

There aren't coupons for prescription drugs, but **Costco** (COST -0.76%) is probably wishing it could print up some "\$749 off" inserts right about now.

Consumer Reports went shopping at 200 pharmacies across the country for a month's supply of five prescription drugs that just went generic: Actos for diabetes, Lexapro for depression, Singulair for asthma, Plavix for blood thinning, and Lipitor for high cholesterol.

What they found was a \$749 difference -- that's 447% -- between the \$916 price tag at **CVS** (CVS +0.09%) and the \$167 that Costco charged for the same five drugs. For generic Lipitor alone CVS charged \$150 to Costco's \$17. The generic Lexapro found at CVS for \$126 could be had at Costco for \$7.

Why such a big difference? Because CVS, **Rite Aid** (RAD -0.87%) and **Walgreen** (WAG +0.71%) draw most of their profits from the pharmacy, while Costco, Sam's Club and other discount stores consider their pharmacies throw-ins that help bulk up foot traffic.

CVS, in particular, also factors in the cost of drive-through windows, automated prescription refill systems, prescription consultation and 24-hour pharmacies that Costco's Monday-Saturday service lacks.

Americans spent an average of \$758 per person out of pocket for medication in 2012, according to a recent Consumer Reports poll. Of the 1,130 people surveyed who regularly took prescription drugs -- both insured and uninsured -- 12% spent more than \$1,200 last year.

With CVS' direct competitors pressed to offer the same costly amenities, Rite Aid's price for that five generic drug cocktail is a whopping \$820. Even with its pharmacies as a second-fiddle throw-in, **Target's** (TGT -0.48%) tally came out to a steep \$796 -- a full \$360 more than Walgreen's \$436.

On the whole, Walgreen fared better than not only its biggest health-and-beauty competitors, but even grocery stores like **SuperValu** (SVU +1.70%), **Safeway** (SWY -1.50%) and **Kroger** (KR -1.05%), which charged \$658 for all five drugs. In fact, most prescriptions at Walgreen were only \$7 more than those offered at **Wal-Mart** (WMT -0.10%) (\$426). Only Lexapro cost more at Walgreen (\$105) than at the big-box retailer (\$84).