

Money-Saving Gadgets

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Introduction

Since the economic recovery seems to be taking a little longer than expected, it's probably prudent to save money wherever possible. While it seems counterintuitive to buy things in order to save money, most of the items mentioned can be found for well under \$50, so it won't take long to recoup your initial investment.

Cut Your Utility Bills

- The \$40 **Kill A Watt EZ** energy meter (www.p3international.com/products/p4460.html) measures the electricity used by your appliances and electronics. You can use it to identify gadgets which leech power even after you've turned them off (placing them in so-called "standby mode.") This is important, because according to the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, standby power use can account for up to 10% of your total home electricity bill (<http://standby.lbl.gov>). Once you've found your worst standby energy leeches with the Kill A Watt, plug them into a **power strip** so that you can cut all power to them. An even more elegant solution can be found in the Isolé IDP-3050 Plug Load Control, which has an integrated motion detector which will cut power to its outlets if nobody is in the room (<http://www.wattstopper.com/products/details.html?id=74>).



The Kill A Watt EZ monitors your energy costs.

- A **programmable electronic thermostat** (\$25 to \$200) allows you to decrease your home's heating or cooling while you're away, significantly reducing your energy use. It's hard to beat a programmable thermostat for big figure cost-savings.



- Compact Fluorescent light bulbs (CFLs)** use 75% less energy than conventional incandescent bulbs and last ten times as long, recouping their cost in six months according to *energystar.gov*. Even better, they have been dropping in price lately, so you can probably find them for less than \$5 per bulb on sale at a local store.

Programmable thermostats can slice your heating and cooling bills by over \$100 per year.

- The **magicJack** (*magicjack.com*) voice-over-Internet-protocol (VOIP) gadget lets you place unlimited calls for an up-front cost of \$40 for the device, plus an annual service charge of \$20. It plugs into an open USB port on your computer with broadband Internet and connects to an ordinary telephone handset. It may be unwise to rely on a magicJack as your sole telephone due to its limited 911 emergency service. Still, picking one up can save you a lot of money if you call distant friends and relatives on a regular basis.



A CFL light bulb uses much less energy than a traditional bulb.

Save Money on Entertainment

- While it's not a gadget, it's worth noting that the **Hinsdale Public Library** is one of the best entertainment bargains around, offering movies, TV programs, audiobooks and well over 100,000 books to keep you engaged in your leisure time. We've got a great selection which grows every month, but if there's something that you don't see on the shelf, we'll be happy to obtain a copy for you from another library.



The magicJack is about the size of a chunky USB flash drive, yet lets you place long distance calls for a rock-bottom rate.

- Load your entertainment gadgets with rechargeable batteries. **Nickel-metal hydride (NiMH) hybrid batteries** (\$10 to \$15 for four AA batteries) come out of the box fully charged and hold their charge while not in use, unlike traditional rechargeable NiMH batteries. When paired with a nice battery charger (\$30 to \$50), these batteries will pay for themselves many times over as compared to standard alkaline cells.

Reduce your Food and Drink Costs

- Your **oven** and **stovetop** are probably the two best devices for saving money on food. Eating a couple of more meals at home instead of getting takeout can help to stretch your budget.
- **Silicone cooking and baking accessories** (\$5 to \$30) like spatulas, basting brushes, oven mitts and baking pans are more durable than their traditional counterparts, offering a lower cost over the long run. They have other benefits as well, such as impressive heat resistance, easy cleanup and possibly a lower likelihood of harboring food-borne bacteria while in storage.

- A **rice cooker** (\$25 to \$150) allows you to save money by buying larger quantities of traditional long-grained rice (e.g., basmati) instead of small portions of pre-cooked “instant” rice. In addition to saving money, the taste and texture of your rice will be better, and the cooking process is dead simple. High-end rice cookers have additional features like fuzzy logic, which uses a computer chip to actively adjust cooking settings for perfect rice every time. Some have a timer so you can have cooked rice waiting for you when you get home from work, a keep warm setting and a removable nonstick bowl to make cleanup easy. If you eat a lot of rice-based food, a dedicated appliance makes sense.



A rice cooker can make bulk-packaged rice taste great with little effort.

- A **faucet-mounted water filter** (\$15 to \$45) can remove foul tasting contaminants from your tap water, saving a bundle compared to bottled water. The cost-per-gallon of filtered water is less than a dime for some models, so it's not hard to see how this can benefit your pocket book. Popular filter manufacturers include PUR, Culligan and Brita.
- In a similar vein, a **liquor filter** like the **Gray Kangaroo** (graykangaroo.com) purportedly improves the taste of inexpensive brands so that they compare favorably with those costing two-to-three times as much. While this \$30 to \$50 filter system won't transform rotgut into top shelf whiskey, reviews have been positive on the whole. It goes without saying that users of any liquor filtration device should drink legally and responsibly.



The Gray Kangaroo liquor filter is designed to enhance the taste of inexpensive spirits.

Conclusion

Because the cost of most of these gadgets is relatively small compared to the money you can save over time with consistent use, you might want to buy a few now to stimulate the economy while realizing your economic benefits gradually over time.

If you have questions, comments or suggestions, you can visit me at the Reference Desk, contact me via email (moetting@hinsdalelibrary.info), or call me at 630-986-1976 ext. 225.

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Mike Oetting, Reference Librarian
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20 East Maple St.
 Hinsdale IL 60521
 630-986-1976
www.hinsdalelibrary.info
reference@hinsdalelibrary.info