Remember the concern that e-commerce would destroy traditional retailing, leaving malls empty? That never happened, but something perhaps equally noteworthy has been taking place instead. Online shopping is coming to resemble store shopping.

Two-thirds of Internet users are now online shoppers, according to a new study by the Pew Internet and American Life Project, a research organization in Washington.

"It's a milestone in the norming of e-commerce," said Lee Rainie, director of the Pew project, which is releasing its latest online shopping data this week.

"What's striking about this is that the percentage of Internet users who do shopping has been growing, even as the Internet population continues to grow," Mr. Rainie said. "So the increase is doubly important because it's a bigger slice of a bigger pie."

The data provide context for the maturation of the online retail industry, which is expected to sell roughly $120 billion worth of goods this year, according to Forrester Research. The data also indicate that lofty expectations of broad e-commerce by the late 1990's were not unrealistic, just premature. Four years ago, 47 percent of online users at the time, or 36 million people, had bought something online. The new Pew research puts the current number at 83 million people.

The Pew data also suggest that the mainstreaming of Internet commerce is nearly complete. Statistics on gender and ethnicity among online shoppers mirror those of off-line shoppers, Mr. Rainie said.

Meanwhile, the gaps in income and education between those who shop in cyberspace and those who need a parking space are narrowing. Half of those who live in households with incomes of $50,000 or less have shopped online, he noted, and 54 percent of Internet users with high school degrees have shopped online.
This is obviously welcome news for all online retail managers, but it bodes particularly well for retailers trying to generate business from a wide swath of the buying public.

Consider Home Depot, which has long targeted the do-it-yourself segment and which Shelley Nandkeolyar, vice president for interactive marketing at the company, says is "pretty demographically representative of the U.S. marketplace."

"Now that the online population is more mainstream," Mr. Nandkeolyar said, "it better reflects our traditional customer base, and it gives us more opportunity to bring a lot of our traditional strategies online."

Last week, HomeDepot.com introduced an online gift registry, improving on a service offered in stores that has fallen short of company expectations. The original service limited gift buyers to the single store chosen by registrants, making the registry difficult for out-of-town consumers to use.

The online version allows registrants and buyers to select from 9,000 products, which are shipped directly to the gift recipient. As of Friday, the site had already logged more than 3,000 registrants, which shows, Mr. Nandkeolyar said, that "there's a huge level of interest."

Mr. Nandkeolyar, who previously held executive positions with the online divisions of Williams-Sonoma and Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia, said Internet shopping had "become more mainstream than I'd have ever anticipated even two years ago."

But according to Mr. Rainie, that is not so surprising. Shoppers typically make their first purchases online between their third and fourth year of Internet use; 80 percent of adult Internet users now have at least three years of experience.

Mr. Rainie said Internet experience also helps explain the evaporation of some notable ethnic differences that used to exist between online and off-line shoppers. Today, Hispanics and African-Americans generally shop online in the same proportions as non-Hispanic whites, a sharp increase from a year or two ago.

Companies catering to blacks, like Fashion Fair, a seller of cosmetics, are starting to notice. FashionFair.com, which does not yet sell anything through its Web site, has seen steady growth in visitors in recent months, according to J. Lance Clarke, its senior vice president and general manager.

Given the increased traffic, the company, which is owned by Johnson Publishing, the publisher of Ebony and Jet magazines, "is looking to sell online, hopefully soon," Mr. Clarke said.

The site currently provides beauty advice and a guide to retail stores that sell its products. But with more African-Americans and women in general purchasing online, Mr. Clarke said "the timing is good" for a
transactional Web site to help the company capture a greater share of the estimated $1.2 billion a year that black women spend on health and beauty goods.

Further encouraging a move to online shopping is the additional effort online retailers have put into making the virtual shopping experience a lot more like the real world one. Lauren Freedman, president of the E-Tailing Group, an Internet consulting firm in Chicago, said online retailers had improved their services considerably in recent years, reducing some shopper resistance.

Ms. Freedman said, for example, that more than 70 percent of 400 online retailers her firm recently surveyed now allow consumers to return at a store items they bought online.

"Three years ago, just a small percentage allowed it," Ms. Freedman said. "For a lot of people, the ability to do that changes the experience."

Of course, some remain resistant to online shopping. According to the latest Pew data, Internet users age 65 and older are less likely to shop online than younger consumers. The percentage of seniors on the Internet who were also shopping online in 2000 was 38 percent; as of February it had reached just 49 percent.

A separate Pew study released last week showed that even though Internet use by Americans 65 and older had increased 47 percent since 2000, 22 percent of this group was online.

Online retailers say they expect to get business from at least part of that group. "The classic problem with the seniors market is that it's very segmented," said Alan Beychok, chief executive of Benchmark Brands, a catalog and online seller of foot care products.

The median age of his off-line customers is 65, Mr. Beychok said, while online, it is 53.

"For people 75 and older, I don't think online buying is really going to happen," he said. "They're much more likely to pay by check and send in their order by mail, and there's a correlation between someone's propensity to use a credit card and their willingness to shop online. These people just aren't comfortable changing their payment method."

Mr. Beychok has nonetheless increased his Internet business by more than 50 percent in the last year. "There are so many people in the younger senior market and the older boomer market that it makes sense to focus our efforts there."