

A Dozen Ways of Saving on Movies This Summer

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The recent release of my book, [*Why Popcorn Costs So Much at the Movies, And Other Pricing Puzzles*](#), has prompted invitations for interviews on related topics, including how moviegoers can save money this summer on their trips to theaters. Although my book is not really devoted to such an issue, the repetition of the question has spurred me to come up with pointers that may be helpful (and I have been surprised at how a little thought and investigation of such questions can go a long way).

The cost of going to the movies can be steep, especially if the concession counter is not avoided. Where I live in Southern California, a night at the movies can cost a couple \$38 -- two tickets at \$21 on a Friday or Saturday night and a medium “combo” (large tub of popcorn and two medium sodas at Regal Theaters) at \$17. Add in three hours of babysitting, and the total cost can easily break \$50 (or even \$60).

What can you do to reduce costs? Consider my top dozen recommendations, in no particular order, including several that are friendly reminders for many busy moviegoers. Note that these recommendations are all based on costs and conditions in Southern California, and recognize that several involve nontrivial tradeoffs on quality and time considerations, which help explain why popcorn is pricey at the movies:

1. Go to the movies in the afternoon for a 25-30% discount on matinee tickets.
2. Check ticket prices for different nights of the week. Regal Theaters (the largest chain of theaters in the country with 6,000 screens) is currently experimenting with higher ticket prices for Friday and Saturday night screenings (\$10.50) and for other nights of the week (\$10).
3. Buy the medium bag of popcorn – unless you intend to get refills.
 - a. You have a good chance of getting as much in the medium bag (because the bag’s sides are flexible) as in the large tub (because the sides are rigid), according to my survey of theater concession counters.
 - b. The tub, which includes free refills, costs \$1 more than the medium bag at Regal and AMC Theaters. Why pay the extra dollar if you never expect to get refills? (If you do get two refills and smother all three tubs with butter, know that you can pay on girth. If you consume three tubs smothered in butter during the course of a two-hour movie, you will down the calories recommended for an adult male for at least two days, and maybe three days.)

4. Recognize that on the “combos” shown in big lighted pictures above the concession counter you get no price break at least not at Regal Theaters in Southern California (you get only a 50-cent price break at AMC Theaters), which can explain why the prices are not indicated on Regal’s lighted displays. A large tub and two medium sodas (“Combo 1”) will cost \$17 at Regal no matter whether bought separately or in a combo.
5. Buy tickets at Costco: 25-30% discount for anytime evening tickets.
6. Buy tickets at the student center of a local university.
 - a. 25-30% discount for anytime evening tickets (at the University of California, Irvine).
 - b. 40% discount for evening tickets used two weeks after a movie’s opening weekend.
7. Go to the movies on Tuesdays. At Regal Theaters in Southern California you get free popcorn Senior tickets at AMC on Tuesdays has a 20-percent discount from the normal senior ticket price..
8. Get a “reward card,” which offers at Regal free concessions (a small bag of popcorn and/or a drink) for accumulated points for buying tickets.
9. Check ticket prices for different theater chains. Theaters do not always have the same prices. For example, AMC adult ticket prices for Sundays-Thursday are 50 cents higher than at Regal. At Costco, at Costco the AMC price two tickets (\$15.99) is a dollar more than the Regal ticket price for two tickets (\$14.99).
10. Buy bags of popcorn bags at a discount at a grocery store at a price per ounce 60 (or more) percent lower than the price at theaters. Do even better at big-box stores. Costco has a bundle of 30 1.5-ounce bags with cheese flavoring for \$6.79, which on a per ounce basis is 85 percent below the price of popcorn at theaters. A theater tub-equivalent of popcorn bought at Costco can cost no more than \$1.25 (but then you will have to be able to smuggle in five small bags and the five the bags will have nearly 1,400 calories).
11. Buy your candy at your local drugstore on the way to the movies for no more than half the price. A 3.5-ounce box of chocolate-covered raisins cost \$3.50 at a Regal Theater, \$1 per ounce. An ounce of chocolate-covered raisins can be bought at Costco for 14 cents, a discount of 86 percent from the theater price per ounce. A 7-ounce Snickers candy bar cost \$1 at a convenience store one block away from the theater.

12. Wait to watch movies until they come out on DVDs, six months to a year after their theater release. A DVD and Costco popcorn can cost \$20, or even less (depending on how long you are willing to wait to see a movie).

Overall, you can easily cut your movie costs in half. If you buy two discounted adult movie tickets for use two weeks after a movie's release, buy your popcorn and sodas at a discount store, your cost can total less than \$17 (55 percent less than the full prices mentioned at the start of this commentary).

I know, you are thinking: "I only want to go to the movies at night, on the opening weekend, and I don't like packaged popcorn and canned drinks. Packaged popcorn is several days old and tastes like dried alfalfa. I want my candy and 'audible and smellable edible' [popcorn in movie industry parlance] from theaters' concession counters." Good luck, you are the kind of moviegoer whom theaters love to charge the prices on tickets and concessions that they do, and they can do so because you insist on buying what you do from one source. But then, you aren't paying for the full movie-going experience at big-box stores. The fact that you can buy that full experience at theaters helps explain why popcorn (and candy and bottled water) costs so much at the movies.

And if you are interested, my *Why Popcorn Costs So Much at the Movies, And Other Pricing Puzzles* (Copernicus/Springer, May 2008), is the Walter B. Gerken Professor of Enterprise and Society in the Paul Merage Business School at the University of California, Irvine.

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