



# Shopping secrets that can save you hundreds

Road-tested tips from readers like you and a few of the savviest shoppers on our staff

The products you see in the pages of ShopSmart are put through all kinds of tough tests by experts so you don't waste your money on fridges that won't keep your food cold, vacuum cleaners that spit dirt in your face, or expensive truffles that taste like balls of lard. But for this story we decided to give readers like you (and some of our own ShopSmart staffers) the microphone, because we all have our own money-saving tricks. You gave us the lowdown on how you uncover deals, avoid lousy merchandise, and get great buys on everything from shoes and groceries to travel. Steal these tips and save big!

## 1 Try it on, then go online.

"I try clothes on in the store and then look for them to go on clearance online. It works great. I found a terrific dress at Ann Taylor but didn't want to pay full price. I checked the Web site every week or so. Sure enough, three weeks later I purchased it online at half-price."

—Tami Hammel, Dollar Bay, Mich.

*ShopSmart tip!* Another good way to keep up on sales is to go to [ShopItToMe.com](http://ShopItToMe.com), where you can sign up for alerts on markdowns at Ann Taylor and many other stores.

## 2 Ask for freebies.

"My girlfriend and I were at the mall and there was a 70 percent off sign at a jewelry store. We both found a piece of jewelry that we liked. We said we would both purchase the jewelry if they would throw in an appraisal (which normally costs \$35), and size the rings for free—another \$35 savings. And they didn't hesitate!"

—Lynn Price, Brookfield, Ohio

## 3 Always check return costs, especially for large items.

"I bought a lamp over the Internet. It looked terrible in my living room, and it was so heavy,

it cost \$95 to send it back. Next time, I will buy in-store so I don't make that mistake again."

—Carol Andersen,  
Port Orchard, Wash.

**ShopSmart tip!** If you're buying a big, bulky item like furniture or a TV online, see if the site will let you return it to a local store.

#### 4 Put sale items on hold.

"I shop at stores the evening before a big sale and ask the clerk to hold things for me until the sale starts."

—Betsy Shoup, San Jose, Calif.

#### 5 Give used cars the twice-over.

"We didn't research the vehicle identification number on our first car, but we should have. It had been in an accident and we sunk about \$2,500 into that lemon. We ended up bringing it back to the dealer because we could not afford it."

—Francine P., Chicago

**ShopSmart tip!** If you're buying a used vehicle, check its history free at [www.nicb.org/cps/rde/](http://www.nicb.org/cps/rde/)

[xchg/nicb/hs.xsl/vincheck.html](http://xchg/nicb/hs.xsl/vincheck.html). As with other services that check vehicle identification numbers, such as CarFax, there's no guarantee it won't miss something. But it's worth a try. Also ask a mechanic to take a look under the hood.

#### 6 Google "promotion code" before you buy.

"I got \$500 off a family trip to London through Zoom Airlines. The discount was from RetailMeNot.com, and I found it when I typed in 'flyzoom.com,' the airline's Web site, and 'promotion code' into Google."

—Rhazel Qizilbash, San Diego

#### 7 Don't buy electronics based on features alone.

"My biggest mistake was buying something over the Internet sight unseen. I wanted an MP3 player and Googled and found numerous sites with lots of different brands. I bought a unit with lots of memory and accessories for big bucks. But I still can't figure out how to use it, even

with the instructions from the manual and online."

—Mary Broderon-Soper,  
Lehigh Acres, Fla.

**ShopSmart tip!** See page 67 for more tips on how to save big bucks on electronics.

#### 8 Dicker with doctors.

"I had a bill for my son at a doctor's office, and I had a balance due because I couldn't get the insurance company to relent on its decision not to cover some of the costs. I contacted the doctor's billing office and told them these were out-of-pocket costs I hadn't anticipated. I asked about a discount, and they agreed to knock off nearly 50 percent if I paid that day."

—Andrea Rock, Croton-on-Hudson, N.Y.

#### 9 Print coupons before you hit the outlets.

"Before I make a trip to the outlets, I go online and print a free coupon for a coupon book, which features discounts at many of the stores. The site also features coupons for dozens of stores not in the book. To get the coupons, you join a free VIP club."

—Jamie Schaefer-Wilson, Irvington, N.Y.

#### 10 Keep reading the ads after you buy.

"I got \$600 off a TV I had already purchased two weeks before. I had paid \$2,499.99 and then saw in the same store's sale ad that the TV was now \$1,899.99. I called the store and was advised to bring in the receipt for the credit—no questions asked. The salesperson credited our banking account; not a store credit but actually right back into our banking account."

—Patricia Counter, Foristell, Mo.

**ShopSmart tip!** In addition to watching out for sales circulars, you can keep track of dropping prices by using a site like [PriceProtectr.com](http://PriceProtectr.com) that can track prices for you.

#### 11 Don't shop when you're exhausted.

"I try not to shop when I'm tired. It makes me less likely to pay attention to price, because I just want to get what I need and leave. I am also less likely to shop around, because if one store has all the items I want I don't have to go elsewhere."

—Sheri Johnson, Yukon, Okla.

#### 12 Check eBay first.

"Even if you skip the auctions and buy only items that have the 'buy it now' option, you can save tons off retail. I recently bought an authentic NFL jersey for \$72 including shipping; it retails for \$215 at the NFL site."

—Michael Martin, Levittown, N.Y.

#### 13 Stock up on pet food.

"I buy canned cat food in bulk to get the case discount. At my grocery store, the discount is 10 percent."

—Sharon Park, Malvern, Pa.

#### 14 Think twice about final-sale items.

"I'm careful now not to buy nonreturnable items on impulse. This applies mostly to auction and consignment items I've purchased where there's a final-sale policy. I bought some high-end window treatments that needed alterations to fit my windows. The person who does custom work for me at a reasonable price is no longer in business, so I'm probably going to have to resell them."

—Pam Donnelly, Scituate, R.I.

#### 15 Find a supermarket that price-matches.

"I take all my grocery ads to a store that price-matches so that I only have to make one stop. This also saves on time and gas."

—Lori Snyder, Ozark, Mo.

**ShopSmart tip!** [Mygrocerydeals.com](http://Mygrocerydeals.com) lists sale items at supermarkets in your area.



#### 16 Always check receipts.

"I had a coupon at Walgreens for deodorant. I noticed the cashier messing with it and assumed he had figured out how to do the discount. I found out when I got home that he apparently just gave up, kept the coupon, and didn't give me the discount."

—Nancy Winer, St. Louis

#### 17 Look good and spend less.

"I make sure I look really nice when I go shopping at a department store. That way I feel less desperate for a makeover and avoid blowing big bucks."

—Artemis DiBenedetto, Eastchester, N.Y.

#### 18 Get software for less.

"If you have a student in the house, you qualify for the 'student edition' of many software packages, like Microsoft Office and Adobe Photoshop. You can save hundreds that way."

—Dean Gallea, Tarrytown, N.Y.

**ShopSmart tip!** You can find software at student prices at [AcademicSuperstore.com](http://AcademicSuperstore.com).

#### 19 If it's a bargain, grab it.

"My biggest mistake has been leaving something behind if I know the price is right. I've always regretted leaving a pair of plastic stackable chairs behind in an 'as is' room in a store. I never saw them again, and at that price, even if they were only used for the summer, they would have been worth the money."

—Kelli Cree, Sunnyvale, Calif.

#### 20 Always try to haggle.

"I always ask, 'Is there any discount available?' or 'Is this the best price you can offer for this product?'"

—Dawn Marie Corrigan,  
West Palm Beach, Fla.

#### 21 Get advance notice of sales.

"High-end shoe stores have sales usually twice a year. If you make friends with one of the sales associates, they will often call you and tell you when their sales are before they occur. You can request that they put certain shoes aside in your size."

—Martha Morgan, Spring, Texas

#### 22 Finagle an upgrade.

"I recently upgraded my cell phone by waiting until my contract expired with my carrier. By signing on for another two years, I was able to get a new, upgraded phone at no cost."

—Gloria Lintermans, Los Angeles

**ShopSmart tip!** Don't underestimate your bargaining power when your phone-service contract expires. You might also be able to get discounts on other goodies or a free month of service.

#### 23 Check your insurance plan for discounts.

"I recently bought new eyeglasses. The store was running a promotion, but when the salesgirl checked, I actually got a better deal by using the discount offered by my health insurance. I saved almost \$100 more than I would have using the store deal."

—Anne Monaghan, Westwood, N.J.

#### 24 Find your shoe size and shop online.

"I shop in stores to find what size I am in different designers' shoes. And then I go online to shop around for discounts. Just make sure the site has free shipping."

—Karen Shinbaum, Jersey City, N.J.