

# Getting What You Paid For

Long lines? Poor service? **Solutions to everyday shopping problems**

“I was in here yesterday. You wouldn't wait on me. Big mistake. Big.”

Julia Roberts as Vivian Ward in *Pretty Woman*

THE OFFER IS OUTSTANDING: “Hi! How can I help you?” But you utter a quick “Oh, I'm just looking” and walk on. Of course, what you really want to say is this: “Well, I'd like to find the perfect pair of jeans—for half price. I'd like the store to myself. I'd like the dressing-room mirrors to be more flattering. And, oh yes, would you feed me grapes and fan me with palm fronds?” To make your next shopping trip as pleasant and productive as possible, *Real Simple* asked retail executives, store managers, salespeople, and shopping analysts to share their collective wisdom. Here are solutions to your most common shopping problems. Sadly, palm fronds are so last year.

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**CHECKING IT TWICE**

Create an inventory of the items you want most, whether it's written (a shopping list) or visual (magazine clips, digital photos). Take a look at those items *before* you make that impulse buy and you may realize you'd rather save than spend.

**Problem: You overspend.**

**Solutions: Pay cash.** It's a lot harder to purchase a \$200 jersey dress if you have to count out every \$20 bill you give to the cashier, rather than pulling out a credit card. Hit the ATM before you go shopping, and vow not to spend any more than you take out, says David Bach, author of *Smart Women Finish Rich: 9 Steps to Achieving Financial Security and Funding Your Dreams* (Broadway, \$15).

**Take a breather.** Before making a big purchase, exit the store. Once you've escaped the enticing lighting and persuasive salespeople, you may very well realize that, no, you don't need that tie-dye tunic after all.

**Avoid "buy one, get the second one half off" sales.** "Do the math. You're not getting that great a deal—about 25 percent off," says Jona Kessans, a former department-store supervisor. If the item is \$50, you'll wind up spending \$75 total, as opposed to \$100.

"That, and you're probably buying two of something you don't need to double up on," says Kessans. "You're better off waiting until merchandise is marked down by 30 percent."

**Visit less affluent areas for sale merchandise.** Ritzier areas are more likely to sell out of an item before it has a chance to go on sale. "Wealthy people are generally more likely to buy items at full price than to wait for them to go on sale," says Tara Makarechi, a former salesperson. So if you live in an affluent area but still appreciate a bargain, visit a neighborhood that has less traffic or a community that is less posh.

**Do an inventory of what you already own before you stock up on the new season's merchandise.** Although fall fashions beckon, once you realize how many Fair Isle sweaters you have, you may be less tempted to buy a new one. On the same note, "never go shopping when your closet is empty because most of your clothes are dirty," says Amanda Ford, author of *Retail Therapy: Life Lessons Learned While Shopping* (Conari Press, \$15). "You might lament that you have nothing to wear and go shopping without realizing that you have all you need. You just need to do your laundry."

**Problem: You want to save time.**

**Solutions: Make a shopping list.** You write down fruit, cereal, and toilet paper for the grocery store. Why hit a retail store, where you're likely to spend a lot more money, empty-handed? Write down what you want and where you plan to buy it.

**Avoid the mall.** If you're looking for just one or two things, you may want to stop at a boutique or a freestanding department store. "It's in the mall's best interest to place the best stores far inside, at the heart, away from the entrance, which is why stopping into one

**Try-It-On Tips**

(Or How to Get Out of the Dressing Room as Fast as Possible)

- **Take a look at yourself in the mirror in your regular clothing before you undress.** Do the mirrors or the lighting seem especially flattering, or just awful? This way, you'll have some means of comparison when you try on store items.
- **Wear tops and bottoms that come on and off easily.** Choose a skirt instead of pants, and ballet flats rather than sneakers.
- **Choose the right undergarments.** Don't go dress shopping in a sports bra. A convertible bra will work with various necklines, and you'll be able to get an idea of how the dress (or a blouse) will look. Similarly, if you're shopping for a swimsuit, wear a thong or bikini briefs as opposed to boy shorts.
- **Use clear deodorant and wear minimal makeup.** When pulling shirts on and off, you don't want to worry about ruining either your shirt or the store's merchandise.
- **Keep jewelry to a minimum.** Necklaces and large earrings get in the way when you're trying on tops.



**PENNY-WISE**

Beware the store credit card (see Credit Check, right), and watch out for the “cash wrap,” the area by the register where retailers hope you’ll make last-minute impulse purchases of socks, fragrances, and accessories.

store at the mall ends up taking you a solid two hours,” says Paco Underhill, author of *Call of the Mall* (Simon & Schuster, \$14).

**Shop alone.** Women spend the most time in a store when they’re shopping with a friend or a child, says Underhill. If you want to get in and out, go solo.

**Problem: You hate fighting crowds and sorting through messy merchandise.**

**Solutions: Shop during the middle of the week.** Not only are stores less crowded on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday but you’ll also get first dibs on new merchandise, according to many salespeople. “Retailers prefer to get their merchandise on the floor before the weekend, when it gets crowded,” says Jeff Rhodes, a store manager for a line of upscale boutiques.

**Wake up early.** “The best time to shop is in the morning,” says Underhill. “The employ-

ees have yet to tire from irritable shoppers, the merchandise hasn’t been picked over and displaced, and there’s also comfort in the fact that you have time to come back for a purchase that needs to be mulled over.”

**Problem: Good service is hard to come by.**

**Solutions: Share your story.** “Make the salesperson want to help you by explaining that you need a dress for a last-minute wedding or that you have a very important interview on Friday, assuming, of course, this is the case,” says Ford. “Once the salesperson is involved, he may feel a bit more inclined to help.”

**Make friends with the salesperson.** If you frequent a particular store or boutique, ask for a salesperson’s business card, and always go to that person when you have questions about an item. Once you have established a relationship, the salesperson will be more likely to give you a heads-up about upcoming sales (when you’re on the verge of paying full price) or to hold an item an extra day or two. Also, “try to find a salesperson who has similar taste and a similar body type—someone who could say, ‘Girl, I tried that on. Don’t even think about it,’” says celebrity stylist Phillip Bloch. “Or, ‘Honey, I tried those. I wear them every day.’”

**Ask twice, even three times.** “I’ve heard that it takes three times for the person to actually hear you,” says Ford. In fact, many of the salespeople interviewed here—even some who work on commission—revealed that when asked to look in the back for an item, they will only pretend to do so, unless the customer refuses to back down. (They often feel it’s not worth the effort, since the customer may not buy the item anyway.)

**Think small.** Boutiques usually don’t have as much traffic as large department stores, so you’re more likely to get attentive service.

**Credit Check**

Getting a discount on your first purchase by applying for the store credit card is sweetly enticing, but it’s best to proceed with caution. Store credit cards have some of the highest interest rates in the country—between 21.33 and 23.49 percent on average. One piece of advice: “If you get the card for a onetime discount, try to pay it off, then cut it up,” says Catherine Williams, vice president of financial literacy for Money Management International, in Houston. **Better yet, sign up for the card to get the discount, but ask if you can pay cash.** Then your card won’t have an outstanding balance, and you won’t have to pay the high interest rate.

**tip** Wondering where to find that deeply discounted pair of designer jeans? Search for outlets by name, location, brand name, or category at [www.outletbound.com](http://www.outletbound.com).



**CUTTING CORNERS**

Save time by familiarizing yourself with the layout of a store. Trendier items are usually placed in front, basics in the middle, and sale items in back.

**Look the part.** Sad but true! Some salespeople we spoke to shamefully admitted that they often decide whether to help a customer based on the type of clothes she is wearing or shopping bags she is carrying. If you want top-notch service—especially from high-end retailers who depend on a small percentage of shoppers for the bulk of their business (and thus don't necessarily need you to buy that one shirt)—sometimes it helps to play the game by dressing well and carrying a handful of shopping bags.

**Problem: You love the skirt, but the only one in your size is on the mannequin.**

**Solution: Give your name and number to the store manager.** Some shops will let you take clothes off a mannequin right away; others won't, due to safety and time issues, or the fact that retailers like their stores to be visually consistent. That said, the clothing on man-

nequins generally changes about every two weeks, so if you really want something (and it's the last one), leave your information with the manager. "We'll call you once we take the mannequin down," says Rhodes.

**Problem: The checkout line is way too long.**

**Solutions: Ask the salesperson who has been waiting on you to put your item on hold.** You can pick it up during a less busy time.

**Head to another department.** If you're in a large department store, for example, hit the less crowded men's or home-furnishings department.

**Try it on now; buy it later.** Make sure the item fits, then see if you can order it online.

**Problem: You're shy about asking for a discount.**

**Solutions: Don't be.** "Ask for a discount on anything you buy—but not for a specific amount off," say Kristina Maticic and Anna Wallner, authors of *The Shopping Bags: Tips, Tricks and Inside Information to Make You a Savvy Shopper* (Dutton/Penguin Group, \$20). Instead, leave things open-ended by asking, "Can you give me a better deal?" "If your salesperson isn't authorized, you may have to ask the manager," says Maticic. If you find a slight flaw or damage—or even if the product's packaging is mangled—you may be entitled to a discount, says Jona Kessans.

**Wait until the store has a major sale, when most items are already discounted 20 to 30 percent.**

After convincing the clerk or manager that you're serious about a larger-than-normal purchase, request an additional 10 to 20 percent discount to close the deal. "If she won't discount the items further, ask her to throw in shirts, shoes, ties, or socks at no additional cost," says Wayne Tate, who, after 25 years of practicing law, has mastered the art of negotiation in and out of the courtroom.

**Setting Sale**

When to buy what, according to Daniel Butler, vice president of merchandising and retail operations for the National Retail Federation.

- **January:** Fall merchandise usually goes on clearance, and you'll find great buys on home goods, from linens to furniture.
- **February:** Take advantage of Valentine's Day promotions on jewelry and gift items.
- **April:** Spring fashions begin the markdown cycle.
- **May:** Look for deals on athletic clothing and shoes.
- **June and July:** Find sales and promotions on summer items through July, when they go on clearance. Father's Day promotions mean great offerings for men, so stock up on male holiday gifts.
- **September and October:** Find good deals on cold-weather items, like coats, gloves, and scarves.
- **November:** Many after-Thanksgiving sales and deals are set and advertised before the holiday, so you can often shop early and beat the crowds.
- **December:** Fall merchandise goes on sale.