

Alvin's money savers

Check out money expert **Alvin Hall** – he's going to save you pounds every week

COMPARISON SITES: WHO'S BEST?

Every month, millions of us visit price comparison sites looking for a money-saving deal. But price comparison sites have also been criticised for not being transparent about how they make their money. Some consumer groups have complained that although it's easy to compare the cost, it's harder to work out if you're comparing similar policies. However, last month some sites joined together to produce a code of practice.

The code of practice covers a range of different areas from transparency to making sure customers aren't misled about quotes or rates that aren't based on their circumstances. The code also says sites must display details of their complaints procedure and should tell users if they'll pass their data onto third parties before it's collected. However, it won't force price comparison sites to spell out how much they earn each time you buy a product they've recommended.

Don't assume you'll get the best deal every time. Compare the results from two or three different sites before you make your decision. That's because some comparison sites compare products offered by more companies than others (and some financial companies refuse to deal with comparison sites).

You should visit a few sites before you buy because they don't always come up with the same 'best buys', even for products such as savings accounts. If shopping for a complicated product, such as travel insurance, make sure the policies offer the same amount of cover. The cheapest may not give you cover you need.

If you want to open a savings account or a cash ISA, I'd also suggest that you look at the financial regulator, the Financial Services Authority's comparison tables (visit moneymadeclear.fsa.gov.uk). Unlike price comparison sites, the FSA doesn't get any money when you purchase or sign up for a product listed in its tables.

It's worth reading the small print if you're buying an insurance policy without getting the advice of an independent broker. Just because a policy is cheap doesn't necessarily mean it's good value. Make sure you look at the level of cover offered, the excess and importantly what's not covered.

MY TOP 5 TIPS

PREPARING FOR AUTUMN

List your anticipated expenditures for the remainder of 2009. It's not that hard – there are only four months left! Christmas is certainly no surprise (and it's not that far away). Also new clothes, birthdays, hen nights, wedding, weekend trips – anything you'll have to spend money on before the end of the year.

Next to each expenditure put the maximum amount you can afford to spend without getting into debt (or increasing it) and without causing financial and emotional anxiety.

Add up the total and divide it by the number of pay days between now and the end of the year. This is the amount you have to save from every pay cheque in order to afford the expenditures you've listed.

If the amount is in the 'Oh My God' category, then start deciding where you can make compromises – what gifts you'll have to buy at sale prices, what clothing purchase can be replaced by a less expensive one, what event you may not be able to attend. Better to begin making these decisions early, while you can still be calm and rational about it.

If the amount is one that you can afford without adding debt or distress, start saving for one (and only one) great Christmas gift you'll give yourself for being so financially disciplined. That gift can be anything reasonable, including a nice deposit into your savings account.

GOT A HOT MONEY-SAVING TIP? I'D LOVE TO HEAR IT!

Email me at alvin.hall@natmags.co.uk. Or post to: Alvin Hall, Reveal, 33 Broadwick Street, London, W1F 0DQ

Alvin Kurber and Katherine Heigl get online

Q&A

I took out an interest-free credit card more than a year ago. I also took out credit card protection at a cost of around £70 a year. When the interest rate went up I tore up the card and paid it off and never thought about it again. A couple of months ago, I got a bill for a credit card for £100. I've rung the bank and the card protection company, but I'm being given the runaround. Can I get my money back?

Wendy, by email

ALVIN SAYS: Cutting up a credit card and not using it is not the same as cancelling your card and closing your account. If you don't want to use your card, you should call and cancel it and the credit card protection (CCP). Because you did not, the CCP company continued to bill your credit card automatically and then the card company began charging interest. More than likely it's the CCP company that's responsible for giving you your money back.

I'd suggest you send a registered letter or email to a specific person at the bank and the CCP company, rather than relying on phone calls. Write a letter stating the problem and that you'd like your £100 back. However, once the company's received money under what it views as fair business, it's pretty difficult to get it back.

Note: Wendy has now had her £100 refunded. Thanks, Alvin!

Team Reveal

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Each week in Reveal I'll be sharing my advice with you

The right tools – that's what everyone needs to do their best work, to build the life they envision, to handle their money appropriately, and to become self-reliant.

Having grown up hoeing rows of peas and beans on a farm, I know at a fundamental level how the right tools, combined with common sense, can put food on the table.

This week, you'll acquire the tools to help you use price comparison sites. I'll also tell you how to prepare for the months ahead with your end of year financial projection.

Start reading now so you get the most for your money.

Alvin

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