

From the Wall Street Journal (author Timothy W. Martin)

Under a futon in her Charleston, S.C., apartment, Stacy Smith has stashed boxes of soy bars, bags of potato chips, bottles of vitamin water, canned vegetables, soup, barbecue sauce and antibacterial wipes. Her bedroom closet is jammed with soda and shampoo, her bookcase with garlic salt and meat marinades.

No, Ms. Smith isn't stocking up for a hurricane. The 39-year-old's apartment is stuffed with groceries because she's one of a growing flock of "extreme couponers."

These discount devotees have formed vast online communities that collectively unearth and swap digital, mobile-phone and paper coupons. The cleverest shoppers combine dozens of coupons and go from store to store buying items in quantity, getting stuff free of charge.

"If you can get 100 packs of toilet paper for free, you're going to," says Erin Libranda, 38. When the resident of Katy, Texas, has amassed enough coupons to buy many months' supply of eggs, she puts tiny cracks in them, adds lemon juice and freezes them.

Jill Lansky, 34, of Kalamazoo, Mich., likes to amuse friends by opening a cupboard to reveal 150 bottles of Powerade she bought for 25 cents each, thanks to coupons she collected on CouponForum.com.

Jody Wilson, 33, got turned onto the couponing Web site [AFullCup.com](#) last March. Since then, she's posted nearly 9,500 messages to the site's forum. "I became extremely addicted," says the credit analyst from Battle Creek, Mich. "There's deal after deal after deal."

Couponers trade deal information and coupons themselves through cellphones, Twitter, Facebook, and message boards on Web sites like [Slickdeals.net](#) and [TheCrazyCouponLady.com](#), motivated as much by competitiveness as by frugality.

Some sites, which tend to make their money from online ads, organize contests to see which member can spend the least cash in a month on essentials. Some couponers brag online about stockpiling free groceries, then selling them at yard sales.

Coupon Fraud Grows

Proud shoppers post photos of themselves posing with their latest hauls. Nathan Engels of Villa Hills, Ky., can't resist loading up on free products. Mr. Engels recently erected a 6-foot-tall tower featuring the 1,142 packages of Jell-O he had got for nothing. He brags about his jam-packed freezer holding 30 pounds of meat, 50 pounds of cheese and 200 bags of vegetables.

"I'm going to buy as much as I can—I don't care if it's a year's or two-year's supply," says Mr. Engels, 28, who is married and has a young daughter.

For decades, shoppers clipped coupons from newspaper circulars, magazines and coupon booklets. Redemptions peaked in the early 1990s, and couponing gradually declined as grocers launched loyalty-card programs that rewarded repeat shoppers with discounts.

But amid the recession last year, the number of coupons redeemed rose 27%, to 3.3 billion from 2.6 billion in 2008, says Inmar Inc., a coupon-processing agent. The year-over-year percentage increase was the largest since Inmar started tracking the statistic more than 20 years ago.

Fueling the increase isn't the general populace but heavy coupon users, people who redeem 104 or more coupons over six months, according to an August report by The Nielsen Co. These users tend to be females under the age of 54 with college degrees and household incomes above \$70,000, Nielsen says.

The upsurge mirrors the growth of Web sites dedicated to couponing. [CouponMom.com](#), which appeals to a broad range of savers, has 2.2 million members, up from one million last January, says site founder [Stephanie Nelson, author of the book, "The Coupon Mom's Guide to Cutting Your Grocery Bills in Half."](#)

[Hotcouponworld.com](#), which has seen its membership grow to 200,000 from 80,000 in the past year, targets couponers who think "there's an economic value in buying all your peanut butter for the year in one week in September," says site founder Julie Parrish, 35, of West Linn, Ore. Two years ago, she bought 50 18-ounce jars of Skippy creamy peanut butter for 17 cents each; last September, she paid 35 cents each. At retail, they cost around \$3.59.

Ms. Smith, the Charleston woman whose closet doubles as a pantry, says she disliked grocery shopping until she got laid off last year from her clerical job and, to economize, turned to couponing Web sites. On two recent trips to her local supermarket, she says she paid \$5 for \$78 worth of items, and \$2 for \$40 worth of goods.

When Ms. Libranda, the Texas shopper, needed 500 coupons for flavored water last summer, she posted a request at [Hotcouponworld.com](#). Within days, she had exchanged postage stamps and cereal box tops with half a dozen other members. "We had free water for a long time," Ms. Libranda says.

All the deal making isn't great for grocers, some of which have seen their profits squeezed by discounting. Craig Herkert, chief executive of Supervalu Inc., operator of Jewel, Albertson's and other supermarkets, recently told analysts that shoppers with an eye for discounts were "executing with surgical precision."

Carrie Petersen of Columbia, Md., says she tries not to abuse discounts. Recently, Ms. Petersen, 38, took 50-cent coupons for meat seasonings to a number of supermarkets that were doubling the coupons' value. Because the seasonings were already on sale for \$1 each, Ms. Petersen got them for nothing.

Instead of scooping piles of packets into her shopping cart, she bought just five at a time at each of the stores she visited. "I never clear the shelf: I don't think that's right," Ms. Peterson says. "I probably only got 30."

Bringing home huge piles of stuff doesn't always work out. Julie Felton, a 39-year-old respiratory therapist from San Marcos, Texas, says she was ecstatic when she combined 20 coupons from a retailer and a manufacturer to get \$5 bags of dog food for nothing—a six-month supply.

Ms. Felton's dog didn't like the food. Neither did her cat, nor the deer that wander into her yard. She wound up donating it to a local animal shelter.