



E-COMMERCE: WHO KNEW BETHLEHEM WAS IN BOLIVIA?

BY E. M. PHILLIPS

These days, it seems as if every business hoping to stay strong must have an address on the World Wide Web.

Still, the practicality of buying certain products on-line may be questionable; books and clothes seems straight forward enough, but what about big ticket items such as cars, furniture and yes, even steel? Is it safe to buy your steel on-line? Who is producing it? Where are the mills located? What are the companies track-records for on-time delivery? Does the material meet ASTM requirements? This review sets out the answer some of these questions for you, and what was found is pretty typical of any daily surfing on the choppy waters of the internet: there are the good, the bad and the not quite ready for prime-time steel sites.

Things are seldom what they seem. Of the 14 sites visited there were a number that promoted the buying and selling of steel but seemed geared more toward other steel issues. For instance, SteelRx.com promotes its vigorous application process, via third party review, as its main selling point. However, their membership leans to the association/professional organization side of the industry rather than the fabrication side. If you have questions about steel they have some very good resources, including sections titled: "Steel Talk," "Data Mine" and "Ask Dr. Steel." But if you are looking to buy steel at a good price with low shipping charges, this site is probably not for you—most of the mills listed are in India.

Another site that advertises itself as a link to all things steel is VirtualSteel.com. VirtualSteel is a site that offers its members information on trade associations, upcoming shows and conference, catalogs, directories, books and magazines having to do with the industry and, for \$500 a year in membership fees, you can scroll through their Rolodex of "1,500 company links."

In the same general vein—but free to the user—are Manufacturing.net and OneBuild.com. In general, these two sites are huge virtual catalogs where the buyers can comparison shop for commercial construction materials. Users can shop by item, which will give the buyer a list of all the different manufactures, compare price, size and other amenities of the available products: price quotes, specific supplier or specific part number. Both of these sites are easy to navigate and useful ways to comparison shop for hardware to software, but they are not for the steel buyer.

There are, of course, plenty of sites where the steel buyer can actually broker for steel rather than construction related information and materials. However, the buyer should be aware of where his or her prospective steel is coming from. For instance, SteelBroker.com offers everything from stainless to hot-dipped galvanized steel in various quantities and grades, but most of the listings are from mills located in the Ukraine, South Africa, Chile and Pakistan. For someone looking to build a bridge in Omaha or a shopping center in Cleveland, the shipping costs could far outweigh any savings that might be gained from simply buying the steel within the United States.

For the steel buyer willing to try his or her luck, there is what can be seen as the “Ebays” of on-line steel buying. SalvageSale.com, located in Houston, is one such auction-based site. SalvageSale advertises that they sell every kind of steel a potential buyer could want. Indeed, while there may be an icon to click on for every type of angle or beam desired, this does not mean that there will be anything for sale. As SalvageSale is an auction site the buyer can not put in queries to steel manufactures but rather must settle for what is posted. During three recent visits to this site there were two postings of available steel under the “structural steel” sub-



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heading: one for 22 bars of prime SBQ bars and two truck-loads of hot rolled rounds.

MetalShopper.com works much the same way as SalvageSale.com. The buyer decides what he or she is looking for, scrolls through the posted steel for sale, and if he or she finds something of interest, submits a bid to the manufacturer. As in many of these sites, there was no informa-

tion posted on membership fees for the buyer; however, listing prices for the seller range from anywhere to \$24.95 for a single listing to \$4.95 per listing for 100 auctions or more. There are only a handful of manufactures on MetalShopper to date, but most are domestic. Overall, MetalShopper is easy to navigate and worth looking into, especially for the buyer who has purchased steel from one of the listed sellers before or if

the buyer is looking for some new manufactures (all contact information is posted as well). There are some good deals to be found at MetalShopper, and it seems to be a site with true growth potential.

SpotMetal.com, a free site to both sellers and buyers, is another auction-based site but is rare in that it works as a bid-based site as well. At SpotMetal the buyer has the option of both scrolling through listed auctions or submitting a request to all suppliers within a stated region. Still, the regions to choose from are broad. North America, for instance, means anywhere in North America, and most of the sellers, unfortunately, are located outside of the United States.

For the buyer looking to gather bids on their future steel purchase rather than trying their hand at auction, there are a handful of sites to visit. The newest of these bidder-based sites is Web4Engineers.com. Not quite up-and-running at press time, Web4Engineers looks to connect buyers and sellers with "cost-effective sourcing and bidding." Thus

far there is no available information on membership fees or who possible sellers may be.

Two bidder-based sites that were fully functional at press time are E-Steel.com and IBuySteel.com. Both of sites are free to the user and are set up so that the buyer lists the desired steel, quantity, price and date to receive the product. The bidder can then choose a few specific manufactures to send the request to or the bidder can send it to all manufacture members. After sending out the request, the buyer then waits for bids to come back, after which negotiations may take place. While both of these sites are user friendly and offer a wide range of structural steel, the buyer should be cautioned that only registered members are allowed to view listings of manufactures currently using the sites.

All in all, the most complete e-steel site thus far found on the sometimes tumultuous internet was MetalSite.com. A user-friendly and buyer-based site, it offers a much

smaller auction board as well. MetalSite offers free membership to potential buyers and assesses fees for the seller depending on how much steel is sold. However, the best selling point for MetalSite are the companies selling on it, including: AISC-members Bethlehem Steel, Mid-America Steel, Infra-Metals, Levinson Steel Co., and a host of other reputable manufactures in the United States with good records for delivery, price and product quality.

The world of steel buying is changing slowly but surely. And, as with anything, you are bound to get the good with the bad, but in these days of "buyer's markets" there are a few sites out there that are worth trying for both the buyer and the seller. Are we headed toward a world where all business is e-business? Nobody knows. But, as my mother always said, "Prepare for the future and the rest will take care of itself."

SITE SUMMARIES

MetalSite.com is a user-friendly, bidder-based site that offers a small auction board as well. The site is free to buyers and offers a good range of domestic steel manufactures, many of which are AISC-members, to buy from.

Contact information:
www.metlasite.com
info@metlasite.com

E-Steel.com is a bid-based site that is free to the user and allows for the buyer to send bids to selected manufactures or to all listed manu-

facturers. Only registered members are allowed to view listings of current member manufactures.

Contact information:
www.esteel.com
clientservice@e-steel.com

IBuySteel.com is a bid-based site that is free to the buyer and allows for him to send out as few or as many requests for bids as he desires. Only current members are allowed to view listings of current member manufactures.

Contact information:
www.ibuysteel.com

Manufacturing.com is a site focused on selling com-

mercial construction materials. Not necessarily for the steel buyer, it is a user-friendly site and very good for comparison shopping for more general construction site related materials.

Contact information:
www.manufacturing.net
MetalShopper.com is an auction-based site that is worth looking into for anyone trying to buy steel on-line. At press time, the community of sellers was still pretty small however, it is a user-friendly site with true growth potential.

Contact information:
www.metalshopper.com

SITE SUMMARIES

OneBuild.com is another site focused more on commercial construction needs from hardware to software. It is not as easy for the user to navigate as some other sites with the same goal, but it is a good way to comparison shop for construction related materials.

Contact information:
www.onebuild.com
contact@onebuild.com

SpotMetal.com is free to all users and functions mostly as an auction-based site, but it does offer a small bid-based section as well. At press time, most of the sellers on the site were located outside of the United States.

Contact information:
www.spotmetal.com

SteelBroker.com is a auction-based site with many members however, most of the sites manufacture members are located outside of the United States.

Contact information:
www.steelbroker.com

SteelRx.com lists itself as the customer's "one stop shop for all steel." Currently, though most of the manufactures are located outside of the United States. Its membership does include many professional organizations and associations and is worth

looking into for answers regarding steel related questions.

Contact information:
www.steelrx.com
partners@steelrx.com

SalvageSale.com is an auction-based site.

Contact information:
Salvagesale.com

VirtualSteel.com is a site where the consumer can gather information in the form of book, magazines, software and contact lists for all things regarding steel. Members alone can fully access the site, membership fees are \$500 a year.

Contact information:
www.virtualsteel.com
info@virtualsteel.com