

Future comparisons: What's next for price comparison websites?

August 2009





User experience research & design

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Executive summary

This report examines the changing markets that price comparison sites have faced and continue to face. It looks at past trends and how the comparison site market currently stands.

Key findings of the report are:

- There are gaps in leading comparisons sites' user experience offering, with many sites needing to improve their presentation of results and control over how the results are presented and manipulated
- There is a lack of functionality to support collaborative decision processes
- There are minimal attempts to tackle trust issues held by many consumers
- Interesting functionality is presented on a number of price comparison sites, that can help retain awareness of the brand through encouraging regular use
- Comparison sites will have to approach their user experiences with far more rigour, supporting user behaviours to encourage greater brand awareness and loyalty.

Introduction

Price comparison sites are big business. In August 2008 Money Supermarket saw 6-month profits up 113% to £14.4m and visitors up 39% to 62 million¹. However, 1 year later they're suffering with visitor numbers falling by a third over 4 months². Multi-million pound advertising budgets are spent to push each brand into the ever more crowded market.

The products they compare cover the whole range of consumer financial services such as insurance, mortgages and credit cards. As a result of this range, it's crucial that the user experience produced by using comparison sites is clear, simple and complete.

The report will examine the leading financial comparison sites' user experience, looking at key deliverables such as:

- The results page
- Overall trust
- Brand recognition

The sites we looked at include:

- ComparetheMarket.com
- Confused.com
- GoCompare.com
- MoneySupermarket.com
- uSwitch.com

Price comparison history

Price comparison sites in Europe are 10 years old. In 1999, 2 sites were set up that have managed to weather the changing fortunes of the price comparison market – MoneySupermarket.com and Kelkoo.fr. MoneySupermarket.com was set up providing mortgage information, before quickly expanding to credit cards and personal loans. It has had a history of expansion with InsureSupermarket.com and TravelSupermarket.com being set up soon after in 2000.

Kelkoo.fr covered retail products – still its specialism. Over the last 10 years it has expended to cover 10 countries and 20 different product categories. It's not been plain sailing though – it was bought by Yahoo! in 2004 for €450 million, before being sold in 2008 for €100 million.

Presentation of results

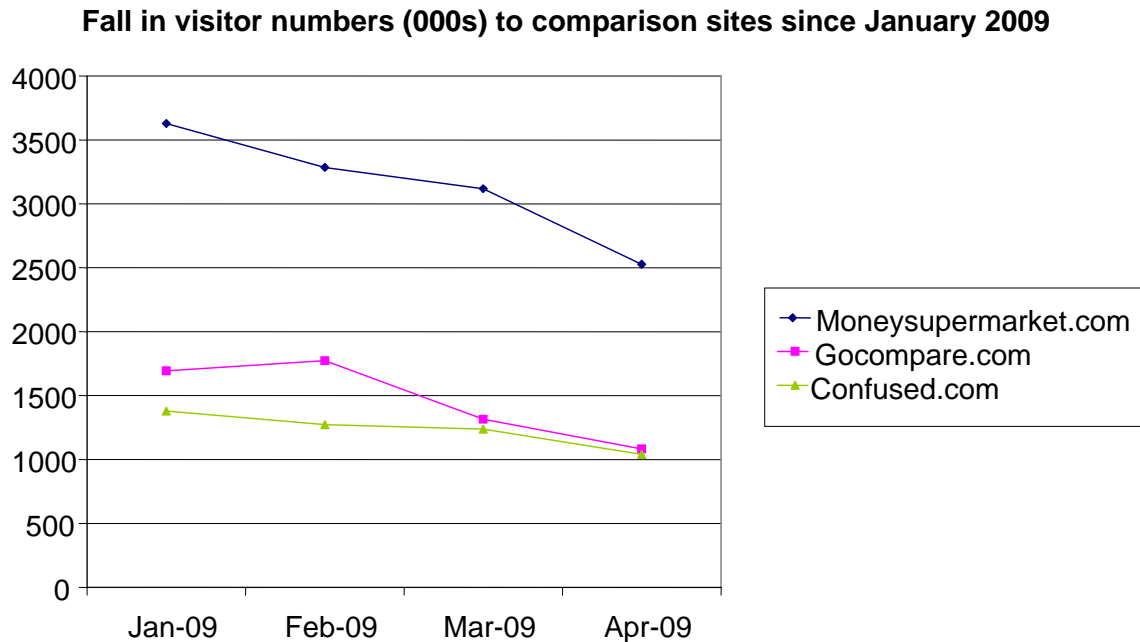
Times have changed significantly since 1999. The technology behind price comparison sites has developed to the nth degree. Originally acting as online classifieds, they started to draw from sites' data feeds published online by the selling sites, detailing the product and its cost. Nowadays comparison sites are able to trawl sites, drawing the cost of products from the relevant sites, live, giving the sites much greater control over what and how to present to users.

Price comparison sites also now have more and more competitors and a much larger range of offerings. All sites offer a range of product categories, either several types of insurance and financial products or a range of different physical product categories e.g. clothes, electricals, books etc.

According to the BBC, as of December 2008 the comparison site market was reported to be worth more than £1bn a year, with more than 6 million people visiting price comparison sites every month³. But there was a turning tide accompanying this uplift. As early as August 2008 MoneySupermarket.com was aware a downturn was heading its way¹.

Current market

Recently price comparison sites have been suffering. According to Which, between the months of January and April this year MoneySupermarket.com, GoCompare.com and Confused.com saw an average fall of 30% in their visitor numbers²:



There has certainly been a drop in comparison site popularity, something that may have led to uSwitch.com being put up for sale⁴. Some insurance suppliers (e.g. Direct Line) have even taken a clear stance against price comparison sites⁵.

Sites are now looking for strategic partnerships to extend their reach (and have been for some time now). The Daily Mail⁶ and Irish Times⁷ websites have started offering comparison services (in partnership with [BeatThatQuote.com](#) and [Chill.ie](#) respectively):



With a more crowded market it will be harder and harder to differentiate one brand from another. Other sites with regular visitors such as newspaper sites have the added advantage of a captive audience – unlike traditional price comparison sites, which rely on visitors coming in from a search engine and landing on a price comparison site before the comparison process can be started.

In order to survive this change in fortunes, price comparison sites need to focus on their delivery. Confused.com recently marketed itself as being really easy to use⁸. But how easy are all the major players' sites to use?

Results page

In May 2008 the FSA conducted an analysis of price comparison sites⁹ and concluded that the sites should:

- Highlight any assumptions made (and ensure they're fair)
- Highlight where products being compared have different features
- Ensure information is up-to-date and presented in a consistent manner
- Ensure firms don't give a misleading impression of their market coverage

The first 2 of these key guidelines are reliant on the usability of the results page.

The results page is arguably the most important page for a price comparison website. It's where the most important interaction occurs – choosing between the available products. In order for people to be able to do this they need 2 things from the page – clear information and the ability to control and adjust the results as they wish. The most common way to do this is through powerful sorting and filtering.

Presentation of results

Let's look at how the sites present the different information in the results:

Provider	Annual Premium	Monthly Premium	Voluntary Excess	Legal Cover	Courtesy Car	Breakdown Cover	Personal Accident Cover	Windscreen Cover	Customer Reviews	Additional Details & Apply
	£906.48	£88.02 @ 9 months £231.58 deposit Total: £1023.76	£0.00 Closest match	£25.00 extra	✓	£45.00 extra	Check with insurer	✓	★★★★★ 7 review(s)	Go to site Call More Details
	£943.99	✓	£0.00 Closest match	£29.00 extra	✗	£58.00 extra	✗	✗	No Reviews Available	Go to site Call More Details
	£966.84	£106.02 @ 9 months	£0.00 Closest	£24.00	✓	✗	✓	✓	★★★★★	Go to site Call More Details

MoneySupermarket.com

4 of the 5 sites attempt to present the information in columns with ticks, crosses and a small amount of text where needed.

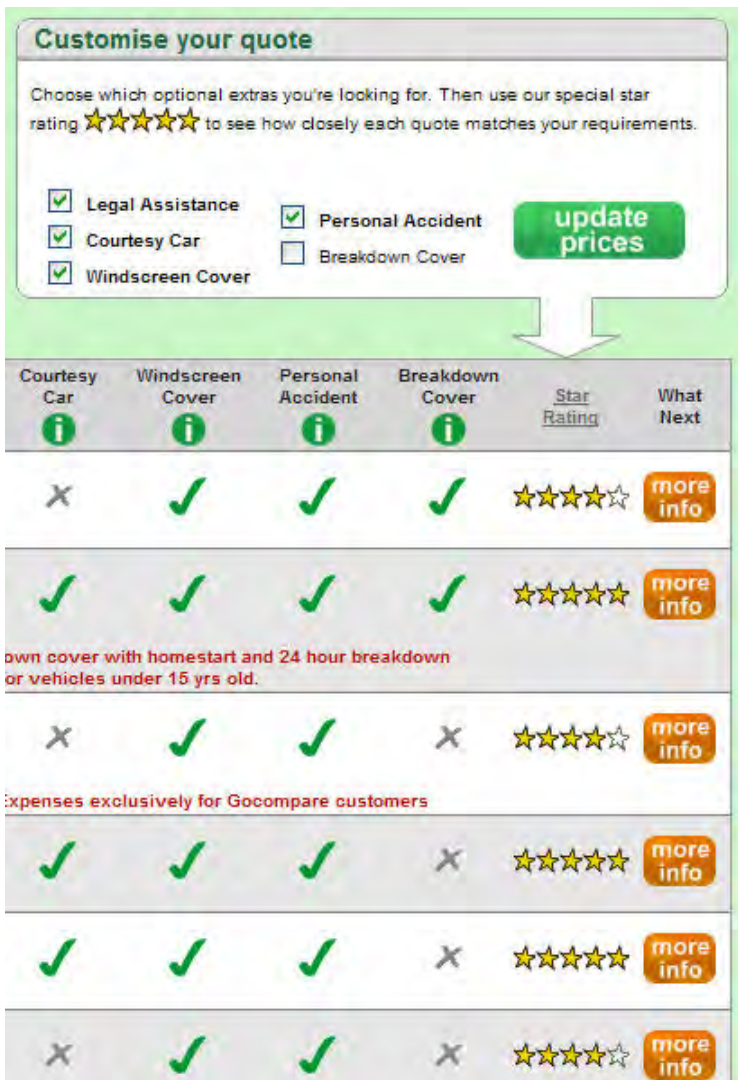
Provider	Annual premium	Policy excess	Monthly premium	Features	More Info
	£998.04	Compulsory £3,000.00 Voluntary £0.00	Please confirm availability on provider's site	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Freephone call centre UK based call centres 	More Info Terms & Conditions
	£1,033.45	Compulsory £3,000.00 Voluntary £0.00	Total cost £1,132.70 Deposit £206.69 Instalments 9 x £102.89	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Freephone call centre UK based call centres 	More Info Terms & Conditions
	£1,044.00	Compulsory £3,000.00 Voluntary £0.00	Total cost £1,170.50 Deposit £208.80 Instalments 10 x £96.17	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> UK based call centres 	More Info Terms & Conditions

uSwitch.com

uSwitch.com takes an alternative approach – placing very little information about each product on the results page. Users are forced to click into the information page for each product to see if it's suitable. This is unlikely to be popular for users (especially those with a slow Internet connection) and may encourage people to try out other sites instead.

Controlling the results

There's more variety in how much control price comparison sites give to users over the presentation of their results.



Customise your quote

Choose which optional extras you're looking for. Then use our special star rating ★★★★★ to see how closely each quote matches your requirements.

Legal Assistance Personal Accident
 Courtesy Car Breakdown Cover
 Windscreen Cover

update prices

Courtesy Car	Windscreen Cover	Personal Accident	Breakdown Cover	Star Rating	What Next
X	✓	✓	✓	★★★★★	more info
✓	✓	✓	✓	★★★★★	more info
own cover with homestart and 24 hour breakdown or vehicles under 15 yrs old.					
X	✓	✓	X	★★★★★	more info
expenses exclusively for Gocompare customers					
✓	✓	✓	X	★★★★★	more info
✓	✓	✓	X	★★★★★	more info
X	✓	✓	X	★★★★★	more info

GoCompare.com (see left) offers users the ability to define the different additional cover areas they need (courtesy car, legal assistance, etc). Each product is given a star rating according to how well each product matches your requirements.

However this functionality is essentially a poor filter – it retains the products in which users have clearly stated they're not interested.

Also, the star rating is traditionally used to represent user reviews so this is likely to confuse users.

MoneySupermarket.com fares even worse, with no filter/sort functionality at all. This places a large cognitive workload on users to remember the different products from a long list that fulfils their requirements.

Confused.com, ComparetheMarket.com and uSwitch.com all offer filtering functionality:

Refine results (36 quotes)

<input type="checkbox"/> UK based call centres only	<input type="checkbox"/> Freephone call centres	<input type="checkbox"/> 24/7 claims helpline
<input type="checkbox"/> £100+ vehicle contents cover	<input type="checkbox"/> Courtesy car	<input type="checkbox"/> Optional NCB for life
<input type="checkbox"/> No policy alteration fees	<input type="checkbox"/> Child car seat cover	<input type="checkbox"/> 90+ days basic cover abroad

Refine ▶

uSwitch.com

Revise your quote Cover: Fully Comprehensive Voluntary Excess: £500

Motor Legal Protection Breakdown Cover

UPDATE RESULTS ▶

Search complete

ComparetheMarket.com

Care must be taken that the filters available to users cover the entire range of filter options that they need. Each site offers different filters options:

- Confused.com (see right) and ComparetheMarket.com offer filters giving users the ability to change the voluntary excess and cover type
- Confused.com and uSwitch.com offer a courtesy car filter

There isn't any uniformity between the filters that the different sites offer. This could be a key differentiator between the different price comparison sites – if one offers the filters that users actually need to display the results relevant to them then they'll naturally gravitate towards that site. The effort needed to sort through its results will just be lower.

Confused.com Highlighter

Find your Best Fit

Only show prices with:

Courtesy Car

Protected no claims

Windscreen cover

Only show prices with a total excess under:

£500

Change Your Quote

Change Voluntary Excess

£ 500

£0 £250 £500

Change your Cover

Comprehensive

Recalculate prices

Trust

As a by-product of their age, more and more users are beginning to understand the price comparison site model. Many have had poor experiences and no longer trust them¹⁰ – “I've never actually managed to get the price quoted by the comparison site as when I click through to the provider I've always found it be to more”. On top of that, consumer watchdogs now advise you to visit several before making a decision¹¹.

How price comparison sites work

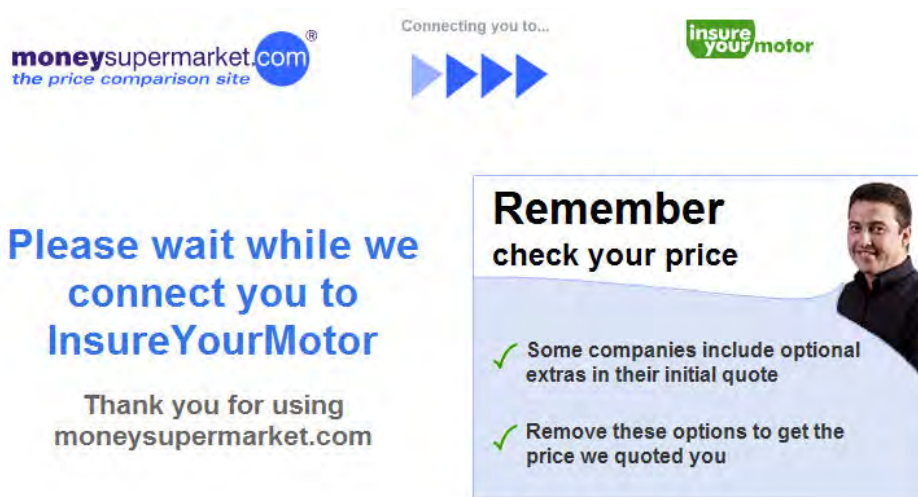
With poor brand perception comes lower trust, meaning sites will have to work harder to win user confidence. A good way to help win trust is to explain how the price comparison site works. With this greater understanding, web users will likely be more forgiving when the user experience falls over due to an external problem (such as a difference between the quote prices on the results and when on the insurance site itself).

Currently none of the 5 sites tackle this well. No mention is made on how they'll find the best product for you (i.e. what their business model is) nor is there a brief overview of what they do in the background.

Going off-site

Many users receive a bad experience after going off the price comparison site – the main complaint of price comparison sites is that people are unable to find the same price quoted on the comparison site when they go through to the insurance site. This affects perception of the comparison site and should be prevented where possible.

MoneySupermarket.com highlights why you may get a different quote when moving through from the comparison site to the insurance site and gives some advice on how to get closer to the original:



moneysupermarket.com[®]
the price comparison site

Connecting you to...

insure
your motor

Please wait while we connect you to InsureYourMotor

Thank you for using
moneysupermarket.com

Remember check your price

- ✓ Some companies include optional extras in their initial quote
- ✓ Remove these options to get the price we quoted you

This will increase understanding and help the users recover from a potentially relationship-ending problem and hopefully increase trust.

Brand recognition and returning customers

Brand recognition and loyalty is the 'Holy Grail' for price comparison sites. Currently there's little to no loyalty. The majority of visitors use MoneySupermarket.com one week, then Confused.com the next. The problem being that people don't remember the comparison site they used – instead, they remember the company they eventually purchase from.

Lack of brand recognition

With little brand loyalty, price comparison sites have 2 main ways to get users to visit their sites:

- Having users enter their sites through search engines (through natural or paid listings)
- Getting users to remember their brand by spending large amounts on advertising

Attempting to get to the top of search listings is tough at the best of times but with other sites also fighting for the top spot, sites can step over the mark. In early 2008 GoCompare.com was blacklisted by Google under the search term “car insurance”. In about 2 weeks it saw its market share of traffic fall from around 17% to 2.3%¹².

This explains the sheer volume of advertising for price comparison sites. There's currently no other way to ensure people keep coming to your site. However people are losing the key message – as many adverts aren't particularly memorable. The new advertising campaign for ComparetheMarket.com has been successful as it really focuses on brand recognition¹³.

Basically, these sites need to find other ways to get customers or to increase brand loyalty. Potential methods include looking for strategic partners (such as a newspaper site) and attempting to generate more trust with users.

Returning customers and supporting their decision making behaviour

Choosing credit cards, insurance and other important financial decisions are often not decided in one sitting by one person, but are often joint decisions between partners over several sessions. These sites must support a broken decision making process – people will need to break off for a whole series of reasons and/or refer to others who may not be present at the time of the initial visit. Sites need to offer users the ability to return to their results later, and even to forward them onto others:



ComparetheMarket.com, GoCompare.com and Confused.com place controls on the page for users to save their results. All the sites send emails with links back to the results, but this isn't made explicit. If users are on the results page they won't necessarily know that their results can be restored from their Inbox. Users will be reassured if these 'save' controls are present on the page.

Both ComparetheMarket.com and GoCompare.com also offer users the ability to send the results on to others. This further supports those people making joint decisions.

One area of delivery we were unable to look at during this review is the long term support for return customers. As insurance renewals occur yearly, sites should send email reminders 11 months after the initial search. These could link to new search results with the same information entered previously (same address, car etc.), with the ability to edit as necessary. This will increase the likelihood of users using the comparison site again, as the effort of entering their details is skipped (or at least reduced).

Other useful features

The following are examples of good functionality used by various price comparison sites for physical objects, such as TVs or phones.

Getting to know selling sites



One aspect of using price comparison sites is encountering a number of unknown sellers. Many of the smaller sellers appear prominently in price comparison sites as they attempt to make customers aware of their brand. Buyers may be reluctant to purchase from brands they don't recognise, and so will miss out on the advantages price comparison sites offer. Sites must find ways to enable users to learn about the different sellers to enable them to make their purchase decision.

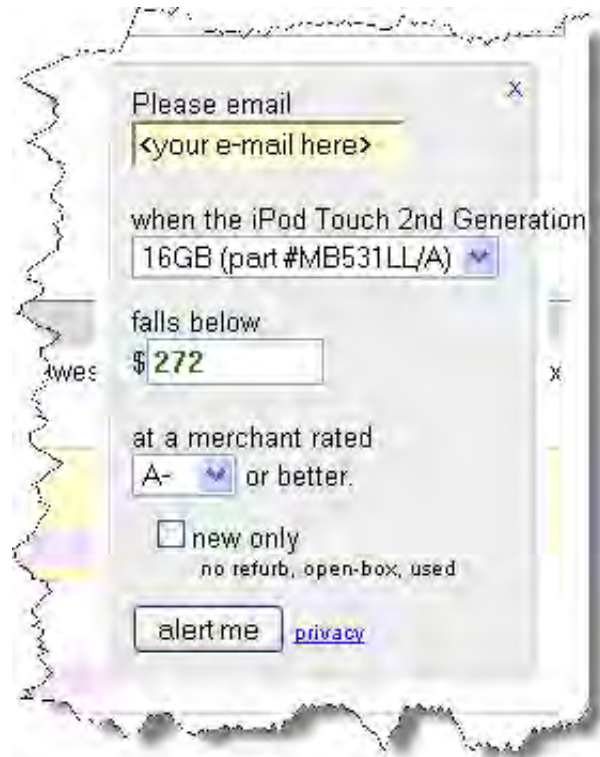
Streetprices.com offers a seller rating option (see left). This feature can help ease users' worries about the

smaller, unknown sellers.

The lurking shopper

Many people consider making a purchase for a while – and never get round to it. They visit the product page/search a couple of times – lurk on the page, before never returning. Price comparison sites are attempting to combat this by encouraging these ‘lurkers’ to make a purchase.

Streetprices.com also offers the option of price alerts (see right) – where you can define the price you’re looking for, and the quality of the seller. An email is sent when one seller drops its prices past the limit.



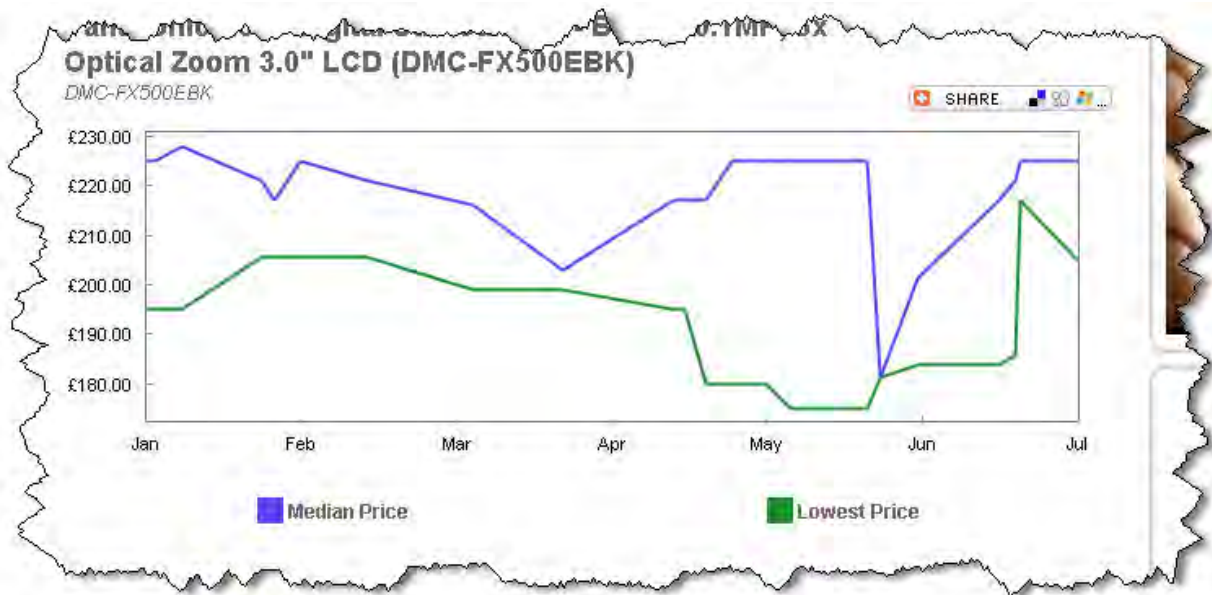
Please email

when the iPod Touch 2nd Generation
16GB (part #MB531LL/A) falls below
\$

at a merchant rated
A- or better.

new only
no refurb, open-box, used

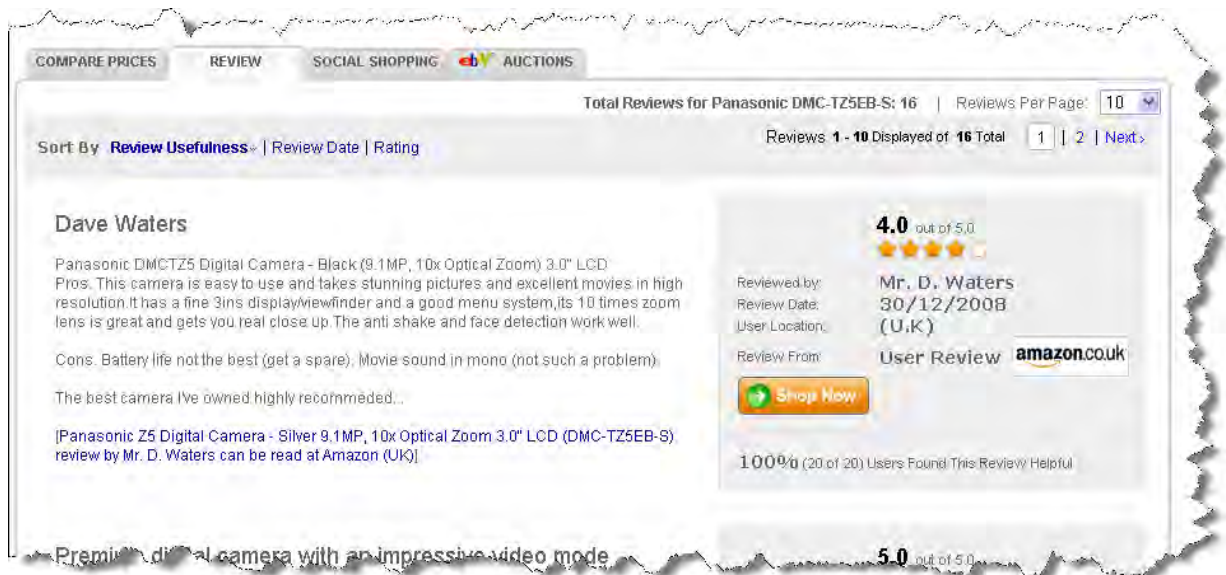
[privacy](#)



Price Spider.com UK offers a price tracking graph to see the change in prices over time (see above). This functionality could however put potential customers off when they might otherwise make a purchase. However this will encourage potential customers to later return to the comparison site (for this and potentially other purchases) to ensure they're getting the best deal.

Making the comparison site a research hub

As well as supporting purchases, price comparison sites can build brand loyalty by encouraging people to return even when not buying. This can be done in a variety of ways, but PriceSpider.com UK uses a very elegant method (see below).



Price Spider.com UK pulls reviews from other sites. This is a great idea, as people often like to have access to as many reviews as possible when making a purchase decision. Amalgamating several reviews from different sites reduces the number of sites browsers must visit, and makes the site useful to browsers as well as buyers.

Conclusion

Price comparison sites are being squeezed during the recession, right when they should be best placed to take advantage of the new, price-conscious age.

The future of price comparison sites in the long-term looks good but they must ensure the sites are simple and easy to use. There are key usability features that the big players could and should improve upon.

The results pages of many of the sites could be clarified, and much greater control over the presentation of the results should be passed over to the user, through filter and sort functionality. Sites should also attempt to design in more functionality that supports the collaborative approach many people take to choosing financial products.

This collaborative functionality will no doubt become a further core part of the price comparison sites' offerings – including shared searches and company and product reviews.

Trust is becoming a more important issue than in the past and price comparison sites as a group must work on building greater trust from users through transparent practices and support once users go off-site.

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User experience research & design

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- Interaction design

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- Accessible content management system
- Accessibility audits

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- Usability testing
- Interviews & focus groups
- Persona creation

Training & mentoring

- Usability, IA & web writing
- Accessibility & CSS
- Ongoing support & mentoring

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