

In times of economic hardship, individuals and families must often search for ways to stretch their food dollars. One way to achieve this is by “couponing,” or finding, collecting, and using coupons to save money on goods purchased. According to a recent CNN report, annual coupon use in the U.S. increased by 27 percent in 2009, with 3.3 billion coupons used (Simone, 2010).

This publication focuses on coupon use for grocery shopping, and provides tips for saving money when purchasing necessary grocery items.

FINDING COUPONS

Coupons are traditionally found in magazines, grocery stores, billing statements (e.g., credit card), and newspapers, especially Sunday newspapers. Additionally, some newspapers may include mailers during the week that offer coupons and other specials. You may also contact grocery stores, commercial food producers, and other companies directly to receive coupons in the mail or via e-mail notification. At times, companies may have kiosks or informational displays in stores where you can get coupons or sign up for promotions.

The explosion of consumer technology use has made newspapers and magazines less popular venues for coupons. Marketers are increasingly responding to consumers’ demands by using the Internet and cellphone/smartphone applications to distribute coupons. Technology also makes it easier for consumers to take charge by seeking out coupons, super-saver deals, and free items on marketing websites.

ACCESSING ONLINE COUPONS

Computer users with an Internet connection can take couponing to a different level. Grocery stores and companies frequently offer their specials, deals, and money-saving coupons on the Internet. Today, consumers may utilize Internet forums, blogs, websites, cellphone applications, Twitter, Facebook, and e-mail list subscriptions to get the most recent discounts. In fact, some companies offer discounts and coupons only online, so keep a lookout for those online specials.

There are three main methods by which you can utilize the Internet for couponing:

1. Visit websites of product companies, grocery stores, and online businesses that offer a variety of cost-saving services to request coupons through the mail.
2. Visit the websites suggested in Method 1 and print out selected coupons directly from the provider. (You will need a printer and scissors to print and cut out the coupons.)
3. Visit the websites suggested in Method 1 and save the coupons on your cellphone or smartphone. If choosing this method, be aware that only cellphones with advanced features, such as smartphones or iPhones, have the capability to save the coupons along with their barcodes. Stores like Target have led the way in uploading coupons on these types of cellphones. Examples of cellphone coupon aggregator applications are ValPak and Shooger. Some people prefer this eco-friendly method because it does not involve printing the coupons.

Suggested Websites for Accessing Online Coupons

Aside from product companies and grocery or food stores, coupons may be obtained from other websites that gather coupons from various sites and information supplied by other consumers; these sites are commonly called “aggregators.” Such sites include RedPlum.com, Coupons.com, CoolSavings.com, CouponMom.com, SmartSource.com, CouponSurfer.com, OnlineCoupons.com, CouponCabin.com, and Valpak.com. There are even sites, such as HeyItsFree.net, that offer free samples and product updates.

For Twitter users, CheapTweet.com and CouponTweet.com (@CheapTweet and @CouponTweet on Twitter) gather coupon codes and deals from Twitter merchants and other Twitter users. The coupons and savings are published in a user-friendly manner, with options for users to tailor the sites according to personal preference, and to vote and comment on the coupons. Other Twitter accounts, such as @heyitsfree, @freestuffrocks, @freenology, and @fstimes, provide updates and news feeds on free goods.

You can get updates from many of these suggested websites through Facebook, Twitter, or e-mail subscription. Some of these sites require that you enter your ZIP code in order to personalize money-saving coupons geographically, such as by state or county.

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ORGANIZING THE COUPONS

This publication will focus only on paper coupons found in print and online sources, since cellphone couponing is still in its infancy. Before going to the store with your coupons, you need to make sure that you and your coupons are organized so that you know the valid coupons you are likely to use.

Coupons may be organized in various ways, but the most popular technique is organizing by product categories, such as dairy, canned goods, meats, baby food, frozen products, and miscellaneous. Other techniques include organizing by how often you buy a product, with categories such as “Need now,” “I may need this,” and “Only if they are cheap,” or by coupon expiration date. You may also have primary categories with subcategories. For example, you may have product (such as dairy) as the primary category with coupons in the category that are sorted by expiration date so that you can toss out the expired ones easily.

Coupons storage methods vary according to your preference, but popular ones include:

1. **Envelopes** – Differently labeled envelopes are used to store coupons by primary categories. These envelopes may be stored in a shoebox or file folders. The large quantity of envelopes may be difficult (and embarrassing) to carry into grocery stores. However, consumers can spare themselves this unnecessary hassle by using their grocery list to decide which coupons they need to bring based on items in the list. This envelope method may be especially useful if you expand couponing to non-grocery items (e.g., car maintenance, electronics, fast-food, clothes, and home maintenance) because you can pick out specific envelopes in which to search for available coupons.
2. **Accordion file or wallet** – Accordion files work well for dropping clipped coupons in for sorting later, but the files could be too large for carrying while shopping. There are also pre-categorized accordion files and wallets specifically for couponing available in some stationary aisles.
3. **4" x 6" or 5" x 7" index cards and file box** – Write the category and subcategory on the index cards and place them in the file box to categorize coupons. This method makes it easy for you to sort the coupons, but requires a lot of coupon and index card flipping at the store.
4. **Album-like binder** – Coupons are placed in transparent pages of the binder to make it easy for you to see and take out the coupons. Subcategory organization may be difficult because it takes some effort to fill in the spaces left by the used and expired coupons.

ADDITIONAL COUPONING TIPS FOR SAVVY SHOPPERS

- **Use multiple coupons** for an item whenever possible, for example combining a grocery store coupon with a manufacturer’s coupon. Check out the store policy regarding combining coupons (e.g., multiple coupons, doubled savings) because not all stores participate in these cost-saving practices.
- **Buy only what you need.** Don’t buy the product just because you have a coupon. However, you may want to try out a new product and save money on the purchase.
- **Read coupons carefully.** There may be some requirements or restrictions. Some coupons are very specific to grocery stores and product type (e.g., flavor, volume, quantity).
- **Stay alert for savings.** Coupons or information about where to get coupons may be overlooked in the magazines or newspapers to which your family subscribes.
- **Do your research.** Spend some time looking for resources on how to organize your coupons, where to get coupons, and what is available online. Consider joining e-mail lists, participating in online forums, and exploring reader blogs on couponing. Participants in these online resources are usually very generous when giving advice and sharing their experience.

If you are new to couponing, it may take some time to locate the best resources and create the organizational method that best meets your needs and suits your style. However, as the system becomes more familiar, you will find yourself enjoying major savings.

REFERENCE

Simone, S.J. 2010. As recession lingers, coupon use jumps 27 percent. *CNN*. Retrieved May 27, 2010 from <http://www.cnn.com/2010/LIVING/wayoflife/01/29/coupon.clipping/index.html>

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