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<http://www.consumerreports.org/cro/news/2014/09/it-says-free-but-it-s-really-just-a-bad-deal/index.htm>

## It says 'free' but it's really just a bad deal

### Don't let stores seduce you by promising something for nothing

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I'm sitting here sipping the last sugary dregs from my free cup of McDonald's coffee and thinking about how companies use and abuse the word "free."

Sometimes products and services are truly free, such as the small cup of coffee participating McDonald's restaurants are [offering during breakfast hours until Sept. 29](#). You don't have to buy anything. Just walk in, get your free cup of coffee, and walk out. (My colleague and I—the skinflints that we are—actually have done this several times, although occasionally we'll each throw in a buck and change for a sausage biscuit.)



Are you miffed or tricked by bogus "free" offers?

Public libraries are free; that is unless you include the taxes people pay to support them. This blog is free, unless you count the cost of the Internet or cell phone service needed to access it.

And then there's pretty-much free, like some doodad a company offers you in exchange for your e-mail address so it can send you advertising, or a free computer program that occasionally nags you to upgrade to the pay version.

But most of the time "free" really isn't free. An example is a store's offer to give you something "free" if you buy something else, often at full price. A common example is: Buy three tires and get one free. But is that really free? Just try walking out with that one tire without paying for the other three. You'll find yourself looking for a get-out-of-jail-free card; and believe me, that won't be free either. What companies really mean in these cases is that you'll get something at no additional charge, not free. And in the tire case, it works out to be a 25

percent discount, which is an okay deal, but hardly the stunner that, say, the McDonald's coffee is or the [absolutely-free Apache OpenOffice productivity software](#), which does mostly everything you can do with Microsoft Office, including opening and editing Microsoft Office documents. Just download and install it, and it's yours.

In contrast to the McDonald's deal, consider Dunkin Donuts' offer for AARP members. Get a free donut with the purchase of a large or extra-large beverage. So let's see. For a crummy "free" donut, you have to buy a beverage and an AARP membership? I usually prefer Dunkin' Donuts coffee to McDonald's. But in this case, I have to go with the clown.

What really gets me is stores that advertise buy one and get two or even three free. How overpriced must that one item be if the store can give away two or three and still make money? Reliance on this sort of advertising by the men's clothier Jos. A. Bank made the retailer the target of [a really funny Saturday Night Live skit](#) and raised eyebrows of [law enforcement officials](#).

**Read "[How to Spot Sales That Are No Bargain](#)" and "[Advertising Tactics That Bug Americans the Most](#)."**

Another favorite of mine is TV infomercials' use of buy-one-get-a-second-one-free (just pay separate shipping and handling.) Take the [Snuggie blanket](#) with "free" book light from Snuggieblanket.com. Shell out \$19.95 and get another Snuggie and free book light. Just pay a separate \$7.95 for shipping and handling. Eight dollars is 40 percent of the cost of the product. Maybe I'm not thinking straight, but that doesn't sound like it's free either.

Linda Minucci of West Islip, N.Y., and her mother, Nancy, say they've given up paying \$7.99 shipping and handling for "free" replacement brush heads for their Cybersonic cordless toothbrushes. They say they like the product, but eight bucks is too much to pay for a "free" replacement brush head, which also comes with a "free" flossing attachment and tongue cleaner. And to get that deal, they have to sign up for a plan that keeps the brush and other items coming automatically every three months.

"That shipping and handling is a made-up thing," Linda Minucci says. "It doesn't cost that at all. Give me a break."

To get their replacement brush heads with "free" shipping and handling, the Minuccis would have to order eight of them and pay \$5 apiece.

[Federal regulations](#) say companies can use the word "free" even if something really isn't truly free, as in the McDonald's coffee sense of the word. For example, a company can require the purchase of a separate product or service. But the offer must clearly and conspicuously disclose the terms and conditions.

And the deal has to be legitimate. In other words, the price of the product or service one has to buy cannot be inflated to cover the cost of the “free” item.

Also, within a 12-month period, the “free” offer shouldn’t go on for more than six months or be repeated more than three times or within 30 days. Otherwise, the free item or service becomes part of the regular product price. The regulations say it also is improper to offer something free if consumers have to buy a product or service that has a price that’s typically negotiated. The rule makes sense if you think about it. If a car dealer offers free mats with the purchase of a new car, for instance, you’d have no way of knowing whether you could have negotiated an even lower price had the “free” mats not been included. In other words, you might be paying for them even though they’re “free.”

## **What to do**

Companies love to use the word “free” because they know it’s like a powerful aphrodisiac that gets people’s attention and possibly blinds them to what could be a not-so-great deal.

If something truly is free, go for it. For example, I wouldn’t even consider buying antivirus software for my computer because the free ones are so good. [Consumer Reports tests](#) found that [Avast! Free Antivirus](#) and [Avira Free Antivirus](#) do as well or better than some of the pay anti-malware programs. (I’ve long used [AVG Antivirus Free](#), which scored almost as well in our tests.)

Sure, a company that’s offering a product or service for free may be hoping you’ll buy something, and it even may encourage you to do so. But that’s fine, as long as there aren’t any hidden strings waiting to snag you along the way.

If a product really isn’t free, don’t get googly-eyed just because a company is advertising something for nothing. Use a Web search, go store-to-store, or do whatever else it takes to make sure the deal is the best one out there, a “free” item notwithstanding. And carefully read the terms and conditions of any offer. Take into account shipping and handling charges and anything else that might turn a free deal into a costly one.

See you at McDonald’s!

—*Anthony Giorgianni*