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Stalking the Retail Aisles With a More Focused Purpose

By **BOB TEDESCHI**

My 12-year-old daughter loves back-to-school shopping for some reason. When I was her age, I considered it akin to digging my own grave.

As a parent, I don't find the process much better. Wandering around a big-box store in search of a pencil sounds like a game show in which the lucky winner gets to hand over a credit card.

I recently tried to determine whether mobile apps could make the process less frustrating or costly. The answer was a qualified yes.

Of the apps made by big-box stores, those from [Best Buy](#) and [Target](#) sped up the shopping process slightly, as did [Westfield Malls](#), a new app from Westfield, a mall developer. Others, for [Sam's Club](#), [Staples](#) and [Wal-Mart](#), were less helpful. (At least the apps themselves are a bargain. They're all free, on both Apple and Android.)

The better ones suggest that they can help you find an item in the local store. Some also offer prices on those goods, but they're often inaccurate.

I assigned myself the task of finding school backpacks, T-shirts and a 64-gigabyte [iPod Touch](#), and I drove to a stretch of road in suburban Connecticut with a mall and nearly every one of the big-box stores.

Of all the apps I tried, Best Buy's was the most reliable and filled with features. I used it to find the nearest store and to check the availability of the iPod Touch before driving there.

The app suggested it was in stock, and it was correct. The price inside was \$399, but when I pointed out to a sales associate that the app showed it for \$370, he said they "can match" the online price.

"Can, or will?" I asked.

“Will,” he said.

From now on, before making a significant purchase at a big-box store, I will download the store’s app so that I have quick access to their online prices.

Like most other apps on my list, Best Buy provides an app-size version of the week’s sales circular for specific stores, and it allows you to collect items on a wish list. Users are also supposed to be able to retrieve product details while in the store by scanning the so-called QR code, a new alternative to bar codes, on many labels.

That sounded promising, so I gave it a try. I repeatedly tried scanning QR codes on five different products, and each time the app returned an error message. So much for that.

Target’s mobile app was also fairly good but a bit more uneven than Best Buy’s. When it came to basic searches for product, the app was good on inventory but bad on prices.

It showed that my local store had the iPod, for instance. But when I arrived, the store’s price was \$395, \$25 more than the price I saw on the app. I checked my phone again and, in gray print beneath the \$370, saw that it was an online-only offer.

Worse still, when I clicked for more information on the iPod, I found out that I couldn’t retrieve an in-store price from the app.

Target doesn’t offer QR scanning, but you can create wish lists and have coupons sent to your phone via text messages. My coupons were for women’s jeans and macaroni and cheese, neither of which I needed.

At least Target knew that the iPod was in my local store. The Sam’s Club app suggested that the iPod wasn’t available, but it was (at a cool \$349, no less). Wal-Mart’s app suggested the iPod was available in the store, but it was not.

Staples was less ambitious. Its app posted products but didn’t try to predict in-store availability, and the prices, according to the app, “may vary by store and online.” That’s not very useful.

[Home Depot](#) isn’t exactly a back-to-school shopping destination, but as a big-box store, it’s worth mentioning. The app’s product search feature is fast and it includes a long list of video tutorials and even a tape measure function. Plus, the store map is good for charting out shopping trips.

But I digress. Back to school we go.

Few people know, or care, who owns the nearest mall, but it may be worth your while to look it up. Westfield, one of the bigger mall developers in the United States, recently introduced a useful [iPhone](#) app that tries to offer information on store inventory.

With my younger son and daughter in tow, I tested out the app at a Westfield mall in Milford, Conn., which includes a Target. We found a bench, opened the Target and Westfield apps and searched for T-shirts and backpacks.

Westfield's product search function was spotty. I typed "women's graphic T-shirts," and the app produced no results. I tried related search terms, and came up empty until I tried "Graphic T."

More than 23,000 T-shirts appeared, so I sorted the results to show only one result per retailer. Fifteen appeared — inexplicably, the ones at Target's didn't make the list — so my daughter chose an Aéropostale shirt for \$24.50.

Using the app's map, we quickly found the store and the shirts, which were on sale (two for \$15).

Still on the Westfield app, we searched for backpacks and found a promising one at Target: the Sumdex Impulse Full Speed, for \$68. We walked to the store and wandered through one section of backpacks.

No Sumdex. We browsed through a second section. No Sumdex.

We walked for a few minutes until we found an employee who could direct us to any other backpacks, and he pointed us to a wall of them. No Sumdex backpacks existed at the store.

I gave up on Westfield and opened the Target app, which showed several Sumdex models available.

Online only.

The apps didn't fail us completely. I turned from the backpacks to find my daughter racing toward a package of pens. "Those are my favorites," she said, then looked around at all the school supplies nearby. "This is so much fun!"

Quick Calls

Cut the Rope: Experiments (\$1 [on iPhone](#) and \$2 [on iPad](#)) is as big a hit as the original, and every bit worth the download. Liz Claiborne Inc.'s Love Is Not Abuse (free [on Apple](#)), for

parents of teenagers, simulates dating-abuse situations and offers resources for more information.