

PREVIEW | MONEY MATTERS

How the Cookies baked up a recipe for financial success



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Even as dark economic storm clouds gather, people are spending widely in all directions, at least on this side of the border. Sure, there's talk of a recession in the U.S., and the likelihood of hard times ahead here, but for now we remain a nation consumed by consumerism, thanks to our still-healthy dollar.

All last check, Canadians were buying cars, fancy phones and big-screen televisions, which are half the price they were this time last year. Video-game systems, meanwhile, have nearly doubled in price, but people are still buying them, too. Try finding a parking space at any mall on the weekend.

The federal government has taken on buying things a grand for our economy, but some people are in over their heads. The burden of their debt explains the existence of Smart Cookies (Wednesday, W Network at 9:30 p.m.), a new series in which five fabulous gals dispense fiscal advice and emotional rescue to the hell-bent 30- to 35-year-old demographic. Help has arrived in the cash-poor and debt-heavy.

And the Cookies have been there. The Vancouver-based series features successful women brought together by money woes. Introduced casually two years ago through friends of friends, they were all well-educated, career-driven and in debt. When the five realized they were collectively in the red for more than \$40,000 — much of it gone to daily lattes and designer jeans and a few houses — they took executive action.

"We started meeting weekly, like a book club, except we would discuss money," says founding member Robyn



A kitchen-table money club to help cope with household finances has provided better bank balances and completely new careers for all five Cookies (left to right, Andrea, Sandra, Angela, Robyn and Katie). (GLOBE AND MAIL)

Gann. "As our first meeting, we read through our all credit-card bills and our bank statements, so we became pretty close quickly."

They called themselves the Smart Cookies, and the weekly meetings paid off. Several months later, the personal portfolios of all five women had improved dramatically. The Cookies sent a letter detailing the story of their friendship and financial turnaround to Oprah. Two weeks later, they were on her show.

"By the time we went on Oprah last January," says Gann, "we had decreased our debt by \$40,000, increased savings by \$20,000 and increased our salaries by \$40,000, collectively. We were on our way."

The Oprah exposure encouraged the ladies to incorporate their brand names, and the transfer of Smart Cookies to television was a natural progression. Ranging in age between 29 and 32, the diverse group is composed of author Angela Self (The Man-

ney Magnet), marketing director Andrea Baxter (The Debt Buster), publicist Katie Demaworth (The Number Cruncher), public-relations director Sandra Hanna (The Savvy Saver) and Gann (The Cash Counsellor), a former social worker.

Unlike the scintilla tone of such homegrown reality series as *The Debt*, *Do Us First* or when host Gal Van Galde appears to enjoy taking people to task — Smart Cookies provides a gentler approach for the financially hapless, and the hosts look terrific during the process.

"We think of the show as *Sex and the City* meets *Queen Eye for the Straight Guy*," says Gann. "We're not about debt and deprivation, we're about living the sweet life without sacrifice. And it all begins with a reality check."

At with most money matters, taking inventory is vital. The first show settles in with a Vancouver clan of six whose long-range dream of visiting *The World's End* (on Saturday,

permanently held due to lack of funds).

Enter Katie and Angela, who examine the family fridge and discover three jambo bottles of ketchup and tons of takeout food ready for the trash bin. Further research reveals the household orders pizza several times a week, and that they rarely dog dinner regularly on lamb. The avoidable extravaganzas represent "hidden money" to the Cookie scrutinizers.

"The number of people living paycheque to paycheque in this country is absurd," says Gann. "And most are amazed to discover how much of their monthly income goes toward miscellaneous spending. There are so many simple changes you can make to save money."

Smart Cookies has countless penny-pinching tips. Were you aware, for example, that switching to vegetarian meals once weekly can result in savings of \$1,000 a year?

Upcoming episodes in the series focus on entertaining

on a fixed budget, car leasing versus buying and the pros and cons of playing the stock market. "We're very cautious with investment matters, since none of us came from that field," Gann says. "Our best advice is for people to get a proper financial adviser."

The wise money expert might steer investors towards the Smart Cookies. Beyond the TV series, the quintet have collaborated on a self-help book due out this fall, and recently launched their own website (www.smartcookies.com), which instructs people on how to form their own money clubs.

And these ladies are thinking big for the future. "We all made the decision a few months ago to put aside our individual careers for the time being, so now we're full-time Smart Cookies," says Gann, who recently performed her second on-air in Vancouver. "Their incredible empowerment in the support of others."

TV Ticker

FRIGHT NIGHT

ABC will mine the horror genre in a new summer series. The network is teaming with studio Lionsgate and writer Entertainment to create the anthology series *Fear Itself*, scheduled for broadcast in mid-July. The 10-episode series will bring together several prominent high-end directors, including John Dahl (*An American Werewolf in London*) and Stuart Gordon (*Ju-Asylum*). On the acting front, the show has signed up *Supernatural* series star Braden Keith and *Mad Men*'s Elisabeth Moss.

SONGS & DANCES

Disney's *High School Musical* will headline the reality-TV treatment. The Disney-owned network ABC is developing a reality-style competition inspired by the successful *High School Musical* franchise. Adopting the format of *American Idol*, the show will conduct a talent search across the United States, followed by a series in which one contestant will be removed weekly. Testimony is better to sign new recruits. This summer, the series will probably feature appearances from the stars of the *High School Musical* films.

OPRAH POWER

Demonstrating that it really is better to give than receive, Oprah Winfrey's new series is off to a strong start. Launching last Sunday night, the first episode of Oprah's Big Give won a ratings bonanza for ABC with 16.6 million viewers — the third-highest start for a new series this season (only the debut of Fox's *Scrubs*: The South Korean Chronicles and The Moment of Truth had higher numbers). Oprah's Big Give performed comparably well in Canada, with 1.7 million viewers watching on CTV.