

Shopping for Furniture and Appliances

Buying furniture and appliances is sort of like buying a new car. For one, you're almost always better off financially *not* buying new furniture (appliances can be a different matter). And when you do buy, you have to deal with the same sorts of salespeople and haggling over prices. But just like at a car dealership, if you're armed with enough time and info, you *can* come out ahead.

Tip Mattress shopping has its own special pitfalls—see the box on page 3 of this pdf for advice.

The best approach to buying furniture and appliances is to start as cheaply as possible, and then gradually upgrade to quality. The middle road isn't cost-effective: If you spend \$250 on a kitchen table from a department store, it loses value faster than a new car and it probably isn't well made so it won't last long. You're better off buying the same table used—or waiting until you can afford a quality table that'll last the rest of your life.

When you're in the market for household items, ask family and friends. You might be surprised at what people are ready to part with—and at what prices. In 20 years together, my wife and I have owned lots of used furniture and appliances, much of which we got from friends and coworkers. These items served us well until we found the money to upgrade to better quality. Sure, some of the stuff was ugly and shoddy, but it did the job and let us save so we could pay cash for better quality.

Tip Don't forget to check garage sales, thrift shops, and Craigslist.org. And keep your eye out for estate sales, which can be an excellent source of quality used items.

As needed—and as you can afford it—upgrade a piece here and there. If you entertain a lot, you might decide you need a nice dining room set. If you fish or hunt or have a garden, it might make sense to pick up a chest freezer for the garage. As you add new stuff, sell (or give away) your old pieces to help somebody else get started.

When you *do* shop for new furniture or appliances, keep these tips in mind:

- **Set a budget.** Know how much you can afford to pay so you won't be tempted to spend more.
- **Do your research.** If you're looking for new name-brand items, get the specs (manufacturer, model name, and number) on the pieces you want, and then research prices online at sites like Amazon.com. While you're at it, look for coupons on the manufacturers' websites and RetailMeNot.com. And don't forget to read reviews at Amazon and in *Consumer Reports*.

Tip To learn how to tell sturdy furniture from low-quality stuff, read this Get Rich Slowly article: <http://tinyurl.com/GRS-furniture>.

- **Look for “scratch and dent” items and other markdowns.** Some people are afraid to buy slightly imperfect stuff, but it's just going to get worn through normal use, so why not take the discount? My wife and I bought a fridge at a 20% off because it had a big dent on the side. Nobody could see the dent once the fridge was installed, and it's worked like a charm for 15 years.
- **Haggle.** In a recent survey of *Consumer Reports* subscribers, “only 10% of people who bought small appliances and 33% of people who bought major appliances tried to haggle. But around 75% of those who did try to bargain succeeded.”The survey says that hagglers saved a median of about \$50 on small appliances and \$100 on larger items. (For more on negotiating, see the box on page 175.)
- **Don't buy the extras.** Just like with a car, skip the add-ons and extended warranties. You can buy the extra features for less elsewhere, and you can “self-insure” in your own savings account (see page 223).
- **Be patient.** The key to getting good deals is to take your time, especially if you're furnishing your first home. Don't be in a rush to outfit every room completely, and beware the danger of accumulating Stuff (see page 96).

That last tip is the most important. When we bought our house, my wife and I couldn't afford to furnish every room without going into debt. For 5 years, the den stood empty or was home to whatever spare furniture we happened to have. Meanwhile, we saved for the items we really wanted. When we had enough in the bank, we waited some more. Our patience paid off: We picked up some high-quality furniture for about half price because we found a coupon *and* the store was having a sale. Now the den looks great, and we didn't go into debt to make that happen.

How to Buy a Mattress

Mattress shopping is an exercise in frustration. No two stores have the same items—each chain gets slightly different models with slightly different features—which makes it almost impossible to comparison shop. Plus there's the jargon: What are *coil counts* and *wire gauges*, and why should you care?

Believe it or not, if the salesperson is any good, she'll be your best resource. She can answer questions about terminology and help you find a mattress that fits your needs. Here are a few points to keep in mind as you shop:

- **Don't worry about finding the perfect mattress.** All that really matters is how it feels. And don't get bogged down by the various features; just find the cheapest bed that feels comfortable.
- **Don't discuss price until you know which mattress you want.** Manufacturers set minimum prices the stores can't sell below, so if the store is willing to negotiate, their products are overpriced. (Some large chains just use these prices and dispense with haggling.) If you have to negotiate, read the box on page 175 to prepare yourself.
- **Make sure there's at least a 30-day money-back guarantee**, and that you understand the terms. You'll need at least that long for your body to get used to the new mattress.

Writing for Slate (<http://slate.com/id/93956>), Seth Stephenson offers this mattress-shopping advice: "If you can't tell the difference between a \$200 and a \$900 mattress (I couldn't, but maybe you can), get the cheaper one. They're nearly the same, anyway. Anything over \$1,500 and you're just paying for prestige.."

To learn more about choosing a mattress, visit the Better Sleep Council at www.bettersleep.org. For a detailed look at mattress shopping from an actual mattress salesman, read <http://tinyurl.com/GRS-mattress>.