparison service can be useful (now available on smartphones). Some sellers (e.g., American Airlines, Amazon.com) provide price comparisons showing competitors. If not satisfied, the buyer may abandon the seller's site. If satisfied, the buyer will place the chosen item in a virtual *shopping cart* (or bag). The buyer may return to the seller's catalog to choose more items. Each selected item is placed in the shopping cart. When the item selection is completed, the buyer goes to a checkout page, where a shipment option is selected from a menu (e.g., standard, next day). Finally, a payment option is selected. For example, **newegg.com** allows you to pay by credit card, PayPal, check after billing, in installments, and so on. After checking all the details for accuracy, the buyer *submits* the order.

The major mechanisms that support this process are described in Sections "Customer Shopping Mechanisms: Webstores, Malls, and Portals" and "Merchant Solutions: Electronic Catalogs, Search Engines, and Shopping Carts" of this chapter. The place where buying and selling occurs is called an *e-marketplace*, which we introduce next.

SECTION 2.1 REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. List the major EC activities.
2. List the major EC mechanisms.
3. Describe the online purchasing process.

2.2 E-MARKETPLACES

Markets (electronic or otherwise) have four major functions: (1) enabling transactions to occur by providing a meeting place for buyers and sellers; (2) enabling the flow of relevant information; (3) providing services associated with market transactions, such as payments and escrow; and (4) providing auxiliary services such as legal, auditing, and security.

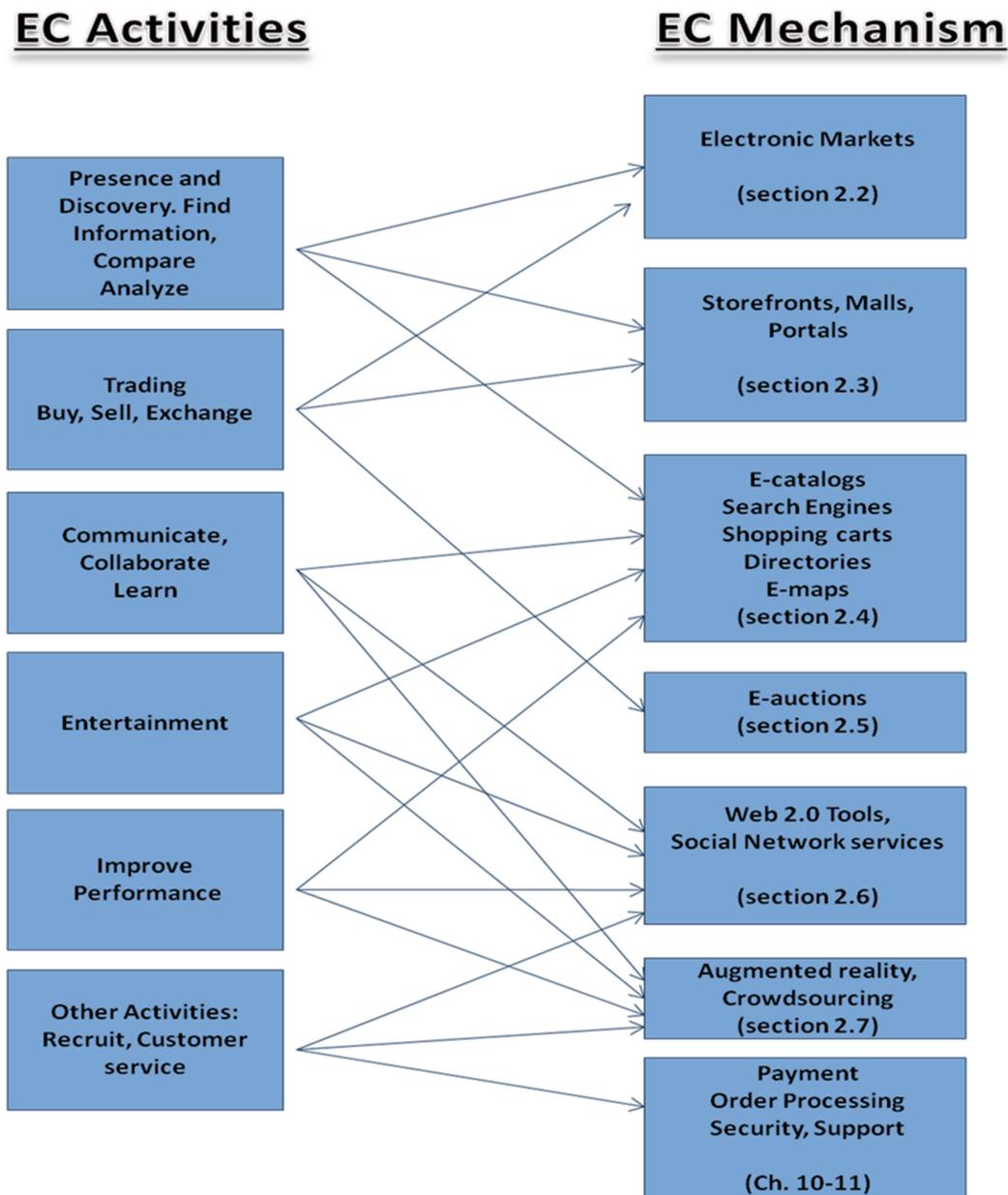


Fig. 2.1 The EC activities–mechanism connection

Electronic Markets

The *electronic market* is the major venue for conducting EC transactions. An **e-marketplace** (also called *e-market*, *virtual market*, or *marketspace*) is an electronic space where sellers and buyers meet and conduct different types of transactions. Customers receive goods and services for money (or for other goods and services, if bartering is used). The functions of an e-market are the same as those of a physical marketplace; however, computerized systems tend to make electronic markets much more efficient by providing more updated information and various support services, such as rapid and smooth executions of transactions.

The emergence of *electronic marketplaces*, especially Web-based ones, has changed several of the processes used in trading and supply chains. In many cases, these changes, driven by technology, have frequently resulted in:

- Lower search time for information and cost to buyers
- Reduced information misunderstanding between sellers and buyers
- Possible reduction in the time gap between purchase and possession of physical products purchased online (especially if the product can be digitized)
- The ability of market participants to be in different locations while trading online
- The ability to conduct transactions at any time (24/7) from any place

The Components and Participants in E-Marketplaces

The major components and players in a *marketspace* are customers, sellers, products and services (physical or digital), infrastructure, a front-end and a back-end mechanism, intermediaries and other business partners, and support services such as security and payments. A brief description of each follows:

- **Customers.** Several billions of Internet users worldwide are potential buyers of goods and services offered on the Internet. These consumers are looking for bargains, customized items, collectors' items, entertainment, socialization, and more. The social customers have more power than regular customers. They can search for detailed information, compare prices, bid, and sometimes negotiate. Buying organizations are also customers, accounting for more than 85% of EC volume and value activities.
- **Sellers.** Millions of webstores are advertising and offering a huge variety of items. These stores are owned by companies, government agencies, or individuals. Every day it is possible to find new offerings of products and services. Sellers can sell directly from their websites or from public e-marketplaces.
- **Products and services.** One of the major differences between the *marketplace* and the *marketspace* is the possible digitization of products and services in a marketspace. Although both types of markets can sell physical products, they can also sell **digital products**, which are goods that can be transformed into a digital format. However, in marketspaces, buyers can buy digitized products online, anytime and from any place in seconds, and receive the purchased goods instantly. In addition to the digitization of software, music, and airline tickets, it is possible to digitize dozens of other products and services.
- **Infrastructure.** The marketspace infrastructure includes electronic networks, databases, hardware, software, and more.
- **Front end.** Customers interact with a marketspace via a **front end**. The major components of the front end can include the seller's portal, electronic catalogs, a shopping cart, a search engine, an auction engine, a payment gateway, and all other activities related to placing orders.
- **Back end.** All the activities that are related to order aggregation and fulfillment, inventory management, purchasing from suppliers, accounting and finance, insurance, payment processing, packaging, and delivery are done in what is termed the **back end** of the business.
- **Intermediaries.** In marketing, an **intermediary** is typically a third party that operates between sellers and buyers. The role of electronic intermediaries is frequently different from that of regular intermediaries (such as wholesalers or retailers), as will be seen throughout the text. For example, online intermediaries create and manage the online markets. They help match buyers and sellers, provide escrow services, and help customers and/or sellers complete transactions. Physical intermediaries may be eliminated and their jobs be computerized (fully or partially) as described next.

Disintermediation and Reintermediation

Intermediaries usually provide three types of services: (1) they provide relevant information about demand: supply, prices, and trading requirements; (2) they help match sellers and buyers; and/or (3) they offer value-added services such as transfer of products, escrow, payment arrangements, consulting, or assistance in finding a business partner. In general, the first and second types of services can be fully automated, and thus it is likely to be assumed by e-marketplaces, infomediaries, and portals that provide free or low-fee services. The third type requires expertise, such as knowledge of the industry, the market, the products, and the technological trends and therefore can only be partially automated.

Intermediaries that provide only (or mainly) the first two types of services may be eliminated; this phenomenon is called **disintermediation**. An example is the airline industry and its push for selling electronic tickets directly by the airlines. Most airlines require customers to pay \$25 or more per ticket processed by an employee via telephone. This results in the *disintermediation* of many travel agents from the purchasing process. In another example, discount stockbrokers that only execute trades manually are disappearing. However, brokers who manage electronic intermediation are not only surviving but may also be prospering (e.g., **travelocity.com** and **expedia.com** in the travel industry and **tdameritrade.com** in stock trading). This phenomenon, in which disintermediated entities or newcomers take on new intermediary roles, is called *reintermediation*.

Disintermediation is more likely to occur in supply chains involving several intermediaries, as illustrated by Case 2.1.

CASE 2.1: EC APPLICATION BLUE NILE INC.: CHANGE AND ADAPTATION IN THE ONLINE JEWELRY INDUSTRY

Blue Nile Inc. (**bluenile.com**), a pure-play online e-tailer that specializes in diamonds and jewelry, capitalized on online diamond sales as a dot-com start-up in 1999. The company is a textbook case of how EC fundamentally changes the way that an industry conducts its business. For information about the company, see quotes.wsj.com/NILE/company-people.

Changing the Industry

Using the B2C EC model—eliminating the need for physical stores—Blue Nile was able to offer discounts of 35%, yet it became profitable in a short time. The critical success factors for the company included its ability to offer large discounts, a huge selection of diamonds online and provides more information about diamonds than its brick-and-mortar competitors. The combination of a 30-day 100% money-back guarantee and a comprehensive set of online tools like live chat, payment options, build-your-own engagement ring, gift ideas, and mobile applications (**m.bluenile.com**) helped the company win over customers.

In order to sell \$473 million in jewelry in 1 year, a traditional retail chain needs over 300 stores and over 3000 employees. Blue Nile does it with one 10,000-square-foot warehouse and 301 employees. The company also bypasses the industry's complex supply chain, in which a diamond may pass through five or more middlemen before reaching a retailer. Because they are a large buyer, they can deal directly with original suppliers.

The company became the eighth-largest specialty jewelry company in the United States and went public in 2004 (one of the most successful IPOs of that year). Blue Nile's sales reached \$129 million in 2003 and expanded to \$473 million in 2015 (a 367% increase over). Historically the company responded well to market changes; while sales fell during the economic downturn in 2008, in 2009 and 2010 the company rallied again with a 2.3% growth.

Adapting to the Market

Changes in the market and competition have kept Blue Nile on its toes. Noticing the company's success, other retailers have entered the space, using many of the same tools Blue Nile pioneered. This includes both general online retailers such as **overstock.com** and **amazon.com**, as well as direct online jewelry retailers such as **jamesallen.com** and **abazias.com**. Additionally, traditional brick-and-mortar retailers such as **jared.com** and **tiffany.com** are significantly expanding their online presence.

Additionally, changes in the market overall may have an effect on Blue Nile's prospects. One of the Company's primary markets is engagement rings. Demographic trends show that the rates of marriage in the United States are decreasing (Yarrow 2015), and this may be one of the reasons behind lower sales from the company. In the first quarter of 2016, engagement ring sales were down 7%, representing the loss of \$58 million (Tu 2016).

To combat these trends, Blue Nile is rethinking its pure-play model and is introducing the idea of "Retail-Reimagined" webrooms, hybrid physical/online presences in large retail markets (Blue Nile 2016). These webrooms seek to provide the same variety and customization options available online, while using a physical location to drive visits and customer confidence.

Sources: Based on Bloomberg (2004), Tu (2016), en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blue_Nile_Company, and bluenile.com/about-blue-nile (both accessed December 2016).

Questions

1. Using the classification of EC (Section "The Electronic Commerce Field: Growth, Content, Classification, and a Brief History", Chap. 1), how would you classify the Blue Nile's business historically? Today?
2. In what ways is the company changing its industry?
3. What are the critical success factors of the company?
4. Competition between Blue Nile and Amazon.com will continue to increase. In your opinion, which one will win? (Visit their websites and see how they sell jewelry.)
5. Compare the following three sites: **diamond.com**, **abazias.com**, and **bluenile.com**.
6. Follow the performance of Blue Nile's stock since 2003 (symbol: NILE, go to **money.cnn.com**). Compare it to the performance of the total market and the averages of the industry. What is your conclusion?
7. Do you feel that the "Retail Reimagined" locations will be successful? Why?

Types of E-Marketplaces

The term *marketplace* differs once it referred to on the Web. It is sometimes referred to as e-marketplace or marketspace. We distinguish two types of e-marketplaces: private and public.

Private E-Marketplaces

Private e-marketplaces are those owned and operated by a single company. **Starbucks.com**, **dell.com**, **target.com**, and **united.com** sell from their websites. Private markets are either sell-side or buy-side. In a **sell-side e-marketplace**, a company (e.g., **net-a-porter.com** or **cisco.com**) will sell either standard or customized products to individuals (B2C) or to businesses (B2B); this type of selling is considered to be *one-to-many*. In a **buy-side e-marketplace**, a company purchases from many potential suppliers; this type of purchasing is considered to be *many-to-one*, and it is a B2B activity. For example, some hotels buy their supplies from approved vendors that come to its e-market. Walmart (**walmart.com**) buys goods from thousands of suppliers. Private marketplaces can be open only to selected members and are not publicly regulated.

Public E-Marketplaces

Public e-marketplaces are often owned by a third party (not a seller or a buyer) or by a small group of buying or selling companies, and they serve many sellers and many buyers. They are open to the public and sometimes are regulated by the government.

SECTION 2.2 REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Define e-marketplace and describe its attributes.
2. What is the difference between a physical marketplace and an e-marketplace (marketspace)?
3. List the components of a marketspace.
4. Define a digital product and provide five examples.
5. Describe private versus public e-markets.

2.3 CUSTOMER SHOPPING MECHANISMS: WEBSTORES, MALLS, AND PORTALS

Several kinds of interactions exist among sellers, buyers, and e-marketplaces. The major B2C mechanisms are *webstores* (*storefronts*) and *Internet malls*. Let us elaborate on these, as well as on the gateways to e-marketplaces—portals.

Webstores

A **webstore** (or **storefront**) refers to a single company's (or individual seller's) website where products and services are sold.

Webstores may target an industry, a location, or a niche market (e.g., **cattoys.com**). The webstore may belong to a manufacturer (e.g., **geappliances.com** and **dell.com**), to a retailer (e.g., **amazon.com**), to individuals selling from home, or to other types of business. Note that some companies refer to their webstores as *portals*.

A webstore includes tools known as *merchant software* that are necessary for conducting online sales. The most common tools are an *electronic catalog*; a *search engine* that helps the consumer find products in the catalog; an *electronic shopping cart* for holding items until checkout; *e-auction facilities* where auctions take place; a *payment gateway* where payment arrangements can be made; a *shipment center* where shipping arrangements are made; and *customer services*, which include product and warranty information and CRM.

Microsites

A *microsite* is a Web page(s) that acts as a supplement to a primary website, but is external to it. It expands on the content by adding editorial, commercial videos, or educational and training material.

Electronic Malls

In addition to shopping at individual webstores, consumers can shop in electronic malls (e-malls). Similar to malls in the physical world, an **e-mall (online mall)** is an online shopping location where many stores present their catalogs. The mall charges commission from the sellers based on their sale volume. For example, the E-mall of Maine (**emallofamerica.com/emallofmaine.htm**) is an e-mall that aggregates products, services, and providers in the state of Maine. It contains a directory of vacation services and product categories and the vendors in each category. When a consumer indicates the category he or she is interested in, the consumer is transferred to the appropriate independent *webstore*. This kind of mall does not provide any shared services; it is merely a directory. Other malls, such as **choicemall.com** or **etsy.com**, do provide some shared services. Both **yahoo.com** and **ebay.com** operate electronic malls.

Web (Information) Portals

A *portal* is an information gateway that is used in e-marketplaces, webstores, and other types of EC (e.g., in e-collaboration, intrabusiness, and e-learning). A **Web (information) portal** is a single point of access, through a Web browser, to critical business information located inside and outside of organizations. This information is aggregated and is accessed and presented in a consistent way. Many Web portals personalize for users. Note that wireless devices are becoming portals for both enterprise and Internet access. A schematic view of a portal is shown in Fig. 2.2. Information sources (external and internal) are shown on the left side, and integrated and process data are shown as output on the monitor's screen. Web portals offer some useful services such as e-mail, news, stock prices, entertainment, shopping capabilities, and so forth.

Types of Portals

Portals can assume many shapes. One way to distinguish among them is to look at their content, which can vary from narrow to broad, and their community or audience, which also can differ. The major types of portals are as follows:

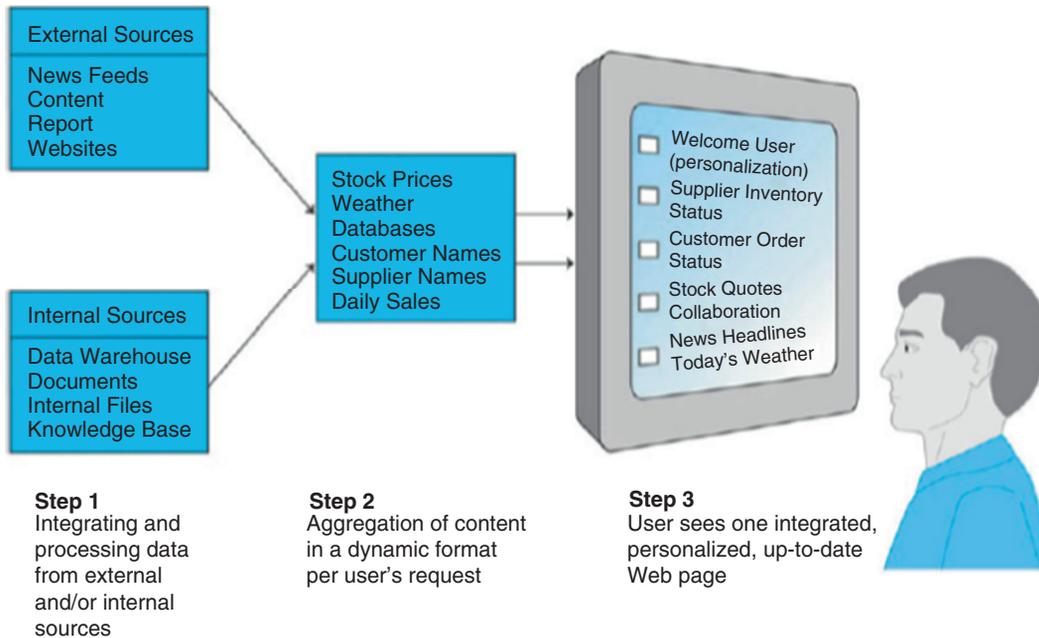


Fig. 2.2 How a portal works

- **Commercial (public) portals.** These popular portals offer content for anyone. Although they can be customized by the user, they are still intended for broad audiences and offer fairly routine content, some in real time (e.g., a stock ticker and news). Examples of such sites are yahoo.com, google.com, and msn.com.
- **Corporate (private) portals.** Corporate portals provide organized access to internal corporate information. These also are known as *enterprise portals* or *enterprise information portals*. Corporate portals appear in different forms. Examples of e-commerce portals can be found at ibm.com/software/products/en/websphere-portal-family.
- **Patient portals.** Several companies offer patient portals, for example, WebMD and myUCLAhealth.org. Patients have access to their personal information. The UCLA portal also allows communication between patients and their caregivers.
- **Publishing portals.** These portals are intended for communities with specific interests and involve relatively little customization of content; however, they provide extensive online search features and some interactive capabilities. Examples of such sites are techweb.com and zdnet.com.
- **Mobile portals.** **Mobile portals** are portals that are accessible from mobile devices. An increasing number of portals are accessible via mobile devices.
- **Voice portals.** **Voice portals** are websites, usually portals, with audio interfaces. This means that they can be accessed by a standard telephone or a cell phone. AOLbyPhone (aolbyphone.com) is an example of a service that allows users to retrieve e-mail, news, and other content from AOL via telephone. It uses both speech recognition and text-to-speech technologies. Products by companies such as Microsoft's Tellme (tmaa.com/microsoftand-247inc.html) offer access to the Internet from telephones, as well as tools to build voice portals. Voice portals are especially popular for 1-800 numbers (enterprise 800 numbers) that provide self-service to customers with information available in Internet databases (e.g., finding your balance or last deposit made at your bank).
- **Knowledge portals.** Knowledge portals enable easy access to knowledge by company employees and facilitate collaboration.
- **Board portals.** These portals support decision making (see Questex 2015).
- **Communities' portals.** These are usually parts of online communities. They are dedicated to some theme and may be sponsored by a vendor such as Sony. An example is gamespot.com/portal.

The Roles and Value of Intermediaries in E-Marketplaces

The two major types of *online intermediaries* are brokers and infomediaries.

Brokers

A *broker* in EC is a person or a company that facilitates transactions between buyers and sellers. The following are different types of brokers:

- **Trading.** A company that aids online trading (e.g., E*TRADE or eBay).
- **Organization of online malls.** A company that organizes many online stores in one place (e.g., Yahoo! Shopping and Alibaba.com).
- **Comparison agent.** A company that helps consumers compare prices, encourages user comments, and provides customer service at different stores (e.g., Bizrate for a great diversity of products and Hotwire, Inc. for travel-related products and services).
- **Shopping aids provider.** A company that helps online shopping by providing escrow, payments, shipping, and security (e.g., PuntoMio, Inc.) for global shoppers.
- **Matching services.** These services match entities such as jobs to applicants, and buyers to sellers.

Distributors in B2B

A special type of intermediary in e-commerce is the B2B *e-distributor*. These intermediaries connect manufacturers with business buyers (customers), such as retailers (or resellers in the computer industry). **E-distributors** aggregate product information from many manufacturers, sometimes thousands of them, in the e-distributor's catalog. An example is W.W. Grainger (**grainger.com**). The distributor buys the products and then sells them, as supermarkets do.

SECTION 2.3 REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Describe webstores and e-malls.
2. List the various types of webstores and e-malls.
3. What are Web (information) portals? List the major types.
4. Describe e-distributors.

2.4 MERCHANT SOLUTIONS: ELECTRONIC CATALOGS, SEARCH ENGINES, AND SHOPPING CARTS

To enable selling online, a website usually needs *EC merchant server software*. Merchant software includes several tools and platforms. Such software offers basic tools that include electronic catalogs, search engines, and shopping carts; all are intended to facilitate the electronic trading process.

One example of such software is osCommerce, which is open-source software (see **oscommerce.com**). For a list of merchant software vendors, see **cmscritic.com/dir/ecommerce-software**.

Electronic Catalogs

Catalogs have been printed on paper for generations. Recently, electronic catalogs on a DVD (or CD-ROM) and on the Internet have gained popularity. **Electronic catalogs (e-catalogs)** consist of a product database, directory, and a presentation function. They are the backbone of most e-commerce sales sites. For merchants, the objective of e-catalogs is to advertise and promote products and services. For the customer, the purpose of such catalogs is to locate information on products and services. E-catalogs can be searched quickly with the help of search engines. Some offer tools for interactions. For an example, see InfiniSys "Change My Image" for Microsoft Windows at **en.infinisys.co.jp/product/cmimage** and for Macintosh at **en.infinisys.co.jp/product/cmimage_mac**.

Most early online catalogs were static presentations of text and messages from paper catalogs. However, online catalogs have evolved to become more dynamic, customizable, and integrated with selling and buying procedures, shopping carts, order taking, and payment. E-catalogs may include video clips. The tools for building them are being integrated with merchant software suites and Web hosting tools (e.g., see smallbusiness.yahoo.com/eccommerce). Examples of a simple product catalog can be seen at JetPens (jetpens.com) and Starbucks Store (store.starbucks.com).

Although used only occasionally in B2C commerce, customized catalogs are used frequently in B2B e-commerce.

EC Search Activities, Types, and Engines

Search activities are popular in EC, and many tools for conducting searches are available. Several studies revealed that 95% of shoppers conduct research online before making any purchase. Consumers may search inside one company's catalog to find a product or service, or use Google or Bing to find companies that sell the product they need. Here we describe only the essentials for EC search. For a video illustration, see "Google Commerce Search" (2:15 min) at youtube.com/watch?v=gj7qrotOmVY. To read publications on electronic research and e-commerce at the Research at Google website, see research.google.com/pubs/EconomicsandElectronicCommerce.html. Let us now look at three major types of searches.

Types of EC Searches

The three major types of EC searches are *Internet/Web search*, *enterprise search*, and *desktop search*.

Internet/Web search. This is the most popular search that involves looking for any documents on the Web. According to Pew Research Internet Project (pewinternet.org) and other statistical sites (e.g., see infoplease.com/ipa/A0921862.html), finding information is one of the most frequent activities done on the Web.

Enterprise search. An **enterprise search** describes the search for information *within* the files and databases of an organization. For example, Google has a powerful Search Appliance (known as GSA).

Desktop search. A **desktop search** involves a search of a user's own computer files (e.g., using copernic.com or windows.microsoft.com/en-us/windows7/products/features/windows-search). Searching for documents is done by looking through all the information that is available on the user's PC. A simple example is the ability to search all files related to your e-mail archive. A search also can be extended to photos, USB ports, and Word documents.

Search Engines

Customers look for information (e.g., requests for product information or pricing) in similar ways. This type of request is repetitive, and answering such requests manually is costly. Search engines deliver answers economically and efficiently by matching questions with frequently asked question (FAQ) templates, which respond with "canned" answers. In general, a **search engine** is a computer program that can access databases of Internet or intranet resources, search for specific information or keywords, and report the results.

Google and Bing are the most popular search engines in the United States. Baidu is the primary search engine in China. Portals such as Yahoo! and MSN have their own search engines. Special search engines organized to answer certain questions or search in specified areas include ask.com, aol.com, and looksmart.com. Thousands of different public search engines are available (see searchengineguide.com). Each of these tools excels in one, or a few, area. These can be very specialized with different capabilities. In addition, many companies have their own enterprise search engines.

Voice-Powered Search

To ease searching, especially when using a smartphone, Google introduced a voice-powered tool (Google Voice Search; google.com/insideseach/features/voiceseach/index-chrome.html) that allows you to skip the keyboard altogether. The first product was included as part of iPhone's mobile search application. It allows you to talk into your phone and ask any question, and the results of your query are provided on your iPhone. In addition to asking questions by talking into your iPhone, you can also listen to search engine results. For an example of Apple's intelligent personal assistant, "Siri," see apple.com/ios/siri and imore.com/siri. Several language translators use a similar technology.

Video and Mobile Search

There are dozens of dedicated search tools and sites that will search for videos and other images. Some of them, such as bing.com/videos, will search across multiple sites; others, such as YouTube, will search only for their own content. For a list of over 40 sites, see thesearchenginelist.com/video-search. For another example, the search engine Bing has a search feature that allows you to listen to more than 5 million full-length songs.

Mobile Search

Several search engines are adapted to mobile search. Notable are Google, Yippy, and Yahoo!

Visual Shopping Search Engine

Visual search means looking for information that is presented visually (photos, images, etc.) For an overview, see scholarpedia.org/article/Visual_search. This technology can be used to support e-commerce. For example, google.com/shopping provides a visual search engine based on machine learning and computer vision that focuses on consumer products.

Visual search is popular when conducted on mobile devices.

Social Network Search Engines

Social network search, also known as *social search*, is a class of online search engines that help people find material about social networking activities, such as in user-generated content, discussion groups, or recommendations. Like all search engines, these organize, prioritize, and filter search results. Examples of such search engines are socialmention.com, “real-time social media search and analysis”; yname.com, “people search across social networks, blogs, and more”; and bing.com/explore/social. For an overview, see the blog “Social Media: The Next Best Search Engine” business2community.com/social-media/social-media-next-best-search-engine-01427662. For a discussion of the benefits and concerns, see en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_search.

Shopping Carts

An **electronic shopping cart** (also known as *shopping bag* or *shopping basket*) is a software that allows customers to accumulate items they wish to buy before they arrange payment and checkout, much like a shopping cart in a supermarket. The electronic shopping cart software program automatically calculates the total cost and adds tax and shipping charges when applicable. Customers can review and revise their shopping list before finalizing their purchase by clicking on the “submit” button.

Shopping carts for B2C are fairly simple (visit amazon.com to see an example), but for B2B, a shopping cart may be more complex. Shopping cart software is sold or provided free to store builders as an independent component outside a merchant suite (e.g., see networksolutions.com/e-commerce/index-v3.jsp – “create an online store now,” shopify.com, and squarespace.com). It also is embedded in merchants’ servers, such as smallbusiness.yahoo.com/ecommerce. Free online shopping carts (trials and demos) are available at volusion.com and 1freecart.com. For shopping cart applications for Facebook, see ecwid.com/facebook-app.html.

Product Configuration (Self-Customization)

A key characteristic of EC is the ability to self-customize products and services, as dell.com, nike.com, or jaguarusa.com. Manufacturers like to produce customized products in economical and rapid ways so that the price of their products will be competitive.

Questions and Answers Online

Intelligent search engines can answer users’ questions. A leading engine is ask.com, a subsidiary of IAC. The Q&A service matches answers from the database to questions users ask. For details, see ask.com and answers.ask.com. A competing engine is answers.com, a question and answer (Q&A) site, which comprises wikianswers.com. Wiki Answers is a community-generated social knowledge Q&A platform available in several languages. People ask questions on the platform and the community answers them. Another similar platform is answers.wikia.com/wiki/Wikianswers.

SECTION 2.4 REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. List and briefly describe the dimensions by which electronic catalogs can be classified.
2. List the benefits of e-catalogs.
3. Describe an electronic shopping cart.
4. Describe voice- and vision-related search engines.
5. What is self-customization?

2.5 AUCTIONS, BARTERING, AND NEGOTIATING ONLINE

One of the most interesting market mechanisms in e-commerce is the electronic auction. Auctions are used in B2C, B2B, C2C, G2B, and G2C.

Definition and Characteristics

An *online auction* is an electronic space where sellers and buyers meet and conduct different types of transactions. This market mechanism uses a competitive process where a seller solicits consecutive bids from buyers (forward e-auctions) or a buyer solicits bids from sellers (reverse e-auctions). A wide variety of online markets qualify as auctions using this definition. Prices are determined dynamically by the bids. Auctions, an established method of commerce for generations, deal with products and services when conventional marketing channels are ineffective or inefficient. For example, e-auctions can expedite the clearance of items that need to be liquidated or sold quickly. Rare coins, stamps, and other collectibles are frequently sold at e-auctions.

There are several types of auctions, each with its own specialties and procedures. (For coverage, see en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Online_auction_business_model.) Auctions can be conducted on *public* auction sites, such as **ebay.com**, or on *private* auction sites, which may be “by invitation only.”

Dynamic Pricing

One major characteristic of auctions is that they are based on dynamic pricing. **Dynamic pricing** refers to prices that are not fixed, but are allowed to fluctuate, and are determined by supply and demand. In contrast, catalog prices are fixed, as are prices in department stores, supermarkets, and most webstores.

Dynamic pricing appears in several forms. Perhaps the oldest forms are negotiation and bargaining, which have been practiced for many generations in open-air markets. The most popular today are the online auctions.

Traditional Auctions Versus E-Auctions

Traditional, physical auctions are still very popular. However, the volume traded on e-auctions is significantly larger and continues to increase. In addition, person-to-person auctions are done mostly online.

Limitations of Traditional Offline Auctions

Traditional offline auctions, regardless of their type, have several limitations. They usually last only a few minutes, or even seconds, for each item sold. This rapid process may give potential buyers little time to make a decision, so they may decide not to bid. Therefore, sellers may not get the highest possible price; bidders may not get what they really want, or they may pay too much for the items. Additionally, in many cases, the bidders do not have much time to examine the goods before placing a bid. Bidders have difficulty learning about specific auctions and cannot compare what is being offered at each location. Bidders must usually be physically present at auctions; thus, many potential bidders are excluded.

Similarly, it may be difficult for sellers to move goods to an auction site. Commissions are fairly high because a physical location must be rented, the auction needs to be advertised, and an auctioneer and other employees need to be paid. Electronic auctioning removes or lessens these drawbacks.

Electronic Auctions

The Internet provides an infrastructure for executing auctions electronically at lower cost, with a wide array of support services, and with many more participating sellers and buyers than physical auctions. Individual consumers and corporations can both participate in this rapidly growing and very convenient form of e-commerce.

Electronic auctions (e-auctions) are similar to offline auctions except that they are conducted online. E-auctions (or online auctions) have been in existence since the 1980s over LANs (e.g., for the historical perspective in flowers; see Saarinen et al. 2006). Host sites on the Web, which were started in 1995, serve as brokers, offering services for sellers to post their goods for sale and enabling buyers to bid on those items.

Major online auction sites, such as eBay, offer consumer products, electronic parts, artwork, vacation packages, airline tickets, and collectibles, as well as excess supplies and inventories that are being auctioned off by businesses. Another type of B2B online auction is used to trade special types of commodities, such as electricity transmission capacities and gas and energy options (e.g., see energyauctionexchange.com). Furthermore, conventional business practices that traditionally have relied on contracts and fixed prices increasingly are converted into auctions with bidding for online procurements.

For a comparison of 10 online auction sites, see online-auction-sites.toptenreviews.com.

Types of Auctions

It is customary to classify auctions into the following major types based on how many buyers and sellers are involved.

One Buyer, One Seller

In this configuration, one can use negotiation, bargaining, or bartering. The resulting price will be determined by each party's bargaining power, supply and demand in the item's market, and (possibly) business environment factors.

One Seller, Many Potential Buyers

In this configuration, the seller uses a **forward auction**, which is an auction where a seller entertains bids from multiple buyers. (Because forward auctions are the most common and traditional form, they often are simply called *auctions*.) The four major types of forward auctions are *English* and *Yankee* auctions, in which bidding prices increase as the auction progresses, and *Dutch* and *free-fall* auctions, in which bidding prices decline as the auction progresses. Each of these can be used for either liquidation or for market efficiency.

Example: Warren Buffet's Annual Power Lunch Auctions

Every year, Warren Buffet, the famous US investment guru, has an auction with the prize being a lunch with him; the winner may also bring along up to seven friends. The winner pays big money for the honor. The money is donated to a charity called the Glide Foundation, which helps the poor and homeless in San Francisco. In the past, Buffett charged \$30,000 per group. Since July 2003, Buffett has placed the invitation on an online auction (eBay). In 2003, bidders pushed the bid from \$30,000 to \$250,100. The highest winning bid in both 2012 and 2016 was the record-setting amount of \$3,456,789, both won by an anonymous bidder. In addition to benefiting the needy, the auction provides an opportunity for people (with money) to meet Mr. Buffett.

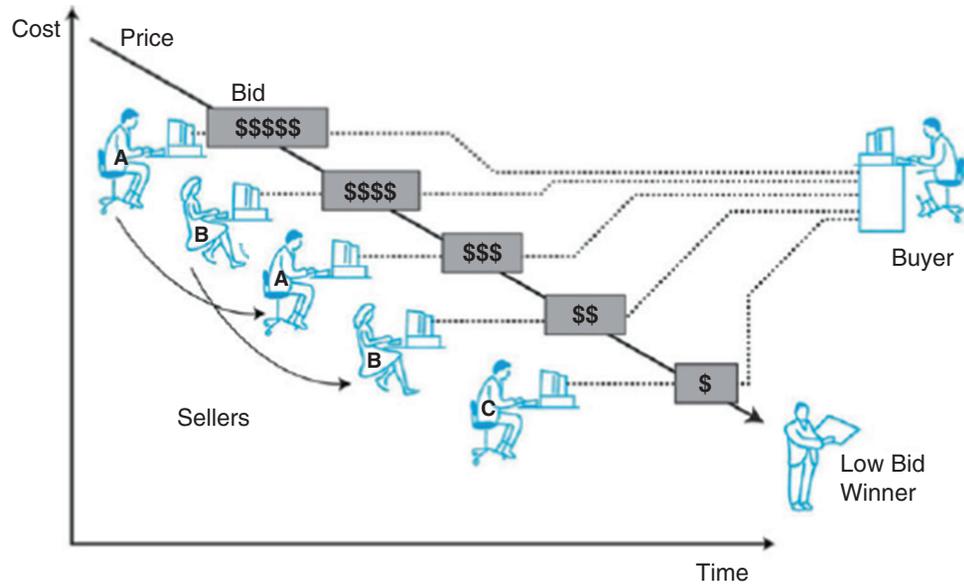
One Buyer, Many Potential Sellers

Two popular types of auctions in which there is one buyer and many potential sellers are reverse auctions (tendering) and name-your-own-price auctions.

Reverse Auctions

When there is one buyer and many potential sellers, a **reverse auction (bidding or tendering system)** is in place. In a reverse auction, the buyer places an item he or she wants to buy for a bid (or *tender*) on a *request for quote* (RFQ) system. Potential suppliers bid on the item, reducing the price sequentially (see Fig. 2.3). In electronic bidding in a reverse auction, several rounds of bidding may take place until the bidders do not reduce the price any further. The winning supplier is the one with the lowest bid (assuming that only price is considered). Reverse auctions are primarily a B2B or G2B mechanism.

Fig. 2.3 The reverse auction process



The Name-Your-Own-Price Model

Priceline.com pioneered the **name-your-own-price model**. In this model, a would-be buyer specifies the price (and other terms) that he or she is willing to pay to any willing and able seller. For example, Priceline.com (priceline.com) presents consumers' requests to sellers, who fill as much of the guaranteed demand as they wish at prices and terms agreed upon by buyers. The sellers may come up with counter offers managed by Priceline. Alternatively, Priceline.com searches its own database that contains the participating vendors' lowest prices and tries to match supplies with requests. This is basically a C2B model, although some businesses also use it.

Many Sellers, Many Buyers

When there are many sellers and many buyers, buyers and their bidding prices are matched with sellers and their asking prices based on the quantities on both sides. Stock and commodity markets are typical examples of this configuration. Buyers and sellers may be individuals or businesses. Such an auction is also called a **double auction**.

Penny Auctions

A *bidding fee auction*, also called a **penny auction**, is a new type of online forward auction in which participants must pay a small nonrefundable fee each time they place a bid (usually in small increments above the previous bid). When the auction-planned time expires, the last participant to have placed a bid wins the item paying the final bid price, which is usually significantly lower than the retail price of the item. For a tutorial, see the video titled "BidBidSold Penny Auction Site Tutorial" (7:35 min) at youtu.be/UeC1w0h2UbY.

Because most bidders will receive nothing in return for their paid bids, some observers have stated that the fee spent on the bid is actually equivalent to a lottery or wager. The auctioneer receives income both in the form of the fees collected for each participant bidder as well as in the form of a seller's commission for the winning bid. Examples of penny auction companies are happybidday.com and quibids.com/en. At bestpennyauctionsites.org, you can find a list of several penny auction companies. Some companies allow the auction's unsuccessful bidders to use all their bidding fees toward a purchase of items at regular or slightly discounted prices. Users need to be careful of scams. For additional information, see en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bidding_fee_auction.

Several other innovative auctions are available.

Benefits of E-Auctions

E-auctions are becoming important selling and buying channels for many companies and individuals. E-auctions enable buyers to access goods and services anywhere auctions are conducted. Moreover, almost perfect market information is available about prices, products, current supply and demand, and so on. These characteristics provide benefits to all.

The auction culture seems to revolutionize the way customers buy, sell, and obtain what they want. A listing of the benefits of e-auctions to sellers, buyers, and e-auctioneers is provided in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1 Benefits of e-auctions

Benefits to sellers	Benefits to buyers	Benefits to E-auctioneers
Increased revenues from broadening bidder base and shortening cycle time. Can sell anywhere globally	Opportunities to find unique items and collectibles	Higher repeat purchases. marketresearch.com found that auction sites, such as eBay, tend to garner higher repeat-purchase rates than the top B2C sites, such as Amazon.com
Opportunity to bargain instead of selling at a fixed price. Can sell at any time and conduct frequent auctions	Entertainment. Participation in e-auctions can be entertaining and exciting (e.g., virtual live auction site tophatter.com)	High “stickiness” to the website (the tendency of customers to stay at sites longer and come back more often). Auction sites are frequently “stickier” than fixed-priced sites. Stickier sites generate more ad revenue for the e-auctioneer
Optimal price setting determined by the market (more buyers, more information)	Convenience. Buyers can bid from anywhere, even using a mobile device; they do not have to travel to a physical auction place	Easy expansion of the auction business
Sellers can gain more customer dollars by offering items directly (saves on the commission to intermediaries; also, physical auctions are very expensive compared to e-auctions)	Anonymity. With the help of a third party, buyers can remain anonymous	
Can liquidate large quantities quickly	Possibility of finding bargains, for both individuals and organizations	
Improved customer relationship and loyalty (in the case of specialized B2B auction sites and electronic exchanges)		

Limitations of E-Auctions

E-auctions have several limitations. The most significant limitations are minimal security, the possibility of fraud, and limited participation.

Minimal Security

Some of the auctions conducted on the Internet are not secure because most are done in an unencrypted (or poorly protected) environment. This means that credit card numbers can be stolen during the payment process. Payment methods such as PayPal (**paypal.com**) can be used to solve the problem. In addition, some B2B auctions are conducted over highly secure private lines.

Possibility of Fraud

In many cases, auction items are unique, used, or antique. Because the buyer cannot see and touch the items, the buyer may receive something different than he/she had in mind. In addition, products may be defective. Buyers may also commit fraud (e.g., by receiving goods or services without paying for them). Thus, the fraud rate in e-auctions is relatively high. For a discussion of e-auction fraud and fraud prevention, see fraud.org/scams/internet-fraud/online-auctions. For general information on Internet fraud in general, see fraud.org/learn/internet-fraud, and for information for sellers, see fraud.org/component/content/article/2-uncategorised/62-seller-beware. Lately, several people have warned about fraud on penny auctions sites. For examples of scams, see tomuse.com/penny-auction-fraud-scam-cheat-bidders.

Limited Participation

Some auctions are by invitation only; others are open only to dealers. Limited participation may be a disadvantage to sellers, who usually benefit from as large a pool of buyers as possible. Buyers also may be unhappy if they are excluded from participation.

Online Bartering

Bartering, the exchange of goods and services, is the oldest method of trade. Today, it is done primarily between organizations. The problem with bartering is that it is difficult to match trading partners. Businesses and individuals may use classified ads to advertise what they need and what they offer in exchange, but they still may not be able to find what they want. Intermediaries may be helpful, but they are expensive (20–30% commissions) and very slow.

E-bartering (electronic bartering)—bartering conducted online—can improve the matching process by attracting more partners to the barter. In addition, matching can be done faster, and as a result, better matches can be found. Items that are frequently bartered online include office space, storage, and factory space; unused facilities; and labor, products, and banner ads. (Note that e-bartering may have tax implications that need to be considered.)

E-bartering is usually done in a **bartering exchange**, a marketplace where an intermediary arranges the transactions. These exchanges can be very effective. Representative bartering websites include **u-exchange.com** “Trade Anything, Pay Nothing,” **swapace.com** “Swap anything for anything,” and **barterdepot.com**. The typical bartering process works like this: First, the company tells the bartering exchange what it wants to offer. The exchange then assesses the value of the company’s products or services and offers it certain “points” or “bartering dollars.” The company can use the “points” to buy the things it needs from a participating member in the exchange.

Bartering sites must be financially secure; otherwise, users may not have a chance to use the points they accumulate. (For further details, see **virtualbarter.net** and **barternews.com**.)

Online Negotiating

Dynamic prices also can be determined by *negotiation*. Negotiated pricing is commonly used for expensive or specialized products. Negotiated prices also are popular when large quantities are purchased. Much like auctions, negotiated prices result from interactions and bargaining among sellers and buyers. Negotiation also deals with terms, such as the payment method, timing, and credit. Negotiation is a well-known process in the offline world (e.g., in real estate, automobile purchases, and contract work). A simple peer-to-peer (P2P) negotiation can be seen at **ioffer.com**.

SECTION 2.5 REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Define auctions and describe how they work.
2. Describe the benefits of e-auctions over traditional (offline) auctions.
3. List the four major types of auctions.
4. Distinguish between forward and reverse auctions.
5. Describe the “name-your-own-price” auction model.
6. Describe penny auctions.
7. List the major benefits of auctions to buyers, sellers, and auctioneers.
8. What are the major limitations of auctions?
9. Define bartering and describe the advantages of e-bartering.
10. Explain the role of online negotiation in EC.

2.6 VIRTUAL COMMUNITIES AND SOCIAL NETWORKS

A *community* is a group of people with common interests who interact with one another. A **virtual community** is one where the interaction takes place over a computer network, mainly the Internet. Virtual communities parallel typical physical communities, such as neighborhoods, clubs, or associations, but people do not meet face-to-face. Instead, they meet online. Virtual communities offer several ways for members to interact, collaborate, and trade (see Table 2.2 for types of virtual communities).

Characteristics of Traditional Online Communities and Their Classification

Most virtual communities are Internet-based, known also as *Internet communities*.

Hundreds of thousands of communities exist on the Internet, and the number is growing rapidly. Pure-play Internet communities may have thousands, or even hundreds of millions, of members. By early 2016 (its 12th anniversary), Facebook had grown to about 1 billion active members around the world. This is one major difference from traditional purely physical communities, which usually are much smaller. Another difference is that offline communities frequently are confined to one geographic location, whereas only a few online communities are geographically confined.

Table 2.2 Types of virtual communities

Community type	Description
Transaction and other business activities	Facilitate buying and selling. Combines an information portal with an infrastructure for trading. Members are buyers, sellers, intermediaries, etc., who are focused on a specific commercial area (e.g., fishing)
Purpose or interest	No trading, just exchange of information on a topic of mutual interest. Examples: Investors consult The Motley Fool (fool.com) for financial advice; music lovers go to mp3.com
Relations or practices	Members are organized around certain life experiences. Examples: ivillage.com caters to women and seniornet.com is for senior citizens. Professional communities also belong to this category. Examples: aboutus.org/Isworld.org is a space for information systems faculty, students, and professionals
Fantasy/role-playing	Members share imaginary environments. For examples on sports fantasy teams espn.com , see games.yahoo.com and horseracegame.com
Social networks	Members communicate, collaborate, create, share, form groups, entertain, and more. Facebook is the leader
Virtual worlds	Members use avatars to represent themselves in a simulated 3D environment where they can play games, conduct business, socialize, and fantasize about whatever they like

Classifications of Virtual Communities

Virtual communities can be classified in several ways.

Public Versus Private Communities

Communities can be designated as *public*, meaning that their membership is open to anyone. The owner of the community may be a privately held corporation (e.g., Twitter), public for profit organizations, or nonprofit organizations. Many of the large social networks, including Facebook, belong to the public for profit category.

In contrast, *private* communities belong to a company, an association, or a group of companies, and their membership is limited to people who meet certain requirements (e.g., work for a particular employer or work in a particular profession). Private communities may be internal (e.g., only employees can be members) or external (for customers and suppliers).

Classification Categories

Another option is to classify the members as *traders*, *players*, *just friends*, *enthusiasts*, or *friends in need*. A more common classification recognizes six types of Internet communities: (1) transaction, (2) purpose or interest, (3) relations or practices, (4) fantasy, (5) social networks, and (6) virtual worlds.

The most popular type of virtual community today is the social networking service, the subject of our next section.

Social Networking Service (Sites)

A social network is a virtual community whose members interact, share, and exhibit social behaviors. They are hosted by social networking sites (or services).

A Definition and Basic Information

A *social network* (or *service*) site as a Web-based company, such as Facebook, that provides free Web space and tools for its community members to build profiles, interact, share, connect, and create and publish content.

A preliminary list of the characteristics and capabilities of social networking sites (SNAs) was provided in section “Drivers and Benefits of e-Commerce” of Chap. 1. More capabilities are provided in this section.

SNAs are also known as *social networks*, and they appear in a variety of forms; the most well-known, most social-oriented, network is Facebook. LinkedIn is a business-oriented network.

A Global Phenomenon

Although Facebook, Pinterest, Twitter, Google+, and other social networks attract the majority of media attention in the United States, they also have many members in other countries. Other country-based social networking sites are proliferating and growing in popularity worldwide. For example, **renren.com** and **us.weibo.com** are large communities in China; **mixi.jp** has been widely adopted in Japan and **vk.com** in Europe (primarily in Russia). Dutch users have embraced **hyves.nl**; and Nasza Klasa (**nk.pl**) has captured Poland. **Hi5.com**, a social network (now part of Tagged), has been popular in Latin America, the United States, South America, and Europe. **Migente.com** is an English language site geared toward the Hispanic community. Additionally, previously popular communication and community services have begun implementing social networking features. For example,

the Chinese instant messaging service **qq.com** became one of the largest social networking services in the world once it added profiles and made friends visible to one another. Finally, Cyworld conquered the Korean market by adding “buddies.”

Representative Capabilities and Services Provided by Social Networking Sites

Social networking sites provide many capabilities and services such as:

- Users can construct a Web page where they present their profile to the public.
- Users can create a circle of friends who are linked together.
- The site provides discussion forums (by subgroup, by topic).
- Photo, video, and document viewing and sharing (streaming videos, user-supplied videos) are supported.
- Wikis can be used to jointly create documents.
- Blogs can be used for discussion, dissemination of information, and much more.
- These sites offer community e-mail and instant messaging (IM) capabilities.
- Experts can be made available to answer member queries.
- Consumers can rate and comment on products and services.
- Online voting may be available to poll member opinions.
- The site may provide an e-newsletter.
- The site supports conference (group) chatting, combined with document and image sharing.
- Message and bulletin board services are available for posting information to groups and individuals on the website.
- The site provides storage for content, including photos, videos, and music.
- Users can bookmark self-created content.
- Users can find other networks, friends, or topics of interest.

These capabilities can make social networks user-friendly.

Business-Oriented Public Social Networks

Business-oriented social networks, also known as *professional social networks*, are social networks whose primary objective is to facilitate business. The prime example here is **linkedin.com**, which provides business connections and enables recruiting and finding jobs. Another example is **craigslist.org**, the largest classified ad site, which offers many social-oriented features (see Case 2.2 later in this section). Another example is The Brainyard, a place for executives to find news, knowledge, and contacts. Finally, **doximity.com** is a medical network for US physicians and healthcare professionals. Businesses are using business social networks to advertise their brands as well as making and enhancing contacts globally.

Some Capabilities of Business-Oriented Networks

With Web 2.0 tools, companies can engage users in new innovative ways. More direct communication is achieved by offering additional ways for consumers to engage and interact among themselves and with organizations. For example, a company can:

- Encourage consumers to rate and comment on products and services.
- Allow consumers to create their own topic areas and build communities (forums) around shared interests possibly related to a company’s products.
- Hire bloggers or staff editors who can lead discussions about customer feedback.
- Provide incentives such as sweepstakes and contests for customers to get involved in new product (service) design and marketing campaigns.
- Encourage user-made videos about products/services and offer prizes for winning video ads.
- Provide interesting stories in e-newsletters.

An interesting business-oriented company that uses classified ads is **craigslist.org**, which is described in Case 2.2.

CASE 2.2: EC APPLICATION

CRAIGSLIST: THE ULTIMATE ONLINE-CLASSIFIED COMMUNITY

If you want to find (or offer) a job, housing, goods and services, social activities, romance, advice, and much more in over 700 local sites in 13 languages, and in more than 70 countries worldwide (2016 data), go to Craigslist (craigslist.org). The site has much more information than you will find in newspapers. According to their website, Craigslist receives 80 million new classified ads every month. Each month there are more than 60 million visitors to the site in the United States alone (see craigslist.org/about/factsheet). Finally, there are over 50 billion page views per month. For more statistics, see alexa.com/siteinfo/craigslist.org. According to Alexa.com, Craigslist is the eleventh most visited site in the United States.

In addition, Craigslist features over 100 topical discussion forums with more than 200 million user postings. Every day, people from 700 local sites in 70 countries worldwide check classified ads and interact on forums. Craigslist is considered by many as one of the few websites that could change the world because it is simply a free social-oriented, popular, and useful notice site. Although many other sites offer free classifieds, no other site comes close to Craigslist.

Users cite the following reasons for the popularity of Craigslist:

- It gives people a voice.
- It is consistent and champions down-to-earth values.
- It illustrates simplicity.
- It has social networking capabilities.
- It can be used for free in most cases (you can post free ads, except for business; for rent, or for sale ads in a few large cities; some employment ads; and for adult and therapeutic services).

For more information, see craigslist.org/about/factsheet.

As an example of the site's benefits, we provide the personal experience of one of the authors, who needed to rent his condo in Long Beach, California. The usual process to get the condo rented would take 2–4 weeks and \$400 to \$700 in newspaper ads, plus ads in local online sites for rental services. With Craigslist, it took less than a week at no cost. As more people discover Craigslist, the traditional newspaper-based classified ad industry will probably be the loser; ad rates may become lower, and fewer ads will be printed.

In some cities, Craigslist charges for “help wanted” ads and apartments listed by brokers. In addition, Craigslist may charge for ads with rich media features.

Concerns About Craigslist

Critics charge that some users post illegitimate or false ads on the site and the Craigslist staff are unable to effectively monitor this practice. Some users have complained about questionable ads and scams being posted. Craigslist also attracts criminals seeking to commit fraud by paying with bad checks. The anonymity of Craigslist's users as well as the lack of ratings encourages unlawful acts.

Another concern is that adult services make up a significant portion of the total traffic on the site and may involve illegal activities, especially concerning minors. With the sheer volume of users and ads posted per day, such monitoring is not possible given the modest workforce of only 40 plus that the site employs (data of 2016). (As of September 8, 2010, Craigslist has been trying to control such activities.)

On the other side, many supporters contend that attempts to control Craigslist may simply cause users to use other, less-regulated sites.

In China, a company called 58.com Inc. (**58.com**) is modeled after Craigslist and provides similar information and generates sizeable revenue and profits. The company is listed in the NYSE under the symbol WUBA.

Sources: Based on Liedtke (2009), Seamans and Zhu (2014), and craigslist.org (accessed January 2017).

Questions

1. Identify the business model used by Craigslist.
2. Visit craigslist.org and identify the social network and business network elements.
3. What do you like about the site? What do you dislike about it?
4. Why is Craigslist considered by some as a site that “could change the world?”
5. What are some of the risks and limitations of using this site?

Private (or Enterprise) Social Networks

In addition to public-oriented business social networks such as LinkedIn and Craigslist, there are many private social networks (also called enterprise networks) within organizations. Other companies with notable internal networks for employees only include Northwestern Mutual. According to the company, they have an internal blog (“Mutualblog”) and a Yammer account internally, which is used by over 1000 employees to dialog and make connections on nonproprietary topics. Private networks are for employees, business partners, and customers.

Business Models and Services Related to Social Networking

Social networking sites provide innovative business models, ranging from customer reviews of food and night life in India (burrrp.mumbai.com) to users who dress up paper dolls that look like celebrities (stardoll.com). New revenue models are being created almost daily. Although some generate limited revenue, others succeed. Lately, the Pinterest model has become popular.

Many communities attract advertisers. For example, vivapets.com attracts pet lovers with wiki contributions in its attempt to catalog all pet breeds. The site attracts hundreds of thousands of unique visitors per month. Obviously, pet food-related vendors are interested in placing ads there.

Some of the popular social-oriented services are:

1. **Reddit.com** is a community-based website that takes short reports from members on podcasts, news articles, and videos, which are then voted on by other participants. Reddit is available on a website, iPhone apps, and Android apps.
2. **Xanga.com** hosts blogs, photo blogs, and social networking profiles. Users of Xanga are referred to as “Xangans.” Xanga was originally launched as a site for sharing book and music reviews. Today it is one of the most popular blogging and networking services, with an estimated 10,000,000–100,000,000 users worldwide. Xanga has a very popular blogging in Hong Kong, Macao, and Singapore. (A *blogring* links together a number of blogs that share mutual interests and can be searched by subject matter).

Mobile Social Commerce

Mobile computing is growing faster than any other type of EC computing. According to Cisco (2016), mobile data traffic will grow 827% (to 30.6 exabytes per month in 2020 from 3.7 exabytes per month in 2015). This clearly boosts mobile commerce. According to Taylor (2015), 90% of smartphone consumers used them to shop online. In subsequent chapters, we will discuss many mobile applications. Instagram is considered an important factor in the future of mobile social commerce. Here we present the basic definitions, technologies, and a few examples.

Mobile Social Networking

Mobile social networking refers to social networking where members chat and connect with one another using any mobile device. Most major social networking websites now offer mobile services. By Q1 2016, Facebook had 1.44 billion mobile users out of a total 1.59 billion monthly active users (see venturebeat.com/2016/01/27/over-half-of-facebook-users-access-the-service-only-on-mobile and newsroom.fb.com/Company-info). Some social networking sites offer mobile-only services (e.g., path.com and javagala.ru).

Mobile social networking is especially popular in Japan, South Korea, and China, generally due to better data pricing (flat rates are widespread in Japan). In Japan and South Korea, where 4G networks offer more bandwidth, the leaders in social networking are **mixi.jp** and Mobage by Dena (**mbga.jp**). Numerous other mobile social networking sites have been launched in Japan. For statistics on the exponential growth of mobile social networks, see **comscore.com**.

Experts predict that mobile social networks will experience explosive growth in the future.

Mobile Enterprise Networks

Several companies have developed (or fully sponsor) mobile-based social networks. For example, Coca-Cola has a social network that can only be accessed by mobile devices. There Coca-Cola employees attempt to influence young people to buy Coke's products.

Examples of Social Mobile Commerce Applications

There are several types of social mobile applications. Illustrative examples are provided next.

Example 1: IBM

IBM is a leader in social commerce adoption on mobile devices. Following are some examples of IBM's initiatives.

- IBM Mobile Connect (formerly IBM Lotus Mobile Connect) (social media and social networks building software, abbreviated as Connect) is popular in industry. Customers can get immediate access to blogs, wikis, and other tools. They can also share photos, videos, and files on major mobile devices (e.g., Android, iOS).
- IBM Connections allows people to generate and vote on ideas at work (see **ibm.com/connections/blogs/SametimeBlog/?lang=en**).
- The capabilities in IBM Connections 5.0, such as Moderations, or Ideation Blogs, enable workers to embrace networks of engaged people.

Example 2: Social Networks

With the current technology, we also see a trend toward sophisticated interactions of Internet social networks with images, voice, and videos. This is expected to be a powerful managerial and marketing feature in the near future.

Recent Innovative Tools and Platforms for Social Networking

A large number of software tools and platforms are available for social networking. Well-known tools are blogs, microblogs, and wikis. Note that the capabilities of these tools are improving continuously. Here we provide a representative list of recent innovative tools:

- **Snapchat.com**—A mobile photo messaging service for “chatting” with friends through photos, videos, and captions “like ‘texting’ with pictures or videos” (see **webtrends.about.com/od/Iphone-Apps/a/What-Is-Snapchat.htm**).
- **WhatsApp.com**—According to its website, WhatsApp is a cross platform free mobile messaging app for smartphones. Users can form groups and send each other unlimited images and video and audio media messages. The company was acquired by Facebook in 2014 for around \$19 billion. WhatsApp was used by over 1 billion people each month in January 2016 (Ahmed 2016).
- **Ortsbo.com**—Enabler of real-time conversational translation mainly in social media.
- **Droid Translator (droid-translator.tiwinnovations.com)**—Translates phone calls, video chats (e.g., Skype), and text conversations into 29 different languages (for more information, see Petroff 2014).
- **Tagged.com**—A maker of *social discovery* products that enable people to meet and socialize with other people through playing games, browsing features, shared interests, and more. You can share tags, browse profiles, and exchange virtual gifts.
- **Viber.com, line.me/en**, etc.—Companies that provide free voice only of video calling for mobile devices and desktops (e.g., Viber for Desktop).

- **Instagram.com**—A free platform for sharing photos and videos. As a social network, it allows for the creation of a review section, etc., (Acquired by Facebook in 2012.)
- **Rocketium.com** focuses on the simple creation of videos with overlaid text.
- **Screenr.com** allows for the simple creation of screen-capture videos with audio for how-to creation.
- **Hshtags.com** (“A social media search engine dedicated to hashtags”)—Enables users to see in real time all public content related to any keyword and join any related public conversation in real time (see digitaltrends.com/social-media/new-search-engine-like-google-social-web).

Mobile Community Activities

In many mobile social networks, devices can be utilized to conduct the same activities that are performed in a nonmobile settings. Customers can even create their own mobile community.

Mobile video sharing, which sometimes is combined with photo sharing, is a new technological and social trend. Mobile video-sharing portals are becoming popular (e.g., see myubo.com). Many social networking sites offer mobile features.

For 2016 statistics about social commerce, see bazaarvoice.com/research-and-insight/social-commerce-statistics.

SECTION 2.6 REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Define virtual communities and describe their characteristics.
2. List the major types of virtual communities.
3. Define social network.
4. Describe mobile social commerce.
5. List some major social networking sites.
6. Describe the global nature of social networks.
7. Describe social networking.
8. Describe mobile social networking and commerce.

2.7 EMERGING EC PLATFORMS: AUGMENTED REALITY AND CROWDSOURCING

Several technologies are used as platforms that enable innovative EC applications. Here we present two.

Augmented Reality

An increasing number of business applications use the technology of *augmented reality* (AR). See Malik (2016) for more details. The term AR has several definitions depending on its field of applications. According to Wikipedia, **augmented reality** is “a live or indirect view of a physical, real-world environment whose elements are *augmented* (or supplemented) by computer-generated sensory input such as sound, video, graphics or GPS data” (see en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Augmented_reality). Such an arrangement helps people enhance the sensory perception of reality. The computerized layer can be seen through an application on mobile devices such as smartphones, webcams, or 3D glasses (including 3D TV). Google developed augmented reality (AR) glasses called “Google Glass.”

Applications in E-Commerce

The major applications in e-commerce are in the areas of advertising and marketing (for details, see Bauer in 2016 and Corpuz in 2015). There are potentially many other areas of applications. For example, Bauer (2016) describes several marketing applications that use the technology to better engage potential customers. Google’s AR is being used by several companies. For example, Walgreens is using AR for improving customer loyalty (see Kaye 2014). Finally, Wikipedia lists many e-commerce-related applications of AR.

Example 1: Net-a-Porter

This innovative company is using an iPhone/iPad app to view an AR “shopping window.” As can be seen in the video “Net-A-Porter Augmented Reality Shopping Windows” (1:37 min) available at digitalbuzzblog.com/net-a-porter-augmented-reality-shopping-windows, customers at the company’s physical store can point the mobile device camera at a clothing display (e.g., in the stores or store windows), and see a 360 degree view of the clothes. They also can see presentations at fashion shows, price, availability, and other relevant information. Furthermore, the window shoppers can immediately buy the clothing online using their mobile device (for the download, see itunes.apple.com/ne/app/net-a-porter/id318597939?mt=8).

Example 2: IKEA

IKEA uses AR to show how its furniture can fit in your house. For details on this mobile devices app, see Truong (2013) and watch the video “Place IKEA Furniture in Your Home with Augmented Reality” at youtube.com/watch?v=vDNzTasuYEw. The technology used is made by Snapshop, a free app for iOS systems.

Example 3: CastAR

Using AR technology, CastAR is able to produce more interactive tabletop gaming environments for users in a small area. See a demonstrations at youtu.be/hL1qT0TK6aw and youtu.be/A4TAppwUMWU.

Applications in Social Gaming

AR is already used in several applications. According to t-immersion.com/augmented-reality/use-cases/social-augmented-reality-games, social AR gaming is a superb tool for generating marketing leads and brand recognition because of the huge number of players engaged in games connected with a product.

Virtual Reality (VR)

Often confused with augmented reality is *virtual reality*. **Virtual reality** is a computer-generated simulation of a real-life environment in which users can be immersed. People feel like they are inside the environment and they can manipulate it (e.g., see Parisi 2016). To experience VR, user must wear special glasses and handsets. The technology has been around for decades but was used mainly for computer games. Lately, however, VR is moving to be an EC element (e.g., see Williams 2016). An example is Facebook’s Oculus, which is experimenting with commercial applications. This is an example of combining social commerce and virtual reality. For details, see Meola (2016).

Comparing AR and VR

According to McKalin (2015), both technologies are similar in their goal of immersing the users. But they do it in different ways and for different purpose. For details see McKalin (2015), Boyajian (2015), and Aukstakalnis (2016).

Crowdsourcing

Another platform for e-commerce is crowdsourcing. Crowdsourcing is a platform for collective intelligence in e-commerce and social commerce (see the industry website crowdsourcing.org). Here we present the essentials of the technology.

Definitions and Major Concepts

The term *crowd* refers to a large group of people such as a group of consumers, employees of a corporation, or members of a social network who offer expertise.

AR is developed into apps for mobile devices to blend digital components into real worlds.

Crowdsourcing utilizes crowds to collectively execute tasks such as solving problems, innovating, or getting large projects completed by dividing the work among many people. The term was coined by Jeff Howe in June 2006 (Howe 2008). In the crowdsourcing process, the initiator recruits a crowd (e.g., customers) to create content, a cumbersome task (e.g., translating Wikipedia articles), or in research and development. This is based on the idea that two heads are better than one. The collective intelligence of large groups is assumed to be able to solve complex problems at low cost (Aitamurto et al. 2016; Blokdijk 2015; Zeref 2015).

Fig. 2.4 The elements of crowdsourcing

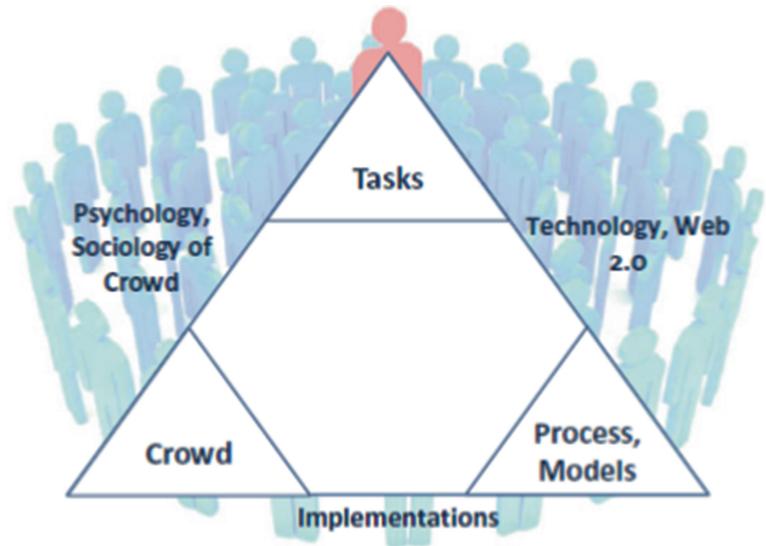
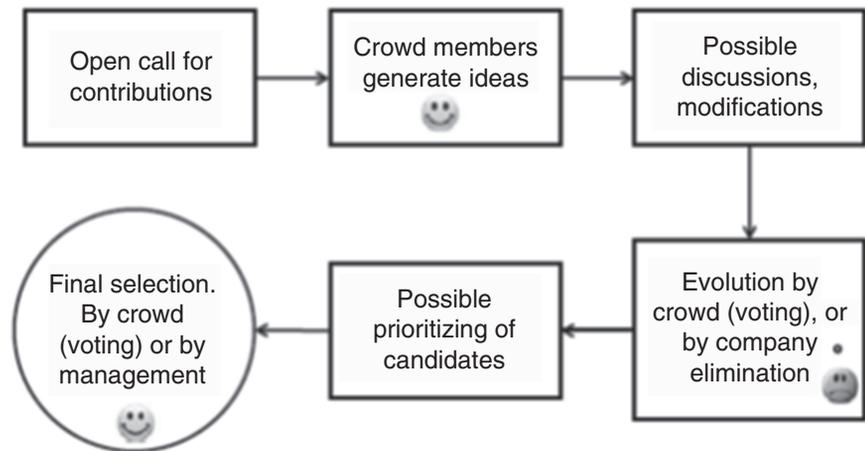


Fig. 2.5 A typical crowdsourcing process



The basic elements of crowdsourcing are illustrated in Fig. 2.4. Three elements are involved: the task(s) to be carried out; the crowd, which is used to work on the task; and the models and processes used by the crowd to execute the task. These elements are connected by features related to the tasks and the crowd (such as the psychology of the crowd), the technologies used (such as idea generation and voting), and implementation issues such as incentives paid to the participants.

The Process of Crowdsourcing

Crowdsourcing can be viewed as a collective problem-solving or work sharing process and usually is conducted as a Web-based activity. In a typical use of crowdsourcing, problems are broadcasted either to a known crowd (e.g., employees or business partners) or to an *unknown* group of participants (e.g., expert problem solvers or consumers). The communication usually starts as an open call for solutions or ideas (see first step in Fig. 2.5). The members of the crowd are organized as an online community, and the members submit individual work (e.g., solutions). The crowd may also discuss the solutions and may vote for a final short list. Alternatively, the short list is then prioritized (e.g., ranked). The final selection can be made by the crowd or by management (Fig. 2.5). The winning individuals in the crowd are well compensated, either monetarily or with special recognition. In other cases, the only rewards may be the satisfaction with a job well done. The use of crowdsourcing can yield results from amateurs or unrecognized professionals.

Example: Starbucks

Starbucks introduced My Starbucks Idea (mystarbucksidea.force.com), a social media site designed to solicit ideas and feedback from customers. The site was built around four key themes: (1) ideas are user generated; (2) users can vote to short list ideas, discussing them before and/or after the vote; and (3) company employees act as “idea partners,” providing answers to questions and leading discussions.

The crowd’s idea generation process is visible to the entire Starbucks community. The members can see the status of each proposal.

An overview of crowdsourcing is provided in a video titled “Crowdsourcing and Crowdfunding Explained” (3:48 min) at youtu.be/-38uPkyH9vI, also see crowdsourcing.org and CrowdSortium (crowdsortium.org). These specialists have developed best practices for the industry.

Benefits of Crowdsourcing

The major perceived benefits of crowdsourcing include the following:

- Problems can be analyzed or solved at comparative little cost. (Payment can be determined by the results; however, sometimes there is no monetary payment, just praise or accolades).
- Solutions can be reached quickly since many people work on the needed research project simultaneously. Also, designs of products may be expedited.
- The contributing crowd may reside within the organization; therefore, talents may be discovered.
- By listening to the crowd, organizations gain firsthand insight into the desires of their customers (or employees). There is built-in market research when the crowd is composed of customers.
- Crowdsourcing can tap into the global world of ideas. The crowd may include business partners, customers, academicians, etc., and the members of the crowd can reside in different countries.
- Customers tend to be more loyal if they participate in a company’s problem-solving project.

Uses of Crowdsourcing in E-Commerce

There are several EC applications of crowdsourcing—notable is the creation of Wikipedia. Corners (2015) and Fitchard (2015) present many successful applications.

SECTION 2.7 REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Define augmented reality.
2. Describe how AR can facilitate EC.
3. Define crowdsourcing.
4. List the elements of crowdsourcing.
5. Describe the process of crowdsourcing.
6. What are the major benefits of crowdsourcing?
7. How is crowdsourcing used in EC?

2.8 THE FUTURE: WEB 3.0, WEB 4.0, AND WEB 5.0

Web 2.0 is here. What’s next? The answer is a still-unknown entity referred to as *Web 3.0*, the future wave of Internet applications. Some of the desired capabilities of Web 3.0 will be discussed later in this section. In general, there is optimism about the future of the use of the Web 3.0 to facilitate EC (see siliconangle.com/blog/2013/08/02/the-future-of-ecommerce-with-web-3-0 and wired.com/insights/2014/09/e-commerce-to-web-3-0).

Web 3.0: What Does the Future Hold?

Web 3.0 is projected to deliver a new generation of business applications that will see business and social computing converge. Web 3.0 could change the manner in which people live and work as well as the organizations where they work, and it may even revolutionize social networking (see 1stwebdesigner 2015).

According to several experts, Web 3.0 could have the following capabilities:

- Make current applications smarter by introducing new intelligent features.
- Provide easier and faster interaction, collaboration, and user engagement.
- Facilitate intelligent-based powerful search engines.
- Provide more user-friendly application–creation and human–computer interaction capabilities.
- Increase the wisdom and creativity of people.
- Enable smarter machines (Gartner 2016).
- Enable much wider bandwidth.
- Enable better visualization including 3D tools.
- Simplify the use of mobile computing and mobile commerce.

For additional capabilities, see O’Connell’s (2015) slideshow.

Web 3.0 and the Semantic Web

One of the major possible platforms of Web 3.0 technologies is the *Semantic Web*. The term was presented by the inventor of the Web, Tim Berners-Lee, who visualized the Semantic Web as the platform for making the Web smarter. There is no standard definition of **Semantic Web**. It is basically a group of methods that focus on machines (in contrast with Web 2.0 that focuses on people). The technology attempts to enable computers to understand the semantics (i.e., the meaning) of information, by using natural language understanding tools. For a video titled “Evolution Web 1.0, Web 2.0 to Web 3.0” (3.58 min), see [youtube.com/watch?v=bsNcjya56v8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bsNcjya56v8).

Concerns

The following are a few concerns regarding the implementation of Web 3.0 and the future of EC.

- **Future threats.** According to the authors’ experiences, the following trends may slow the growth of EC and Web 3.0 and may even cripple the Internet.
- **Security and privacy concerns.** Shoppers, as users of e-banking and other services, and members of social networks, worry about online security and privacy. The Web needs to be made safer.
- **Lack of net neutrality.** If the big telecommunications companies are allowed to charge companies for a guarantee of faster access, critics fear that small innovative Web companies could be demolished by the big companies that can afford to pay more for efficient Internet usage. **Copyright complaints.** The legal problems of YouTube, Craigslist, Wikipedia, and others may result in a loss of originality, dedication, and creativity of user-generated content.
- **Insufficient connectivity.** Upstream bandwidths are still constraining applications, making uploading of video files a time-consuming task.
- **Language fitness.** There will be a need to reconsider the existing spoken languages with Web 3.0 taxonomies and schemes.
- **Standards.** There will be a need for architectural standards for Web 3.0.

Therefore, some believe that the Semantic Web will never work (see the 91 min video at [youtube.com/watch?v=oKiXpO2rbJM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oKiXpO2rbJM)).

Despite these concerns, Web 3.0 and e-commerce could thrive due to several innovations in the technological environment.

The Technological Environment

The future of EC and the Semantic Web is dependent on how far the relevant information technology advances (e.g., see Gartner 2016). Of the many predictions, we cite two here. Also, see Gartner's annual reports about Strategic Technology Trends at gartner.com/technology/research.

Web 4.0

Web 4.0 is the Web generation after Web 3.0. It is still an unknown entity. It is known as Symbiotic Web. Several futurists, including Daniel Burrus (see a video at bigthink.com/big-think-tv/web-40-the-ultra-intelligent-electronic-agent-is-coming), view the primary business driver of Web 4.0 as vastly more powerful electronic agents. These agents will work to integrate and personalize all of an individual's interactions with technology (Fowler and Rodd 2015).

For a discussion, see Koren (2013) or Edwards (2013).

Web 5.0

According to Patel (2013), "Web 5.0 is still an underground idea in progress and there is no exact definition of how it would be. Web 5.0 can be considered as a Symbionet Web, decentralized." Patel provides some technical information. Additional details and a comparison are provided at flatworldbusiness.wordpress.com/flat-education/previiously/web-1-0-vs-web-2-0-vs-web-3-0-a-bird-eye-on-the-definition.

SECTION 2.8 REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is Web 3.0, and how will it differ from Web 2.0?
2. Define Semantic Web.
3. List the major potential inhibitors and concerns of e-commerce and Web 3.0.
4. What are the major influencing computing and IT trends?
5. What are Web 4.0 and Web 5.0?

MANAGERIAL ISSUES

Some managerial issues related to this chapter are as follows.

1. **Should we use auctions for selling?** A major strategic issue is whether to use auctions as sales channels. Auctions do have some limitations, and forward auctions may create conflicts with other distribution channels. If a company decides to use auctions, it needs to select auction mechanisms and determine a pricing strategy. These decisions determine the success of the auctions and the ability to attract and retain visitors on the selling site. Auctions also require support services. Decisions about how to provide these services and to what extent to use business partners are critical to the success of high-volume auctions.
2. **Should we barter?** Bartering can be an interesting strategy, especially for companies that lack cash, need special material or machinery, and have surplus resources. However, the valuation of what is bought or sold may be hard to determine, and the tax implications in some countries are not clear.
3. **How do we select merchant software?** There are many products and vendors on the market. Small businesses should consider offers from Yahoo! or eBay since the software is combined with hosting and offers exposure to the vendor-managed e-market. The functionalities of the software as well as the ease of building webstores need to be examined.
4. **How can we use Facebook and other social networks in our business?** The many possibilities are mostly in marketing and advertising. Any progressive organization should examine and experiment with social networking.

SUMMARY

In this chapter, you learned about the following EC issues as they relate to the chapter's learning objectives.

1. **Activities and mechanisms.** The major activities are information dissemination and presence, online trading, collaboration, entertainment, and search. The major mechanisms are marketplaces, webstores, shopping carts, catalogs, search engines, Web 2.0 tools, and virtual worlds.

Most of the activities are between sellers and buyers. However, there also are collaboration activities among supply chain members as well as among people within organizations. EC attempts to automate the interaction process for the above activities.

2. **E-marketplaces and their components.** An e-marketplace or marketspace is a virtual market that does not suffer from limitations of space, time, or borders. As such, it can be very efficient and effective. Its major components include customers, sellers, products (some digital), infrastructure, front-end processes, back-end activities, electronic intermediaries, other business partners, and support services.

The role of intermediaries will change as e-markets develop: Some will be eliminated (disintermediation); others will change their roles and prosper (reintermediation). In the B2B area, for example, e-distributors connect manufacturers with buyers by aggregating e-catalogs of many suppliers. New value-added services that range from content creation to syndication are mushrooming.

3. **The major types of e-marketplaces.** In the B2C area, there are webstores and e-malls. In the B2B area, there are private and public e-marketplaces, which may be vertical (within one industry) or horizontal (across different industries). Exchanges are the platform for many buyers and sellers to meet and trade. Different types of portals provide access to e-marketplaces.
4. **Electronic catalogs, search engines, and shopping carts.** The major mechanisms in e-markets are e-catalogs, search engines, software (intelligent) agents, and electronic shopping carts. These mechanisms, which are known as merchant suites, facilitate EC by providing a user-friendly and efficient shopping environment.
5. **Types of auctions and their characteristics.** In forward auctions, bids from buyers are placed sequentially, either in increasing mode or in decreasing mode. In reverse auctions, buyers place an RFQ, and suppliers submit offers in one or several rounds. In name-your-own-price auctions, buyers specify how much they are willing to pay for a product or service, and an intermediary tries to find a supplier to fulfill the request. Penny auctions are forward auctions where a small fee is paid each time a bid is made. The final member to bid wins the auction when the designated time is up.
6. **The benefits and limitations of auctions.** The major benefits for sellers are the ability to reach many buyers, sell quickly, and save on intermediary commissions. Buyers have excellent access to auctions and a chance to obtain bargains and collectibles while shopping from their homes. The major limitation is the possibility of fraud.
7. **Bartering and negotiating.** Electronic bartering can greatly facilitate the swapping of goods and services among organizations, thanks to improved search and matching capabilities, which is managed by bartering exchanges. Software agents can facilitate online negotiation.
8. **The structure and role of virtual communities.** Virtual communities create new types of business opportunities. They bring people with similar interests together at one website. (Such groups are a natural target for advertisers and marketers.) Using chat rooms, discussion spaces, and so forth, members can exchange opinions about certain products and services. Of special interest are communities of transactions, whose interest is the promotion of commercial buying and selling. Virtual communities can foster customer loyalty. This may increase sales of products made by vendors that sponsor communities and facilitate customer feedback for improving service and business operations.
9. **Social networks as EC mechanisms.** These are very large Internet communities that enable the sharing of content, including text, videos, and photos, and promote online socialization and interaction. Hundreds of social networks are emerging around the world, competing for advertising money. Millions of corporations advertise, entertain, and even sell on social networks.

Business-oriented communities concentrate on business issues, both in one country and around the world (e.g., recruiting, finding business partners). Social marketplaces meld social networks and some aspects of business. Notable business-oriented social networks are LinkedIn and XING. Some companies are active in public social networks such as Facebook. Other companies own and operate their own social networks within the company, which are known as enterprise social networks. Their members are usually employees and retirees. They are used mainly for collaboration, knowledge creation and preservation, training, and socialization. Many large companies have such networks (e.g., IBM, Wells Fargo, Northwestern Mutual).

10. **Augmented reality (AR) and crowdsourcing.** These emerging technologies facilitate two types of EC activities. AR blends visual aspects of computer and physical worlds. Thus, it can facilitate advertisement and presentation of information. It works by pointing a mobile device (e.g., smartphone) to a product or building and adds information to what you see (e.g., 360 degree view, price tag). Crowdsourcing solicits the wisdom of the crowd for idea generation or problem-solving. It also is used to divide a large task among many people, each of whom is executing a different, small subtask.
11. **Web 3.0 and Web 4.0.** Web 3.0, the next generation of the Web, will combine social and business computing. It will be more portable and personal, with powerful search engines, increased clout, and greater connectivity with the wireless environment and on-demand applications. Knowledge management will be one of its main pillars. The Semantic Web will play a major role in Web 3.0 applications. Web 3.0 and its applications will depend on IT trends such as the developments in cloud computing, utility computing, parallel processing, and machine intelligence. Web 4.0 is a futuristic Web that will be built on ubiquitous and intelligent systems. It will connect “islands” of intelligence from different sources.

KEY TERMS

Augmented reality
Back end
Bartering
Bartering exchange
Business-oriented social network
Buy-side e-marketplace
Crowdsourcing
Desktop search
Digital products
Disintermediation
Double auction
Dynamic pricing
E-bartering (electronic bartering)
E-distributor
E-mall (online mall)
E-marketplace
Electronic auction (e-auction)
Electronic catalog (e-catalog)
Electronic shopping cart
Enterprise search
Forward auction
Front end
Intermediary
Mobile portal
Mobile social networking
Name-your-own-price model
Penny auction
Reverse auction (bidding or tendering system)
Search engine
Sell-side e-marketplace
Semantic Web
Virtual community
Virtual reality
Voice portal
Web 3.0
Web 4.0
Web (information) portal
Webstore (storefront)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Compare physical marketplaces with marketplaces. What are the advantages and limitations of each?
2. Discuss the competitive advantage of Craigslist using classified ads.
3. Describe the advantages of Web 3.0 over Web 1.0 and Web 2.0.
4. Discuss the need for portals in EC.
5. How do business-oriented networks differ from regular social networks such as Facebook?
6. Why are social marketplaces considered to be a Web 2.0 application?
7. Discuss the following statement: “Technically, you can put together a portal in a weekend, but culturally there are a slew of things to consider; therefore it takes much longer.”
8. Discuss the pros and cons of selling cars via auctions.

Discuss the differences between virtual reality and augmented reality.

TOPICS FOR CLASS DISCUSSION AND DEBATES

1. Compare and contrast the efficiency of traditional markets with that of digital markets.
2. Some claim that social networking, especially microblogging and social networking sites, displace the traditional electronic bulletin board systems. Discuss.
3. Discuss the advantages of dynamic pricing strategy over fixed pricing. What are the potential disadvantages of dynamic pricing?
4. Enter Facebook and search for companies that do auctions on the site. Identify the different types of auctions on the site.
5. What is the advantage of a business using eBay instead of conducting auctions from its own site? Distinguish between C2C and B2B cases.
6. Debate: Should companies build in-house social networks for external activities or use existing public social networks?
7. Debate: Should Craigslist and YouTube monitor and control what users publish there? Who will pay the cost?
8. Debate: Social networking services can provide good security to enterprise social networks. However, security may limit users’ creativity and disrupt the business. Should a company use such a service?
9. Debate: Some research suggests that the use of public social networks by employees during work hours can be good for a business because employees develop relationships and share information, which increases productivity and innovation. Others say it is a waste of time and ban the use of Facebook, YouTube, and other such sites at work.
10. Debate the business value of social networking.
11. Debate: Facebook and Twitter compete for advertisers’ money. Which one has a better chance to get more ad money and why?
12. Some of the largest social media networks exist in China (**qq.com**, **qzone.qq.com**, **us.weibo.com**, **weixin.qq.com**, and **renren.com**). Find information about these networks and list their properties. How do they differ from US social networks?

INTERNET EXERCISES

1. Enter **droid-translator.tiwinnovations.com** and **tranzactive.com** and compare their translation capabilities.
2. Examine how bartering is conducted online at **tradeaway.com**, **barterquest.com**, and **u-exchange.com**. Compare and contrast the functionalities and ease of use of these sites.
3. Enter **volusion.com** and identify all specific e-commerce mechanisms (or solutions) provided by the company.
4. Enter **respond.com** and request a product or a service. Once you receive replies, select the best deal. You have no obligation to buy. Write a short report based on your experience.
5. Enter **dtsearch.com** and find its capabilities. What type(s) of search does it conduct (e.g., desktop, enterprise, general)?
6. Enter **cars.com**. List all services available to both sellers and buyers of cars. Compare it to **carsdirect.com**. Finally, identify the revenue sources of both sites.

7. Enter **ups.com**.
 - (a) Find out what information is available to customers before they send a package.
 - (b) Find out about the “package tracking” system; be specific.
 - (c) Compute the cost of delivering a 10" × 20" × 15" box, weighing 40 pounds, from your hometown to Long Beach, California. Compare the cost for the fastest delivery option with to the lowest possible delivery cost.
 - (d) Prepare a spreadsheet using Excel for two different types of calculations available on the UPS site. Enter data to solve for two different calculations.
8. Enter **magicleap.com** and find the company’s activities in augmented reality. Write a report.
9. Enter **truecar.com** and review the services they provide to car buyers. Write a report.
10. Enter **ibm.com** and **oracle.com**. Prepare a list of the major products available for building corporate portals.
11. Enter **go.sap.com/index.html** and find the key capabilities of its enterprise portals. List the benefits of using five of the capabilities of SAP’s portals.
12. Enter **networksolutions.com**. View the shopping cart demo. What features impress you the most and why? What related services does it provide? Compare it to **storefront.net**, **nexternal.com**, and **ecwid.com**.
13. Enter the website of a social networking service of your choice. Build a homepage. Add a chat room and a message board to your site using the free tools provided. Describe the other capabilities available. Make at least five new friends.
14. Enter **vivapets.com** and **dogster.com** and compare their offerings.
15. Enter **w3.org**. Find material about Semantic Web (SW); check their RDF/FAQ and search for some applications. Write a report.
16. Enter **zippycart.com** and read the article “13 Ecommerce Link Building Tactics for Your Online Store” at **zippycart.com/ecommerce-news/1430-13-ways-to-gain-inbound-links-to-your-online-store.html**. Write a brief summary.

TEAM ASSIGNMENTS AND PROJECTS

1. Assignment for the Opening Case

Read the opening case and answer the following questions:

- (a) Why is Pinterest considered a social network?
 - (b) What are the company’s business and revenue models?
 - (c) How can manufacturers advertise on Pinterest?
 - (d) Compare Pinterest and We Heart It. Pay attention to the business models.
 - (e) Pinterest has a large amount of money. How does it use this money on its website to increase its competitive advantage?
2. Assign each group a large e-tailer (e.g., Amazon.com, Walmart.com, Target.com, Dell.com, Apple.com, and HP.com). Trace the purchasing process. Look at the catalogs, search engines, shopping carts, Web 2.0 features, and any other mechanisms that improve e-shopping. Prepare a presentation that includes recommendations for improving the existing process.
 3. Compare the shopping carts from Shopopify, Big Commerce, and Open Cart. Distinguish between hosted and self-hosted carts. Watch the O’Reilly Media video titled “Online Communities: The Tribalization of Business” (Part 1 is 6:15 min; Parts 2 and 3 are optional) at **youtube.com/watch?v=qQJvKyytMXU** and answer the following questions:
 - (a) Why is the term tribalization used in the video?
 - (b) What are virtual communities?
 - (c) How can traditional businesses benefit from online communities?
 - (d) What is the value of communities for the customers?
 - (e) Compare social vs. marketing frameworks.
 - (f) How are virtual communities aligned with the businesses?
 - (g) Discuss the issues of measurements, metrics, and CSFs.
 - (h) Optional: View Part 2 (**youtube.com/watch?v=U0JsT8mfZHc#t=15**) and Part 3 (**youtube.com/watch?v=AeE9VWQY9Tc**) (6:50 and 10:24 min respectively), and summarize the major topics discussed.

4. The team's mission is to analyze Pinterest's U.S. and global competition, including similar companies in China and Brazil. Begin by looking at weheartit.com. Look at another country of your choice. Comment on the cultural differences. Write a report.
5. There are many applications of augmented reality. Find current ones and classify them by areas (e.g., marketing). Make a class presentation.

CLOSING CASE: DRIVING CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT WITH AUGMENTED REALITY AT TESCO

The Problem

Businesses are constantly searching for new products and services that can be used to recruit and retain customers. These products and services can be used to grow profits or act as “loss leaders” to bring customers into the store. Grocery stores are very price competitive, especially in more mature economies such as Britain.

Tesco is a world leading retailer of groceries and other goods with locations in 11 countries (www.tescopl.com/about-us/our-businesses). Britain is one of the company's primary markets, and completion in the market is growing. These changes are being driven primarily by the growth of discounters such as Aldi and Lidi. With these competitors focusing of price completion, it is becoming more important for more traditional retailers such as Tesco to build store traffic by offering unique goods and services (Telegraph 2017).

Disney is global entertainment and media brand well known for their movies, television programs, resorts, and products (thewaltdisneycompany.com/about/#our-businesses). One of Disney's most recent animated features was the movie Frozen, which earned over \$1.2 billion worldwide since its release in 2013. The movie and its characters still enjoy a strong popularity with fans, especially children.

The Solution

Tesco has identified the need to create unique promotions to drive traffic to its locations and brokered a partnership with Disney to help create a unique offering that was meant to showcase new augmented reality technology deployed by Engine Creative (2016). The store provided the opportunity for customers to receive a free sticker folder and stickers related to the themes and characters in the Frozen movie. Using the free Tesco Discover Augmented Reality app, customers were able to interactive with the stickers through different 3D scenes. Additionally, the app is designed to take interactive selfies with their favorite Frozen characters (youtube.com/watch?v=P0Zq8YFmiWk).

The Results

The promotion was a success on multiple levels. First, it drove significant traffic into stores, and supplies of stickers were exhausted in many locations. Second, the promotion drove significant downloads of the Tesco Discover Augmented Reality app. While the app was initially used for the Frozen promotion, it also contained a number of additional augmented realty functions designed to be used on an ongoing basis. These features included enabling shoppers to discover great videos of their favorite recipes, Scan-to-Shop gift guides, magazines and catalogs, enter exclusive competitions, and play a range of interactive games that can only be accessed by scanning Tesco products and publications.

Sources: Based on Creative Engine (2016) and Telegraph (2017).

Questions

1. How does price completion drive the need to compete in other areas?
2. Why would Tesco partner with Disney to drive traffic to its locations?
3. Why did Tesco use an expended set of features (beyond the promotion) in its app?
4. Do you think augmented reality applications can help Tesco differentiate itself?

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