

8 Things You're Doing Wrong When You Buy Furniture Online

By Jennifer Geddes | Jul 26, 2018



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We don't need to tell you about the brilliance of online shopping: Point, click, and presto! You've just furnished your entire house in a matter of minutes.

But for how easy online furniture shopping is, it's equally easy to screw up. Badly.

Maybe you only skimmed the return policy. Or perhaps the color you thought was forest green is really more like lime. And don't even get us started on the damaged pieces that showed up with the 6-foot entertainment center. It's enough to push a sane person over the edge.

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Looks—especially online—can be deceiving. Lighting, camera angles, and styling can render that chair a different piece of furniture altogether once it's sitting in your living room.

Never fear—you can master online furniture shopping by watching out for these eight easy-to-make mistakes.

1. Glossing over dimensions

Before you put that sofa in your shopping cart, you'll check the measurements to make sure it'll fit in your living room, right? Right? But there's more to consider here. Most shoppers don't factor in ceiling height or the width of their stairwell, experts say.

Make sure to take the bannister into account when hauling furniture up and down the stairs, and measure doorways—twice, urges Jeff Lauter, owner of Lauter's Fine Furniture. Then, add an inch or two to your measurements in case the online numbers are off.

And don't be shy about calling the company for more detailed info.

"Some sofa feet are made to screw off, which gives you an extra few inches to get through doorways, but this may not be clear from the product description," says designer Darla DeMorrow.

2. Placing too much weight on reviews

Consumer alert: Take bad (and good) reviews with a big grain of salt—fake ones do exist, and some reviews may be outdated.

"Check a couple of the recent best and the bottom worst, and bear in mind that a few bad reviews may have come from an earlier version of the product," DeMorrow explains.

And note how the company responds to critical comments. If you end up with an issue after you buy, you'll want to know that the company has your back.

3. Assuming assembly will be easy-breezy

If you're envisioning an item that snaps together like Lego bricks, think again: In fact, you'll likely need a few tools to put your furniture together.

"Most furniture today is imported, and since shipping is a large portion of the cost, companies spend tremendous resources to 'flat pack' to reduce space in ocean containers," says Greg Jaron, owner of Jarons Furniture Outlet in New Jersey. The result? Multiple pages of instructions and dozens of pieces to assemble.

If you're not the DIY type, shop in a brick-and-mortar store. But if you do go the assembly route, make sure to assemble the item in the room where it'll live. Don't build a dresser in the hallway only to find it won't fit through the bedroom door.

4. Eyeballing the color

Chances are good you've been the recipient of a shirt or a pair of shoes that looks nothing like the color you picked online, in part because computer and phone screens display color differently. But when it's furniture? That can be an expensive mistake.

To forestall the heartbreak, view the item on multiple devices and request a fabric swatch. Many online furniture companies will send a sample for a minimal fee—worth it if you're trying to match something to curtains or paint.

"You'll also want to feel the fabric sample, consider its durability, and even test it for stain resistance," says Karen Gray-Plaisted of Design Solutions KGP

Still can't decide whether the color will work in your room? Head to Instagram or Pinterest for amateur photos that will give you a better idea of how the piece appears in real life. Or take advantage of technology—both Wayfair and Chairish offer a "view in room" feature so you can see how a piece will look.

5. Cheaping out on delivery

Free shipping isn't uncommon, but there are various levels of delivery service that you should consider. White glove, for example, means the delivery people will bring the piece inside, unwrap it—even assemble it in some cases—and then haul away the mess.

6. Expecting free returns—or returns at all

This one's usually made plain in the delivery section (which you should read, and then read it again).

"Typically, returns have a large restocking fee and shipping costs attached, and you'll often have to send the item back in the original packaging, which can be a challenge if it's bulky," says Jaron.

Beware of anything that's dubbed "clearance" or "custom," too. You might think you've hit pay dirt with that special-order orange settee that's so virtually chic. But if it's hideous upon arrival, you're going to be frustrated to hear that the company won't take it back.

7. Not knowing where to look for sales and discounts

Online furniture retailers are almost always having a sale—you just have to know where to look, says Sarah Hollenbeck, shopping and savings expert at Offers.com.

The best way to find available coupons is to download a shopping browser extension, which will comb the web for coupons and discounts and automatically apply them to your cart at checkout.

"Unfortunately, there isn't a tried and true way to tell when certain retailers are going to discount that couch you fell in love with," Hollenbeck says. "But being aware of regular sale patterns each month can help you shop at the right time."

8. Expecting perfection

The biggest problem with online furniture shopping is that so much arrives damaged or without all the parts.

"I've had to send back three vanities in order to get the right one," DeMorrow says. "So if you're up against a deadline, you might want to order from a big-box store, where they can quickly pull the items right off their shelves."

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