

Know-how



Cut your monthly bills

Invest in 10 smart household gadgets that will pay you back fast

Spending money to save money? That might seem counterintuitive, but the innovative products below return well above their purchase price in household savings. Check out how a small investment can make a big impact on your family's bottom line.

By Melissa Fiorenza



1 Lower your cell phone bill

HOW If you spent less time on your cell phone, your bill would drop considerably, but who isn't glued to a mobile these days? With XLink, you can gab all you want—at home—for no charge at all. Just route your cell phone calls to a regular phone through the XLink console (via a Bluetooth signal). Your cell phone's caller ID and voice mail will transfer over, too, and you don't even need a landline for the console to work.

Hot deal!
 Get \$5 off at myxlink.com with coupon code "xlink4you" (expires April 19).

SAVE about \$33 per month (depending on your phone usage).
GET IT XLink, \$99; amazon.com.



TOP: MARK LEIBOWITZ/MASTERFILE

2 Enjoy free home phone service

HOW When you plug MagicJack into a telephone and your computer's USB port, your calls (in the United States and Canada) are free, using your high-speed Internet connection. The service also comes with call-waiting, voice mail and caller ID, at no extra charge.

SAVE up to \$600 per year, or whatever amount you normally spend on your phone bill.
GET IT MagicJack, \$40; magicjack.com.

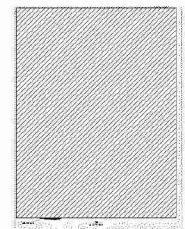


Hot deal!
 Get free shipping at prothermostats.com with code "ezread" (expires April 19).

3 Slash heating and cooling costs

HOW The average household spends a whopping \$2,000 per year on energy, and half of that cash goes toward heating or cooling when you're asleep or away from home. One smart solution: a programmable thermostat, which you set to power down energy consumption during low-use periods. Look for one that allows different settings for week and weekend schedules.

SAVE approximately \$250 per year (depending on your usage).
GET IT You can find basic thermostats for less than \$50 online, but a higher-quality one, like Emerson's Blue Easy Reader (\$120; prothermostats.com), provides upgraded features such as a 6-inch display and a seven-day programmable mode.



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Buy the best
 Shopping for more gadgets? Look for the Better Business Bureau seal on Web sites, or check bbb.org. You also can read user reviews at sites such as epinions.com.



4 Nab free HDTV

HOW Since TV went digital, you no longer need cable to receive local broadcast network HDTV channels. For static-free reception, all that's required is a digital antenna (and a converter box if your TV is analog instead of digital). To find out which antenna will work for your location and which channels you'll receive, simply enter your address at antennaweb.org. Although you won't get paid cable channels anymore, you may be amazed at how many HDTV channels are free (the number varies based on your location).

SAVE the \$600 or more a year you spend on cable.

GET IT Antennaweb.org lists antennas ranging from \$10 to \$200. Or spend less by making your own for about \$15 with the instructions at current.org/ptv/ptv0821make.pdf.

Hot deal!
 Get 5 percent off at cableorganizer.com with code "allyouave" (expires April 19).



6 Shed some light

HOW Few things are more irksome than family members leaving a room and neglecting to turn out the lights (hello, huge electric bill!). To cut costs, install motion-activated sensors, then program them to turn off automatically after a set period of time. If you want to settle down for a quiet read, you can override the sensor manually.

SAVE 10 percent to 70 percent off your electric bill, depending on your habits.

GET IT Consider the affordable Decora Manual on Occupancy sensor at left (\$28; cableorganizer.com). Not only does it give you the option to manually switch it on and off, but you can also select how long lights should stay on (from 30 seconds to indefinitely).

Hot deal!
 Get \$10 off a soda maker at sodastreamusa.com with code "allyou" (expires April 10).

5 Decrease grocery expenses

HOW When ALL YOU asked readers for their favorite money-saving purchases, FoodSaver vacuums were a hit. Just put your food into one of the plastic bags, seal it with the vacuum, then store it in your pantry, refrigerator or freezer to extend freshness up to five times over.

SAVE up to the approximately \$600 per year that the average family loses on wasted food.

GET IT Starting at \$100; foodsaver.com.

7 Concoct your own cola

HOW Spend a fortune on fizzy drinks? You're not alone. The average family of four consumes nearly 2,400 sodas annually—totaling roughly \$1,080. With a home fountain machine, you can save money and have fun making everything from soda water to diet root beer. After purchasing a start-up kit, you buy refill canisters of CO2 and syrup. A liter of sparkling water is 21 cents, compared

with \$1.50 or more for the store-bought variety, and flavored soda costs roughly 25 cents per 12 ounces.

SAVE about \$350 per year for a family of four (you'll also produce less household waste).

GET IT SodaStream Fountain Jet starter kit (includes soda maker, carbonator and two bottles), \$100; sodastreamusa.com.



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Tip strip

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Maximize your savings

Pay as little as possible when you buy a cost-effective product.

Install it yourself
 Hiring a pro to put in, say, a programmable thermostat could run you anywhere from \$75 to \$400. Avoid the extra expense and follow an easy step-by-step video at lowes.com.

Skip the new model
 Whenever applicable, inquire about a refurbished model of the item you're looking to buy. It will be cheaper than the brand-new version—but just as reliable.

Get a refund
 Ask if the store has a price-guarantee policy. If it does, and the cost of an item you already purchased goes down within a certain time period (usually two weeks), you may be entitled to a refund equal to the difference between the two prices.

Negotiate
 Don't be afraid to haggle for a better price at big-box stores like Home Depot and Best Buy. Go armed with ads from competitors and prices from the Internet, and you could snag a better deal.

Split the price
 Only need two rechargeable batteries for the house, but the pack comes with more? Ask around to see if friends or neighbors want to divvy up the cost and products.

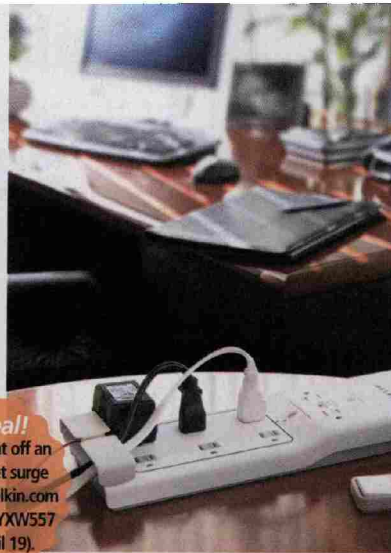
8 End wasted energy

HOW The amount of power frittered away when home electronics (computers, televisions, kitchen appliances) are plugged in but not in use can reach up to 22 percent of all appliance consumption. Rid your house of such "phantom loads" by bundling cords into a power surge strip. New models allow you to deactivate some devices and leave others on (so you can turn off the TV without losing the settings on your cable box, for example).

SAVE from \$50 to more than \$100 per year, depending on your level of use.

GET IT Smart Strip Power Saving surge protector, \$29; cableorganizer.com. Conserve eight-outlet surge protector (right), \$50; belkin.com.

Hot deal!
 Get 20 percent off an 8- or 10-outlet surge protector at belkin.com with code 336YXW557 (expires April 19).



9 Power up with fewer batteries

HOW Why anybody still uses alkaline batteries is a mystery, since eco-friendly rechargeables last longer and are simple

to use. Be sure to get pre-charged ones, which boast an even greater life span.

SAVE \$80 annually (or up to \$250 if you use many portable devices).

GET IT Duracell Value charger with four AA pre-charged rechargeables, \$15; amazon.com.

10 Spend less on water



HOW Typical showerheads use nearly 20 gallons of water in a five-minute shower. Install a low-flow showerhead and you can save 8,000 gallons per year. Aerators, which also restrict flow, are a cheaper alternative—they cost as little as \$5, while low-flow showerheads start at \$8.

SAVE 20 percent or more on bills with a faucet aerator, or shave \$250 off your yearly water bill with a 1½-gallon-per-minute (GPM) showerhead.

GET IT Faucet aerators ½ to 1½ GPM, \$6 for 2; eartheasy.com. Evolve Roadrunner low-flow showerhead (left), \$40; evolveshowerheads.com.



Add more money-saving items to your list

Find out which purchases made a positive impact on these readers' budgets.

“Last year I got a Kindle, an electronic book reader. Everyone thought it was a waste of money until I pointed out that, since I'm an avid reader, I save more than \$100 a month because I'm not buying books anymore!”

—Christy Maugeri, 25, Eastampton, N.J.

“I can't tell you how many times I've had a plumber clear out clogged up drains—and it always costs more than \$100. Realizing this would be an ongoing expense, I finally bought an electric snake for \$80. I have used it several times and even lent it to friends. It's the best investment ever!”

—Donna Paglia, 43, Elk Grove Village, Ill.

Sources: Christina Hansen, product specialist for cableorganizer.com; Tom Luhman, director of product management for Batteries Plus; Jennifer Schwab, director of sustainability at Sierra Club Green Home

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