

Shopping without borders with ShopandBox

New service pairs Singapore shoppers with people overseas who help to buy and ship the products to bypass regional restrictions.
COLIN TAN reports

Overseas shopping websites that reject Singapore-issued credit cards, do not ship to Singapore or charge inflated prices have frustrated many online shoppers here.

ShopandBox is a service that hopes to change all that. It is a personalised peer-to-peer shopping service that pairs shoppers here with “boxers” overseas, that is, people who will buy the product and ship it to them.

The company is founded by four friends – Mr Xin-Lung Tai, 29, his wife, Rebecca, 28, Mr Louis Tan, 29, and Ms Lily Lin, 33.

Mrs Tai, who is in charge of marketing, said the idea came about because her husband was unhappy with what he regarded as “price gouging” in Australia.

Mr Tan designed the website while Ms Lin runs the day-to-day operations.

The four invested \$30,000 to set up ShopandBox. Mr Tai, then a management consultant in Melbourne, and his wife, a senior researcher, both quit their jobs to work full-time on the website.

Said Mrs Tai: “Our family was shocked at first. Everyone thought we were crazy for quitting our jobs, but they came around and showed support once they realised how useful our service is.”

ShopandBox launched last

November. So far, she said, it has filled more than 500 orders for shoppers from more than 20 countries.

She said: “Singaporeans spend the most per order, averaging US\$457 (S\$572); and Malaysians are in second place, with US\$389.”

PERSONAL TOUCH

What it offers sounds similar to that offered by companies such as Borderlinx, ComGateway and vPost, which receive customers’ purchases and send them on, bypassing regional restrictions on credit cards and overseas shipping curbs.

Where their company differs, Mr Tai explained, is in its flexibility. Because their boxers are locals in the country of purchase, they can advise customers where best to buy products and translate instructions and information labels in foreign languages for the customer. An online message board lets customers communicate with the boxer and receive updates throughout.

The service allows anyone to view what was ordered and the messages exchanged by customer and boxer, but the customer’s personal information is withheld for privacy reasons.

A boxer can travel to stores to buy products not sold online, for a nominal fee set by him to cover his transport and time, said Mrs Tai. This is a service its competitors do not offer. ComGateway supports online sites in the United States, Borderlinx supports those in the US and Britain, and vPost supports shopping in the US, Britain, China and Japan.

ShopandBox supports 10 regions so far – US, Britain, China, Japan, South Korea, France, Australia, Hong Kong, Malaysia and Singapore.

Mrs Tai said it has signed up 26 boxers, mostly college students, retirees and stay-at-home parents looking to earn an income in their spare time. The company interviews

them by Skype to assess their suitability and asks for a copy of their passports as a security measure.

Payment takes place in two stages. In the first stage, customers are sent an invoice covering the product’s cost and ShopandBox’s service fee, which ranges from 10 per cent to 14 per cent. For pricier items, the percentage is lower.

Once payment is confirmed, the boxer buys the product and the customer gets a second invoice for the shipping fee.

The boxer then repacks the product in a smaller box to reduce volumetric weight and, thus, the shipping fee. The shopper can ask for excess product packaging to be removed, or to have several purchases repacked into one box free of charge.

Payment is by credit card or PayPal. The fee for using PayPal is borne by the customer and goes directly to PayPal.

Turnaround time varies. Once a

boxer receives the purchases, they are packed within a day to be shipped by DHL Express. Delivery is supposed to take three days and the customer can opt to insure the box.

ShopandBox said that customers seem satisfied with the service.

Among them was Ms Isabelle Lim, 28, a sales manager and repeat customer who has bought fashion accessories and cosmetics from South Korea. She said: “The boxer helped me to translate the language and the products. I’ll use it in the future and refer my friends to this.”

Mr Tai has plans to expand the service to Italy and Taiwan, among other regions, and to create a mobile app.

He said: “What keeps us going is that we wake up every day and see a new order. It’s the ability to help shoppers purchase things around the world. Seeing shoppers come back repeatedly validates our idea.”

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PHOTO: SHOPANDBOX

Mr Xin-Lung Tai (left) and his wife Rebecca co-founded shopping service ShopandBox with two friends last November. It now supports 10 regions and has handled more than 500 orders for shoppers from more than 20 countries.

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