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Open slather on discount prices

By Lesley Parker
June 24, 2009

For the best shopping deals in town - just ask.

Australians are "e-haggling" to negotiate better prices for goods and services as straitened times make them more value conscious.

"There's been an evolution in haggling," says the program director with the Australian Centre for Retail Studies at Monash University, Stephen Ogden-Barnes. "People are distancing themselves from deal-making in-store and focusing on deal research online. In-store haggling is being replaced by online comparison shopping."

The centre's research shows that one in two Australian consumers now window shop online before buying in-store.

Once they've found a competitive price online, they'll go to their preferred store armed with this research to seek the same or, preferably, a better price.

The general manager of corporate affairs at David Jones, Helen Karlis, confirms this is the company's experience, adding that DJs prefers price matching to face-to-face haggling.

"We don't do individual haggling the staff don't have the authority to do that," Karlis says. "And I don't think people think of DJs in that manner."

"However, a lot of our customers do shop around, phone other places, then come to us and ask us to price match which we do."

In contrast, electronics retailer Bing Lee says "everything's negotiable" and its staff can discuss prices on the shop floor.

The retailer says on its website that its catalogue or website prices are the manufacturer's recommended retail prices and, "in the real world of buying and selling, few if any products are sold at the manufacturer's recommended retail prices".

Whether you call it haggling or price matching, it could save you hundreds of dollars a year.

Bing Lee certainly isn't alone in sealing the deal with a discount. From washing machines to gym membership or the handbag that's not officially on sale, there's no harm in asking for a discount.

A recent survey by US consumer advocacy group Consumer Reports found the answer will often be "yes".

Consumer Reports found that two out of three respondents had tried to negotiate a better deal in the past six months and that half of these people "always" or "often" haggled.

Among the negotiators, 81 per cent had paid less for clothing, 78 per cent secured a better price on a car and 75 per cent took home cheaper appliances, among other things. Younger people were more inclined to haggle than older shoppers, the survey found.

Ogden-Barnes says Australians aren't natural hagglers. "I don't think we are skilled hagglers," he says. "Here, haggling can be confrontational."

Sellers might respond to an offer with: "You've got to be joking, mate." And potential buyers sometimes demean a product or service as a negotiating tactic.

"When a buyer asks, they often do it confrontationally; when a seller rebuffs, they often do it dismissively," Ogden-Barnes says. "That isn't the spirit of haggling as you see in other countries, where it's enthusiastic but respectful."

Consumers are more likely to get a better deal if they put their case respectfully, he suggests.

"I've got no doubt that anyone who has worked in retail will know what is meant by a 'difficult' customer and how little people want to do for a difficult customer," he says.

Instead, explain why you'd like a better price for example, telling the seller that you like their product but can't ignore the fact that another brand or retailer is cheaper and then ask how they can help.

The managing director of consumer research consultancy Directional Insights, Helen Bakewell, says the influence of immigrants and the propensity for young Australians to travel means haggling is becoming more common and negotiating skills are improving.

"Not everyone feels comfortable doing this but you will see more of it," Bakewell says. "And retailers are becoming much more receptive to it it's not just electronic goods now, it's clothing as well."

She expects haggling to remain a tool in the shopper's arsenal even when more prosperous times return.

PLAY YOUR CARDS RIGHT

Don't be afraid to ask - they can only say no.

Know your product and your prices - research online and by phone.

Be respectful when asking for a better price - don't demean the product, service or seller.

Ask for the "cash" price.

Shop at the end of the month, when sales staff may be keen to meet targets or lift commission.

The retailer will be more able to talk turkey at a quiet time of the day.

Don't negotiate within earshot of other customers - the seller may not want to broadcast a deal.

If the shop assistant can't help, ask to talk to the manager about price.

Never act desperate to buy.

You may do better in the store than on the phone.

Pool your shopping (alone or with friends) and buy more than one item - you can ask for a volume discount.

If you can't get a cash discount, ask the retailer to throw something else in free.

Look for imperfections and ask for a discount if you don't mind the flaw or can fix it.

There's no harm in asking whether an item will be going on sale soon.

As a last resort, turn on your heels and see if the seller quickly changes his or her mind before you reach the front door.

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