



Credit card companies dangle plenty of alluring 5% cash-back offers in front of consumers, but they usually come with a big catch: the 5% is only for certain items (entertainment, dining out, gas, etc.) during certain times of the year.

These confusing parameters mean that many consumers leave money on the table because they forget which categories are getting cash-back in which months, or they altogether shun cash-back cards with rotating categories because of the perceived annoyance of them — which is sometimes too bad, as these tend to give the highest cash-back percentage (typically up to 5%), while those with cash-back on all/most items throughout the year tend to cap out at 1% to 2%, says Matt Schulz, the senior analyst with [CreditCards.com](https://www.creditcards.com).

But there's a simple, low-tech solution to this that can help you max out the amount of cash your credit card companies hand you each year (assuming, of course, that you pay off your balance in full and on-time every month). Here's how it works: Sign up for a few of the most lucrative cash-back credit cards (consider those with 5% cash-back on rotating categories you'll actually use — so if you frequently buy gas and groceries, get cards with 5% back on those at certain points of the year — as well as a card that offers solid cash-back on all purchases in case the items you want to buy aren't covered by a rotating category). Then, on white stickers that you will stick on the back of each card (leave the plastic strip exposed), write out the "rules" (rotating categories/timing/amount of cash back) of each card.

For example, if Card A has 5% off gas for January through March, 5% off entertainment for April through June, 5% off dining out for July through September, and 5% off groceries for October through December, place that info on the sticker; do this for each card. This way, when you're about to purchase something, you can easily see which card to use for that purchase — without having to open up your smartphone to check an app or look online. It's "an interesting, low-tech way" to do this, says Schulz.

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What can you earn?

How much you can earn from using this sticker trick depends on a variety of factors — which cash-back cards you use and how much you spend, among them. But let's say that you earn 5% cash back on 10% of your purchases throughout the year; and 1% cash back on the rest of them. If you're like the average American (who spends roughly \$1,200 a month on credit cards, according to an analysis of Nilson Report data by [CreditCards.com](https://www.creditcards.com)), this could earn you an extra \$200+ throughout the year with little effort.

Combine those rewards with one of the cash-back cards that offers a sign-up bonus (these are becoming increasingly common, says Schulz), and you could end up with more. Schulz says the [Chase Freedom card](#) is an interesting option as it offers 5% cash back on up to \$1,500 in purchases on select categories each quarter (plus 1% cash back on an unlimited amount of other purchases) and a \$100 sign-up bonus for those who aren't currently cardmembers and spend \$500 in the first three months. He also likes the American Express Blue Cash Everyday because it offers one year of Amazon Prime free, plus \$50 back after spending \$1,000 in three months, as well as 3% cash-back on groceries up to \$6,000 and 1% cash-back on all other purchases.

What cash back cards are best for you?

The cash-back cards that make the most sense for you depend on your spending habits, so you should look for cards that offer high rewards for things you buy a lot. Let's say most of your spending is on groceries — you may want one card that offers 5% back on groceries January through March, another that offers that deal in other months (rotating category cards tend to rotate the earning categories by quarters) so you can maximize this reward. Plus, it's a good idea (if one of these rotating category cards doesn't offer this already) to get a card that offers cash-back on all purchases, as you'll certainly buy things that won't be eligible for the 5% reward categories. (Just don't open a whole bunch of credit accounts at once as this can hurt your credit score; instead, stagger this plan a bit so that you're opening the accounts more slowly throughout the year.)

[NerdWallet.com](#) has a tool that can help you figure out which cash-back cards make the most sense for what you buy, and the company's Director of Credit Cards, Kevin Yuann, says that, in general, a few good ones to consider are the Chase Freedom and Discover It, both of which offer 5% cash-back on rotating quarterly categories that make sense for the time of year (Chase Freedom, for example, offers 5% cash back on gas in the summer months, when people take road trips).

What are the pitfalls to watch out for?

Beyond the obvious pitfalls — cash-back cards tend to have high interest rates, so consumers have to pay off balances in full and on time; and some cards have annual fees — consumers should beware of a few things. First, there may be limits on how much cash back you can get on a certain card (read the fine print to find out). Plus, Yuann points out that you may have to, each quarter, enroll in the rotating cash-back rewards program if you want to take part (we recommend using automatic reminders on a Google calendar so you don't forget) and some purchases don't count for rewards (for example, if you buy your groceries at a store like Wal-Mart **WMT, -0.70%**, that may not count toward your cash-back on groceries because the credit card company views Wal-Mart as a retailer instead of a grocer).

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