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of The Sentinel Staff**

Ruth Vorpapel's husband sometimes brings clients home for dinner -- 60 to 80 of them.

Vorpapel, who lives in Goldenrod, is married to an insurance agency owner who several times a year entertains his customers at their homes. To prepare, she doesn't just make a quick trip to the grocery store down the street; she fights the traffic from Goldenrod to Eatonville to do her heavy-duty shopping at the Costco Wholesale there.

For her, membership has its privileges: Vorpapel estimates that she saves \$75 to \$100 on a typical purchase of \$300 in groceries for her dinner parties. "I like the fact that I can buy in large quantities," Vorpapel said, looking over her nearly full shopping cart. "I saved 14 cents on every two pounds of powdered sugar, and I bought 20 pounds. And I don't have to buy 15 cans of beans; I can buy three big cans."

Vorpapel is not alone in her quest for bargains in bulk. On that recent afternoon, customers swarmed into the Costco Wholesale club, which is one of four membership warehouses operating in Central Florida. People in business suits, men in coveralls and mothers with children pushed oversized shopping carts and dollies along wide, concrete aisles between 20-foot-high steel shelves. Thousands of products -- housewares, office supplies, clothing, auto supplies and even exercise equipment -- were stacked neatly on the shelves.

How can consumers find bargains in a store about twice the size of a football field? Is it worth even trying?

Consumer advocates say warehouse stores offer bargains for consumers who, like Vorpapel, entertain often; have large families; or have large pantries. Warehouse membership clubs sell most of their consumer items in bulk at near-wholesale prices. The bulk sizes keep prices low but make shopping warehouse stores impractical for a couple or single person with no children and little storage space.

If you decide to shop warehouse stores, there are trade-offs you must make to get the savings. Warehouse clubs stock a wide variety of items -- from videocassette recorders to hair sprays -- but they carry a limited selection of each product. The warehouses also don't offer delivery service or have the dressing rooms typically found in other stores.

But don't let the no-frills or few-frills atmosphere fool you. Consumer advocates agree that warehouse stores offer some of the lowest prices on a wide variety of items; however, they recommend shopping around

to make sure you're getting the best bargains for your bucks.

On average, warehouse clubs carry 5,000 items and brands, compared with 10,000 items in many specialty stores. The clubs are paring down that list to about 3,000 items, only the best-selling goods and the most popular brands, said Rick Kirby, merchandise manager of the Costco in Eatonville.

"People are usually leery when they come to a warehouse club," he said. "They think they will see damaged products or no-name brands. When they see Kodak film or Wilson sporting goods, they think, 'What's the catch?' Now they realize what warehouse clubs are all about."

The first membership warehouse clubs started in the early 1980s and initially marketed themselves primarily to owners of small businesses that would buy merchandise for resale, office or personal use. But the lists of those qualifying for membership quickly grew to include about half the working population of the country, according to some estimates.

Now, a dozen chains across the country operate 300 membership warehouses that last year rang up \$13.4 billion in sales. Costco and Sam's Wholesale, two of the largest, each operate two membership warehouses in the Orlando area.

To become a warehouse club member, you usually have to be employed by or affiliated with a government agency or one of a host of businesses such as hospitals, banks and savings and loan associations. You also must pay an annual membership fee of \$25 to \$35 a year. One exception is Sam's Wholesale, which gives individual members a choice of paying a 5 percent surcharge on warehouse prices and no annual fee, or a \$25 annual fee with no surcharge on purchases.

The clubs claim to offer larger discounts than consumers will find in other retail stores, including off-pricers such as Ross Dress for Less, "category killers" such as Circuit City appliance stores or factory outlets such as those at the Belz Factory Outlet Mall in Orlando.

"Most of the people in the stores are buying for their homes," explained Larry Gresholm, associate director for the Center for Retail Studies at Texas A&M University in College Station. "The prices are low, and the sales volume is huge. But you just don't go in and buy one or two of something. You go in to stock up on something."

Warehouse stores claim to sell at 8 percent to 10 percent above wholesale cost, which represents 50 percent to 60 percent off the retail price.