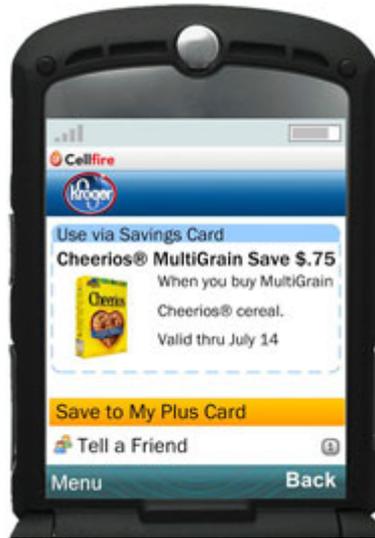


Cents-off coupons and other special deals, via your cellphone

Bob Tedeschi

In the last decade, retailers and manufacturers pushed to put their coupons online, figuring people would love browsing on PCs for deals. They didn't for a long list of reasons, including the fact that it was not easier than leafing through the paper and tearing out what you need.



Now the cellphone industry is trying its own approach. The theory is that you will browse for deals when you are at the store, or maybe receive deal alerts when you are nearby, and simply use the phone as a virtual coupon when you are at the cashier.

The idea has lots of promise. Whether it's worth your while depends on where you live, how much you use the products featured by these coupon services and how much work you're willing to do for a bargain.

Of the services emerging in the nascent cellular-coupon industry, two — Cellfire and 8Coupons — offer good examples of the state of the art. Both are free, and will work on virtually any phone, but the experience can be disappointing if you use one of the services in the wrong place.

After I completed a short registration form on Cellfire (the service works on most Internet-enabled phones), the service scanned its database for deals near me. Or sort of near. When I registered as a user in Midtown Manhattan, the featured deals included a free used DVD and a free movie rental from Hollywood Video. Great news, except the closest locations were in New Jersey.

I could also get a free photo portrait from Sears, provided I wanted to trudge to Brooklyn for it, or order something online from 1-800-Flowers.com.

That's it. Three deals, and none was actually located in one of the biggest shopping zones in the universe.

In reviews posted to the iTunes site, some Cellfire users have complained openly about the dearth of available coupons from the application. (Cellfire's iPhone app garnered two stars, out of a possible five, from about 50 reviewers.)

Greg Sterling, an industry analyst at Sterling Market Intelligence, said that no mobile-coupon service had a great inventory of deals, although he predicted that stores would start to "get with the program" in the coming year.

In the meantime, if you live in the heartland, you may have a better experience. Cellfire recently signed a deal with Kroger, the grocery chain, to show users a list of 10 to 30 offers, like 50 cents off Cottonelle toilet paper or 75 cents off a box of Chex cereal. When you select a discount, Cellfire feeds the coupon information directly to the grocer's loyalty program. Users submit their loyalty program membership numbers to Cellfire; with subsequent swipes of the loyalty card, all of the chosen discounts are credited. For nongrocery items, the cashier simply reads a code on your phone's display and enters it into the cash register.

Getting the application on your phone is easy enough. Just go to the Cellfire Web site and register there, and the service will send a message to your phone with the application embedded. If you are on AT&T, Verizon or T-Mobile, you can also find Cellfire's service on the phone's application stores. (Sprint users must go to Cellfire.com.)

If you don't live near a Kroger store, Cellfire says it will soon have similar programs with grocers in the Northeast. Until then, 8Coupons may be worth a look, provided you live in New York. The service stands in sharp contrast to Cellfire, in that almost all of its roughly 1,200 coupons are for products sold in Manhattan.

Users of 8Coupons go to the company's Web site and browse a list of merchants from which they might like to receive offers. Whenever that merchant has an offer, users receive the coupon code via text message. Last week, for instance, users could save 15 percent off the purchase of two cases of dog food at Groom-O-Rama, a pet supplies store in Greenwich Village.

The company also feeds its coupons to Outalot, a free service intended to offer information about stores and restaurants wherever you happen to be carrying your phone. When you sign up with Outalot, it will send a coupon via text message whenever you are near a merchant you've chosen to receive offers from, say, a restaurant.

When I set my location as Union Square in Manhattan, Outalot failed to offer me a coupon for Pop Burger, a nearby hamburger place that featured deals on 8Coupons' service. Landy Ung, the chief executive of 8Coupons, said that was because I was not physically in the area.

Outalot works on any cellphone with a Web browser, but owners of older phones with inadequate browsers may find it harder to use. And if you don't have an unlimited data plan, it can be costly.

Individual retailers, meanwhile, are also starting to hop onto the text-messaging bandwagon — most notably Wal-Mart, which recently began sending out SMS alerts to subscribers. Wal-Mart customers can receive offers by logging onto Walmart.com/mobileinfo, and entering their mobile phone number. Subscribers receive up to three holiday-season alerts a week, for each shopping category chosen.

That offers a glimpse of the downside to this trend. You may be enticed to sign up for text messages from multiple retailers, and end up with a mountain of mobile spam, not to mention a fat monthly bill. So sign up wisely, lest you turn your cellphone into your enemy.

Quick Calls

Want to protect that sleek new smartphone, but don't want to destroy its beauty with a protective case? Mobigrip has an inexpensive option: an elastic leash that slips around your finger, preventing you from dropping the phone. (Available at mobigrips.com for about \$10.) ... Sprint released a new BlackBerry Curve this week, for users who want Wi-Fi and the ability to engage in push-to-talk conversations with groups of people. The 8350i costs \$150 with a two-year contract. ... Automotive cellphone chargers are great for those who forget to plug in

their phones at home, but another good alternative is the Powerstick, a portable back-up battery roughly the size of a pack of gum. The device plugs into your PC's U.S.B. port to charge, and offers up to 90 minutes of power. It comes with adapters for many popular phones, digital cameras and MP3 players. (\$60, at Powerstick.com.) ... Motorola's Krave ZN4, a touch-screen flip phone, now works with RemoSync, a corporate e-mail application that plugs into a user's work calendar, contacts and inbox. The app costs \$10 monthly; the device costs \$180 with a two-year Verizon contract.

New York Times, New York, 18 dez. 2008, Technology, online. Disponível em <www.nytimes.com>. Acesso em: 19 dez. 2008.

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