

The raw and the clicked

- 1 THERE is "a huge difference between being late and being too late," said Dalton Philips, the boss of Morrisons, on November 21st, as he announced the launch of the British grocer's online-shopping service. Morrisons' competitors have been selling broccoli and baby food via the internet for more than a decade. Britain's fourth-largest grocery chain had shunned e-commerce as a profit-sapping distraction. It paid with falling market share and the defection of some of its best customers to Tesco, the country's biggest grocer, and Ocado, an online-only supermarket.
- 2 Morrisons' change of heart will be noticed beyond Britain. Grocery is the biggest category in retailing but the most resistant to the advance of online shopping. Even in Britain, where it has gone furthest, it may account for just 5% of sales this year. But it is growing fast everywhere.
- 3 Grocers have held back for good reasons. Like many bricks-and-mortar merchants they fret that online commerce will shrivel sales in stores but not the costs associated with them. Grocery, with its tiny margins, adds complications. Virtual shopping-carts contain dozens of low-value items, which must be stored at different temperatures. Retailers can either get in-store staff to pick them off the shelves, which becomes disruptive as volumes rise, or build dedicated warehouses, which is costly. So are home deliveries: even in thickly settled Britain each one costs grocers around £10 (\$16), but shoppers typically pay little more than £3.
- 4 Consumers are also wary. Many want to examine fresh produce before they buy it. They recoil when online grocers deliver "substitutions" instead of what they ordered. Many shoppers try grocery websites but "get discouraged", says David Shukri of the Institute of Grocery Distribution in London. Yet to shun online is to risk losing grocers' best customers: prosperous families and those with children.
- 5 Among pioneers there have been spectacular wipeouts. California's Webvan expanded at breakneck speed, pampered customers with services like home delivery within half-hour slots, lost control of costs and collapsed in 2001. Its demise deterred imitators. In Britain Ocado has yet to make much money after more than a decade. Tesco claims its online operation, with nearly half the British market, is profitable. But it uses "murky" accounting for the cost of stores, where much of the produce is picked, says Andrew Gwynn of Exane BNP Paribas, an investment bank.
- 6 "It really is a prisoner's dilemma and you can't afford not to play," says Chris Biggs of BCG.

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