

Cheap Observer's Report Dealing—When, Where, and How

By Alex McConahay

Ahh, RTMC Astronomy Expo is passed. OPT was offering ten per cent off, and no sales tax. Woodland Hills was also cutting prices for those who showed for the weekend. But, alas, with RTMC fading away in the past, and PATS too far in the future, it is time to move on to Cheap Observer hints on wheeling and dealing on the internet and storefront shops.

By far the easiest way to buy a piece of astronomical equipment is to walk into a store, and lay down the asking price.

This is made considerably easier because nearly all astronomical equipment is sold at list price. No astronomical Wal-mart or Costco has the same thing for less. An Ethos or an SBIG at OPT is going to be within a few pennies of an Ethos or SBIG at Woodland Hills. In other words, if you want it pretty much now, and don't want to quibble about price, just go in and lay down the credit card without shopping around. You won't lose much, if anything, on a single new standard item buying it at one store versus another.

But if you are willing to do some legwork on a big-ticket item, you can save a few per cent. Some tricks and tech-

There is a lot to be said about actually wandering around the store and seeing how things feel and work. Here, in the OPT showroom (or at the one at Woodland hills or Scope City, you will find many telescopes, books, and accessories—some of which you did not know you needed until you got there.



niques:

- Be specific about what you want, and call—or better yet, write/email—to five or six stores asking them for a quote. It really does not take long to do this and you may find somebody willing to lowball the list price.
- More likely in getting quotes you will find the merchants willing to throw in shipping or some other incidental cost. This can save ten to fifty dollars or more.
- Do not limit yourself to one item. Say you are buying a camera. You will also need filters, a filter wheel, cabling, adapters, dew shields, and whatever. The merchant may have some kind of pressure to sell the main item at list price, but leeway to discount or throw in some of the other items. You will have paid as much for the camera, but gotten the rest of the stuff for less. You pay less overall for the whole "kit." This is how the big New York camera stores operate.
- Offer cash/checks. This saves merchants a few percentage points of credit card fees.

In dealing with the big stores directly, it is good to know the people personally. The members of the RAS have a few good names at both OPT and Woodland Hills. (I won't publish them in

the Prime Focus, but if you want to know, just drop by and ask me, Frank Boecker, or some of the other members.)

I am familiar with three major walk-in telescope stores in Southern California: Woodland Hills, OPT, and Scope City. I do not know Scope City as well (although I have bought some of my favorite pieces of equipment there in the past), but OPT and Woodland Hills have made a real outreach effort, supporting our club at Nightfall, RTMC, Riverside AstroImaging Workshop, and in other ways.

After they get to know you these folks will be helpful steering you to different, less expensive (well, sometimes) choices. And they will even tell you—"Hey you already have an XXXX. You can use that by YYYY. You don't need a new whatever!" This saves a lot of money. (Happened to me twice in the last month.)

Since we are talking about wheeling and dealing, and not service, I won't go too far into how knowing the salesperson at OPT or Woodland Hills can ease your warranty and repair problems. But be aware that having an advocate with a piece of equipment that did not turn out right is a great asset. Similarly, we won't say too much here about how important a brick and mortar store is for those who have not really seen or used the product in question. Take a look at these things before you plunk your credit card down. You can do this in your local store much better than on the internet.

By the way, knowing the people personally does have its drawbacks. When you have asked the counter salesman for a quote on a scope, and he sees you at the next star party with that scope, but knows you did not buy it from him, it can be a little awkward. But, the relationship survives somehow as long as you deal fairly with the folk (and spread some joy and cash their way at times).

Also, the big stores can often be a great resource for nearly new items of various kinds. Other people (not Cheap Observers fans, I have to assume) actually spend lots of dollars on equipment only to find they would rather have something else. These folks turn to the "consignment" section of the big stores. Sometimes, an item is on the display floor for a while and cannot be sold as "new." Sometimes things are slightly damaged or cosmetically imperfect. Sometimes things are returned to the stores. All these things can go up for sale at the local walk-in stores. These items, while they cannot be sold as new, are not really "used," and may offer more than a few percentage points discount. Give them a call before buying "new."

As an example, I ordered a mount for my new observatory. Two months later, the vendor had somebody walk in wanting to explore trading-in the mount I had ordered while he upgraded to

The Woodland Hills website (below) offers so many goodies that you can just "click and get." You may, at times be able to get an even better deal by bundling your purchases or contacting the store directly.

The screenshot shows the website for Woodland Hills Camera & Telescopes. At the top, there is a navigation bar with categories like Telescopes, Spotting Scopes, Mounts & Tripods, CCD Cameras, Software & Books, and View Shopping Cart. Below this is a grid of product listings, each with an image, name, and price. For example, the ED80SF Refractor is listed for \$1,799.00, and the SkyTools 3 Professional Edition is \$2,499.00. A large banner in the center reads "LAND, SEA AND SKY SPORT OPTICS SALE!" and features a woman looking through binoculars. Below the banner are more product listings, including the Vixen Viper 90mm and the Sphinx Mount with Tripod. The website also includes a search bar, a "SHOP BY PRICE" section, and a sidebar with "Current Promotions" and "Astro Photography Classes".

a Paramount. The vendor called me to ask if I wanted the used mount instead, at a substantial discount off new.

Finally, on big scope stores, it should be noted that some have "clubs" or "preferred member" discounts. This gives you a little two or three per cent discount on your items. Be sure to ask.

Of course, much of our telescope business with big companies is done over the internet. Large dealers throughout the country can offer you the same service via UPS that you get from the walk-in stores in Southern California. And, after all, San Fernando Valley, Oceanside, and Costa Mesa (Woodland Hills, OPT, Scope City, respectively) are still quite a drive away.

Generally speaking, shopping over the internet offers a pretty much fixed price—whatever is on the button on the internet site shopping cart. However, it may be possible to negotiate. Each of the big sites has a "contact us" link where you can actually call, reach a human, and start to negotiate, or send an email with a list of items as described earlier.

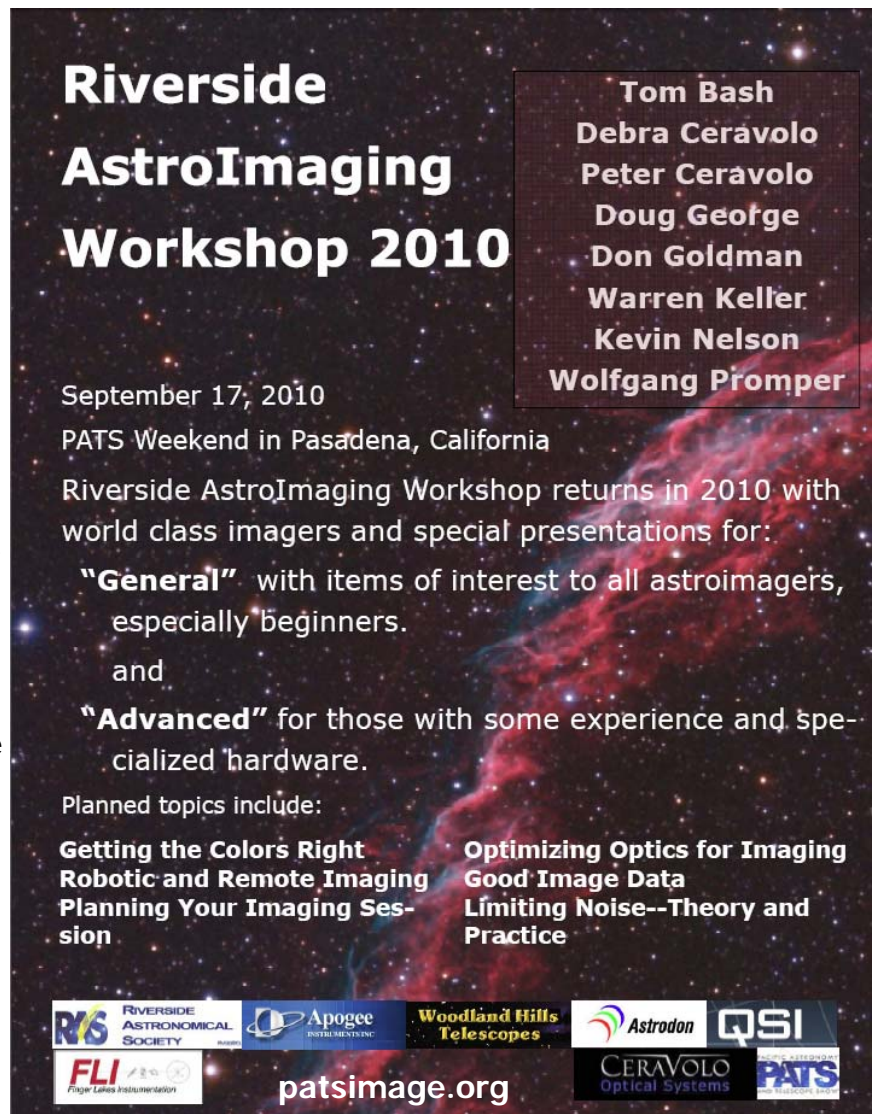
Shipping has gotten so routine lately that we all know how it operates. Quite often the items we buy off the internet never get to the vendor we bought them from. They are "drop-shipped" directly from the manufacturer's US supply house to your door. If this is the case, you usually will have a shipping charge. But at other times, they are at the store, and there may be no shipping charges. And it never hurts to ask the merchant to include shipping in your order.

It helps to know people who work near the stores and live near you and can

pick up your packages. (And, while picking up your stuff, they get a few precious minutes in the store spending their own money!!!)

One other thing to consider is that sales tax can add eight percent or so to whatever you buy. But beware of buying out of state to avoid this tax. If it is delivered to California, you still owe that money. You can pay it at purchase time or to the FTB the next April 15. But you do owe it.

So, find a store or internet site, and get happy with them. You won't save tons because of "List price" regulations. But if every penny counts, or you just like to brag about your bargaining, it is worth a try.



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