

Secrets of a Shopping Super Star

Would you like to look fabulous and do it on a budget to boot! Of course you would and you can. All it takes is a little know-how.

Meet our friend Sharon, the “ Shopping Doc” or as her husband prefers to call her, the Queen of Discount. We prefer “Shopping Doc”, in deference to the fact that she recently earned a doctorate, while managing to look stylish for the entire 5 year ordeal.

She has a great wardrobe but what sets her apart is her almost super human ability to find great pieces at unbelievable prices. So we thought we’d ask her to share some of her secrets for shopping super success with you.

Image Talks: So are great shoppers just born or is this a skill that that anyone can learn?

Shopping Doc: Well, I absolutely believe that anyone can become a great shopper if they are willing to spend some time and energy educating themselves. I grew up in New York, which is a place you can buy almost anything and almost always at a discount. My mother used to say that any fool can buy retail, the message being that smart people should be able to find ways to get great deals. I can remember going to Loehmann’s in N.Y. during my teens. At the time, Loehmann’s was THE place for great buys on women’s better clothing. In the parking lot, I would feel that little shiver of excitement the French call a *frisson* just thinking about the possibilities of a great find...that was such fun! Anyway, it practically became an article of religious faith with me that I was never going to pay retail for my clothes. Luckily, even though I no longer live in N.Y., I do live in a city where there are great bargains to be found if you know where to look and now with the availability of shopping on the internet, it really doesn’t matter where you live.

Image Talks: We’re getting a little *frisson* just hearing your story! So, give us an example. Is there a strategy that anyone can follow?

Shopping Doc: Absolutely there’s a strategy and I follow it consistently no matter what I’m shopping for. Recently I snagged a gorgeous black long suede skirt for \$44, a fitted red suede jacket for \$43, a wonderful alpaca cape for \$99, and designer shoes at less than half price. These pieces are all new, current season items in my size, all first quality, and most importantly, they all compliment my personal style, fit into my existing wardrobe and expand my options. The skirt is a perfect example. I purchased it at Chico’s, a store I shop frequently. I know that every other month or so, Chico’s sends out a catalogue with a coupon. Often the coupon is worth 50% off any item over \$100 or 25% off your entire purchase. Stores are happy to add you to their mailing list; just ask. Additionally, Chico’s extends special pricing and privileges to members of its

Passport Club. To be a member, you need to have already met a set minimum purchase but once you've met that minimum you are entitled to free shipping on all web or phone purchases plus a 5% discount on all future purchases, a very good deal! At the beginning of each season, I stroll around the store and check out items I might be interested in. But, I never buy on this initial trip. I might jot down the name and item number of the things that I really, really want. Then, when the coupon arrives, I'm ready. I call the store where I saw the item and see if they still have it. If they don't, I ask them if they can locate it for me. They have so many stores, rarely am I disappointed and because shipping is free (of course I'm a Passport member) it doesn't matter if the closest location is across the country. In this case, not only was the skirt still at the local store, but it had also been marked down in the interim so I got a terrific buy on it. Actually, when I went to pick up the skirt, I noticed they had lots of items on sale. I also bought a great T-shirt that works with the skirt at 60% off. Then they deducted an additional 5% because I'm a Passport member. Some but not all coupons, like the \$10 birthday coupon sent to all Passport members, can be used along with sale pricing and with other coupons. You do need to be careful and read the fine print to avoid any unpleasant surprises at the checkout stand. But when you are able to use multiple coupons and sale pricing, you know you have hit the mother lode. Your gorgeous new outfit is practically free!

Chico's makes this method of shopping particularly easy because they are so customer-service oriented and will gladly check their database to find items for you at other locations. However, I use the same principle to shop at places like Macy's, which also run great sales and print 15% or 20% discount coupons in the local newspaper. Better yet, they will send them directly to you when you open a credit card account. I find Macy's is a good place to shop for purses, socks, lingerie, and some men's clothing but only if I haven't been able to find those items at T.J. Maxx which beats even Macy's sale + coupon prices.

Let me say a word about factory outlet malls. Generally, I find them disappointing. I think much of the clothing is second-rate, made specifically for sale at the outlets. On the other hand, there are a few stores that have great outlets, Chico's being one of them. Someday, I'm going to get to the Peruvian Connection outlet in Santa Fe where I'm going to find one of their fabulous sweaters for a pittance, I just know it. I think if you live near an outlet mall it is absolutely worth checking it out but I also think you need to be cautious and have done some comparison shopping beforehand so you know what you are looking at and what it should cost. There's a Coach outlet near where I live that may discount items a whopping 10% or so. That's certainly not enough to get me very excited.

Image Talks: But doesn't shopping like this take a great deal of time and patience? Not everyone can spend hours looking for a great deal.

Shopping Doc: Well, yes and no. Yes, it does take patience. If you want it RIGHT NOW, you are probably going to pay more for it. Generally, I'm willing to wait a little. Yes, it may take more than one trip to the store but if I'm pressed for time, I'll have the item sent. I don't have a big problem with returns. Experience has given me a good eye for what works for me and how the various brands that my favorite stores carry will fit me. But no, I don't think it actually takes much more time to shop this way. The rewards are substantial and well worth your effort!

Image Talks: So to recap, our Shopping Doc has described a shopping method that anyone can follow. It relies on a few simple strategies.

- Get on the mailing lists of all the stores that you frequently shop.
- If a store has a preferred customer program, join.
- Visit stores early in the season to see what you would love to add to your wardrobe.
- Wait to buy until merchandise goes on sale, you have a coupon, or better yet wait until you have **both** a coupon and a sale.

Stay tuned for more shopping secrets from our Shopping Doc!

Do you have a question about shopping or a shopping success story to share? Contact us at shopping@imagetalks.com