

# AskBob Special Report: Money-Saving Consumer Tips



## Sample Chapter: Price Busters For Online Shoppers

Shopping online is a two-step process; first, find the product you want, and then find the best price for it. A lot of factors may come into play, including sales tax, shipping fees, and the availability of discount coupon codes. Read on to learn about three nifty tools that will help you get the lowest price when shopping online...

### ***The Foreman Resolution***

Former heavyweight boxer George Foreman did commercials for Meineke Mufflers in the 1990s, and famously said "I'm NOT gonna pay a lot for this muffler!" That was a few years before ecommerce went mainstream, but if you start your online shopping expedition with the same resolve, you can save money, too.

Lots of people shop on Amazon because of their "free 2-day shipping" option for [Amazon Prime](#) members. But the truth is that free shipping isn't always free, and Amazon's price for a given item is not guaranteed to be the lowest.

[Honey](#) automatically finds coupon codes for you while you are shopping. Just register at Honey's site and install the browser extension for Chrome or Firefox. Then, when you add an item to a site's shopping cart, click the Honey icon to display the coupon code that saves you the most money (or learn that no coupons are available).

When shopping on Amazon, Honey compares sellers for you, and takes into account shipping costs and your Prime status. Honey's price tracking and price history tools will tell you if it's a good time to buy the item, or if it might be better to wait. The Droplist feature lets you mark an item you're not ready to buy yet. If Honey detects a price drop at that store, they'll notify you.

The coupon codes provided by Honey work most of the time and save users considerable amounts of money. The company says that users save an average of 17.9% (or about \$129) when shopping with their 30,000 participating merchants. Honey has a loyalty rewards program that pays "Honey Gold," a feature that lets you earn gift cards which can be redeemed at popular stores. [Honey's privacy policy](#) is refreshing and clear: "We do not sell your personal information. Ever."

[Capital One Shopping](#), formerly known as WikiBuy has price comparison and coupon finder tools, similar to Honey. Capital One Financial Corporation bought WikiBuy a few years ago, and I have shied away from it since. Maybe it has something to do with the fact that they also bought Paribus and rolled it in to the Capital One Shopping app. Paribus snoops around in your email inbox to find out where you've been shopping and what you buy. Or maybe it's the new name, so closely associated with a huge financial corporation, that gives me pause. (What's in my wallet? None of your business, Jennifer Garner.)

[Rakuten \(formerly Ebates\)](#) has a simple, straightforward business model known as a loyalty program. The company earns cash from participating sellers each time a Rakuten member makes a purchase. Part of that money is shared with members in cash payments.

Rakuten offers up to 25% in cash rebates when you shop online at popular stores like Amazon, Best Buy, JCPenney, Kohls, Macy's, Old Navy, Target and over 2500 more. There are no points, and no "funny money" -- you get cash to spend however and wherever you wish. You get paid every three months via your choice of Paypal or paper check.

Price comparison services like [Google Shopping](#) are also handy for bargain hunters. Other price comparison tools such as [Bizrate](#) and [Pricegrabber](#) let you compare prices when shopping for computers, electronics, clothing, cameras, furniture, appliances, toys, and other popular categories.

The [Camelizer extension](#) works only with Amazon. It provides a shortcut to the CamelCamelCamel

database of historical prices, presenting charts that show how the price of an item has varied over time. Amazon prices, along with new and used Marketplace sellers' prices are plotted on a single graph. At a glance, you can see the volatility of an item's price and which sales channel you should choose. If an item's price is pretty stable, you may as well buy it now. But if it has fluctuated significantly in the past, you may want to set a future date on which to check the price again. The Camelizer accommodates these options. The Camelizer works with a slew of national retailers, and is available for Google Chrome, Mozilla Firefox, Microsoft Edge, Opera and Safari.

Depending on the source, ecommerce stats show that between 40 and 50% of all online purchases happen at Amazon. I try to keep in mind that there are plenty of alternatives to buying on Amazon. And let's face it, Amazon mogul Jeff Bezos, with a net worth over \$200 billion, doesn't need the money. I'll start a shopping trip with a Google search and then use a price comparison tool, which often leads to me finding an excellent supplier with good prices.

Each of these shopping tools has unique features, any of which may be decisive if you have to choose just one shopping tool. But you don't have to make that choice. You can disable any or all of them for most of your web-surfing time, and enable one or more only for significant shopping sprees. (Use your browser's settings icon in the upper-right corner to turn extensions on or off.)

I really don't need to compare five prices when shopping for pencils; the price differences are going to be negligible. But when it comes to expensive geek toys or power tools, I will often use at least two of them to find a good deal. Note that I didn't say "the best deal." That is and will remain as elusive as a unicorn. Do you use these or other tools to save when shopping online?

## Sample Chapter: How to Get Your Free Credit Score

Your credit score is one of the most important numbers in your financial life. This one number summarizes your creditworthiness, and it's the first thing lenders look at when you apply for a loan, and often the last. Learn how a credit SCORE is different from a credit REPORT, and find out how to get your credit score, for free...

### ***Get Your Credit Score for Free***

Your credit score is a number ranging from 300-850, with lower numbers representing a "poor credit risk" and higher ones indicating an "excellent credit risk." Your credit score can make a difference of several hundred dollars a month in your mortgage or car payment.

You may even be unable to get credit at all if your credit score is terrible. But do you know what your credit score is right now?

Most people don't know their credit scores. They may know what it was the last time they applied for a loan, but it may have changed since then. Perhaps your own credit activity triggered a change in your credit score. But identity theft is a growing problem, and ID thieves may be ruining your credit score without your knowledge.

It's a good idea to monitor your credit score regularly to be on the lookout for changes that require investigation. Just checking your score will not affect your rating, but it can be costly to monitor your credit score. Fortunately, if you know where to look, you can find out your credit score for free.

### ***Free Credit Score... With Strings Attached***

Yes, there lots of places online that offer a "free credit score" with strings attached. You'll have to fork over a credit card number for a trial subscription to an ongoing credit monitoring service. Some don't even throw you the free trial bone. [MyFICO.com](http://MyFICO.com) will tell you your credit score as reported by the three major credit reporting agencies – Equifax, Experian, and Transunion – if you sign up for a credit monitoring service that costs from \$20 to \$40 a month. (myFICO is the consumer division of FICO, the company that invented the FICO credit score.)

Wait, scores? Yes, consumers have at least THREE credit scores -- one from each of the aforementioned credit reporting agencies. These "FICO scores" are the numbers that most lenders use when deciding whether to offer a loan. Each of the major credit bureaus (Experian, TransUnion, and Equifax) use a proprietary scoring method developed and licensed by the Fair Isaac Corporation to calculate your FICO credit score. Usually they're all pretty close. But incorrect, inconsistent, or missing information in your credit files can cause them to differ. But beware... the one-time free credit score is

just the bait on a hook...

Firms that offer credit monitoring services are required by law to let you cancel a subscription without penalty during a trial period, which can range from only 7 to a more reasonable 30 days. But many people forget to cancel and get locked into contracts that can cost from \$5 a month to over \$400 a year. If you are diligent and highly organized, this might be a good way to get your credit score for free. But if you flirt with the bait regularly, the odds are that one day you will get hooked too.

If you're merely curious and you want just an estimate of your FICO credit score, MyFICO offers a free [Credit Score Estimator](#). The estimator asks you ten questions about your finances and provides you with a range in which they think your score will fall. The nice thing about this tool is that no credit card is required, and you don't have to cough up any personally identifying information. The downside is that it could be way off, and banks will only use the actual FICO score when making lending decisions.

Many banks and major retailers offer ongoing credit score reporting and monitoring as part of their services. Credit unions and credit card providers may have similar perks. If you are shopping for a new bank or credit card, try to negotiate free credit score monitoring as part of any package you hope to put together.

But don't kid yourself. Whoever gives you a credit score is paying something to the Big Three for it. You're probably paying for it somewhere among all the other charges you get from any service provider.

## ***A Truly FREE Credit Score?***

There are a few exceptions that I have found: [Credit Karma](#) is advertiser-supported, so you will be presented with offers from credit card companies and other lenders after you give your personal information, in exchange for your Equifax and TransUnion credit scores. But you won't have to cough up a credit card number or commit to a subscription service. You will have to provide your birthdate and the last 4 digits of your social security number, to verify your identity. Credit Karma has an excellent rating with the BBB, and they're been around for several years, so I feel comfortable recommending this service.

Credit Karma shows your credit scores calculated using VantageScore 3.0. It's free and there's no impact to your credit. VantageScore was created by Equifax, Experian and TransUnion and is supposed to provide better scoring consistency across the three bureaus. VantageScore take into account up to 24 months of your payment history, how long you've had credit, the types of credit you have (credit cards, auto loans, student loans, mortgages, etc.), your credit limits and how much of those limits you're using.

[NerdWallet](#) also provides the TransUnion VantageScore for free. Their credit score simulator helps you see how certain actions can mean big point changes in your credit score. NerdWallet recommends that you use less than 30% of your credit limit on any card. The best scores go to people using 10% or less

of their credit limit. You may bump up your credit score by raising the limits on your cards, or by extending your streak of on-time payments.

Another free option is [Credit Sesame](#), which provides your TransUnion credit score and an overview of your credit and debt situation. Credit Sesame uses a patented "bank-level analytics engine", which continually analyzes the lending markets, in search of ways for you to save money on loans, credit card debts and your home mortgage. No credit card is required to use the Credit Sesame service.

## ***What Goes Into a Credit Score?***

CreditKarma, NerdWallet and CreditSesame all use VantageScore 3.0 to calculate your credit score. However, most banks and other lenders make their decisions using the FICO model. But chances are good that if you have a good VantageScore, you will also have a good FICO score. That's because both of them use similar methodologies for calculating your credit score. Factors that are important in determining your credit score include the following:

- On-time Payment History: Missed payments or accounts sent to collections will bring down your score.
- Credit Balances: Lenders prefer a low ratio of debt to available credit
- Recent Applications: If you've applied for a lot of credit recently, that's a potential red flag.
- Credit History: The longer your credit history, the better for your credit score.
- Credit Mix: Lenders like to see that you are managing a wide range of credit products, such as car loans, credit cards, student loans, mortgage, etc.

## Sample Chapter: Compare Prescription Prices Online

Retail prices for the same prescription can vary significantly from one pharmacy to another; there may even be big differences between stores of the same brand. It can pay big dividends to shop around, but shopping prescription prices is pretty difficult. Until now...

### ***Finding the Best Prescription Prices***

Americans spend over \$300 billion on prescription drugs annually. That's over \$3,000 per household.

Even with health insurance, prescriptions can take a big bite out of a tight budget. Traditional co-payments usually max out between \$50 and \$100 per prescription. Co-insurance is worse, replacing flat co-payments with percentages; effectively, there is no cap on the amount that the patient must pay. And if you have no prescription drug coverage, you're going to feel the full pain of retail prices.

"Can you hold, please?" are the first words a pharmacy tech learns. Once they find out you're shopping price, the hold time can get even longer. Some stores won't even provide prices over the phone; they know that once you're in the store, you're likely to take whatever price they name.

But it does pay to shop around. The price difference for a prescription can be as much as \$100 between two pharmacies in the same town. Often, there are coupons, discounts offered by the pharmacy or manufacturer, or cheaper alternative drugs available. And sometimes, your co-pay isn't the cheapest option. But it can take hours and hours of calling and/or online research to find the best price.

Enter the crowd-sourced online prescription price comparison tools! If we patients just pool our knowledge of local retail drug prices, each of us can find the cheapest neighborhood source of drugs. We might even shame some stores into lowering their out-of-line prices. There are a bunch of apps for this purpose, but they're not all equal.

### ***Tools for Online Drug Price Comparison***

Consumer Reports compared four of the most widely used drug price comparison apps. Here's a synopsis of the findings:

[GoodRx](#) is a free web-based tool, also available for iPhone/iPad and Android devices. It's rated the best of the four at finding the lowest prices in stores and online. You can search by medical condition, drug name, or pharmacy location (using Zip code or your GPS coordinates). It provides lots of savings tips as well as price comparisons.

GoodRx is a free service and you don't have to cough up any personal information to search for discounts on your medications. Their website says that they promise not to not sell your personal health

information to anyone. In addition to the price search option, GoodRx has a Pill Identifier, tips for Medicare patients, and even tips on finding the best price for your pet's medications.

[WeRX](#) found slightly higher prices than GoodRx did. (To be fair, Consumer Reports searched for only four drugs.) But WeRX found prices at a lot more local “mom-n-pop” stores than GoodRx did. The app also provides one-click reporting of a new location and price that you have found.

GoodRX and WeRX are crowd-sourced databases. LowestMed and Mobile Rx Card are apps for prescription discount “memberships,” a marketing gimmick that many feel is a scam. Their promoters claim that they entitle the “member” to discounts of 10% to 85% on prescription drugs. The U. S. Better Business Bureaus found that most discount cards [deliver much less than they promise](#).

Remember: if you’re not the customer, you’re the product. Free discount cards are financed by pharmacies that pay for referrals, and for data about your prescription buying habits. Crowd-sourced apps like GoodRx or WebRX may not be perfect, but they’re probably more trustworthy.

Doctors are typically not aware of how much medications cost, or whether they will be covered by your health insurance. Always ask your doctor if there is a generic alternative for any drug that he or she prescribes, especially if you're paying out of pocket. That alone can cut the cost by hundreds of dollars. Don't hesitate to ask for samples or coupons, and by all means, use these online tools to compare prices at your local drugstores.

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