
WSJ(12/17) Learning To Spend (A Little) More

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(From THE WALL STREET JOURNAL) By Neal Templin

Writing this column has had a disturbing effect on me: I'm getting less cheap.

Have I become a free spender? Hardly. In the coming months, I will be singing the virtues of everything from cheap haircuts to greasy-spoon restaurants. Still, I've noticed some small but noticeable changes in my spending habits.

The biggest is tipping. As a former busboy, I never stiffed waiters. But I used to think a 15% tip was just fine unless the service was outstanding. I learned through writing a column on the subject that 20% is rapidly becoming the standard tip. So that's pretty much what I give now.

Of course, if I thought 20% was outrageous, I wouldn't care what other people tip. But waiting tables is a tough, underpaid job, and I decided tipping an extra 5% made more difference to the waiter than it did to me. (It amounts to only an extra dollar on a \$20 meal.)

The more subtle change has been around the house. I'm generally getting less bent out of shape when my wife, Clarissa, and the kids spend money on things I consider a waste. The shift has been subtle enough that Clarissa says she's barely noticed. "Just a smidgen," she told me. "Or as we say in cooking, 'A dash.'"

Well, it has seemed like more than a smidgen to me. But I'll come back to that.

The more pressing question: Why would writing a column on being cheap make a person less so? Wouldn't it have the opposite effect?

I talked to some academics who have researched tightwads, and they weren't surprised. Cheapskates have an emotional aversion to spending -- they can actually experience pain when they spend. The pain can be out of proportion to the amount spent.

So if you want to make a person less cheap, the cognitive side of his personality has to override the emotional. One way to do this is to make that person explain in writing why he's being cheap.

The goal is to encourage "heightened deliberations," says Scott Rick, an assistant professor of marketing at the University of Michigan. "That will tend to extinguish the influence of emotion."

Thanks to The Wall Street Journal, I've conducted a giant writing experiment on being cheap, penning thousands of words on the subject over the past 18 months.

And I haven't liked everything I've learned about myself. I've had to ponder the times when my penny-pinching irritated my family or when I denied myself some small pleasure because it wasn't the cheapest choice.

The result: I'm making an effort to not be automatically against every expenditure. I try to bear in mind that it isn't usually the little purchases that drag down a household budget. Far more important is how big a house you buy, how expensive a car you drive, where you send your kids to school.

It's not an easy transformation for me. Wasting money on little things still bothers me quite a bit. Let me give you an example. We had some friends over for dinner a couple of months ago. So Clarissa ran out and bought a large electric coffee maker for \$40 before the dinner.

I thought it wasteful. I don't drink coffee, and our children, all now adults, don't either. Clarissa drinks just one cup a day. So we're never going to use this coffee maker unless we have company over.

After that dinner, Clarissa asked who wanted coffee, and nobody did. So the coffee maker went unopened. It sat there. I asked Clarissa about it once, and she said she planned to return it to the store. She didn't. It's still sitting in our den because Clarissa says she might need it some day.

Before, I would have nagged her several times about the pot. The thought of us owning another appliance we didn't need would have bugged me. More so than the \$40.

This time I bit my tongue, mainly. To me, that's a change. To Clarissa, the fact I mentioned the coffee pot at all shows I haven't really changed. In any event, Clarissa thinks any talk from me about not being as cheap as before is beside the point.

"You were never as cheap as you thought," she informed me. "Because I was spending the money anyway."