

How to get the best prices

NEW YORK (CNN) -- There's never been a better time to be a bargain hunter. Here are some tips and strategies to help you get the best price.

First, try your hand at haggling. The results might surprise you. A Consumer Reports survey released in November indicates that more than 90 percent of people who haggled over furniture, electronics and appliances, floor and demonstration models scored a lower price on at least one purchase during the past three years.

And the weaker the economy, the stronger your bargaining power.

"Retailers are doing whatever they can to bring consumers in," said Robert Spector, a retail historian and author of the forthcoming book "The Mom & Pop Store."

Where will you get the most out of your haggling? Big-ticket items, says Tod Marks of Consumer Reports, a nonprofit consumer product rating company.

That includes furniture, mattresses and jewelry. In fact, those items might be marked up to begin with, to offset discounts or haggling customers, Marks says. Expensive computers or TVs are another area where consumers may have some wiggle room.



And where you haggle makes a difference. Stores that sell based on volume may be more receptive to negotiation than niche retailers. The longer merchandise lies around, the better chances you have of getting a deal. The retailer doesn't want to take up that precious store space for products that aren't selling.

Even if you don't think you'll get a deal, it can't hurt to take a chance. "We're not a culture accustomed to haggling on anything but cars and houses," Marks said. "But there's no place you can't haggle. The worst they can say is no."

And keep in mind that historically, haggling was the norm, Spector says.

"In the 18th and early 19th century, people who had money would dress down when they went shopping so they could get a cheaper price," he said.

In fact, the concept of fixed pricing didn't really take hold of the country until the first big New York department store opened in the 1850s.

To improve your chances of getting the price you want:

- Keep the conversation polite. Don't go into a store demanding to negotiate. Ask the retailer to work with you.
- Do your homework. Check the price at other stores. If you find something that's cheaper, print out the ad or find a flyer and bring it with you.
- Inspect the product to see whether there are any flaws, like a missing button or a scratch. You could walk away with a deal if you can live with (or fix) some minor blemishes.
- Talk to the person who has the power to bargain with you. If you don't think you're getting anywhere with a sales associate, ask for the store manager or a supervisor.
- Offer to pay in cash as an incentive. If you use a credit card, the credit company will charge a transaction fee to the retailer that's between 2 and 8 percent. Paying in cash is more attractive to the merchant.
- And, of course, be discreet. You don't want other customers listening in on the great deal you could get.

Knowing when to shop for deals is just as important to getting a good price.

If you're in the market for a refrigerator, stove range or dishwasher, you may want to wait until September or October, says Sharon Franke of the Good Housekeeping Research Institute, a lab that tests and evaluates products for Good Housekeeping magazine. Around that time, retailers are trying to move out the old models to make room for the new models.

In January and February, you'll also find some good deals on linens and furniture, she says.

Getting a good deal on groceries these days is getting more challenging. But it is possible. Save your shopping for Sunday evening, says Teri Gault of the Grocery Game, a consumer savings program. This way, you're maximizing the coupons in your circular. Also, the shelves may be restocked then, and there are fewer customers, so you'll get more attention.

If you're a last-minute kind of traveler, the best time to buy an airline ticket is on Wednesday morning, according to Anne Banas of Smartertravel.com. Airlines release their distressed inventory for flights for the upcoming weekend by Wednesday. US Airways offers last-minute international fares on Friday morning, Banas says.

If you just looking to book a regular flight and have some time to spare, the best day to look is Tuesday evening. Airlines often release sales Tuesday mornings, and other airlines will match discounts on competing routes by the end of the day, Banas says.

As a rule of thumb, try to book at least 21 days in advance if you want to travel domestically. Try to book two to three months out to get the best price for international travel.

If you're looking to get the best deal on a car, head to the dealership at the end of the month. A lot of dealerships have monthly sales quotas to meet. That may make salespeople hungrier to strike a deal.

One of the best months to buy is September, says Phillip Reed of Edmunds.com. Car makers are trying to get rid of old models and bring in the new ones.

And you'll want to head out on a Tuesday or Wednesday morning, Reed says.

"It's so far from the weekend, and you'll get lots of personal attention," he says.

If you need some incentives to sweeten the deal, you'll see a lot of promotions throughout the summer, says Jesse Toprak of Edmunds.com. Because sales have been slow this year, manufacturers are ramping up incentives like cash back and low APR plans.

When it comes to comparison shopping, we can let our fingers do the walking. Check out comparison shopping sites like www.shopzilla.com or www.pricegrabber.com. Plug in what you're looking for, and you'll get a list of prices and stores that sell that product.

If you plan on ordering something through the Internet, make sure to take advantage of the discounts and coupons coming to you. Go to <http://shopping.yahoo.com> and click on "coupons." You'll get a list of stores that are offering coupons, special sale prices or free shipping. Other site to grab some discounts and cash back: www.fatwallet.com, www.couponmountain.com and www.ebates.com.

And if finding sales online is your goal, check out www.shopittome.com. This Web site notifies you when a particular piece of clothing you've chosen (by brand and size) goes on sale at major retailers.

If you want to make sure your purchase doesn't go on sale after you buy it, go to www.priceprotectr.com. If you buy an item, you can register to have the site track your purchase. If that item goes on sale during the retailers' price protection period, you'll get an e-mail with information on how to get your money back.