Out of stock? Students build website to track store inventories amid pandemic

1 April 2020, by Lara Korte

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It's an all too common sight these days: long lines, empty shelves, and days of waiting for toilet paper to come back in stock. But as fears around the coronavirus drive essentials off the shelves, two University of Texas students have an idea to help.

Rithwik Pattikonda and Darshan Bhatta, a sophomore and freshman studying computer science, recently launched InStok.org, a website designed to check inventories of big stores like Target and CVS and tell users where they can find the items they need.

Pattikonda said he got the idea when he saw his parents having a difficult time finding essentials.

"Initially, I saw my parents were really struggling to find certain types of grocery items," he said. "And when I saw the news, I noticed the panic was a lot more widespread."

Pattikonda and Bhatta spent nearly a week coding the site from scratch. It works by checking the online inventories of major chain stores including Target, CVS and Walgreens, and aggregating them in one place. Users can type in their ZIP code, the item they want, and see which stores have it in stock. You can even compare prices and ask the site to send you alerts when items are available. The site is free to use, and does not require signing up for an account.

While it's definitely helpful in avoiding the frustration of another "out of stock" sign, Pattikonda said he hopes it prevents people from make unnecessary shopping trips at a time when most of the population should be social distancing.

"Instead of going to seven or eight stores, they can choose one or two stores and get their items," he said.

The students launched the site Tuesday, and it already has had 70,000 visitors. Pattikonda himself used it to find some waffles.

"I think the whole need for this product is really what's carrying it," he said. "All we did was post in two subreddits, and from there, it just pretty much organically picked up because of how much people need it."

Although built out of Texas, the site is good to use anywhere, as long as you inform it of your location. The students have already received thousands of positive comments from users on Reddit and other social media, who say the site helped them find scarce goods.

While the site is definitely helpful, Pattikonda wants to emphasize that it's not perfect. Some stores update their online inventory automatically, others do it in the mornings and evenings, when employees do a physical inventory of the shelves.

"At the end of the day, we're just aggregating this information from store websites," he said.

Nielsen data show the sale of many household staples and cleaning supplies have soared

compared to this time last year. During the first week of March, for example, Americans purchased 470% more hand sanitizer compared to the same week last year. Other high-demand items include dry beans, powdered milk products and rubbing alcohol.

Right now, with UT shut down for the semester, Pattikonda and Bhatta have both returned to their parents' homes near Dallas, and will resume classes online Monday. They said they hope they can keep the website up and running once their coursework resumes, but until then, want to encourage people to stay calm, and not buy more than necessary.

"You should really only buy what you need," he said. "Especially because these elderly people and other disadvantaged people will have trouble finding things."

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