

Tax Time: Getting Them Done for Less



Looks like the rocky economy hasn't spared anyone—including your local tax pro. Many major tax-prep franchises took a hit last year; the number of returns completed by Jackson Hewitt, for instance, dropped nearly 13 percent. And with the use of tax-prep software on the rise (sales of TurboTax jumped 12 percent over the past tax year), the number crunchers may be in for another tough year. Of course, trouble for the industry could mean good deals for you. Below, our guide to getting your taxes done on the cheap.

■ **STRENGTH IN NUMBERS.** Group discounts for family members are increasingly common in the tax world, with some preparers offering savings of up to a third of the total bill for parents of college-age dependents. Referral discounts are also popular; Tracey Hennessey, an enrolled agent in Elkhorn, Wis., is rewarding anyone who brings in at least four new customers this year with a free return. Tax preparers are also using social networking to spread the word about discounts not heavily advertised elsewhere; Peoples Income Tax, which has 10 offices in Virginia, is using LinkedIn to promote its 50 percent discount for people who lost their jobs last year.

■ **MIX AND MATCH.** For those who need a little face time, H&R Block is offering a new \$100 combo option, which allows people to complete their taxes online, then bring them into an office to be checked and corrected for about \$80 less than having it done by a pro. TurboTax, too, is rolling out more ways for filers to get a little extra help. This year people using the company's online products can make an unlimited number of calls to the company's telephone help line for an additional flat fee.

■ **TIMING IS EVERYTHING.** Many tax preparers say they're willing to cut a deal for clients who avoid the Tax Day rush. Getting in early may be the best bet for a discount, but Bruce Bergley, a Minneapolis-based CPA, says he'll trim existing clients' bills by about 10 percent if they'll file after Apr. 15 (they will need to file an extension and pay any owed taxes, of course). "If you're willing to let the accountant catch his breath, I'd see about negotiating," says Bergley. If you must get your taxes done during crunch time, experts suggest seeking out preparers who are new to the business and willing to offer a deal in exchange for the chance to pump up their client list.

—Jami Makan

YOUR MONEY'S WORTH

Light-Emitting Alarm Clocks

Worth It

The light on the **BlueMax Sunrise System Model 200 by Full Spectrum Solutions** (\$129) is intended to simulate dawn, helping the body wake up more naturally. The clock can begin emitting light between 15 and 90 minutes before the desired wake-up time and



gradually gets brighter. Heavy sleepers have an optional backup alarm sound. The Model 200 also comes with a choice of lightbulbs to mimic morning or midday light.

Not Worth It

The good-looking **Philips Wake-Up Light** (\$170) offers five optional sounds: birds, chimes, African jungle, standard beep or digital FM radio. But its basic display doesn't show the date, and the timing of the light can't be customized; it goes on a half hour before your desired wake-up time. The company says 30 minutes is ideal for people who want to feel rested and energized every morning.

—J.M.

