

Seniors take advantage of discounts

Age-related specials also help generate business

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At what age does one become a senior?

When it comes to qualifying for discounts, the age of seniority can be 50, 55, 60, 62, 65, even 66.

And there's no consistency to the savings either. They're all over the board.

"If I could find them listed and categorized, it would be of great value," said Thomas Aiello, 66, a retired mechanical contractor from Estero.

Fred Peer, another Lee County resident, uses his AARP card frequently for hotel discounts but said the inconsistencies of other offers make other deals trickier to locate.

Sure the deals are out there, but who can keep track of them?

That's what Doug Brown of Albuquerque, N.M., thought one day about five years ago when he bought a \$7.50 movie ticket for \$4.50. His recent birthday had saved him 40 percent and he liked it. But when he set out to locate a directory of places that listed other such deals, he came up empty-handed.

So he created seniordiscounts.com, an Internet site that today includes about 125,000 special deals for the senior crowd that are searchable by ZIP code. Discounts can be a nice perk for the 50-plus set, ranging from meals to groceries to haircuts to airfares.

For businesses, they're a marketing tool, a way to generate business on slow days, and a method of promoting goodwill.

Adults 55-plus number 59 million, or more than 21 percent of the U.S. population. The 65-plus group totals 35 million and is expected to double to 70.3 million by 2030, according to the 2000 U.S. Census.

There was a time when companies — especially airlines — scaled back on the discounts, saying there were so many people turning 55 they couldn't afford to do it.

ADDING, NOT SUBTRACTING

But David Smidt, president of seniordiscount.com, said these days more are being added than subtracted. Also, many airlines have reinstated theirs.

Smidt's Web site's motto: "Find gold in the golden years" — said the site gets about 100,000 unique customers a month. Some 60,000 subscribe to its electronic newsletter, which offers tips for digging out deals.

The company builds its discount database by contacting retailers and asking what they offer, receiving information from businesses that want to be included, and by soliciting information from consumers, including having contests. The discounts are searchable by category such as travel, or restaurants.

Smidt said most senior discounts on his Web site start at ages 55 to 60 while travel-related ones, such as those offered to AARP members, generally start at 50.

Don't assume there's no discount. You'd be surprised who will shave off a percentage for a 55-plus customer if they ask, he said.

"We have apartment complexes, Lincoln and Cadillac dealerships, car washes, tree service, lawn care, plumbers, handymen ..." he said.

When it comes to getting quotes and estimates, he suggests getting the price first, then asking for the discount.

Smidt, 30, thinks seniors deserve a break, even though some younger people struggling to make ends meet might disagree.

He says businesses provide senior discounts to give back to the people who have given to them.

But there are other motives.

"Restaurants do it to fill spots that aren't busy, or hotels in off-season because seniors tend to have more time to travel. And they tend to be loyal and will come back if they get good service," he said. Sometimes they're offered smaller portions for lower prices, as is the case at some Bob Evans and Cracker Barrel restaurants.

DRAWING CUSTOMERS

In retail stores, many discounts are limited to midweek days when business is slower.

Tom Ottwell, spokesman for AARP, said that even though discounts kick in for members at age 50, "some people 50 and over may not identify themselves as senior." That may be especially true of baby boomers, who strive for a more youthful lifestyle than their parents and may feel a stigma associated with aging.

But there are plenty more who embrace the perk.

Stephanie Atkins, assistant manager of Factory Card & Party Outlet in Cape Coral, where

people 55-plus get 10 percent off purchases on Wednesdays, said customers "make it more of a point to come in on Wednesdays."

And it's no hassle for the clerks. There's a button on the cash register that automatically takes the discount.

Ten percent may not be much, but "some people think it's a big deal," Atkins said.

At Bealls Outlets around Lee County, many 50-plus customers look forward to Mondays for the 15 percent that gets shaved off their bill.

Seniors can double-dip on Mondays via a frequent shopper card — available for customers of any age on any day of the week — that gets punched for every \$10 spent. With 20 punches, holders receive another 20 percent off an entire purchase.

At T.J. Maxx, a national discount chain, senior discounts are offered only in Florida — a 10 percent reduction for people 55 and up on Mondays — said Laura McDowell, spokeswoman.

"It's a nice customer service," said McDowell, and its geared to the high number of retirees in the state.

"It's hard to say whether it boosts sales. We don't track it," McDowell said.

BANKING PRIVILEGES

The 50-plus set can get deals at banks, too. An example: Edison National Bank in Fort Myers, and Bank of the Islands on Sanibel allow free cashier's checks, money orders and travelers checks and no monthly service charge. Other senior perks include bonus interest on CDs — with no minimum balance required.

"This is just our way of recognizing that these customers have reached a special time in their lives and have earned the right to be pampered," said bank President Robbie B. Roepstorff. "They seem appreciative, and occasionally surprised, that we would do this."

GETTING THOSE DISCOUNTS

- One Web site to check is www.seniordiscounts.com, (800) 372-7513, or write: SeniorDiscounts.com, P.O. Box 541912, Houston, TX 77254-1912.

The discounts are searchable online by city or ZIP code. Those who pay an annual \$19.99 membership fee get a 500-page book detailing discounts around the nation along with a card that entitles holders to a 15 percent to 20 percent discount at participating businesses.

The company also asks people to report senior discounts to them for inclusion on the Web site.

- AARP membership entitles anyone 50 or over to various discounts on car rental, hotels, airlines and more. Log onto www.aarp.org or call (888) 687-2277).

Some of the discounts available in Lee County, and age eligibility:

STORES

Bealls Outlet

15 percent, Mondays, age 50

Goodwill Industries

15 percent, Wednesdays, 55

Ross Dress For Less

10 percent, Tuesdays, 55

Sally Beauty Supply

5 percent to 25 percent off non-sale items, 55; varies by store.

TJ Maxx

10 percent, Mondays, 55

Publix Super Markets

5 percent, Wednesdays, 60; check specific stores for details

Factory Card & Party Outlet, Cape Coral

10 percent, Wednesdays, 55

Priced Right Liquor, Fort Myers and Cape Coral

10 percent, Tuesdays, 62

RESTAURANTS

Grandy's

10 percent, age 65

Long John Silver's

10 percent off or a discounted beverage, 55

Mrs. Fields Cookies

10 percent, 60

TCBY Yogurt
10 percent; age varies by location, usually 55

Wendy's Old Fashioned Hamburgers
10 percent, or discounted drink price, varies, 55

Arby's
10 percent, generally 55

IHOP
10 percent; senior menu available with smaller portions, 55

Hardees
10 percent, 55

OTHER

Midas Auto Service Experts
10 percent off parts and service, 55, but may vary by store

AMC Merchants Crossing 16
\$2 off regular adult admission, 55

SuperCuts
\$2 off the regular adult haircut, may vary, 60

AIRLINES

Some airlines offer discounts ranging from 5 percent to 15 percent and age eligibility varies; some aren't available for online booking. Several airlines offer discounts only to AARP members. Those that have their own discount program include:

Air Canada
Usually 10 percent, 60

America West
10 percent, 62 and one companion of any age; also Senior Saver Pack.

American Airlines/ American Eagle
Discount varies, 65

ATA Airlines
Discounts for selected markets and dates, 62

Continental Airlines
Discount varies, 65

Midwest Airlines

Flat rate senior fares, 55

Southwest Airlines

Senior Fare fully refundable. Ticket price typically \$129 plus tax, 65

United Airlines

\$159 round trip with the Silver Wings Plus program, 55

— Source: SeniorDiscounts.com