

Bargain shop your way back to school

CHICAGO (8/6/08)--Cash-strapped consumers are tightening their belts as they head into the back-to-school shopping season, with 90% of households planning to change their shopping strategies by searching for more sale items, purchasing only what's needed, and using more coupons (MarketWatch.com July 24).

This year could be one of the most challenging seasons for back-to-school shoppers and retailers. To add to the blow, America's Research Group, Charleston, S.C., reports that this summer has seen the worst employment rates for high-school and college students in more than 30 years.

With budgets tight, moms, dads, and kids are seeking the best deals for those back-to-school threads. Consider these strategies to save time and stretch your budget:

- Check out thrift stores. As the economy continues to struggle, more consumers are looking to resale shops--and discovering incredible deals. You may have to do some searching through disorganized stores, but go with an open mind and be on the lookout for brand-name clothing at a great price;
- Take advantage of state sales-tax holidays. This annual event--in which participating states eliminate sales taxes--is intended to help curb back-to-school costs while also increasing local retailers' sales. Visit taxadmin.org/fta/rate/sales_holiday.html to see if your state participates. If you missed it this year, plan ahead for next year.
- Ask the boss about employee discounts. Some employers arrange back-to-school employee discounts at local retailers;
- Plan your trip. Maximize time and save money on gas by making a list and doing all shopping in a single trip--or consider carpooling; and
- Use the Internet. Search for on-line coupons, rebates, and major deals which often appear earlier than the in-store sale and offer more variety. Also, to save trips--which translates into saved time and money--visit NearbyNow.com. This website lets you search a merchandise database of more than 200 shopping malls across the country for an item before you get in the car and make the trip to the mall.

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