



Living With Less

20 freebies for your birthday

Dinner (or dessert or a small gift) is on the house, if you know where the deals are. And if you're planning a Disney visit, the parks' perks are cause for celebration.

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MSN Money

Disneyland and Disney World will let you in for free on your birthday in 2009.

Houlihan's restaurants give away dinner on your special day each year. Hollywood Video will spot you a DVD rental. And what's a birthday without ice cream? Take your pick, gratis, from shops such as Baskin-Robbins, Friendly's, Carvel and Cold Stone Creamery.

Hamburgers, pizza, burritos, barbecued ribs, deli sandwiches, gift cards, discounts on shoes -- these and other gifts are handed out by national chains through birthday-club programs designed to reward loyal customers.

Not a customer? Not a problem! The word "free" will get you in at least once.

Maybe even more than once: When I signed up at Qdoba Mexican Grill last week, it e-mailed me a coupon for a free order of chips and salsa. Guess where I'm [walking](#) this weekend?

"People are looking for free," says John Dillon, the vice president of marketing for Denny's. "The power of the word 'free' really resonates with people."

(He should know; Denny's gave away 2 million [Grand Slam breakfasts](#) recently.)

There are freebies, and there are verified freebies

Where people look for free, naturally, is the Internet. Do a search for "birthday freebies" and you'll get plenty of hits. Some of them are strictly regional, though, and some contain information that's outdated or just plain wrong. Case in point: Please stop asking for a free AutoZone oil change on your birthday.

"We don't even *do* oil changes," says Ray Pohlman, a spokesman for the auto-supply chain. "That (rumor) got started on the Internet years and years ago. We've been trying to snuff it out ever since."

That's why I personally verified all the offers in this article. Because I couldn't list every freebie out there, I chose a handful of well-known companies with giveaways that don't require a big buy-in on your part. Free dessert at a steakhouse -- well, that's nice, but if I can afford a steakhouse, I'm not sweating bullets over the cost of a brownie with ice cream. But lately, some people may find that a free combo meal at Burger King followed by a free Baskin-Robbins cone is the only celebration their kids are going to get this year.

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Not that freebies are limited to children. "People who come to our site typically are looking for something for themselves," says Jeff Spry, the founder of [BirthdayFreebies.com](#). A blogger named Heather who runs [Freebies4Mom.com](#) says many giveaways are "really about spoiling yourself."

"For people who don't have any money or who have no room in their budget for these things, it's such a gift," says Heather, whose site features a separate birthday freebies section. "You do pay for freebies with your time. But with (most), you sign up once, and . . . you will get something over multiple years."

Sign up, already

In this economy, who's going to turn down a free lunch? But first, a few strategies:

- Set up a dedicated e-mail for birthday goodies. Even if a business promises not to sell your information to marketers, it will likely send regular messages about sales and promotions.
- Sign up for multiple offers, then s-t-r-e-t-c-h that celebration by dining and "desserting" out as many times as you can in your birthday month. It helps to have understanding friends who don't mind being the buy-one half of the BOGO offers.
- Call to make sure the local store accepts an offer, because some franchisees opt out of national promotions.
- Bring your identification and a printout of the offer, and tell the server ahead of time, not after the check has arrived.
- Base your [tip](#) on what you would have paid without the discount, not what you actually paid.
- When your child ages out of the kiddie offers, sign him or her up for the grown-up ones (when appropriate).
- If it's a "no purchase required" offer, such as a free bath product, don't feel obligated to buy something else. Just say "thank you" and go.

Video on MSN Money



▶ Treasure hunting in thrift stores

If you're buying at retail stores, you're wasting money. Follow Donna Freedman as she explores her local thrift store to find great deals you won't believe.

And now . . . on to the offers.

Kid stuff

Sign kids up as soon as they're born to get maximum use of giveaways. You're likely to find these on your own by visiting fast-food and family-friendly restaurants, children's museums, theme parks and specialty stores for kids. Look on parenting Web sites, too.

- **Burger King, Club BK:** free hamburger meal for ages 13 and under. [Online registration](#) only; parents must set up account.
- **California Pizza Kitchen, CPKids Birthday Club:** free meal of pizza, pasta, chicken or salad plus dessert and a drink for ages 10 and under; can be used anytime during the birthday month. Online [registration](#) only; parents must set up account.
- **Denny's Birthday Club:** free kids entree and sundae for ages 10 and under, on the actual birthday only. Sign up in the restaurants, or fax or mail this [application](#).
- **Friendly's Birthday Club:** free kids meal for ages 12 and under with the purchase of an adult meal; expires in a month. Register [online](#).
- **Geoffrey's Birthday Club at Toys R Us:** free gift card and birthday card for ages 10 and under; kids who visit a store can collect a crown and a balloon and hear birthday wishes over the store's loudspeaker. Parents get a \$5 Toys R Us coupon in advance of the birthday. Click [here](#) to register.

[Continued: Grown-up giveaways](#)

Grown-up giveaways

They say that age 10 is the time to quit expecting everybody to make a big deal over your birthday. Admit it, though: You really *do* want somebody to notice. (What you don't want are those singing waiters.)

- **DSWRewards:** This program for shoes includes a "\$5 off any purchase" certificate on your birthday. Register [here](#).
- **Friendly's Birthday Club:** free ice cream cone; good for one month. Register [here](#).
- **Hollywood Video:** free "Film Library" rental on birthday only; free birthday rentals offered to everyone on your membership account. No sign-up is required; just make sure that birth dates are listed.
- **Houlihan's E-mail Club:** free entree; coupon expires in two weeks. Online [registration](#) only.
- **Moe's Southwest Grill:** free burrito on your birthday. Register [here](#).
- **Qdoba E-club:** free entree when you buy a second entree; coupon arrives about one week before your birthday and is good for two weeks after. Online [registration](#) only.
- **Schlotzsky's Bun & Fun E-club:** free small sandwich. (Not every restaurant participates; call to make sure yours does.) Online [registration](#) only.
- **Sephora:** The birthday gift varies from year to year, but it may be bath products, cosmetics or skin-care items. Create an account with the store's [Beauty Insider](#) program and you are automatically registered for a gift.

For all ages

The big enchilada is the Disneyland/Disney World promotion: a free day in the park of your choice, this year only. If you were planning a trip anyway, this could save you anywhere from \$59 to \$69 (more if you have octuplets). Click [here](#) to find out how to register. Pay careful attention to the parks' ID requirements, especially the fact that you may need an original or certified copy (not a photocopy) of a child's birth certificate.

- **Baskin-Robbins:** free 2.5-ounce scoop on your birthday; good for one week before and one week after birthday. Sign up [here](#).
- **Carvel:** free cup or cone of soft-serve ice cream on your birthday. Online [registration](#) only.
- **Cold Stone Creamery Birthday Club:** free ice cream; good for one week before and one week after birthday. Online [registration](#) only.
- **Famous Dave's P.I.G. Club:** As an adult "pretty important guest," you get one of five free items, ranging from an appetizer to the massive All American Barbecue Feast. Children 12 and under get a free kids meal. Good for one week before and one week after birthday. Register [here](#).
- **Marie Callender's E-Club:** Adults get \$5 off an entree plus a free slice of pie. Ages 12 and under get a free kids meal and a bakery treat. Sign up in the restaurant or [online](#).
- **Red Robin eClub:** free burger of your choice; some restaurants also include a free small sundae. Good for one week before and one week after birthday. Click [here](#) to register.

Have fun applying for all these freebies. And here's one more strategy: Tell your server that you tip directly in proportion to how many birthday songs you *don't* hear.

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Save money today

Baby, it's cold outside: Kids' winter coats and boots can take a serious bite out of clothing budgets. One thrifty mom found a simple way to cut her outerwear costs in half. Read the [tip](#).

Small change, big savings: Ten years ago, a [Smart Spending](#) message board reader made one small adjustment to a utility bill. That change has saved her \$600 so far. Find out more [here](#).

Getting your money's worth: Other readers report why "empty" doesn't always mean "empty." Read their [secrets](#) for getting an extra week or more out of your toiletries.

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