



**C**ouponing — an activity once practiced by a relatively small percentage of frugal shoppers — has become downright trendy. Perhaps that’s not surprising in the current economy, which has made saving money a more noble — and necessary — pursuit than ever. But another key contributing factor to the coupon craze is the Internet, which has made finding discounts easier and less time consuming, while also multiplying the potential savings. Few understand the burgeoning new world of couponing better than Huntley resident Jill Cataldo. What started nearly five years ago as a way to save a little money has blossomed into big business and made her a nationally recognized couponing expert. Through her workshops, DVDs, blog, television appearances and syndicated column, Cataldo shares couponing tips that can help shoppers cut their grocery bills in half.

**Q} How did you first get into couponing?**

My mom was an avid coupon user in the 70s when I was growing up, and once I grew up and moved out, I began using them, too. However, I wasn’t using them to their fullest potential — not even close! When I was pregnant with my second son, I became motivated to save even more money. Occasionally I’d see people on the news buying hundreds of dollars worth of groceries for pennies and I’d think, “I want to be one of those people!” It motivated me to learn the best ways to match coupons to sales and cut my grocery bill significantly.

**Q} How did your knowledge grow from saving for your own family to becoming a “brand” and offering tips on your website, national television and newspapers?**

Back in June, 2008, the *Chicago Sun-Times* had asked readers how they were saving money in the current economy. I wrote a short email about using the Internet to help match coupons to the best sales at the supermarket. From that, they did a feature piece on me, which led to six follow-up pieces in the *Sun-Times* over the next few months and appearances on local television and radio. Those appearances led to my weekly recurring “Deals of the Week” segment on one of the prominent Chicago radio stations.

After the first month of discussing the week’s best grocery deals on the radio, I began blogging the same grocery deals online at [JillCataldo.com](http://JillCataldo.com). I also blogged about coupon trends, tips and tricks of the trade, which I continue to write about today.

In August, 2008 I decided to teach a coupon class at my local library. Our library is small, and they said that if 20 or 30 people registered for the class, they’d

consider it to be a great success; 162 people signed up! The library was astounded, and they just kept letting people register. Ultimately, the class was moved to a local church that could hold that many people. After that, my phone started ringing and my calendar started filling with bookings for my workshop. Now, 2.5 years later, I teach my Super-Couponing workshop three times a week all over Chicagoland, and the demand’s showing no signs of slowing down.

About two months later, I was approached about writing a syndicated newspaper column on coupon use. I loved the idea — I have a journalism degree and a background in writing and marketing, so writing about coupons came very naturally. Now, my column “Super-Couponing Tips” is syndicated in over 120 markets nationally to a weekly audience of over 20 million.

And, yes, my name has absolutely become my “brand!” Last year, ABC News called me one of the premier coupon experts in the country. This year, Nightline called me “Dear Abby with coupons!” I have become the go-to girl that many media outlets rely on as a source for stories on coupons, shopping trends and money-saving strategies.

**Q} Your couponing expertise has brought you national exposure. What has been the most interesting or unusual experience in your new-found celebrity?**

Realizing just how many followers I have locally in Chicagoland! It’s rare to walk into a grocery store anywhere in our area and not be recognized by someone — whether the stores are downtown, on the south side, the north side, in the suburbs, I always seem to get spotted by somebody. This used to surprise me until I started thinking about

**Q&A RAPID FIRE**

**Most you’ve ever saved in one shopping trip?** A \$125.96 bill down to \$22.41 after cou-

pons, saving \$103.55.

**How much do you think you’ve saved since you starting couponing?** The first year I couponed at this level, I actually kept track, and it was over \$5,400 in one year. Now

I’ve lost track, but over the past four years, it’s easily over \$24,000.

**Favorite stores to shop at?** Jewel-Osco, a Chicagoland coupon shopper’s true love; and Meijer, a good friend to couponers

how many people read my blog — it attracts 30,000 readers each week, and many of them are going to the grocery store on the same days that I am.

What's surprised me the most though is the weight that my writing carries with my readers. So many of them rely on my "Deals of the Week" written feature (of the best bargains at Chicago-area supermarkets and drugstores) to determine what they're buying, and they don't stray too far from it! I remember reading a post on my blog in which a reader asked other readers to comment on the best trash bag deals that week, and another person wrote back, saying not to buy them because "Jill didn't blog about trash bags this week, so there can't be any good deals on them."

I've learned, too, that if I blog about a particularly hot deal, stores' shelves can be wiped out within hours. I remember a fantastic deal on ice cream that a local supermarket was running — with coupons, the ice cream was free. I wrote about it, and the next day I went to the store — three large freezer cases were completely empty, and the fourth held one lonely tub of ice cream! I actually snapped a photo of that with my phone as a reminder of how powerful (and how fast!) the spread of information can be, and also how many people are couponing in our area.

### **Q } How did you figure out your couponing method with the grocery store's 12-week cycle?**

It started with a box of cereal. I noticed that one week, cereal might be \$1.99 a box, but a week later, it might be \$3.99 — nearly double the price. Those kind of price fluctuations are the kinds of things most people don't pay attention to, but I began to. What would happen if you only bought the items you need when their prices were low, and you bought enough to last you until the next time they cycled low? This is a game that couponers around the country play every day. We wait for those low sale prices, cut them even more with our coupons and then we stock up. These cycles run about every 12 weeks, so if you buy about three months' worth of cereal, soup or pasta, you're well-stocked until the next time the price takes a big dip.

Following the sales cycles also makes shopping fun. When you see a tube of toothpaste on sale for \$1 and use a \$1 coupon on it, it's free, and that little thrill of getting something free also makes you think, "What else can I get free with coupons?" As it turns out, lots of things!

### **Q } Where did you come up with the name Super-Couponing?**

When I was writing my coupon workshop, it was important to me to brand it with a name that appealed to men as well as women. That may seem funny since most people's perception is that women are traditionally the grocery shoppers and coupon users — and certainly, many shoppers are women.

During the time that I was writing my workshop, though, I was also doing my "Deals of the Week" segment each week on the largest rock station in Chicago. The station's audience? Males ages 25-34! Men shop for groceries too, and trust me, they also like to save big in the checkout lane.

If men were calling into the radio show each week to discuss the best sales at the grocery store, they'd likely be interested in attending my coupon class, too, and my background in marketing also dictated that I didn't want to exclude an entire demographic with a poorly chosen brand name. I wanted a name that encompassed the power of what one can do with coupons, regardless of gender, and, who doesn't want to feel like a super-hero in the checkout lane? "Super-Couponing" was perfect!

I believe it was the right choice too, as on many nights, up to 30 percent of my audience is made up of men. Here's a funny story — last month, I taught a class to a women's circle at a church. Because they knew my workshop draws very well with men, they chose to advertise it as "Women Only" to preserve that dynamic of having an all-female group, and men showed up at the door anyway. You know this topic's of interest to everyone when men are begging to be let into a women-only event! (The church relented and let them in.)

### **Q } What do you teach people in your classes and DVDs?**

In one hour, I teach how to cut your

grocery bill by 50 percent or more with coupons. It's easy, fun and not terribly time-consuming. I've long said that there is no magic to this — truly, anyone can do it, but you have to "throw out" any previous misconceptions about being a coupon shopper that you might already hold on to. You won't be spending hours cutting hundreds of little loose pieces of paper with the methods I teach. Today's coupon shopper is savvy, efficient and using the power of the Internet to cut only the coupons they need, which are matched to the best, lowest sale prices at the store this week.

### **Q } What kind of responses do you get when you share your knowledge with classes in person? Are people surprised by what they thought they knew and what you talk to them about?**

I love teaching my workshops because I get to meet so many people from all walks of life. Many of them have never cut a coupon before in their lives, while others are already using coupons, but they're not Super-Couponing — they're not pushing their savings to the extreme. I enjoy watching them almost have an awakening of sorts during the class because they realize how much more money they could be saving if they were matching those coupons to sales more effectively.

Once, I had a woman in the front row of my class who scowled all the way through. My workshops are very lively, fast-paced and laced with humor — I keep my audiences laughing and learning all the way through, but this woman was having none of it. She sat, face dead-panned, arms crossed. After the class, she came up to me wagging her finger and said, "I have no idea who you are, and I am not a coupon shopper. I just attended this class because my girlfriend couldn't make it, and she sent me in her place." I smiled and asked her what she thought of the workshop. Her reply? "I'm angry! I'm upset because I had no idea that all of this was out there, and that I could be saving so much money with coupons. I'm angry I didn't know about this sooner."

Her reaction's not unusual. When people learn that they could be saving 30 percent, 50 percent, 70 percent or more on

the groceries and products that they're already buying regularly for their households, it's natural for people to feel some angst over what they've previously been spending each week.

**Q } What are the one or two most important things to do or strategies to follow to maximize savings through couponing?**

Save all of your coupons. People who coupon "the old way" cut the ones they know they'll use, then toss the rest of the coupon insert. The trouble is many of those coupons will line up to good sales weeks from now, making many of those products very inexpensive or free, and if you don't save them all, you may wish you had some of them back. In class, I use an example showing \$1 sales on pasta or frozen vegetables — if you threw your \$1 coupons for those items away, you wouldn't be able to take advantage of those sales.

Second, don't be afraid to stock up. What coupon shoppers call "stockpiling" is a huge part of how we save, too. I rarely pay more than 25-cents for a box for cereal of any brand — after coupons, of course. But those crazy-cheap cereal deals don't come around every day. Cereal has an 11-month shelf life. Take a look at the date on it sometime when you're at the store. If cereal is cycling low, I'm never afraid to buy 10 boxes of it, because our family of five will likely eat it long before it outdates.

**Q } What are some of the biggest misconceptions when it comes to using coupons?**

"Coupons are only for junk food." This one's repeated so often that it's gotten a bit ridiculous. To people stating this, I'd ask, "Do you brush your teeth? Wash your hair? Shave? Clean your house?" Personal care and cleaning products are two of the easiest categories to coupon down to zero! If you're even a moderate coupon shopper, you can pretty much guarantee you'll never pay for toothpaste, toothbrushes, shampoo, razors or household cleaners again.

"There aren't any coupons for healthy foods, organics, and produce." When I appeared on Nightline earlier this year, we filmed a great shopping trip featuring lots

of meats, produce and organics — my pre-coupon total was \$118.84, and I brought it down to \$30.61 with coupons. I received a lot of e-mail from viewers after that, and many of them asked, "Where did you get a coupon for organic broccoli?" Again, you do have to toss out all of your previously held misconceptions about coupons. These days, there are coupons out there for just about everything!

**Q } How much time does it take people on a daily or weekly basis to follow your method of couponing?**

Not as long as most people think. You can do this in about a half-hour to an hour a week. I teach what I call a "clipless" method of couponing, which is a little play on words: "clip LESS." I want to spend as little time as possible cutting coupons, and I don't want to spend hours organizing lots of little pieces of paper either. With the method I teach, you only cut exactly the coupons you need for this week's trip, but in that half-hour to an hour, you'll cut your grocery bill by half or better. It's time well spent.

**Q } Couponing has become huge lately. What do you think the biggest trends are for couponing right now?**

The Internet has completely changed the way people shop with coupons. There are so many great tools online for coupon shoppers — sites that track sales cycles and match coupons for us, sites that show stores' flyers weeks ahead of time to give shoppers extra time to plan for sales. Electronic coupons are really growing in popularity. Many can be loaded to your shopper's card via a store's website; others can be loaded via smartphone and scanned in the lane.

Coupon blogs are everywhere, too. When I first started blogging the deals, there weren't many at all. Now, there are coupon blogs around the country posting sales and following deals at specific stores. The flow of information never stops, and all of these things make this a very, very good time to be a coupon shopper!

**Q } You have turned your expertise into a business. What are your plans to**

**grow your "brand" and business in the future?**

I have more ideas, plans and concepts right now than I have time in the day to pursue them all! In the short term, though, I'd like to film and release my second, advanced Super-Couponing class on DVD. In that class, I teach not only how to push your grocery savings to 70 percent or more, but also how to track sales cycles for clothing, housewares and a variety of other categories. This class is incredibly popular locally, and it only makes sense to bring it to DVD for people outside our market area to enjoy, too, as I did with the first Super-Couponing class.

My weekly "Super-Couponing Tips" video series is also nearing its first year in syndication, and I'm very happy with the success it's received. It's syndicated online to many of the same publications that carry my written column each week. These are one-minute video tips that give shoppers a quick, easy coupon tip of the week to continue to maximize their savings.

Beyond that, there's a lot in the work, but that's about all I can say at the moment!

**Q } How do you find time to still do your couponing, maintain a blog, website, classes and appearances?**

I still think of myself as a stay-at-home mom, though there's no denying I'm a working mother, too. I feel blessed that I'm able to run my business mostly from home, and I'm still home with my children during the day. I try to schedule most of my appearances in the evenings so that we still have a lot of time together as a family.

Time management can be difficult, though, at times. I do work a lot of late nights — 2 or 3 a.m. is not uncommon simply because there aren't enough hours in the day to accomplish everything. I receive over two hundred emails a day from readers — that's over a thousand emails a week. Keeping up with the mail alone is an incredibly daunting task.

**Q } You live in Huntley. What are your favorite local places ?**

Our family loves Del Toro's Tex-Mex Grill in Huntley (the Tacos Al Pastor are my favorite!) A bonus: they often have coupons

for their restaurant! Truly, the food's so good though that I'll eat there even without a coupon.

Huntley's Deicke Park has an amazing Discovery Zone for children, which is a fantastic interactive playground themed around the town of Huntley. It has a police station, a fire department, a school, a replica of the famous Huntley Dairy Mart and so much more. Many areas have electronic triggers, playing sounds and effects when children jump and play with them in different ways. It's such an innovative, unique play place that people come from other towns to spend a few hours there. We're lucky that it's practically in our backyard!

– Brittany Ashcroft

*For the full interview, go to [westsuburbanliving.net](http://westsuburbanliving.net).*