

Let me declare an interest from the outset: I reckon I've just saved about £200 on my electricity bill.

I've always been a bit ambivalent towards price comparison websites. The headline savings always seemed too good to be true. As granny always used to say, if it looks too good to be true, then it probably is. But not today.

It took me less than five minutes browsing at the Consumer Power website to find a company selling electricity around 30% cheaper than my current supplier. With granny's stern warning ringing in my ears, I chose to spend a further 15 minutes manually re-checking all the calculations just to convince myself that there was no hidden catch. There wasn't one.

After that, it took a further minute or two to apply, online, to the new supplier. Now all I need to do is wait for them to take care of it, a process that should take between four and six weeks. The old and the new supplier will arrange the switch between them, so I don't need to do anything else.

Comparing market prices is something my grandparents did instinctively. They knew, as they walked the high street, who had the reputation for cleanliness, fair dealing and good value. Modern innovations such as supermarkets and, more recently, the internet, have simplified the equation somewhat. But they have also drawn us into buying with minimum effort, all in one place: maximum efficiency, minimum time spent. The supermarket puts everything under one roof, but thanks to online shopping you don't even have to go there to get it.

We've forgotten how to shop around and how to haggle to get the best deal. But services like Consumer Power are there to help. Consumer Power focuses on the domestic energy market – electricity and mains gas – but there are others dealing with everything from financial services to your internet connection. There's now even a site that lets you compare the price of the same trolley of groceries at the likes of Asda and Tesco.

Some of the things you can compare online – like your energy bill or your internet service – are very straightforward. Others are a bit more involved. For example, a website providing a comparison between dozens of car insurers needs to ask you every conceivable question that even just one of those insurers might want an answer to. But even if it takes you five or 10 minutes to complete a form, at least you only have to do it once. And, as I have just found out, you really can save a packet. Repeating the exercise for my car insurance is now top of my to do list.

Chris Townsend