

A chance to give back: Businesses offer senior discounts

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ARCATA -- If you're looking for a quiet day shopping at Wildberries Marketplace, don't try Wednesday.

Phil Ricord, the market's general manager, said last week that Wednesday has been the grocery store's busiest day of the week for two years running. And, Ricord said, it isn't because people like to get their shopping done in the middle of the week or stock up before the weekend rush. Rather, it's because Wednesday is "Senior Day" at Wildberries, when every customer over the age of 60 receives a 10 percent discount.

"Our sales on Wednesdays typically increase by an average of approximately 10 percent," Ricord said, alluding to the fact that doling out a senior discount isn't just being a good neighbor, it's good business.

Across Humboldt County, a plethora of businesses offer discounts to seniors, which can add up to big savings for those who take advantage of them and big numbers for the businesses that offer them. Many local business owners said the discounts are also a chance to give back.

"From my perspective, it's a way to acknowledge the contributions that seniors have made to our well-being, and to accommodate their typically fixed incomes," Ricord explained.

According to a report on consumer expenditures released by the U.S. Department of Labor in 2006, those age 55 and older spend an average of about \$250 a month on groceries -- a hefty sum for those living on fixed incomes that sometimes dip below the poverty level. Shopping at Wildberries or either of the North Coast Co-op stores, which offer a 5 percent discount to seniors on Wednesdays, could save seniors \$25 or \$12 a month, respectively.

The over-55 set also spends an average of \$238 monthly on utilities, according to the report, another big number that can be cut dramatically by taking advantage of discounts offered through the phone and gas and electric companies. PG&E offers the CARE program, which is based on income rather than age, and takes 20 percent off the total gas and electric bill for households of two that make less than \$28,600 annually.

According to PG&E, the average gas and electric bill for Eureka users in January 2006 was \$136.30, so that would have meant a savings of \$27.26 for someone in the CARE program. Similarly, PG&E offers the medical baseline program, which doubles the allotted electric usage for households that have medical equipment that can run up their bills.

AT&T also offers an income-based discount called LifeLine, which can take 50 percent off AT&T California's applicable tariffed monthly rate. This amounts to an average monthly savings of more than \$5. Combined, these discounts can add up.

According to the Labor Department report, those over age 55 also spend more than \$160 a month eating out. A host of local restaurants offer senior discounts, but the largest ones seem to come from Denny's, Oriental Buffet and Applebee's.

Oriental Buffet and Applebee's offer discounts of 10 percent to those 60 and over and 55 and over, respectively.

But Denny's, with a 20-percent discount on Thursdays for those 55 and older at all three of its Humboldt County locations, seems to lead the way on restaurant discounts. That's no accident, said Antonio Salas, who owns the McKinleyville and Fortuna locations.

"We want to be part of our community and we want to give back to our community the best we can," Salas said, adding that Thursdays are now one of the restaurant's busier days.

Clothing can also be a major expense, according to the report, and combined with beauty services, adds up to a \$109 monthly expenditure. Both Ross and Gottschalk's at the Bayshore Mall in Eureka offer a Tuesday discount of 10 percent to those 55 and older.

Gottschalk's Store Manager Mary Crumley said Tuesday ends up trailing only Saturday as the store's busiest day of the week. Chris Lamoreaux, a manager at Ross, had a similar take, saying the discount "definitely pays off for us."

But the discounts don't end there. Many pharmacies, including Barnes Arcata Family Drug and Lima's Professional Pharmacy, offer discounts on prescriptions and over-the-counter purchases.

Similarly, Longs Drugs and Rite Aid Pharmacies offer a 10-percent discount on all their house-brand items.

Senior discounts are also available for many home services. Roto-Rooter offers a 10-percent senior discount for all calls and services, while MapleService Plumbing and Heating gives those 55 and older 5 percent off their entire bill.

Senior discounts are also available in a wide variety of other local businesses, from video rental stores to veterinarians. Some of them aren't advertised, so those looking to save a bit of money might be wise making it a practice to ask.

A 10-percent discount here and a 5-percent discount there might not sound like much, but they certainly add up. Based on the numbers supplied by the Labor Department report and discounts available locally, an average person over the age of 55 who qualifies for

the CARE and LifeLine programs could save at least \$106 a month by actively planning to take advantage of the discounts listed in this story.

Based on the responses of local businesses, it also seems that offering a senior discount is a good way to give business a boost, but most said it is simply a way to give back to those who have done so much.

"If you're 55 or older, you've earned this discount," said Salas.

"You've somehow contributed to our community and you've earned it ... And, hopefully, when I get old, somebody will give me a deal."

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