

Annexe K

Price comparison site trawl summary

Introduction

K.1 We carried out a web trawl of PCS. The purpose of the web trawl was to understand the following:

- How prices for the same product compare across a number of PCS.
- If the prices shown on sites are direct prices available on click through.
- Whether or not any explanation was provided about ranking or rating of the retailers shown on the site.
- Whether or not PCS state how many products in the market they compare and total number of traders compared.

Methodology

K.2 We reviewed a mix of 10 large and small PCS for six different products: car hire, flights, television, mobile phone, CDs and broadband.¹

K.3 The following aspects were investigated for each search:

- best price returned
- number of products returned
- number of suppliers per product returned
- explanation about weighting of rankings or number of retailers included, and
- whether or not a product is available at the same price on click through.

¹ Due to legal restrictions we did not conduct web trawls for products where the provision of personal data was required, such as credit cards and insurance products.

General findings

- K.4 There was a high degree of variation in prices. In the majority of the market sectors reviewed, different prices (for the cheapest result) were returned by each PCS for the same product criteria. However, there is greater consistency in the prices returned by the five largest PCS.
- K.5 There was also variation in number of products and suppliers returned by each PCS. It should be noted that the PCS reviewed have different search methodology and business model, for example, some sites search specific suppliers they have contracts with while others scrape prices from websites.
- K.6 The majority of the prices shown on the sites were the same prices available on click through. However, there were still cases where a product was not available, prices were not the same on click through or were only 'base prices' with additional charges added on click through. This was particularly evident in flights, car hire, mobile phones and broadband. The latter applies to both market leaders and smaller players.
- K.7 The majority of the PCS rank products by the best available price or product value (for example, broadband providers services are ranked by price, download speed, contract length, download limit, etc). Only a small minority of PCS provide information about independent ratings of the suppliers, such as customer ratings and reviews.
- K.8 The majority of PCS state how many products in the market they compare and total number of traders compared.
- K.9 The PCS trawl suggests that PCS are a good starting point to see what prices and offers are available from different retailers, but that in order to get a comprehensive picture of products and prices available in the market it may be necessary to use more than one PCS.

Results by Sector

Car hire

- Eight out of the 10 PCS reviewed returned different top price results.
- The lowest number of products returned was two and the highest was 199. This is due to varied business models, for example, some PCS have contractual relationships with particular providers and others search through other aggregators including rental agencies and other PCS.
- All 10 PCS displayed company names next to the featured products. Products are ranked by price (cheapest first). Only one out of the 10 PCS reviewed provided additional information on the ranking of retailers, such as customer ratings and reviews.
- Nine out of the 10 PCS reviewed returned the same 'base price' on click through to a selected product. However, two add 'opt- out' on 'car reduction insurance' and 'total damage excess waiver' respectively. Four sites add 'opt-in' on insurance refusal and 'car excess reduction insurance'.²
- Two out of the 10 PCS reviewed displayed additional results/ alternative cars on click through.

Flights

- All 10 of the PCS reviewed returned different top price results, even when top results were provided by the same airline. For example, six PCS top results were for the same airline, but all showed a different price.
- The highest number of results returned was 1148 results from 12 airlines, followed by 822 results from six airlines. The

² 1 PCS did not return any results – link malfunctioned.

lowest number of results returned was 14 results from five airlines. Nine out of the 10 PCS reviewed searched through airlines only, one PCS also searched travel websites.

- Two of the PCS reviewed do not provide any explanation on weighting of rankings of retailers. Only one PCS provides a list of airlines not compared explaining that they have not given permission to be included. Six provide a list of flight companies compared. Only one PCS provides customer reviews under each product. One PCS explains that a specific provider is a chosen partner.
- We note that four out of the 10 PCS reviewed require customers to buy tickets directly from the PCS, so we were unable to click through to the flight companies. Four PCS returned prices excluding additional charges for luggage and other optional charges which appear on click through the web pages of flight companies. In one case the price returned was different on click through and in another case a link to the selected flight was not provided, only a phone number to call.

Television

- For televisions we considered two search categories - the top product featured on the PCS and the best price for a specific TV model. All 10 PCS returned different results for the top featured product. Only two out of the 10 PCS reviewed returned the same top price for a specific TV model. Two did not return any results for a requested specific TV model.
- The highest number of results returned for a specific TV model was 35 products from 32 retailers. However, seven of the 10 PCS reviewed returned four or fewer products and retailers.
- All 10 PCS provide a list of retailers. Six provide a link to customer reviews under each retailer.
- On click through the same product was available at the same price for all PCS bar the two that did not have the requested TV model.

Mobile phone

- For mobile phones we also considered the top product featured on each PCS as well as the best price for a specific mobile phone.
- Different top products were featured by each of the 10 PCS. When considering a specific mobile phone seven different prices were returned from the 10 PCS reviewed. One PCS did not return any results for the specific Mobile phone requested.
- Eight out of the 10 PCS reviewed compared thousands of mobile phone deals. The highest number of deals compared by a PCS was 828,895. The lowest number of deals compared was 623.
- The highest number of deals returned by a PCS for the specific mobile phone deal searched for in our trawl was 6,065 deals. In contrast one PCS only returned one deal relating to the specific phone.
- The highest overall number of retailers returned was 16. Eight out of the 10 PCS reviewed returned between one and five retailers for a specific mobile phone deal. All major networks are represented by all 10 PCS.
- Six sites provide the number of retailers searched. Two provide customer reviews under each retailer and one ranks phones by manufacturer, wireless interface and phone form factor. Two out of the 10 PCS reviewed do not provide any information on number or ranking of retailers.
- On click through the same product was available at the same price for the specific mobile phone on six out of the 10 PCS reviewed. In one case the product was available at the same price on click through, but with the additional 'one month free insurance, thereafter, can be cancelled'. Three PCS did not return same price on click through either due to the product being out of stock or an error message appearing.

CD

- Two out of the 10 PCS reviewed returned the same best price product. One PCS did not return any results for a specific CD.
- The highest number of products returned was 16 by 16 retailers. However, six sites returned two or fewer products and retailers.
- Two PCS provide customer reviews under each retailer. Eight out of the 10 PCS reviewed rank retailers by product price – starting from the cheapest. Two did not offer explanation on rankings or number of retailers.
- On click through the same product was available at the same price on six out of the 10 sites. In three cases the product was cheaper on click through and in one case it was more expensive.

Broadband

- Nine out of 10 PCS provide a 'top price' as a starting point for a search. Search results are based on the search through the featured product. One PCS required post code information before starting a basic search, so it was excluded from our web trawl due to legal restrictions.
- Six out of nine PCS featured the same top price for a broadband and phone deal.
- All nine sites featured at least six top broadband providers. The highest number of providers returned was 11.
- On click through the same product was available at the same price on seven out of the 10 PCS reviewed. However, each site had an additional charge for line rental. In one case the price returned by the PCS was an evening rate only with varied daytime and standard rates shown on click through. In one case the price was not the same on click through.