

# Dollars & Sense: Net some savings online

Pay less for your iPod, laptop and cell phone with these local and Internet shopping tips.

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Think outside the big box. That's the answer for landing good deals on electronics this back-to-school season. Meanwhile, you have buddies to see before you split and schmoozing to do to loosen up parental purse strings. Dollars & Sense makes your shopping easier and cheaper, whether it's an iPod, a laptop, a cell phone or a small flat-panel TV.

Say you want a new Razr phone. Go to the retail store of your choice, write down the model number and price, preferably on the salesperson's card. Then go home and check the websites listed here for features and critical reviews. Also check eBay and the price comparison sites listed for the best price. If you still want to buy the item locally, tell the retailer the price you found online and ask if the salesperson can match it or do better.

Also check to see if the item is out of stock, a common problem. If not, ask for an upgraded model at the same price. Check a retailer's website if it's not in stock at the store. Also, double-check the Web price. It may be different than at the store. Best Buy allows you to buy online and have items delivered to a store near you.

Electronics return policies can be a pain. If you're worried about the strictness of big-box stores such as Target, Best Buy or Circuit City, try Costco. Its liberal policy wins hands down. Always know the return policy before you buy. Keep receipts and all original packaging.

Websites for selection, features

and reviews

**General electronics:** [www.cnet.com](http://www.cnet.com), [www.consumerreports.org](http://www.consumerreports.org), [www.crutchfield.com](http://www.crutchfield.com) and [www.resellerratings.com](http://www.resellerratings.com) (reviews).

**Computers:** [www.pcconnection.com](http://www.pcconnection.com), [www.macconnection.com](http://www.macconnection.com).

**Digital cameras:** [www.dpreview.com](http://www.dpreview.com)

**Cell phones:** [www.billsaver.com](http://www.billsaver.com), [www.wirefly.com](http://www.wirefly.com) and [www.myrateplan.com](http://www.myrateplan.com) compare plans and phones. Check reception on or off campus at [www.cellreception.com](http://www.cellreception.com).

Websites for good prices

[Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com) is very reputable and often competitively priced.

[Overstock.com](http://Overstock.com) is like an outlet store for closeouts, overstocks and discontinued items.

[Costco.com](http://Costco.com) allows anyone to look and check prices but only members can shop (\$50 annual fee).

[Bradsdeals.com](http://Bradsdeals.com) includes a wide variety of products on sale, especially computers.

[TigerDirect.com](http://TigerDirect.com) has PCs for as little as \$200 and laptops for under \$500.

[Usedlaptops.com](http://Usedlaptops.com) sells name-brand notebooks starting at \$225.

[Dealmac.com](http://Dealmac.com) includes deals on general electronics.

Price comparison sites

These sites help you identify a good price, not just the manufacturer's suggested retail price.

[www.froogle.com](http://www.froogle.com)

[www.yahooshopping.com](http://www.yahooshopping.com)

[www.shopping.com](http://www.shopping.com)

[www.pricegrabber.com](http://www.pricegrabber.com)

Local stores to check for deals:

Brand Name Deals (1000 E. Moore Lake Dr., Fridley, 763-572-9800) sells retail returns and overstocks. Current stock includes Toshiba, Compaq, Dell and HP laptops (\$349 to \$849), MP3 players (\$40 to \$150), iPods Shuffles (\$50), iPod Nano (2 GB \$139) and 4-gigabyte iPod Mini (\$149), an off-brand 40-gigabyte MP3 (\$149), 20-inch flat panel TVs

(\$89 and up), dorm-sized refrigerator specials with minor blemishes (\$20 for 1.8 cubic feet, \$30 for 4.2 cubic feet. Flat-panel TVs start at \$89 from 20 inches up. Returns are accepted for 10 days. Open Wednesdays through Sundays.

General Nanosystems (3014 University Av. SE., Minneapolis, 612-331-3690, [www.generalnanosystems.com](http://www.generalnanosystems.com)) has low prices on custom-built computers. Checkbook, a nonprofit group that rates local service providers, calls it a highly regarded repair center.

Pawn America (10 Twin Cities locations, including Roseville, 651-487-1595, [www.pawnamerica.com](http://www.pawnamerica.com)) is a rare pawnshop that offers a money-back guarantee (seven days). Shoppers can find MP3 players, including iPods, for \$30 to \$300, laptops starting at \$149, and Texas Instruments graphics calculators from \$40 to \$70.

Micro Center (3710 Hwy. 100 S., St. Louis Park, 952-285-4040) has a good computer selection, including customized options. Consumer Reports gave Micro its top rating for retail computer stores.

Wireless Toyz (Champlin, Lakeville, Minneapolis, 612-824-2300) just entered the Twin Cities market as a cell phone specialty retailer. It offers service from Nextel, Sprint, T-Mobile, Verizon and Ampd as well as prepaid options. Qwest and Cingular plans are not offered. Plans are priced the same as at big-box stores, but managers say the phones are more competitively priced.

Petter's (Mall of America, St. Cloud, Mounds View, 763-717-2967) has an excellent deal on a national brand, new (not refurbished) 4-gigabyte MP3 player (not Apple) that sells for \$160 (regularly \$235).