

DIAL M FOR MONEY



Homemakers tell us their favourite smartphone apps to manage the family budget and minimise costs. By *Jenni Marsh*

WEB RESOURCES

To get the best advice on smartphone applications that can help to ease the burden of running a household, *Money Magazine* polled the real experts - busy Hong Kong mothers - for what works.

Not unlike the era before 3G, busy mothers are concerned about problems such as how to find low-cost parking, where to shop for the best coupon deals, how to save on petrol, and how best to manage appointments and stay in touch with friends and family.

One thing impressed upon us was the huge number of new apps developed for both the iOS and Android operating systems - a trend that can be partly explained by the lucrative app market in a city where 58 per cent of residents own a smartphone.

As the percentage of smartphone users in the city continues to march higher, watch out for more innovations to come.

Juno Koon's favourite app is a free download called Park Easy. The mother of two and housewife from Mid-Levels uses the app to get information on where to park her car when visiting popular shopping districts, including costs, opening hours and what special deals are available. In one instance, the app relayed information about a deal at the car park at Times Square. It let her know that a consumer, who spends more than HK\$200 at a restaurant or shop between Monday and Thursday, is awarded three hours free parking. Normally during the week such a slot would cost HK\$27 an hour.

Times Square even has its own



app - TS Diary, available on the iPhone only, which automatically gives drivers another hour's parking for free.

For Koon, who visits Times Square frequently, the savings are considerable.

"The apps are really good if I am going somewhere I've never been before and need to find out where to park," Koon says. "I can see if there's free parking or if I need money for a toll, and at the same time find out if there's a good deal."

Koon, who uses both Instagram and Facebook, says her friends are

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Juno Koon
Hong Kong-based mother

increasingly using their mobile phones to organise their lives. She uses WhatsApp, which offers free texting, to keep in contact with her network. "When I need inspiration for a recipe I use a cooking app that I downloaded, my schedule for meeting my daughter who is studying at the University of Hong Kong is in my phone's calendar," she says.

"The days of cutting coupons from magazines and hanging a calendar on the kitchen wall are fading fast," Koon says.

A quick glance of Google Android's app store reveals hundreds of apps - both paid and free - to help individuals manage their budgets. Some apps, such as My Budget Book and You Need A Budget, are simply digital Filofaxes to help users organise their lives, update logs and spreadsheets on the move, while other free apps such as Hang Seng Mobile allow users to do their banking through the day.

Bonnie Lau is private yoga tutor who lives in Sai Kung. She drives into the city three days a week to meet private clients, and she also makes daily trips to Sha Tin to deliver her kids to and from school. Her need? Cheap petrol.

"I travel about 220 kilometres a week, and have a Volkswagen Passat, so I can spend up to HK\$1,408 on petrol a month," Lau says.

To keep motoring costs low, Lau uses Mileage Tracker - an Android app that costs HK\$24.99. Users rate the app four-and-a-half stars out of five. The app uses global positioning system (GPS) technology to track her journeys.

"I'm self-employed so keeping track of how far I drive is essential. I can see which routes use the most petrol and take the shortest. The app wasn't free but it's saved me hundreds of dollars," Lau says.

Gerda Wong, a housewife in Tuen Mun, uses a similar app called Car Costs Complete, which allows her to log the mileage and petrol consumption of different routes around the city, car expenses such as repairs and services, and make projections for the year ahead.

"When I first started using it, I was just interested to see how many miles we did each week - I'm a



family of five and driving around in our big Toyota Lucia didn't feel very green."

For those really concerned about the environment there is Fuel School - an iPhone app aimed at mums on the school run who want to save petrol and the environment. The app uses GPS to analyse the user's style of driving, then advises motorists on how best to change their style to save fuel. It also gives tips on how to maintain your vehicle.

The Consumer Council's Oil Watch site gives motorists information on where to get the best deal when it comes to filling up. Victoria Unwin, 36, who lives in Kennedy Town, likes that the council's site has simple graphs showing the pump prices for a variety of vendors - Esso, PetroChina, Sinopec, Caltex and Shell - for regular, premium unleaded and diesel.

"There can be a HK\$3 difference per litre, which when you're filling up a big tank a few times a week makes sense to deviate to the cheapest petrol station," Unwin says.

Victoria checks the site on her mobile device, then uses a Google Maps app to locate the nearest petrol station with the cheapest price.

"With 4G internet on my iPhone, it really takes a matter of seconds," she says.

Debbie Leung, executive director of start-up Hong Kong Apps, says the market for apps changed dramatically in 2010 with the launch of the iPhone 4. Prior to the gadget's introduction, many companies didn't appreciate the potential for apps to transform consumer lifestyles.

"Users before 2010 treated smartphones and mobile apps as trendy gadgets, something tailor-made for young guys that might not be practical. But now, using smartphones and mobile apps are part of Hong Kong people's lives," she explains.

"People like using their smartphones for organising their finances and to save money because the devices provide both convenience and privacy."

Leung points to an array of money-saving apps popular in Hong Kong, such as AASocks, which provides share prices; Breeze Home, a property valuation tool; Taxi Metre, which lets users estimate the cost of their fare before hopping in a cab; and Dah Sing Life, a retirement calculator.

As smartphone penetration continues to increase, developers are becoming more innovative.

One such attempt is Grocery Genius, which enables shoppers to keep track of what they consume, with the aim to help streamline spending. Users must initially invest a considerable amount of time entering data tracking what they have bought from which store and how much it costs. Gradually, the app learns grocery lists, and begins to suggest where to shop for good deals when purchasing a combination of products. It also enables consumers to calculate mock grocery bills for price comparison.

Related apps allow shoppers to map

which grocery aisles have certain products, a handy program that will help time-strapped mothers plan the quickest route around the grocery store.

Still, other apps take saving money a step further. Jetso - a Hong Kong interpretation of the Groupon phenomenon - has a mobile app that allows users to filter by their bank and credit card to see what deals are available to them that day. For example, at the time of writing a Citibank PremierMiles card carrier could benefit from 10 per cent off yoga classes, while a HSBC visa card owner can enjoy sushi for HK\$9 rather than HK\$18 at G.Sushi.

Alternately, users can filter by subject, then by region and finally by coupon or preferential card status offers.

Jennifer Woo, a 32-year-old married web developer from Lamma, is a regular user of Jetso.

"Hong Kong is very prone to credit card deals, so it's useful to have one app that aggregates them. For example, Soho did a Citibank deal where a lot of dining places on certain days had a percentage discount, so you can still go to nice places without killing your budget," she says.

As wired mobile devices become ever more popular, Leung believes the scope for making savings through technology will continue to improve.

"The appeal of mobile app technology is broadening and its future is unlimited," she says.