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Fix Your Spending Leaks • Spare Change
Store Promotions: How They Compete For Your Money
• Keeping Your Credit Card Data Safe • Easy DIY Holiday Gifts



Easy Fix-Its Can Help Plug Your Spending Leaks

If you find yourself frequently wondering “Where did all of my money go?” then it’s probably a sign that you need to revisit your budget. Here are a few ideas to help you plug your budget ‘leaks.’

Track Daily Expenses

Record everything you purchase and how much it costs using an application on your phone, an Excel spreadsheet or by writing it down. Try to save all receipts so you can account for every penny you spend. For help, visit SmartAboutMoney.org. Type ‘Tracking Your Expenses Worksheet’ in the search field and download the PDF.

Evaluate Your Spending History

Track your expenses for several weeks to get a clearer picture of where your money is going. Look through your list of purchases for small things like daily coffee drinks, vending machine snacks or impulse buys. These types of expenditures may seem insignificant, however they can add up if you aren’t prudent.

Seeing how some of your expenditures stack up over time may help you realize how much money you could save by cutting back on some things. SmartAboutMoney.org also features a ‘Plug Spending Leaks’ worksheet that may help you.

Reevaluate What You Really Want

Once you have tracked your expenses and discovered your spending leaks, it’s time to consider what purchases mean the most to your life and financial future.

Figure out your income and subtract necessities such

as rent, utilities, car insurance and food from your total income. Take a look at what you have remaining. Think about the daily expenses you’ve tracked over the last month and evaluate how much you spent on non-necessities during your tracking period. Consider what you can cut back on.

To help break things down you may want to divide your expenses into categories. Start with necessities such as food, clothing and utilities. Then, make sure you set that amount aside so that you don’t spend it on something else you don’t need. For example, if your grocery budget is \$200 per paycheck, you could take that cash and put it in an envelope, taking it out as you need it. Putting the cash aside and knowing that once it is gone you won’t have any more for that category until your next paycheck may help you decide what’s important and what isn’t.



Set Goals

Continue to write down budgeting goals for yourself. If you want to spend less in a particular category each month, consider ways to accomplish this goal. Once you are more aware of your money habits you may find it easier to pinpoint trouble areas in your budget. When you make money work for you, your financial dreams and goals have a better chance of becoming a reality.



More Budget Tips To Help You Save

If you are having difficulty getting your budget back on track, trying one of the ideas below could help you get a handle on your finances once again.

Set A Reasonable Budget. Make sure your financial goals are attainable. If you feel deprived you may get discouraged and digress from your budget plan.

Try to start with baby steps. As you achieve one goal, move onto the next. It might be a wise idea to cut back in one area of your budget. Then, once you are comfortable with a new routine, begin looking at ways you can save in other areas of your life.

Try Buying Second Hand. Whether it’s a casual swap with a neighbor or a pre-owned item listed on Freecycle.org, going ‘free’ is greener and may save you money, according to WomansDay.com.

Consider organizing community swaps in your area where you can barter, trade or simply give away items that you no longer need. Visit WomansDay.com and type ‘10 Tips for Hosting A Successful Clothing Swap’ in the search field for more information.

Avoid Impulse Buys. Try to avoid shopping unless you really need to go to the store. When you do need to shop, make a shopping list and stick to it. Place only things on your list that meet your needs and fall within your budget.

If you see something you like, give yourself time to think about the purchase. You may want to write the item down, wait a few days and then revisit it to see if the urge to purchase the item is still as strong as when you were in the store.



Awareness Can Help You Keep Card Data Safe

Credit Corner



Dishonest people only need a few seconds to steal your credit card information. Check out some of the tricks thieves use below and find out how you can avoid becoming a victim.

Out Of Sight, Out Of Mind? Be aware of any instance where your credit card is processed behind closed doors. For example, when you are dining out does the waitress or bartender process your bill out of sight? A dishonest person has a better chance to collect credit card data when others cannot see what they are doing. According to Fox News, try to pay in cash at establishments that process your card data where you cannot observe the transaction. Since paying in cash may not be feasible in some instances it would probably be a good idea to foster the habit of monitoring your bank account online as often as possible to identify suspicious transactions if they occur. Report any discrepancies to your bank as soon as possible.

Shred Rather Than Trash. Identity thieves have access to a plethora of personal information depending on what you throw into the trash. Bankrate.com suggests shredding any documents that contain highly sensitive personal information, such as your name or social security number, before tossing it into the trash.

Gas Stations. Some high-tech thieves attach skimmers to ATM machines and gas pumps. Skimmers can read credit card information and transfer it via Bluetooth signal to a computer close by. Some thieves may even install tiny cameras out of sight that can capture your PIN numbers for debit cards when you type them. CreditCards.com suggests going into the store to process transactions and be sure to sign all credit card receipts. Again, it would be wise to keep track of your accounts online as often as possible in case suspicious behavior occurs.

Online. It is possible for hackers to install a type of software, called malware, on websites with low security. The malware can then download onto your computer when you visit the site, opening you up to identity theft if you share any kind of personal information, such as account numbers or passwords, on that particular site. Also be aware of any suspicious emails that arrive in your inbox as thieves may be phishing for instant information. If you click on any link in the email you are vulnerable. Avoid doing business with online vendors that you aren't familiar with. Also, try to purchase only from established merchants and websites. Avoid doing personal business on public computers. Consider setting up a special email account for financial purposes only and check it from safe locations.

If your information has been compromised, notify your financial institutions and local law enforcement in addition to the three major credit reporting agencies -- Experian, Equifax and TransUnion. For tips on keeping your debit card transactions safe, read Spare Change on page 3.



Spare Change

Be Aware When Using Debit As Payment

Using debit as a form of payment can be quick and convenient. However, you may want to avoid using debit card as payment in some situations.

Going Out To Eat

In most cases when you dine out, the waitress takes your card and walks away remaining out of site while she completes your transaction. To be on the safe side, Mainstreet.com suggests using cash for payment if you go out to eat.

Shopping Online

If you purchase an item online and run into problems with it, you may have difficulty returning it or getting your money back. Debit cards do not typically carry the same kind of



protection for problem purchases like credit cards do. In addition, if you shop from a site that isn't secure and your debit card number is stolen, it could be difficult to get the money restored to your account. Try to purchase from well-known companies and from websites that you feel safe and secure shopping from. Also, make sure you are aware of any company's return policies and procedures before you buy.

Automatic Withdrawals

You may want to avoid agreeing to regular automatic bill payments or other withdrawals involving your debit card unless you are extremely disciplined and well-organized with your finances. Forgetting to deduct a payment from your balance can lead to costly overdraft fees.

Credit Vs. Debit Options

Some stores allow consumers to choose either debit or credit. When you choose 'debit', cash is usually withdrawn immediately from your account. If you choose the 'credit' option, money may take a few days to withdraw. During that delay, you may forget to deduct that purchase from your balance leading to overdraft fees.

Tips To Save On Laundry Costs

Making a few small changes could help you save on your laundry costs each year.

• Use Hot Water Only When Needed.

Unless your clothing is very dirty or you are washing undergarments, try to use cold water and the delicate cycle. According to Bankrate.com, up to 90 percent of the cost of washing clothes comes from heating the water.

• **Cut Back On Detergent.** PlanetGreen.com suggests using half the recommended amount of detergent, even with heavily soiled loads. If the recommended use lines are hard to read, you may use a black marker to draw a line at the halfway mark making it easier to see.

• **Out To Dry.** According to LaundryList.org, your household could save by hanging clothes outside to dry when possible. If you live in a neighborhood where laundry lines aren't allowed or if the weather isn't appropriate, you can hang clothing in a well-ventilated garage, laundry room or extra space.

• **Easy-To-Care-For Clothing.** If possible, try to avoid purchasing clothes that need to be dry-cleaned. Clothing that is easy to wash and care for at home can save you time and money. Also, try to look for materials that wrinkle less easily and require less ironing as they will reduce your energy usage.



Try These Easy DIY Ideas For Great Holiday Gifts

Handmade gifts can be unique, uncomplicated and inexpensive. Here are a few ideas to try.

Just 'Faux' Someone Special. Look for mirror frames, architectural ornaments or other unique items at thrift stores, garage sales or repurposing centers and gild them with inexpensive faux gold leaf or apply a crackle finish.

You can find supplies at most craft or hobby stores at a low cost. Remember to check around the house for additional items you may need for the process, such as newspaper, painter's tape and varnish, before you buy them. For tips on how to gild or apply other faux finishes, visit ThisOldHouse.com and type 'Faux Finishes' in the search field.



until the salts are completely saturated. Make sure that the mix isn't too runny or dry. You may want to add a few drops of lavender oil and a pinch of lavender flowers and mix well. Then divide the mixture into pretty gift containers that you can buy or make at low cost. For more ideas visit BHG.com/novhandmade.

Gift Baskets. WiseBread.com suggests assembling a gift basket tailored to the recipient's tastes. For example, if your friend like movies you can create a 'movie night basket' or gift bag with a DVD (you may find some great selections at your local discount store for \$10 or less), microwave popcorn and another treat. If you know someone who loves tea or coffee, you could make a basket with their favorite specialty blends and add an inexpensive coffee mug.

Holiday Wreaths. Find some evergreen boughs, assorted greenery and wire and you are on your way to creating a beautiful homemade gift. For tips and more ideas visit GoodHousekeeping.com and type 'Eco-Friendly Christmas Wreath Ideas' in the search field.



Organic Lavender Bath Salts. Ingredients for homemade bath salts, skin oils and moisturizers should be available at most health food stores.

Better Homes and Gardens magazine suggests mixing a coarse salt, such as Dead Sea Salt, with organic skin oil like macadamia nut oil. Mix both ingredients in a bowl and continue to stir the mixture

Store Promotions: How They Compete For Your Money

Whenever you shop, especially during the holiday season, you should try to be aware of offers like those listed below which may be a disguise to get you to spend more.

'Free' Offers. If you shop online or from catalogs, try to think carefully about offers of free shipping. If you need to spend a certain amount to receive free shipping, carefully consider whether you would be spending more than you need to for the offer to kick in. If you do purchase online or through a catalog, shipping costs may be high and add significantly to your bill. Prior to doing so try to visit your mall or other local shopping place to see if a similar product is readily available. Many 'As Seen On TV' items are readily available at your local discount chain.

Also, try to think carefully about promotions that claim to include 'free' extras if you buy a certain amount. Promotions like these may lead you to spend more than you budgeted for. Try to determine whether the free product is worth it or if you really need it.

Beware Of Fine Print. If you receive any sales coupons or advertisements try to read the fine print, usually found at the bottom



of an ad after an asterisk. If you are still unclear on terms and conditions of the ad then call the store for clarification.

Buy One - Get One.

Promotions such as BOGO promotions are quite common, especially at grocery stores. BOGO used to mean buy one get one free. However, the term BOGO has evolved in many instances to stand

for buy one get one (then insert your limitation here). Consider carefully before falling for a BOGO promotion. It may stand for buy one get one fifty percent off. It isn't always "buy one get one free" anymore.

Mail-In Rebates. If you want your rebate discount, be sure to complete promptly and send in all the required paperwork such as the receipt and UPC. Also, photocopy everything that you send to the company in case you have to follow up on the status of your rebate. It is possible to save money through rebates however it can be a hassle and time consuming. The average time that it takes to receive a rebate is six to eight weeks. Therefore, do not purchase a product that you cannot really afford just because it has a rebate, especially if you need the money now.

Many promotions, such as those listed above, could save you money. Be a savvy shopper by weighing each promotion to make what you are purchasing doesn't sidetrack you from your budget goals. Making a list, as with any shopping expedition, could help you stick within your spending parameters. If you work at practicing good budgeting skills throughout the year, you will be better able to distinguish between the good and bad sales gimmicks.



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