

# Review: No more writing checks in lifestyle change

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In this Dec. 27, 2009 photo, a detail of a blank check is shown in New York. Most payments can now be made electronically, so why use checks? (AP Photo/Mark Lennihan)

(AP) -- It's been nine months since I've written a check. That's not to say I'm on some 12-step program to resist shopping. My credit card bills would suggest otherwise. Rather, when I opened a new bank account in March, I challenged myself to see to how much I could use my bank's online bill-payment service to stretch the 10 starter checks I got for free.

Ordering a box of checks can cost \$20 to \$30, and in these tough times, every penny counts. I also save 44 cents in postage for most checks that go unwritten.

To my surprise, I haven't needed to use any of the 10 free checks all year.

I knew I wouldn't have trouble paying electricity, cable TV, phone or credit card bills. And for merchants, friends and others without prior electronic arrangements with my bank, Citibank, its bill-payment service simply prints out a check and mails it directly. I've done that with rent for my apartment, and so far I haven't been evicted.

Trouble could lie with bills that have payment slips to return.

Because Citibank's service - like those offered by other banks - sends checks or makes electronic transfers to merchants directly, there's no way to attach that slip.

I thought I'd encountered such a roadblock just a month into my experiment, as I needed to submit a form with some state tax payments. I prepared to pull out one of those precious starter checks. But then I noticed that New York state has a Web site for making electronic payments directly, without forms. Problem solved.

The solutions aren't always elegant, though.

Instead of handing my building's super a holiday tip, I had Citibank mail a check with "Merry Xmas" and my apartment number printed on the memo line. There wasn't enough space to use the nonreligious "Happy Holidays," and the bill-pay approach seems so impersonal. We'll see how quickly I get repairs done in the coming year.

Perhaps the most nonsensical check-free experience involved my registration for a marathon in Charlotte, N.C. I could have mailed in a form with my check for 44 cents postage. Instead, to conserve my 10 starter checks, I paid a \$7 processing fee to submit it online.

I know, it might sound silly. But I've gotten so used to a check-free lifestyle over these past nine months that I couldn't bear the thought of writing one and mailing it in - and getting closer to having to pay for a box of checks.

I do miss getting canceled checks back, but banks have generally moved away from that anyhow, with or without electronic payments. Instead, many banks now let you view electronic images of canceled checks online.

For electronic payments and transfers, Citibank lets you view records online for about four months. After that, you'd have to rely on the brief listings in the monthly statements or contact customer service for more detailed records. But I was glad to learn that option would remain available even after I closed my account.

My one disappointment with online bill payment is over what's known as the float.

Normally, I would get to keep my money for several days while a check got mailed and cashed. If a friend procrastinated, the money could remain mine for weeks or months.

With Citibank's service, the money is taken out of my account as soon as the bank sends the payment. Citibank uses the interest earned during that period to cover costs of running the service.

Not all banks do this, though - some will deduct the funds from your account when the recipient gets the payment. And we're really just talking about a few pennies here, not enough to offset the convenience of online bill payment.

It's become such a lifestyle change that I have now gone paperless with

many other accounts as well. Credit card and cable TV statements are now delivered electronically, after years of my resisting nagging by those companies.

It got me wondering: What's the point of checks in this era of credit cards, PayPal and electronic transfers? Many merchants don't even accept personal checks anymore.

The biggest test of my check-free devotion came when I called Citibank to find out just how much a box of checks would cost - only to learn they come for free at my account level.

As much as I love free, my reply was still: No, thanks.

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