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By Mary Gazze, The Canadian Press, thecanadianpress.com Updated: May 28, 2011 2:30 PM

Group buys save cash, but watch for conditions



Fred Chartrand. The Canadian Press
Stephanie Draker brags about the wedding gift she bought for one of her best friends. The 28-year-old says a daily deal through a group buying website helped her get a high-end photo album at a price she could afford. "Normally it cost a couple hundred dollars and I got it for \$60," she said. "I would not have been able to afford it if I had done it without the coupon."

TORONTO - Stephanie Draker brags about the wedding gift she bought for one of her best friends.

The 28-year-old works in the arts industry in Toronto and normally has to watch her spending, but says a daily deal through a group buying website helped her get a high-end photo album at a price she could afford.

"Normally it costs a couple hundred dollars and I got it for \$60," she said. "I would not have been able to afford it if I had done it without the coupon."

The number of group buying websites has ballooned over the last few months from American giants Groupon and LivingSocial to include some 90 smaller sites operating in Canada. They all promise huge savings on one daily bargain, so long as a minimum number of people buy in.

But as the industry grows, consumers need to watch for surprises that can make group buying coupon deals not as attractive as they may seem.

A survey released this week by aggregator website OneSpout.com found that Canadians are increasingly surfing for deals, with half of respondents saying they had visited at least one deal-a-day site. Customers pay up front for deals like \$50 for a rock climbing adventure that normally costs \$100; or \$20 for \$40 worth of food at a local pizza joint.

But in one example group buying customers complained that it took months to book a haircut appointment. In another case, a butcher took weeks to process orders and in yet another, floral bouquets arrived nearly dead.

And coupons come with expiry dates and conditions like only one use per table at a restaurant. They may exclude alcoholic drinks or taxes, or they may require customers to buy something else at full price.

In one infamous example, FTD Florists offered a Groupon deal, but charged inflated prices on some arrangements. Later Groupon and FTD provided refunds to customers who complained.

Then there's the story about a Toronto spa that sold so many coupons it basically gave away a years' worth of business, leading to bankruptcy. The group buying site later refunded customers' money.

Draker, who used to buy a couple of vouchers a month, has since cut back.




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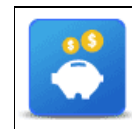


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Normally she has had great experiences, but once she bought a voucher for a newly opened restaurant only to find there was just one waiter to serve a full house.

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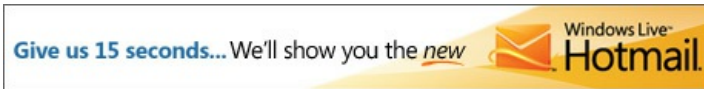
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