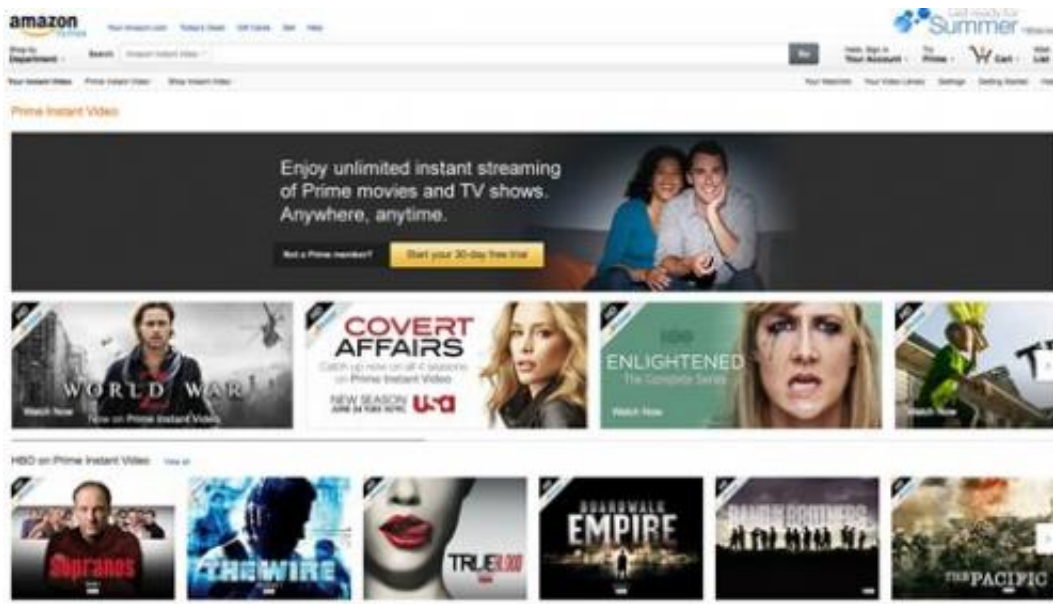


Review: Value in Amazon Prime goes beyond shipping (Update)

June 18 2014, by Anick Jesdanun



This screen shot shows movies and television programs available for free to Amazon Prime members. Amazon changed the dynamics in 2011 when it started offering movies and TV shows to Prime members for free. Unlike Netflix, Amazon offers only part of its collection for free. (AP Photo/Amazon.com)

Spending \$99 a year for an Amazon Prime membership to get free shipping hardly seems like a deal. After all, I can usually get free shipping by spending at least \$35 on a single order.

But Prime's benefits became apparent gradually over the nine months I've used it.

During a trip last month, for instance, I got started on the first season of "The Good Wife" and read Michael Lewis' "The Blind Side." Last weekend, I added Journey's "Greatest Hits" album to my music library and began watching the spy drama "The Americans." I finished a book on photography on my way to work Monday.

All that came for free with Prime.

Some features work only with a Kindle e-reader or tablet—or with the new Fire phone that Amazon.com Inc. announced Wednesday. Buyers of that phone will get 12 months of Prime for free.

Nonetheless, there's plenty to enjoy, even without an Amazon device:

— UNLIMITED VIDEO:

Since 2006, Amazon has been offering video for download, much like Apple's iTunes. Although TV episodes cost just \$2 or \$3 each, I hate paying for something that's been shown on television for free.

Amazon changed the dynamics in 2011 when it started offering movies and TV shows to Prime members for free. Unlike Netflix, Amazon offers only part of its collection that way. Video is available on a variety of devices, but not Google's Chromecast or smartphones and tablets running Google's Android system, with the exception of Kindles.

As with Netflix, free video has typically been limited to streaming, meaning you need a persistent Internet connection. But last fall, Amazon began enabling downloads on Kindle tablets. That came in handy during my train trip through Ohio and other states last month, when I kept encountering stretches without cellular service and couldn't watch Netflix.

— EXCLUSIVE VIDEO:

Lately, Amazon has been making exclusive deals to block shows from Netflix, Hulu and other streaming services. Prime is the only way to get free streaming of past seasons of "24" and classic HBO series such as "The Sopranos" and "The Wire." This summer, Amazon is making episodes of two CBS series, "Under the Dome" and "Extant," available through Prime just four days after the broadcast.

Without Prime, you can still buy some shows digitally or on DVD. CBS is also making its shows available for free, though they will carry ads, while Prime will not.

Amazon also has been getting into original programming, though none of its shows has gotten the critical reception that Netflix has had with "House of Cards" and "Orange is the New Black." After getting customer feedback on 14 shows, Amazon ordered full seasons for two comedies and three kids' series. So far, people who don't have Prime aren't able to buy episodes.

— E-BOOKS:

You can borrow one book a month as long as you have an Amazon e-reader, tablet or phone, but you're not offered everything that Amazon makes available for purchase. The selection includes the "Harry Potter" and "Hunger Games" series and several books by best-selling author Michael Lewis. But once I finished those, I struggled to find books of interest.

Each month, Prime members can also choose one of four books to own outright, regardless of whether they own an Amazon device. These books are all published by Amazon. So far, none has interested me enough to get—even for free.

— MUSIC:

This is Amazon's newest benefit, debuting just last week. More than a million songs are available for streaming on Kindle tablets, Web browsers and Amazon's Music app for Apple and Android devices. In some cases, you can download songs for offline playback.

As with books and video, free music is limited to a portion of what Amazon makes available for sale. Universal Music Group's catalog is missing, but you do get Grammys winner Daft Punk and plenty of '80s tracks from Journey and Madonna.

— FOR KIDS:

Amazon's FreeTime Unlimited service offers plenty of kid-friendly apps, books and video for a set monthly price. Prime members still have to pay, but they get a few dollars off the monthly fee.

— SHIPPING:

And of course, there's the free shipping. I started out by saying that I could get free shipping by spending at least \$35 on an order. However, that's for standard shipping, which takes up to eight business days. With Prime, I got a \$14 corkscrew in just two days.

That said, shipping isn't expensive, and you need up to 20 small orders a year to make it worth the \$99 membership fee. Plus, scores of items are excluded from free shipping, including some running shorts I was looking to buy.

The benefits of Prime clearly go beyond free shipping. None of the other perks is enough by itself, but as a package, they make Prime a great value.

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