

Loaded with coupons and surveys, receipts grow longer, aggravating many

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By Cristina Rouvalis, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

The sales receipt -- once an unassuming little piece of paper -- has grown and grown, spewing out coupons and other promotions that curl into bags, clog up wallets and drive some shoppers batty.

Just the other day Monica Phillips bought gasoline, iced tea and cigarettes at a gas station convenience store and was aghast when the cash register kept spitting out more and more paper.

"What would I want to do with this?" she asked the cashier before handing it back.

The cashier flashed her a look as if to say, "What do you want me to do with it?" before taking the receipt back and tossing it away.

"They are stupid pieces of paper that don't mean anything and just clutter up your life," said Ms. Phillips, an artist and clothing stylist who lives on Mount Washington. "The only thing they are good for is writing phone numbers on them."

But retail consultants say receipts are growing unwieldy because they contain coupons and other promotions that target consumers at the source: where they shop for things they actually buy. Traditional coupons entice only a tiny segment of the population. Of the \$300 billion worth of paper coupons distributed every year, most often in fliers and newspapers, only 2.8 percent are redeemed, said Peter Sealey, a California-based marketing consultant. "The coupon industry is undergoing a revolution."

The receipts from drugstore chain CVS are sometimes long and cumbersome. But CVS spokeswoman Erin Pensa said customers are not complaining because often they contain Extra bucks, an award based on 2 percent of all purchases. The customer reward program is so wildly popular that it has 50 million card holders, about 22,000 new members every day, she said, and the chain is installing machines in some stores where customers can print them out before checkout.

"People love it," Ms. Pensa insisted. "Every time you spend, you get something back. You get it as CVS cash."

Sure, some people might view a curling receipt as one of the irritations of modern life, but not Mary Bach, a Murrysville consumer advocate and an ardent coupon clipper. She likes Extra bucks on her receipt because she can spend them on anything she wants.

"The length doesn't bother me. It is like money in the bank. A consumer like me really likes them. They might be a nuisance for everyone else."

For Ms. Phillips, it is definitely a nuisance. The only exception is when she gets a receipt from Rite Aid for a \$10,000 sweepstakes promotion -- a tack a growing number of retailers are taking to get customer feedback and build loyalty.

Ms. Phillips usually calls the number on the receipt to answer a few questions on a customer satisfaction survey because she feels the potential payoff is worth the hassle. But overall, she thinks receipts you can unfurl like a flag are a big waste of paper.

Mary Beth Johnson agrees. All those separate coupons she gets at Giant Eagle simply clutter her purse, the Mt. Lebanon resident says. "I can't stand all that paper, all those stupid coupons for stuff I don't buy, like kid's toilet paper" -- her only child is 24.

She threw out the bear-paw toilet paper coupon and a big receipt after a recent trip to the grocery store, only to get home and discover that she had left the two most expensive items she bought, pork chops and lamb chops, at the store.

"How are you going to get it back without a receipt?" asked her husband,

Dave, a receipt saver. "How many people left pork chops?" she countered. Ends up she was right -- the store had kept the meat for her in the refrigerator and gave it back.

Jack Trout, a Greenwich, Conn.-based marketing consultant, believes long receipts are all part of the marketing din that is deafening all but the most dedicated discount-seekers.

"It is overkill. It only appeals to the coupon freaks. The rest of us get mad and are throwing this stuff away. What is this stuff? Why are you clogging up my wallet? Where do I put it? We are just an over-merchandised and over-marketed world. It is all too much."