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Priceline: Saving cash can cost you convenience

James Turner

Sometimes the difference between a bargain and a rip-off is simply a matter of how many hoops someone is willing to jump through to get a good deal.

Priceline (www.priceline.com) is a perfect example.

The company is famous for two things: restarting William Shatner's singing career through its tongue-in-cheek TV commercials and letting consumers name their price for airline tickets, groceries, gasoline, and an expanding galaxy of other items.

Of course, naming your price comes with quite a few strings attached.

Let's start with airline tickets, its first big market.

On the Priceline Web site, you enter your travel details and select how you're willing to be inconvenienced, ranging from traveling with multiple connections to flying on a different day than you requested.

The more you put up with, the less you presumably pay. Next, you specify the amount you are willing to pay (with helpful hints as to what the normal airfare would be).

The last step is to decide whether you are willing to accept offers from Priceline partners (like signing up for long-distance service) in order to reduce the cost of the ticket.

Now the truly inconvenient part starts.

You are required to take a leap of blind faith by giving Priceline your credit-card number and seeing if anyone accepts the offer.

If so, you are locked in, and stuck with whatever flight times and connections were issued to you, with no refund possible. So you better be extremely flexible before using this service.

The gas card is also full of conditions. After filling out an application and receiving your gas card, you bid for gas at local service stations.

Typically, you can shave about a dime a gallon off prices in the Northeast, from my experience.

But now the "gotchas" start.

First, if you pump five gallons more than the agreed amount, you will be charged full price for the additional gasoline - plus a \$1.50 penalty.

Second, it's not good for spur-of-the-moment purchases, since you must log on to the Web site and buy the

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gas before you go to the pump.

Third, if you don't use all the gas you've bought within 90 days, you lose it.

And finally, you're limited to 100 gallons a month, which means that the most you're likely to save is about \$10 a month.

Of course, as with airline tickets, you can save more by signing up for partner programs, but I'm not certain I'd switch long-distance phone companies to save \$5 on a tank of gas.

*James Turner is a computer consultant and avid Web user.

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