

Make Every Dollar Count — Tips for Smart Shoppers

Who doesn't want to get the best deal for their dollar — especially during these tough economic times? There's no shortage of sale ads from merchants who want your business: they're using preferred customer specials, early bird sales, midnight madness events, coupon savings days, and pre- AND post-holiday sales. Just how do you decide if their deals are real?

The Federal Trade Commission, the nation's consumer protection agency, has some tips to help you get the most for your money.

- * Shop around. A "sale" price isn't always the "best" price. Some merchants may offer a sale price on an item for a limited time; others may discount the price on the same item every day. Having an item's manufacturer, model number, and other identifying information can help you get the best price for the item you want.

- * Read sale ads carefully. Some may say "quantities limited," "no rain checks," or "not available at all stores." Before you step out the door, call ahead to make sure the merchant has the item in stock. If you're shopping for a popular or hard-to-find item, ask the merchant if he'd be willing to hold the item until you can get to the store.

- * Take time and travel costs into consideration. If an item is on sale, but it's way across town, how much are you really saving once you factor in your time, your transportation, and parking?

- * Look for price-matching policies. Some merchants will match, or even beat, a competitor's prices—at least for a limited time. Read the merchant's pricing policy. It may not apply to all items.

- * Go online. Check out websites that compare prices for items offered online. Some sites also may compare prices offered at stores in your area. If you decide to buy online, keep shipping costs and delivery time in mind.

- * Calculate bargain offers that are based on purchases of additional merchandise. For example, "buy one, get one free," "free gift with purchase," or "free shipping with minimum purchase" may sound enticing. If you don't really want nor need the item, it's not a deal.

- * Ask about sale adjustments. If you buy an item at regular price and it goes on sale the next week, can you get a credit or refund for the discounted amount? What documentation will you need?

- * Ask about refund and return policies for sale items. Merchants often have different refund and return policies for sale items, especially clearance merchandise.

Remember, whether you're shopping for things you buy routinely — or saving for that occasional big ticket item — planning is key. These shopping tips can help you save money on everyday purchases, as well as on some products and services you buy once in a while.