

Nelson slowly joins online shopping

MICHELLE SUTTON

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Online shopping is slowly catching on in Nelson, say city retailers, but many warn it's no substitute for customer service.

National statistics from Nielsen shows the number of online shoppers in the country has reached more than 1.6 million, double the number since 2004 and 49 per cent of the population aged over 18.

It surveyed 15,000 adult internet users in New Zealand about online shopping habits this year and found the most popular online purchases were airline tickets, 50 per cent, then clothing, shoes, accessories, 32 per cent, followed by books, magazines, 29 per cent, entertainment tickets, 27 per cent and travel related services such as accommodation and car hire 24 per cent.

Nelson retailers that spoke to the Nelson Mail this week said shoppers and stores were following global online purchasing trends, but the uptake was slower.

"Nelson businesses have been less prepared to embrace e-commerce opportunities, due in part to the size and nature of our local market," said Allan Innes-Walker, director of Nelson-based business designer Hothouse.

He joined other Nelson business leaders warning that digital developments were unable to replace customer service.

"The online environment is no magic fix," Mr Innes-Walker said.

It was simply a contemporary way of forming powerful relationships with customers and selling products, he said.

Paper Plus Nelson owner David Moir stressed the importance of both on-line and bricks-and-mortar.

"If you focus on one only, you do so at your own peril," he said.

This year the store offered back-to-school stationery online with home deliveries, for some schools. It accounted for about 10 per cent of total back-to-school sales, he said.

However, customers continued to visit the physical store as it remained part of the shopping experience.

This would continue to be a sales focus, he said.

Nelson Tasman Chamber of Commerce chief executive Dot Kettle said on-line sales would never totally replace personal service.

"That's still no substitute for customers getting good service and personal advice," she said.

Online shopping had not impacted on commercial property rents in Nelson, but it was impacting on the amount of retail space required, she said.

She was unaware of any Nelson businesses closing because of competition from online shopping, but Hamills Hunting and Fishing owner Brady Tasker cited it as a reason contributing to the store closing earlier this year along with the economic downturn.

"It's probably a contributing factor in a lot of business decisions for stores," Ms Kettle said.