

## **Coupons – a tax on people with better things to do**

*By Rick Maier*

When I was a kid, my parents made me lick and stick S&H Green Stamps in those little booklets. Then they would redeem the stamps for merchandise - a transistor radio, electric knife sharpener, or new set of TV trays. I had better things to do than fool with those stamps, so I suppose that's where my resentment started.

Thankfully, the popularity of Green Stamps has dried up, although the company still exists (see [www.greenpoints.com](http://www.greenpoints.com)). But a third-cousin-twice-removed incentive program still lurks out there, one that appeals to that all-American lust for a bargain – clipping coupons.

For years I've ignored the fifty cents here, dollar off there coupons. But a national drug store chain recently sent an 88-page tome offering more than \$525 in coupon savings. That's serious savings on stuff I actually use – name-brand pain relievers, tooth paste and Rice Krispies!

It's hard to figure how much you'd have to spend to save \$525 (I stopped counting at \$3,333.14). And of course there are offsetting costs when you buy more than you need before the time you need it – cash flow burdens, warehousing expenses, plus Snap Crackle and Pop stop talking to the milk after a few months of storage.

How do coupon clippers remember to take each little slip to the store when they need that product? The best plan would be to keep one of those compartmentalized purses to file the coupons by product with a cross-reference to expiration date - something I'm just not going to do. I suspect that most clippers cut the things out and leave them all over the kitchen, the car, and in every pocket of clothing they own.

As much as I would appreciate a good deal to try those new Listerine PocketPaks or to save \$1 on Bikini Zone analgesic creme, I must resist the urge to change my shopping patterns from the just-in-time impulse buying that works so well for me today.

I understand why retailers offer discounts – to move stuff that won't sell at the regular price, or to lure us into their stores to buy other things at regular prices. I'm all for new product promotions, lower prices and affinity programs that reward customer loyalty.

But what's so important about cutting out a little piece of paper and presenting it at the counter? Just advertise the everyday low price, like Wal-Mart and Target! Why should one's ability to use scissors be a prerequisite to saving money, or do they hope we will lose the coupon and buy the product anyway? And it doesn't even promote store loyalty when retailers honor each other's coupons.

With apologies to those who consider coupons an exciting hobby or sport, it's time to demand that retailers move on. We have better things to do. Coupons have lost their promotional appeal and have become a tax on those who don't use them.

I hope retailers don't get mad at the Telegraph for printing this editorial. They should take all the money they save by eliminating coupons and divide it between lower prices, giving themselves a raise and higher margins to pump up their stock price.

We already have the successor to coupons – the Kroger Plus card – which also penalizes non-use as much as it offers savings, and now our most private buying patterns are in the database.

If we don't draw the line soon, some young advertising genius will dream up the idea to give away perforated sheets of pale green postage-size stamps that can be pasted into books and redeemed for valuable merchandise.

Picture: S&H Green Stamps sign

Caption: Possibly the last S&H Green Stamp sign in Macon can be seen on Emory Highway. The retailer is out of business.

Picture: table full of coupons

Caption: It takes a lot of time to clip coupons and even more discipline to remember to redeem them.