



Chicago Tribune

Dialed in on Discounts

Apps fetch coupons, but most need loyalty cards to seal deals

July 02, 2010 | By Gregory Karp, Spending Smart, Tribune Newspapers

You might have heard about the high-tech, whiz-bang ways you can get coupons on your cell phone so you never have to clip a paper coupon again.

You envision yourself in the supermarket checkout line. The cashier scans your smart phone to accept the coupon and credit you 50 cents off of Hellmann's mayonnaise.

Unfortunately, that's not reality yet. The obstacles are many, not the least of which is this: Traditional bar-code readers have difficulty reading glossy glass screens on phones and other hand-held devices. A notable exception is Target, which uses a different type of bar-code reader.

Phone-based coupons with a code that the cashier keys in or writes down are limited in availability.

However, one version of digital or paperless coupons is ready today for prime time, said Matthew Tilley, spokesman for coupon market-research site CouponInfoNow.com. "What is working today... is direct-to-card digital coupons."

How it works

You choose coupons you want to use, either through a Web site or through a phone, and the coupons are electronically loaded onto your store loyalty card.

At the supermarket, you present your loyalty card to get regular sales discounts and also the credit for coupons you purposefully loaded onto the card.

Supermarkets involved with direct-to-card coupons include Kroger and its affiliated stores: Ralphs, Fry's Food, Fred Meyer and others.

Safeway and its affiliated stores, such as Dominick's, Genuardi's and Vons; Giant Eagle; ShopRite; and Shop 'n Save also have save-to-card coupons. Other large supermarket chains are likely to begin programs this year, experts say.

How to get started

Sign up for a loyalty card. If you don't like carrying around a bunch of loyalty cards, you can often give the cashier your phone number, or combine up to six loyalty-card bar codes onto a single card at KeyRingThing.com.

Go online. Visit Cellfire.com, Shortcuts.com, Coupons.com and your supermarket Web site. Register your loyalty card at the sites. Identify coupons you want loaded onto your card by clicking on them. You'll see duplication of coupons at these sites, but it's worth checking out all of them, especially the store sites. They are likely to have a few exclusive offers, experts say.

They're not necessarily the same coupons and coupon values you'll find in the Sunday newspaper. Parents can select e-coupons at Upromise.com. Savings are automatically deposited into your college-savings account.

Stack coupons. One secret of digital coupons is you can often use a direct-to-card coupon together with a paper coupon on the same item, at least until the technology gets smarter and prevents you from doing that, said Stephanie Nelson, founder of CouponMom.com.

A downside of digital coupons is stores that double the value of paper coupons won't double the value of digital ones.

Go click crazy. Don't waste time debating whether to add a coupon to your card. If there's any chance you'll buy the product, load the coupon, Nelson said. "It doesn't hurt to just throw them all on your card," she said. "Then, if you happen to buy the item, you get the value off." You typically have room for at least 100. Unused coupons will expire off the card automatically in a few weeks, so you don't need to manage how full the card is.

Print to remember. A downside of direct-to-card coupons is you don't have a physical reminder about what coupons you have so you know which products to buy. Direct-to-card Web sites will allow you to print a list of saved offers to take with you.

The old standby. Digital coupons might be the future, but for now, Tilley said, there's still just one distribution channel for 90 percent of coupons: the Sunday newspaper.

Gregory Karp is author of "Living Rich by Spending Smart." E-mail him at yourmoney@tribune.com.

Texting for dollars

Since more people have access to text messaging rather than mobile Internet, using texts for coupons and rebates is coming soon, experts say.

How it will work: In a supermarket you'll see a potato chip display with a sign saying you can get \$1 off that brand of chips if you text the word "CHIPS" to 55555. You type in your store loyalty card number – just the first time you use it. When you check out using your loyalty card, you'll see the \$1 savings come off your total, said Ken Fenyo, president of You Technology, which builds systems behind digital promotions.

For rebates, you might get a short text code inside the package. Use it and your rebate will be sent to an electronic account, such as PayPal, said Matthew Tilley, spokesman for coupon market-research site CouponInfoNow.com.

Free coupon apps

Grocery iQ

Description: A robust shopping-list app and coupon finder, it's probably the most powerful supermarket coupon app.

Pros: Smart shopping-list function combined with coupons from established site, Coupons.com. Users can add to their shopping list by scanning bar codes of items with the iPhone camera.

Cons: Save-to-card feature only available for Safeway family of stores. Groceries only.

Cellfire Mobile Coupons

Description: Choose grocery coupons on your device to add to your loyalty card.

Pros: Powered by Cellfire.com. Includes non-grocery coupons, such as Sears and 1-800-FLOWERS.

Cons: Limited by supermarkets that deal with Cellfire, mostly Safeway and Kroger families of stores.

Valpak

Description: A mobile version of the familiar blue envelope stuffed with local coupons.

Pros: Uses your current location to find local coupons not found in other apps.

Cons: Limited number of offers.

Coupon Sherpa

Description: Non-grocery coupon-finder.

Pros: Finds coupons based on your location. Claims to have exclusive coupons.

Cons: Includes limited number of mostly chain stores. Some retailers require you to print coupons.

Yowza!!

Description: Find non-grocery coupons near you.

Pros: Set number of miles from current location to search for stores with coupons. Claims exclusive deals for Yowza!! users.

Cons: Limited number of stores and coupons. Some results are just ads.

CardStar

Description: Combine your loyalty cards onto your device.

Pros: Have all your retail loyalty cards in one place.

Cons: Some store bar-code scanners have trouble reading bars on the device. But it displays your loyalty card number, which can be keyed in manually.



YOU Technology Brand Services
1701 Gateway Blvd., Suite 101 ♦ South SF, CA 94080
Phone: 650.624.3800 ♦ Fax: 650.624.3899
Email: brandinfo@you.net ♦ www.you.net

YOU Technology Retail Services
1625 South Congress Avenue ♦ Delray Beach, FL 33445
Phone: 561.454.7600 ♦ Fax: 561.265.2493
Email: retailinfo@you.net ♦ www.you.net