

Digital Life: One-stop comparison shopping

A new website gathers Web product reviews.

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Comparison shopping is one of the biggest consumer uses of the Internet, studies show. But Doug Baker thinks people are tired of spending so much time at it.

To simplify comparison shopping, Baker's new Minneapolis-based website, Wize.com, gathers product reviews from around the Web and uses them to rank consumer products in many categories from 1 (worst) to 100 (best). For each product the site offers price comparisons at various retailers, as well as shipping information and whether it's in stock, a feature now common on the Web.

"Doing product research online has taken an enormous amount of time because there hasn't been one source for information gathered from lots of places," said Baker, the CEO of Wize, the 10-employee firm that launched the website last month. "There's a lot of time savings if you can come to one website."

Wize.com assigns consumer goods a ranking based on a combination of online product reviews by ordinary people and experts, plus a factor called "buzz," which is the number of times a product has been reviewed in the past 60 days, Baker said. The website has about 800,000 reviews of 20,000 products as varied as computers and children's car seats.

Last week, Wize.com gave a ranking of 95 to a Zen Vision digital music player, a 71 to a Graco Turbo booster children's car seat and a 59 to a Vermont Casting outdoor propane cooking grill.

"A single point number rating system is the best way to identify a great product," Baker said. "We like it because it's based on collective intelligence, the wisdom of the crowd."

But the ratings system also helps Wize.com distinguish itself from two prominent competing websites. Epinions.com, lacks a single-number ranking system, but offers more detailed product performance summaries based on user and expert reviews. Planetfeedback.com, organizes user product reviews by company rather than product type.

Baker has taken pains to create the appearance of providing honest reviews. Wize.com doesn't sell products or get paid to post reviews of any products, Baker said. The website doesn't pay for the reviews it publishes, and uses reviews taken only from websites that it deems credible. Wize.com makes money by selling ads and by charging online retailers for providing links to their websites.

But just because consumers do their research at Wize.com doesn't mean they buy from its advertisers; Baker estimated that two-thirds of consumers use what they've learned to shop at physical stores.

"It would be better for us if more people bought products online, because we are advertising supported," Baker said. "But the advertising we have now is enough to support our business, so if people buy at a physical store, that's fine."

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