

The Price is Not Right

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We know that the role of advertising is to mislead a prospective buyer to the greatest extent the law allows. In America more and more of the misleading takes the form of deceptive presentation of the price of an item or service. Although these practices insult the intelligence of perceptive consumer, vendors and their advertising agencies must believe that they work.

Priced to the nines

In a recent flyer from a mattress retailer the price of every item ended in a string of 9's. One mattress cost \$399.99, a better one was \$499.99. An appliance store offers a washing machine for \$299.99 and a vacuum cleaner for only \$79.99.

What's the point? Some advertising genius has decided that Americans are too slow-witted to realize that the washing machine will set them back three hundred dollars. It just *sounds* less expensive.

There's little that consumers can do about this silly practice. However, if I see a product listed at \$199.99 by one vendor and \$200 by another, I'll buy it from the latter.

And when is the last time you saw the price per gallon of gasoline end in anything other than nine tenths of a cent, no longer significant given today's soaring prices?

Buy it by the half pound

Recently American delicatessens have begun pricing corned beef and salami by the *half pound*. You see the little sign

3.49 / ½ lb.

and for a moment you're tempted until you realize that it's a \$7 per pound item and the store was trying to fool you.

Free lunch?

"Buy any mattress and get a matching box spring *absolutely free*," proclaims the television, accenting every syllable. In the supermarket a sign above bags of pretzels says "Buy one -- get one free."

Years ago the District of Columbia enacted a rule forbidding the word "free" to mean "included". If you advertise something as "free", then it has to be free, they reasoned. Alas, interstate commerce regulations prevailed and the rule was short lived.

What if I don't want S & H?

Products advertised on television always slip in the seemingly innocent "plus shipping and handling". The item you might want is only \$19.99 (plus \$6.99 S&H); in other words \$27. Often the surcharge is exorbitant, and applies to each item when you order more than one.

Some time I'd like to try telling the telephone order taker that I don't want the shipping and handling. "But it's the only way we can get the merchandise to you," she'll explain. "I'll come and pick it up," I'll bluff, forcing her to admit that her employer never intended to sell the items for \$19.99.

Who cares about the price, anyway?

Ads for certain products, including cars, encyclopaedias, and kitchen gadgets tell us the monthly payment rather than the actual price. "Own this Audi for \$299 a month" or "get this set of knives for just four easy monthly payments of \$19.99 (plus shipping and handling)"

A variant of that one for recurring charges, such as cable TV or credit card fees, is to quote a bargain price "for the first N months" without telling us what we'll have to pay in month N+1. Of course the fine print requires us to sign up for a much longer period.

Up to you

In my youth I once wasted an hour and a half in a Times Square record shop that had a giant sign in the window:

<p>SALE! EVERY RECORD IN THE STORE up to 50% OFF!</p>
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When the cashier revealed my mistake I asked her to explain what the word "every" meant on that sign. She waited on the next person.

Sometimes "up to" applies only indirectly to the price. A long-distance phone service advertises "Only 99 cents for all calls *up to* 20 minutes," presumably including wrong numbers and answering machine messages. A diet pill seller promises "Lose *up to* 20 pounds in the first month or your money back." I'm trying to imagine lawyers arguing in court about whether I had lost "up to 20 pounds".

The thinking consumer

These practices are deceptive but, in most U.S. states, not illegal. The vendors have not actually lied about their prices or their guarantees. We can avoid being their victims by just careful listening, reading, and thinking. If everyone would join us, the advertisers would eventually stop their deceptive practices.

I not only don't buy misleadingly priced items, but I try not to patronize the deceptive vendors at all. Of course, I still have to buy gasoline.