

Quicken can be a tool — or home wrecker

I'm proud to proclaim that I'm tight with a buck. I admire financial restraint and discipline. I love a bargain. That's why I'm so excited that Quicken 2002 and Money 2002 have just hit the shelves. For just \$60, there is no cheaper stimulant for an obsessive tightwad and no cheaper way to stress out a marriage.

I've knelt at the Quicken altar for almost a decade now. In that time, I've devoted myself to collecting receipts and inputting thousands of purchases from fries (category: "Dining") to Fry's (category: "Computer").

Thanks to Quicken, I don't need a forensic auditor to learn that since 1992 my family has spent \$139,604 on mortgage payments, \$61,308 on groceries (and our kids haven't even hit the teen years), \$11,719 on gasoline, \$2,686 on cable TV, \$2,335 on sporting goods and \$172 on dry cleaning.

And thanks to Quicken, starting an argument with my wife is as simple as hitting "Print." Armed with an itemized report of our spending, all I have to do is point at "Clothing," "Dining" and "Miscellaneous" — the three categories that stake out the borders for our family's financial Bermuda Triangle. If only my wife knew how easy it would be to cook the books to make it appear that she spends all the money — and that I don't wear clothes, never eat out and have a receipt for every rationalized purchase.

The truth is, Quicken reports should be treated like X-rays. Although they can be amazing diagnostic tools, the cumulative side effects of overexposure can be hazardous to you — or your marriage.

Cupertino budget counselor Carol Park says some clients love Quicken because it provides exhibit after exhibit in the trial of Saver v. Spender. "All those years, it's been the same argument: 'You're spending too much.' And then they have the proof."

It's too bad Quicken doesn't include a pop-up box with Park's response to such evidence: "How important is this marriage to you? Are you willing to give up being right because the marriage is more important?"

Quicken doesn't have to become an obsession, I suppose, but our financial statements pile up like dirty laundry. We hardly lead complicated financial lives, but my chore involves tracking personal and business checking and savings accounts, a 401(k), a few IRAs, a handful of stocks and mutual funds and the kids' college-savings accounts.

Quicken and Money are trying to make it easy to download financial information to save users the trouble, but that misses the point. The value of Quicken is in getting dirty with the data. Habits come into focus when you input withdrawal after withdrawal from the ATM, or when you must enter a stack of receipts for snacks, lattes and burritos.

One person told Karen McCall, the founder of the Financial Recovery Counseling Institute in San Anselmo: "There were times I thought, 'If I have to write it down, it's not worth spending.'"

Likewise, Stanford T. Young frequently prescribes Quicken to his wealthy clients at Financial Clarity in Mountain View because tracking spending jars their sense of entitlement.

"They say, 'I can afford this chair because I'm a VP.' Then two weeks later, they say, 'I should be able to buy these skis because I'm a VP' — and they forgot about the chair," Young says. "What Quicken does is bring all those independent decisions together in a way that you can . . . understand what happened in the last year of decisions."

For me, the challenge is learning how to manage Quicken, rather than letting it ruin my life and marriage. Without Quicken, I couldn't mentally account for all our spending any more than I could tell you how many times a day I draw breath. Both activities are controlled subconsciously. The difference is that spending is often discretionary.