

Shop smart for back to school

Written by Holyoke Enterprise

Savvy parents are always on the lookout for ways to extend their shopping dollars. For back to school, that means uncovering discounts, rebates, contests and other ways to earn free products.

This year there are several tips parents will want to keep in mind, as well as special opportunities available for smart shoppers, no matter the age of their kids:

—Don't always opt for 10 cent specials. Though you might save up front, these products can fall apart quickly, costing you time and money to buy another set. Choose products sturdy enough to last the entire school year. Select notebooks, folders and organizational systems with durable covers and quality materials. Some brands offer extras like notebooks with covered spines so spiral coils don't get out of place, or binders with patented materials protecting against peeling or bent corners.

—Sign up for product rebates and loyalty programs. This is especially handy when you will be purchasing many items from a manufacturer, such as notebooks and folders. For example, Mead offers "Mead Money Madness" -- a points program offering rewards for eligible purchases. Look for the Money Madness tag on the company's products, enter the UPC at www.mead.com and earn points. Points are redeemable for real-world prizes, including retailer gift cards, school supplies, music and more.

—Buy basics in bulk. When it comes to things you know you'll need - such as paper, pens and tape - seek out bulk opportunities. Shopper clubs and warehouse stores aren't just for food or household necessities. Peruse online auctions to take advantage of bulk offerings and discounts.

—College students can save money by asking others to gift items off their wish list, and parents can make sure their back to school purchases are actually appreciated, thanks to the first college dorm registry. Organize.com is offering college students a dorm registry, letting them choose from thousands of products to outfit their dorm room and help in the classroom. When loved ones buy gifts, they can even have packages delivered directly to the student's dorm as they move in, saving on transportation and storage hassles. Plus, students creating registries can save 10 percent off all Organize.com purchases.

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—Make kids' school clothes last by choosing items that can be worn in different seasons. The layered look also is a good option, as clothing can be worn in different combinations to create different looks. Check out newspaper circulars and online retailers for special seasonal discounts.

—Opt for products with special offers, and enter back-to-school contests. For instance, Target is offering a free subscription to Seventeen Magazine simply for purchasing designated notebooks and supplies. On the contest front, the “Five Star Artist Contest” (at www.beafivestartist.com) will give two winners a \$5,000 cash prize and the chance to have their artwork grace a future notebook cover. Another contest, the “Dream Dorm Makeover” (at www.organize.com), will earn lucky college students Organize.com gift cards, plus bundles of school supplies.

Above all, make sure your kids know the difference between wants and needs. Consider having them chip-in for purchases, and they'll quickly learn the difference!