

Best Practices for Coupon Sites

Transcript From an Interview With
Amy Ely, Kim Salvino and Jeannine Crooks
buy.at

Hosted by Deborah Carney and Vinny O'Hare
Affiliate ABCs.com



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Preface

[Affiliate ABCs](#) hosts Deborah Carney and Vinny O'Hare joined Kim Salvino, Amy Ely, and Jeannine Crooks of [buy.at](#) to talk about best practices, tools, and ideas for coupon sites in the affiliate industry.

Topics include:

- **Best practices** – ensuring sites are adding value and providing complete, updated coupons, removed expired deals and coupons quickly
- **Tools available** – such as [For Me To Coupon](#), [buy.at's OfferCentral](#), Shareasale Network Deals Database
- **Ideas** – consider niche targeting, work with merchants to create unique coupons
- **Scripts, plugins – don't use them "out of the box"**. Customize, change, build your traffic. No script or plugin is going to bring you traffic, they are only the display mechanism
- **Check Merchant Rules about coupon sites** – some practices like "Click to Reveal Code" are prohibited, know and follow the rules.

If managed well, these sites can tap into the massive revenue opportunity presented by digital coupons in the US market. Specifically, [eMarketer](#) forecasts that **88.2 million US adults that will redeem online coupons or codes in 2011**. That's a huge number, but you have to build a site that gives them value to find you and not just toss up an automatically generated site and hope they find it. One example: Find a niche like fishing and find deals and coupons that appeal to fisherman.

Read on for a lot more great tips about how to run a coupon site that will bring revenue and not headaches.

Deborah: Hi everyone, and welcome to a new episode of Affiliate ABCs. I'm one of your hosts, Deborah Carney.

Vinny: And I'm your other host, Vinny O'Hare.

Deborah: We have a unique panel of guests today. Ladies, why don't you introduce yourselves.

Amy: I am Amy Ely, Marketing Manager at Buy.at.

Kim: Kim Salvino, Head of Publishers for Buy.at/us.

Jeannine: Jeannine Crooks, Account Manager with Buy.at/us.

Deborah: Today we picked a topic that is a pretty hot topic recently. As all of us work with affiliates and as affiliate managers, we're seeing quite an influx of coupon websites that are using standardized scripts and WordPress plug-ins. The sites are kind of all blending together. We wanted to talk about some coupon site best practices, because if you're using any kind of a cookie cutter . . .

Vinny: Cookie cutter coupon site.

Deborah: Yeah, cookie cutter site. Whether it's a coupon site or a loyalty site or just a regular affiliate site, any time you're using a cookie cutter script or a plug-in, you're not adding anything additional. You're going to get declined by your affiliate managers that you're applying to and you may be wondering why and you're thinking it's because you're a coupon site.

Vinny: I was going to say, not all affiliate managers will decline you, but most of them will.

Deborah: Or they'll let you in and then . . .

Vinny: Nothing will happen. You'll never have a sale or you might have one sale.

Deborah: Right. So, instead of getting frustrated, Kim, why don't you talk to us about some things you've seen with some best practices for coupon sites?

Kim: Sure. Well, it starts out with adding value, of course, just like any other affiliate site should. With adding value specifically on the coupon side, you have to have up-to-date and accurate information. These are supposed to be codes, deals, percentage off, or however you classify them that are up-to-date, valid, complete, and that the merchant approves of. That's the hardest part, I think, for some of the affiliate sites that just want to put up the coupons and be quick and dirty about it to get the traffic, to get the sales coming in.

If it's not merchant approved or if it's not merchant provided, then they may not wish to have them appear on an affiliate coupon site. It could be just for their own email customers. It could be something that they use specifically for first-time customers. If it's not valid, if it's not an accurate coupon listing, if it's not a good offer that the consumer is going to be able to truly use once they click on through, then that creates a customer service issue for the merchant. No one likes those.

Deborah: Not only a customer service issue for the merchant, but for the site. They'll come back to your website and say, "This coupon didn't work. You suck." You don't want that on your website either.

Kim: True. Whether they come back or not, your cookie is there.

Deborah: That's true. That's where there are a lot of merchants that are concerned and affiliates need to be aware of it. If there's too much, even if it's just perceived that there's too much, invaluable traffic or traffic that merchants think they would have gotten anyway, they're starting to slap down the whole channel. They're not even allowing good coupon sites to be in their programs or they're cutting commissions on coupon sites. While merchants think that's fair, of course affiliates are . . .

Vinny: Screaming bloody hell.

Deborah: Rightly so. Amy, I think you're the one who mentioned, our society right now is very deals driven and coupon driven.

Amy: Yeah. Actually there was a statistic that came out recently from eMarketer that estimated that 88.2 million US adults will redeem an online coupon or code for use either online or offline at least once. That's a huge market and it's a huge opportunity for affiliates. What's really important, especially the affiliates that are listening to this podcast, is if you want to tap into this market, you need to make sure you're not a "me too" site, that you are a site that's adding value. That's going to drive customers to choose you rather than other coupon sites that are trying to take advantage of the same market.

Deborah: Right. Jeannine, what are your thoughts?

Jeannine: I've seen so many people who have tried to go out and just start up a brand new coupon site and thinking, like you were saying before, that this was going to be their secret way to make a million dollars. There are so many other things that can be done than just doing this mass coupon presentation. I think people just really need to think about it before they proceed forward. There's a lot of value in coupon sites, for sure, but people need to be really smart about it as they approach the whole topic.

Deborah: I think another thing that Kim and I had discussed, too, is that there are a lot of websites that maybe don't offer coupons but they offer deals. A coupon site can

harness within the various networks, most of them have some kind of a tool that will show you the current coupons for the merchants in the network. It may not be coupons. It may be deals. It may be free shipping. There are many other things that you can highlight, but you need to know where to find those.

There's a service called For Me To Coupon. It's a paid monthly service. They actually go through and they make sure that all the coupons are good, they haven't expired. They pull out the expired coupons. You can use it to populate a coupon site. Again, you need to add something else. You can't just have a list of coupons on your site because now you're competing against thousands of other websites that only have coupons on their site.

Kim: Right. I think that really leads into the topic that we've come across in so many of the Merchant ABCs podcasts. That is communicating with the merchant or the network that you're working with and try to see if you can come up with something truly unique for your site. If you say that you have X amount of traffic that you can provide for that merchant if they were to give you something that's a little bit different from any other affiliate sites that are out there or any of the other channels that they're giving coupon information, then you can drive in unique traffic because you do have something different.

Deborah: I think part of that is the way that you structure your site. Of course, a lot of coupon and deal sites that run on scripts, they basically just pull in the coupons and it just ranks them and just throws them out there willy-nilly with some categorizations.

Vinny: Click to reveal.

Deborah: Click to reveal. Thank you, Vinny.

Vinny: The thing about these websites, these scripts is they'll never rank anywhere in the search engines because nobody's ever going to link back to them because 90% of them are just junk.

Deborah: There's no added value.

Vinny: There's no added value. They'll never rank anyway, so there's no sense in even having them in your program, I think.

Deborah: Vinny just brought up a really good point. This is actually against most terms of service but unfortunately, people are buying scripts that allow them to do a little checkbox. On a really good coupon site, you are going to show the savings. You're going to show what the savings is, what the coupon code is, and you do want the customer to click through to the merchant. However, hiding that coupon behind a little button that says "click to reveal," what happens is when you click

it, a cookie is set, but then, oh wait, there was no coupon code for that. That's a deal on the website or there was no deal at all.

Vinny: Or there never was a coupon for that website.

Deborah: There never was a coupon for that website. And that's one of the things that merchants are getting upset about also, that people are optimizing for merchant name coupon when there isn't one. That goes along with adding value. Now you've annoyed the shopper. The shopper's unhappy with the merchant and the shopper's unhappy with the website. Nobody's happy.

Jeannine: Oh, yeah. You see so many bad executions and that's what's really scary. You know that as affiliates are trying to create these sites, they're doing so in the hope of trying to create their business or whatever or as affiliates are trying to create it, they're trying to create a new business for themselves. Unless they can add unique value, it just doesn't pay off. That's what I always try to counsel affiliates. Before you think about ever doing a coupon site, really have a plan that's going to make you special or it's not going to work. Just buying a script is not going to make it happen.

Deborah: Kim, do you have some suggestions for how affiliates can set their site apart?

Kim: Absolutely. I think that one of the first things they should do is reach out to the merchant. Again, there's that communication point. Ask the merchant specifically if they're having any deals, how much advanced notice they can give them of such deals, and even asking for an exclusive code that would track directly to them. That way you have the merchant's buy-in. They already know you're using that code. They've approved it. Maybe they'll give you a higher discount or something special that's uniquely yours rather than just a code that says, "your coupon site free ship," something like that. Maybe they'll give you 10% off overall, over and above what they're already offering.

That's definitely one of the first things that I encourage everyone to do, is to reach out to the merchants. I think a lot of the networks now have some really great tools that help with coupon tracking and with making coupons available and coupon listings in addition to forming a coupon. That helps affiliates keep everything straight, know when it's turned on, know when it's turned off, and can turn it on and off according to those recommendations and requirements made by the advertiser.

From there, don't say you have a code if you don't. If you have a code, I shouldn't have to click to see it. I shouldn't have to hover. It should not open up a window behind me or behind your original site without me knowing exclusively that that's what it's going to do. Don't put up expired codes. Not only does it, as you guys said before, cause customer service issues for the merchant, it does for the affiliate as well. Maybe that particular consumer won't come back to your affiliate

site after that because it didn't work. It didn't provide the functionality that they were looking for.

Deborah: I think another thing is people, affiliates think that if they put up a coupon site, traffic will just come. They don't have to market themselves because people will just show up.

Kim: There are too many.

Deborah: Exactly. They forget that even if they spend some money on a script or a service or whatever, they still need to do a lot of work and they need to do the marketing part. You brought up about exclusive codes. Make sure you don't put somebody else's exclusive code on your website. That's the quickest way to get kicked out of a merchant's affiliate program.

Vinny: Odds are those affiliate commissions' will be reversed anyway and go to the right affiliate. It's a waste of time.

Deborah: Yeah. There's a lot more. I know you guys have a way to tie merchant codes right to the affiliate so it can't be used by another affiliate. Yours can be used but it credits the correct affiliate.

Kim: Right. We have a tool called Offer Central, and basically what that does is it enables merchants to give specific coupon codes to individual affiliates or groups of affiliates. If an unauthorized affiliate comes in and uses that code, that merchant can reassign it to the affiliate that was originally supposed to be using it. There definitely are tools out there. That speaks to your point, Deb and Vinny, that you shouldn't just scrape coupon codes off of other sites, because you very likely won't get anything out of it after all.

Deborah: Right. One of our merchants has a code that won't work unless the right affiliate link is clicked, which could be a bad customer experience. However, we don't get very many complaints about it except from other affiliates that tried to stick the code on their site and it didn't work.

Kim: Right. One other point. You were asking earlier what can really make your site set apart. If you think that, as an affiliate, if somebody types "coupons" or "coupons + brand" into a search bar that you're going to show up there without much effort, that's just not understanding how SEO works.

Deborah: Right.

Kim: But one way to consider doing it is maybe go after a particular market. Maybe coupons specific for moms or coupons specific for outdoor enthusiasts. Go after a market that may come to really appreciate the extra care in marketing that you're doing to target the deals to them. Then you could turn around to the merchant or

the network and say, 'No, I'm not just another coupon site. I actually have an audience of outdoor enthusiasts or moms that come to my coupon site regularly because that's the audience I'm targeting.'

Deborah: There you go. There's your adding value part. Instead of the be all, do all for all the coupons everywhere, which you're never going to rank for anyway, pick a niche and go for long tail and go for deals. There are a lot of companies that don't specifically do coupons but they do deals. To go back to, again, one of our clients, they do a deals data feed through the ShareASale network. They keep it up-to-date. They have the end dates on it. Affiliates are converting that really well when they target that toward a specific destination or a specific type of tour.

If you're traveling and you want to go on a wine tour, you have a website about wine. You can put the deals for the wine country up and then underneath it, the things that aren't deals but that are still specific to your site. Blending coupons into an existing site, while it's a little more difficult, blending deals and finding deals is going to get you a better, more loyal audience than if you're just throwing up another site that has every coupon in the world from every network on it.

Vinny: You hit that right on that head.

Deborah: Thank you.

Kim: Maybe you could work with a network or merchants to say, if you buy this product from this merchant and this product from this other merchant, if they're related products in some way, then the customer gets some sort of a bonus. You can really look at the landscape of advertisers that are available to you and suggest some creative marketing ideas to get something truly unique.

Deborah: Yep. It's all about thinking outside of the box. For years, everybody, and people still do, use the Amazon script. They try to put the entire Amazon bookstore on their website. The days of that working are long gone.

Vinny: I've probably still got one of them up somewhere.

Deborah: It's all about targeting. Adding value doesn't mean that you have to sit down and do full product reviews and spend hours and hours. The more time you put into your site, the more you're going to get out of it. The more variety you put on your site, within your topic, the more you're going to get out of it.

Like Amy said, and Kim and I, instead of just using the coupons and deals, put other information. Most merchants, if they don't have a product data feed, have information about their products so that you can do a page about their products. I don't mean that page that has a little blurb at the top and then down at the bottom there are 18 rows of the merchant name combined with coupon, promo code, travel code. Those sites have been heavily hit by Google Updates, and they're

going to continue to get hit, because the pages have no value other than the one little blurb at the top. If there's no real coupon up there, you've lost your traffic anyway. All right. Kim, anything else you think you would like to add?

Vinny: Closing thoughts.

Deborah: What are your closing thoughts?

Kim: If you want to be a coupon site, nothing wrong with that. We love coupon sites, as long as they're doing things the right way. No deceptive clicks. Don't put expired coupons up. Work with your advertisers to get something that's truly yours so that it will generate sales and traffic your way, not only traffic that's going to hit you up one time, but that's going to come back because you're also providing a value to them and to the merchant. That's about it. Just continue to communicate with your advertisers. They're your first stop on the train of revenue there.

Deborah: Jeannine?

Jeannine: Kim always gives great advice, so that's so cool. I think the best thing I would say if somebody was looking to try and start a new coupon site is really spend a lot of time taking a look at what the leading coupon sites are already doing and try and figure out if there's an opportunity, if there's some area or niche or something that's not being addressed by them. I'm not going to say it's going to be easy, because there are some truly amazing coupon sites out there now, but there are always opportunities for someone who's creative. You need to find out whatever it is that's going to differentiate you from the others that will give people a reason to come to your site as opposed to the ones that already exist.

Deborah: Okay. Amy?

Amy: Wow. It's hard to follow these two. Just a really simple piece of advice. Don't take the easy way out. Put the effort into it and you'll get the results.

Deborah: Yep. Don't just slap up the script. Put the work into it once you do.

Vinny: That was beautiful. All three of them hit it right on the head.

Deborah: Yeah. For me, I think it would be remove those expired coupons. Manage your site. Don't just let the script do it for you. Again, we're seeing a lot of emails that we're having to send out. A lot of merchants are deciding to shut down the channel because people aren't cleaning up their sites and taking the old codes down because they want to try and rank for them. Vinny?

Vinny: I think we hit it pretty much.

Deborah: Okay. Well, we hope you've all enjoyed this episode of Affiliate ABCs. We'd love for you to come over to the AffiliateABCs.com website and leave your comments. Amy, why don't you list off where people can find the three of you?

Amy: Sure. You can find us on the web at www.Buy.at/us. That's our website. You can find us on Twitter at [Twitter.com/buyatus](https://twitter.com/buyatus). You can find us on Facebook at [Facebook.com/buy.at](https://facebook.com/buy.at).

Deborah: Okay, great. Vinny?

Vinny: You can find me at VinnyOHare.com or [Twitter.com/VinnyOHare](https://twitter.com/VinnyOHare).

Deborah: As always, you can find us at [Twitter.com/AffiliateABCs](https://twitter.com/AffiliateABCs) and AffiliateABCs.com. We'd like to thank GeekCast.fm for hosting not only our podcast but many other podcasts that can teach you how to be a better affiliate. Thanks everybody and have a great day.

Amy: Bye.

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