



# Consumer News & Views

THE OFFICIAL MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF THE AMERICAN CONSUMER COUNCIL



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## Consumer confidence Stumbles in January

The Conference Board's **Consumer Confidence Index®** increased in December, then decreased slightly in January. Consumer confidence remains high.

The Index now stands at 113.8 (1985=100), down from 115.2 in December.

Consumers' appraisal of current business conditions was more favorable in January.

- 21.1% of consumers said business conditions were "good," up from 19.4%.
- 25.6% of consumers said business conditions were "bad," down from 27.1%.

The **Expectations Index**—Consumers' optimism about the short-term business conditions outlook declined in January.

- 23.8% of consumers expect business conditions will improve, down from 25.4%.
- 19.0% expect business conditions to worsen, up from 18.6%.

## 3 Reasons to File Your Taxes NOW!

*by The Missing Ink LLC*  
1/28/2022

Tax season is upon us, and now is the perfect time to file your tax returns. Tax season officially began on January 24. Filers have until mid-April to complete and submit their taxes.

You may not want to wait until the last minute to file your tax returns. A major reason is due to the IRS being backlogged from the previous year and the aftermath of the pandemic.

Here is why it may be beneficial to file your taxes early this year:

### Fast Refund

It is true that if you file your taxes earlier, you will receive your tax refund earlier. This year may be different than the others.

Many households received an increased Child Tax Credit in the form of monthly payment installments. This alone can cause your refund to get backed up.

Remember that it takes the IRS up to three weeks to process each filers' refunds if filed electronically. If you file a paper tax return, you can expect double the time to receive your tax refund.

### Do You Owe Money? Give Yourself Time

Many people receive a tax refund. There is a group of filers who end up owing the government money.



If you fall in this category, filing your tax returns early provides you with the essential time to set up your payment plans. Financial strategy can help you avoid penalties for late payments on your taxes. Filing early also provides you with the chance to research last-minute changes that can lower what you owe.

### Stimulus Funds

If you file your taxes early this year, you may be entitled to stimulus funds. Lawmakers permitted a \$1,400 stimulus check last March yet many people have not yet received it. You may be entitled to claim that stimulus money on your taxes.

Ask your accountant if you are eligible to receive last year's stimulus check. The faster you file, the faster you'll receive it.

It is easy to procrastinate filing your taxes. It is vital to file early this year as the IRS is still wrapping up taxes from the year prior. Start preparing your tax documents now and file as soon as you can. You will be happy that you did.



# Biggest Changes to Social Security for 2022



If you are eligible for social security, you may be in for a real treat this year. Social security is due to undergo many changes for 2022.

Here are the changes that are happening to social security this year:

## Large Increase in Medicare Part B Premiums

From 2013 to 2022, Social Security has seen an increase in payments of 18.8%. This year has seen an even larger increase due to inflation. Medicare Part B premiums have increased by \$21.60 for a total of \$170.10. Many Medicare beneficiaries may not see the full amount in their checks unless they are deducted straight from their Social Security retirement payments.

Mary Johnson, a reputable Social Security and Medicare policy analyst for the Senior Citizens League, states, "The folks with the lowest benefits see the smallest increase, yet they may be the same people who depend on Social Security for most, or even all of their income."

As an example, a beneficiary who received \$1,000 in Social Security benefits last year would have only received \$851.50 a month after 2021 Part B premium of \$148.50 was deducted. This year, the payment would rise to \$1,059 yet \$170.10 for Medicare would be deducted, leaving the beneficiary with just \$888.90. This is only \$37.40 more than they received in benefits in 2021.

## Monthly Benefits

One of the largest changes to Social Security in 2022 is the 5.9% cost of living adjustment (COLA). This is a retirement check that is sent with the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) each month to beneficiaries.

AARP states that COLA is due to boost the average retirement check to \$1,657 a month—a \$92 increase. Workers who retired at full retirement age will also see an increase to \$3,345—a \$197 boost. The following chart provides essential details for all beneficiaries.

Estimated Average Monthly Social Security Benefits Payable in January 2022		
	Before 5.9% COLA	After 5.9% COLA
All Retired Workers	\$1,565	\$1,657
Aged Couple, Both Receiving Benefits	\$2,599	\$2,753
Widowed Mother and Two Children	\$3,009	\$3,187
Aged Widow(er) Alone	\$1,467	\$1,553
Disabled Worker, Spouse and One or More Children	\$2,250	\$2,383
All Disabled Workers	\$1,282	\$1,358

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## Continued

### **Taxes**

A 6.2% tax on employees pays for Social security and is matched by the employers. The tax rate has yet to change yet the income that is subject to taxation has now increased like COLA.

If beneficiaries paid Social Security tax in 2021 on up to \$142,800 of taxable income, neither the beneficiary nor the employer will pay higher than \$147,000 on taxes in 2022. As the taxable maximum has increased, consequently, so has the maximum amount of earnings calculated by the SSA that calculates retirement benefits for beneficiaries.

### **Full Retirement Age Keeps Rising**

The earliest age for retirement is 62 years old. However, claiming your retirement before full retirement age can have disastrous results—you will permanently receive a reduced payout.

Social Security is set to increase the retirement age by two months each year until 67 years of age is reached. If you turned 62 years old in 2021, your new full retirement age is now 66 years old and 10 months. Provided the Social Security laws stay the same, workers born after 1960 are not at full retirement age until they reach 70 years of age.

If you choose to delay receiving your Social Security checks beyond the full retirement age, workers are eligible to collect payments up to 32% higher than their full monthly payout. The cap off is age 70 years old where workers can no longer receive increased monthly benefits.

### **Social Security Disability Benefits Increased (SSDI)**

SSDI is an insurance program where workers earn benefits coverage by paying Social Security taxes from their paychecks. This program was designed to assist workers who can no longer work due to a disability. It helps replace the lost income.

Over 9.6 million Americans are due to receive a 5.9% increase and a boost in benefits in 2022. Disabled workers went from earning \$1,282 in 2021 to \$1,358 in 2022 per month.

### **The Next Step**

Workers may want to consult with a financial advisor. Preparing for retirement requires strategic planning. Find out more about your retirement options by contacting your local qualified financial advisor.



## *Consumer Confidence Remains High After January Turndown*



Although persistent inflation continues to occur enmeshed with the newest coronavirus variant, Omicron, consumer confidence remains high. The optimism of American consumers was shaky with January's turndown and the continued supply chain shortage but there is still hope.

The Conference Board revealed that its consumer confidence index shows consumer confidence fell from 113.8 to 115.2 in respect to December. However, the same assessment revealed current labor and business conditions increased from 14.82 to 144.8 in respect to December.

Although there is a noted slight decline, consumer confidence continues to remain high. Consumer index reports that inflation rose at an alarming rate of 7%, the fastest in 40 years. Although inflation shows no signs of slowing down anytime, consumers continue to buy the necessities—and even more. From major appliances to cars and groceries, American consumers continue to purchase goods.

The Federal Reserve recently announced they will increase interest rates in March for the first time in the last several years. This is being done as a means to combat the increasing inflation. Many economists have stated they feel this move is too little, too late. Investors have already begun dumping stocks at the mere mention of a rate increase. This caused the Dow Jones Industrial Average to decline more than 1,000 points before rallying once more.



## Continued



Prices rose sharply in 2021 for cars, gas, food and furniture but that has not hindered the U.S. consumer. The proportion of people planning to purchase homes, automobiles, and major appliances over the next six months all increased, the Conference Board said.

Concern over inflation actually declined for the second straight month, but remains elevated after hitting a 13-year high in November, the board said. On Wednesday, the Federal Reserve is expected to signal its intent to begin raising interest rates in March for the first time in three years, the main mechanism for combatting inflation. Economists have expressed concern that the Fed is already moving too late to combat surging prices.

The prospect of higher rates has investors dumping stocks with abandon. Last week, a sell-off sent the S&P 500 index into its worst weekly loss since the pandemic erupted in March 2020. On Monday, the Dow Jones Industrial Average declined more than 1,000 points before rallying.

Major U.S. markets are down between 1% and 2% Tuesday.





# Top Things to Get Rid of in 2022— A decluttering edition



A new year is here and well underway. As we head into the second month of 2022, it is time to clear the clutter.

Psychology Today states that too much clutter reduces productivity and happiness. Even your memory is impacted by a cluttered environment according to neuroscience studies. It is referred to as The Forgetting Curve and Spacing Effect. This year is the perfect year to declutter and destress. We all need it. The idea is to keep anything that enhances the value of our lives—and get rid of whatever doesn't.

Here are the top things to get rid of in 2022:

## **“Just-in-case” Things**

Have you ever said to yourself, “I am going to keep these, just in case.” Odds are you have compiled a pile of just-in-case items you no longer need.

Examples of just-in-case items include:

- Old magazines and newspapers
- Damaged items that can be replaced
- Non-working cellphones

If you are no longer using items and they are collecting dust, it is time to get rid of them.

## **Actual Garbage**

If you are stockpiling trash around the house, it is time to take it out. There is no emotional attachment to actual garbage, so it is easy to bag it up and throw it out.

Empty all of your wastebins, piles of shredded papers, old mail, and any broken items and throw them in the garbage.

## **Clothing You No Longer Like**

This may be difficult for many as we tend to attach ourselves emotionally to our belongings. If you no longer wear certain clothes in your drawers or closets, pull them out and place them on the bed.

This includes clothing you no longer fit into. Anything that is still in good condition can be resold or donated to the local shelter or veterans' association. Contact your local homeless shelters to see if they are accepting new donations.

Anything you wish to keep and still wear, put back in your closet for your next day out.

## **Forgotten Hobbies**

If you started a new hobby and have abandoned it, no longer interested, it is time to get rid of it. Hobbies are to entertain ourselves but we must be realistic. If you know you are no longer going to use these items, toss them. Anything that can still be used can be donated to your local shelters and community centers.

## **Expired Items**

You may be shocked to learn the average person has many expired items in their refrigerator—such as condiments. It is wise to discard any expired food items and condiments as you may become ill if you consume them. Clear out your medicine cabinets of expired medication as well. Expired medicine may harm you or its effectiveness be reduced. Your next area of decluttering is throwing away any expired makeup. You run the risk of eye infections, inflammation, or worse if you wear old makeup.

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## Continued

### Digital Clutter

You may not realize how much your emails have piled up. Do you see 1,000s of emails and never open them? It is time to throw them in the digital trash. Unsubscribe from any email subscriptions you do not use or want. It is healing to unfollow people on social media who no longer add value to your life.

Clear the music you no longer listen to and delete files that are no longer needed. Any apps that you no longer use? Delete them as well.

A clear home creates a clear mind. Start this year with a clean slate and only keep things around that continue to add to the value of your life.

### Decluttering and Purging Your Home

If your home is feeling a little disorganized, it may be time to start decluttering the various rooms in your house. The key to this initiative is to go room by room -- be sure to finish one space before moving onto the next!

When you start on a new room, completely empty the space by removing items from on top of tables, drawers, bins, hangers, and more. Once all the items are laid out, you can assess each item and determine if it should go into the "donate", "sell", or "trash" box.

Spaces in your house to declutter include the bedrooms, living room, kitchen, and garage. However, there are other rooms that might need attention as well such as the entryway and bathrooms. When it comes to decluttering and purging your bathroom, take some time to look over your medications and toss anything that is expired.

These expired medicine bottles and pills take up unnecessary space and can also be unsafe to ingest -- it's best to toss them into the "trash" bin and find nearby options for safe medication disposal.

### Relationships That No Longer Serve You

One important aspect of decluttering and purging your life includes taking a deeper look at the relationships you spend a lot of your time and energy on. If you find yourself being the one to constantly reach out and make plans while your friend puts in little to no effort to reciprocate, it may be time to step back. Now, this doesn't mean you need to break up with that individual, it just means you are allowing yourself to prioritize and pour into others that positively impact your life, bringing you joy and fulfillment.





# *How Do I Leverage My Home Equity?*



If you are interested in leveraging your home equity, now may be a perfect time. With the steep incline of home prices and low inventory, capital gains are at an all-time high.

If you are wondering how to leverage your home equity, the following tips are a great place to start. If you are a homeowner, you are sitting on a wealth accumulation that continues to increase over time.

Here is everything you need to know about how to leverage your home equity:

## **What is Home Equity?**

Lending Tree reveals that home equity begins with the value of the home. Next, you subtract the amount of money on your mortgage. For example, if your home is worth \$400,000 and you have \$200,000 left to pay on your mortgage, your home equity is \$200,000.

Unless you have not paid on your mortgage or have a lien on your property, the lender does not own any portion of the property. The lender does have an interest in the property however, you are still the legal homeowner.

## **When Should You Leverage Your Home Equity?**

Obtaining a home equity loan is a great way to leverage your home's equity. Do know that with the benefits also come the risks.

For example, if you are putting your house up as collateral, you may risk losing it if you cannot repay the loan.

You can leverage your home equity when:

### **Remodeling Your Home**

You can use a home equity loan to remodel your house. Adding a room or remodeling an area is a great way to add more equity. The interest rates are lower than personal loans too.

### **When You Have a Financial Emergency**

Emergencies happen. If an emergency happens to you, you can take out a home equity loan to stay financially stable. Make sure to pay back the loan on time to not risk future financial implications or losing your home.

### **If You are Using Money for Good Debt**

Remodeling your home can be classified as "good debt" as you are increasing the equity on your home. The investment generates more wealth and improves your total net worth. Financial emergencies can also constitute "good debt" dependent upon the circumstances i.e. purchase a car to get to and from work.

### **Paying for Tuition**

Paying for school tuition can be expensive. Leveraging your home equity can help cover the costs in addition to getting lower interest rates than a private student loan. Your higher education contributes to a higher paycheck in the future. This can be considered as another "good debt".

Leveraging your home equity by obtaining a home equity loan or home equity loan line of credit (HELOC) is a great way to build up your home equity. You can contact your local lending advisor for more information to begin your home leveraging process today.

# *How to Protect Yourself from the Omicron Variant*



As we head into the second year of the pandemic, researchers urge citizens to protect themselves from the new Omicron variant. This specific strain has over 30 new mutations and is between 2.7 and 3.7 times more contagious than its sister variant, Delta.

We must take action to protect ourselves from the new variant. There are several essential steps to take to ensure you are as protected as you can be.

## **Get Vaccinated**

If you have not yet gotten vaccinated, now is a great time. The vaccine does not prevent you from getting Omicron but greatly reduces the chance of having severe symptoms and requiring hospitalization. Getting vaccinated also slows the transmission of the virus and keeps hospital beds open for those in need.

## **Get Boosted**

If you have received both vaccines, when you are eligible, you can receive your booster. The booster is the best tool we have to prevent serious infection and hospitalization from the Omicron variant. Everyone 18 and older can receive their boost shots 5 months after their Pfizer and Moderna shots, and 2 months after their Johnson & Johnson shots.

## **Keep Masking Up**

The pandemic is wearing thin on all of us—but it is imperative to keep wearing your mask. In indoor public places, it is essential to mask up to prevent the spread and contracting of the virus. You may check your local county's transmission rate to see the level of your specific community transmission.

## **Keep the Hope**

Researchers and the CDC are suggesting the pandemic will soon be endemic. We will continue to learn to live with the virus and keep transmission rates low. Dr. Anthony Fauci revealed he believes the Omicron variant will have peaked by March but to continue masking up, getting vaccinated and boosted, and keep the hope.

Together, we will make it through this. Visit [Vaccine.gov](https://www.vaccine.gov) to find a vaccine and booster center near you.



# Signs and Symptoms of Omicron



The new coronavirus variant is quickly spreading itself throughout the world. At 2.7 to 3.7 times more contagious than the previous variant Delta, Omicron has taken the world by storm.

Omicron is now the world's most highly-transmissible disease. Although scientists have revealed the symptoms of Omicron may be milder than its predecessor, it is still incredibly dangerous nonetheless.

Here are the signs and symptoms of Omicron to watch out for:

## Sore Throat

In the tsunami of cases, doctors reveal the most common symptom of Omicron is a sore throat. Patients complain of scratchy or sore throats as the first onset symptom of the variant.

## Congestion and Runny Nose

Another common symptom of Omicron is congestion or a runny nose. Sinuses become swollen at the first signs of infection.

## Muscle Aches and Pains

The next sign to look out for is muscle and body aches and pains. This strain of the virus is believed to mimic the common cold or flu.

## Fever and Chills

The next sign you may have Omicron is having a fever or chills. Like its predecessors, these symptoms are still present in this variant of coronavirus.

## New Loss of Taste and Smell

Although not as prominent as Delta, Omicron can still affect your sense of taste and smell. A new loss of both senses can mean you have contracted Omicron.

## Additional Signs and Symptoms

There are many signs and symptoms that may mean you have contracted the Omicron variant. They include:

- Headache
- Fatigue
- Shortness of breath
- Difficulty breathing
- Nausea or vomiting
- Diarrhea
- And more

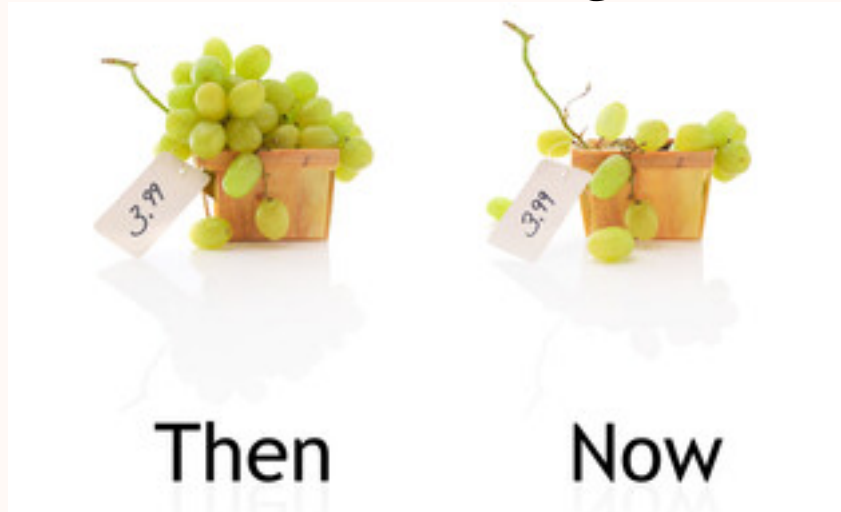
There is still a risk of hospitalization and severe illness with this variant. The disease affects everyone differently, regardless of medical background.

For this reason, get vaccinated and boosted to protect yourself from this highly transmissible virus. It greatly reduces the risk of severe illness and hospitalization. Visit [Vaccine.org](https://www.vaccine.org) for more information.





# ***Shrinkflation—The new business strategy that cuts consumer costs and angers consumers***



Inflation has reached an all-time high. Everything from retail to groceries and gas has seen a great uptick in prices.

As consumers across the country cry out for help, the prices continue to increase. Popular consumer product corporations have taken it upon themselves to lower the costs of their products with—shrinkflation.

## **What is Shrinkflation?**

Shrinkflation is a business strategy designed to lower consumer prices to make products more affordable. Businesses are grappling with higher operating costs; therefore, they created a way to satisfy their needs as well as their consumers.

More and more companies are looking to avoid scaring off their customers by increasing prices. Shrinkflation is when companies are keeping the prices the same—but providing less product.

Major consumer brands like General Mills and Chobani yogurt are now offering less products at the same or higher prices to make ends meet. This is now a more commonplace practice in the business world.

## **Consumers are Noticing**

Consumers were quick to notice the quality or packaging shape, portion, and size of the products they buy have changed. The prices may not have increased, but the amount of product is noticeably altered.

This leaves consumers furious over feeling taken advantage of. Chobani was recently under fire when a consumer called out the famous brand. The consumer revealed the content size went from 5.3 oz to 4.5 oz for the same price. That is a whopping 15% difference from the same dollar amount.

## **Where Inflation Hits Consumers the Hardest**

Consumers are rightfully aggravated that popular brands are cutting the corners at the expense of the public. Shrinkflation has even affected Milky Way fun-sized bars and has sucked the fun right out of them. Everything from toothpaste to detergents is now being affected shrinkflation.

The bottles of toothpaste continue to look identical—until you notice you are paying the same price for lesser product. Consumers feel this deceptive practice is unethical but have no control over the matter. The products are used day-to-day, so they feel obligated to continue purchasing the products and receiving less.

## **What Do the Major Consumer Brands Say?**

Major consumer brands are arguing the change is due to upgraded formulas and more concentrated products with no need for more products. They continue to assert the changes are also made to not tinker with the quality of the products and that the change is indeed necessary.

Consumers are not buying it.

## Welcome one of our credit union partners!

As a nonprofit consumer education organization, ACC has developed partnerships with credit unions across the country. These partnerships allow ACC members eligibility with our credit unions. If approved, our members gain access to a member-owned financial institution, with products and services designed to make banking more affordable, simple and convenient, and to offer additional resources that can help our members identify and achieve their financial dreams.



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### The First Florida Credit Union Difference

Since 1957, Bayer Heritage Federal Credit Union has been providing exceptional products and services to our over 36,000 members. A growing credit union, we currently have 13 branches located in WV, OH, PA, SC, and TX, an asset size of over \$600 million, and have members residing in nearly every state.

With members spread throughout so many locations, we offer online banking, online membership and loan applications, mobile app, remote deposit, bill pay, Shared Branching, and Checking+ Rewards with cashback.

Also, traditional products and services including:

- New/Used Auto Loans
- Fixed/Variable Rate Mortgage Lending
- Business Lending
- Home Equity and HELOC
- Christmas & Vacation Club Accounts
- IRAs
- Certificates of Deposit
- Visa Credit Cards

Through our employees and website, members have access to financial literacy programs such as Banzai, our Bayer Heritage Retirement and Investment Services, financial webinars, annual scholarships, and student loan options. All designed to help our members succeed in all facets of their lives ranging from saving for a home, a college education, or planning for a comfortable retirement.

We have several internal programs all geared towards giving back to our local communities. Our CU Next and community outreach groups assist at Senior Nights at our local high schools to help students and parents prepare for college;

create holiday cards for soldiers and those in nursing homes; clean up and help restore local parks and collect donations for programs such as the Gabriel Project and local Children's Hospitals. Since 2008, we've donated over \$528,971 to Children's Miracle Network and over \$22,000 every year to our local schools and communities. These and other individual efforts have been acknowledged by being awarded "Volunteer of the Year" by the Summersville, SC Chamber of Commerce!

All of us at Bayer HFCU are thrilled to be able to give potential members another way to join our Credit Union! You can find more information about us at either [www.bayerhfcu.com](http://www.bayerhfcu.com) or by calling us at 1-800-272-6003.

# ACC Wrap Up

THE OFFICIAL MONTHLY NEWSLETTER OF THE AMERICAN CONSUMER COUNCIL



## Green C Certification

If your company or organization would like to increase its credibility with consumers, you should consider applying for ACC's **"Green C" Certification**.

*Applications for the Spring cycle are now being accepted through April 30.*

It's a proven fact that consumers prefer to do business with eco-friendly companies, implement green initiatives and that practice Corporate Social Responsibility. The process is straight-forward, and all applicants are recognized by the ACC and the Green USA Institute.

All applicants should review the criteria, then complete and submit their applications to ACC's Green Consumer Council for review, assessment and feedback. Program details and the Green C Certification criteria can be viewed online at [bit.ly/3d45Con](http://bit.ly/3d45Con).

For more information, call 1-800-544-0414 or visit ACC's website [here](#).



## Friend of the Consumer

Is your business consumer-friendly?

Does your business deserve greater recognition for its service to consumers?

If so, you should apply for the American Consumer Council's Friend of the Consumer Award.



Each year, ACC awards numerous "Friend of the Consumer" awards to deserving manufacturers, retailers, and other businesses that produce or sell products in the United States, and which meet or exceed federally mandated standards, and have "demonstrated a commitment to American consumers by providing products or services that foster consumer confidence and market acceptance."

To apply, complete the online application found here [bit.ly/3w6jE1N](http://bit.ly/3w6jE1N) and return it to ACC with the application fee.

Applicants will be notified within five days of receipt of their application. Thereafter, a panel of independent judges will review your application and make a formal recommendation within 20 days of your submission.



## Financial Education

ACC is honored to have a partnership with Kim Curtis — author, speaker, and CEO of The Wealth Legacy Institute in Denver, Colorado — who writes, produces and hosts our [financial education video series](#).

This free video series is comprised of 26 videos designed to help consumers, including Millennials and

Gen Y individuals, to better manage their finances, feel more confident about their financial dealings, and get access to financial services.

Past video topics include, "How to Have a Great Vacation on the Cheap," "How to Ask Your Boss for a Raise," "Essential Checklist When Getting Married," "Goals to Reach by Age 30," and others with advice about timeshares, paying off debt, identify theft, and more. *Check out the new videos for 2021!*

To peruse and view Kim's many resourceful videos, visit [bit.ly/3snW661](http://bit.ly/3snW661).



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