Case 10: No Comparison (Shopping)

In a world where online sellers can use cut-rate pricing to beat the brains out of brick-and-mortar retailers, Amazon is making moves to change the game once again in its favor. Contrary to Amazon’s reputation, however, the end result this time may not be lower prices for consumers.

Amazon has no doubt lured away millions of shoppers from traditional stores by offering discounted prices via smartphone searches as shoppers check out merchandise in physical store aisles, a practice known as “window shopping.” This practice most likely played a role in Amazon’s inexorable climb to the top of the online heap. But, now that the Internet goliath is opening its own brick-and-mortar bookstores in a number of cities and acquiring 465 physical grocery stores in its takeover of Whole Foods, it has developed a tool to keep customers from using its in-store Wi Fi to comparison shop.

Amazon’s patent, The Physical Store Online Shopping Control (US 9,665,881 B1), describes a system that can identify a customer’s Internet-connected device (when it connects through the store’s Wi Fi) and sense when the customer is trying to access a competitor’s website. Once the system discovers such an attempt, it identifies what item the consumer is trying to access. It could then do one of several things: redirect the customer’s browser to Amazon’s own site or to an approved site; send marketing material to the customer; alert a sales person to approach the customer on the floor; or simply block access.

Of course, having a patent doesn’t mean Amazon will actually use it. But if it did, the customer’s only choice would be to not use the in-store provided Wi Fi service.

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