Grocery buying tips from a savings pro

Centerville’s Cindy Ewing runs a helpful website. Costs are rising this year, so here’s timely advice.

By DeAnn Owens
Contributing Writer

The Food Institute has determined the budget for groceries for a family of four will increase about $4 a week in 2013. In order to offset raised prices at the grocery store, shoppers need to pay attention to sales, utilize coupons and shop around to get the best deal.

But just because something is on sale or you have a coupon, doesn’t mean you should buy it.

Cindy Ewing of Centerville, a savings expert who speaks and teaches about the topic, has advice you can use to help manage grocery costs. Ewing runs the website at www.HappyHomemakerCindy.com.

Ewing says it is not about how much you save, but how little you spend to get what your family needs.

And knowing your budget is the first step to getting what you need for the least amount of money possible.

“Budgets are a huge thing. Do you know how much you are spending? Because if you don’t, we won’t know how much we’re cutting off your grocery bill,” Ewing said.

“Sales come back over and over again. People think that something will never be on sale again, but it will. It’s an 8-12 week rotation-sale cycle, and if you’re not loyal to a grocery store, you can find what you need,” Ewing said.

For six years, Ewing has been stretching her grocery dollars by sticking to some rules.

“Buy before you need it, while it’s on sale, match it with coupons, without hoarding and bringing a lot of stuff into your home,” Ewing said.

Ewing advises using cash for buying groceries because cash makes you more accountable for your purchases.

“Make sure you’re using the food you buy and not throwing it away,” Ewing said.
Plan meals to save at the grocery and to eliminate the question of what’s for dinner. On her site, Ewing shares her plans for meals that are kid-friendly, easy, cheap and healthy.

“Most people have the same 10 meals. I already know what my family will eat,” Ewing said.

Ewing uses the weekly specials on meat for her families’ dinners.

“For example, if Tyson chicken is on sale, I buy enough for a month. If pork loin is on sale next week, I buy enough for a month. I buy our favorite meats on rotation and within a month, you’ll have all the things everyone in the family needs,” Ewing said.

Cooking, dividing up and freezing right away ensure that the meat she buys and the money she spends will not go to waste.

“I am a bulk cooker. I will brown the taco meat or cook up the chicken, separate it into containers and freeze them and then write taco meat on the container,” Ewing said noting that the meat will fulfill a variety of dishes.

Ewing applies the same rules to fresh fruits and vegetables.

“If you wash and chop up produce right away, your family is more apt to eat it, as opposed to leaving a cantaloupe on the counter for a week, and then it goes bad,” Ewing said.

If she overbuys on produce and it turns mushy, Ewing throws it in a smoothie or freezes it for a future smoothie.

“Take yogurt — if it’s on sale, and you buy too much, freeze it like Gogurts,” Ewing said. “I put yogurt in ice cube trays, freeze, and then put two-three sections in a bag, one cup of frozen fruit, and just make my own smoothie kit.”

Ewing budgets a $1-1.50/pound for fresh produce, double that amount for organic.

Control portions to stay within a budget.

Ewing advises knowing how much you need and how much you will eat before you buy; perhaps fresh is the best option, but if you don’t need a large amount, check out the salad bar, and if you do need a large amount, don’t forget to head to the frozen section.

“Take advantage of frozen, but avoid sauce-laden veggies and fruits,” Ewing said. “Sometimes the bigger bag (frozen) is not always the best deal. Sometimes it’s better to buy several smaller bags.”

Even when it comes to treats, Ewing calculates the cost before making a purchase.

“I look at the ready-made cookie dough, because sometimes it ends up being cheaper than the ingredients I need to make it from scratch,” Ewing said.

Shop all brands to stretch your dollars.

“I’m not brand loyal. If you like a product brand, then you have to stock up on that item. Decide how many of the item you want,” Ewing said. “For toiletries, I look for the best deal, because I don’t have any skin allergies, but not everyone can do that.”

Be aware of sales traps.

“10 for 10 sales — people think you have to buy all 10 to get it for a dollar, but you don’t, you can buy just one. Meijer does the buy 10 and get the 11th free, so in that case you would have to buy 10,” Ewing said.

“Start with small steps with small changes and work your way up. If you try to change it all at once, you’ll get overwhelmed,” Ewing said. “Stick to a budget.”

RESOURCES

For more of Ewing’s savings tips and recipes, visit www.HappyHomemakerCindy.com.

For more information on The Food Institute, visit www.foodinstitute.com.

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