

The 9 weirdest tax write-offs

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From: Robert Morien (*PhD_failure_at_nousefulinfo.com*)

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The IRS offers no points for originality, but you can't blame taxpayers for trying. They're writing off criminal acts, their pets and even their televisions.

Did you hear the one about the ostrich? The sperm donor? The dog food?

They're just three of the more ingenious tax deductions that creative Americans have devised over the years to counterpunch the tax collector. A quick Ali shuffle, a feint with the left and an outlandish deduction delivered with a straight face can take the sting out of the annual tax beating -- at least until the Internal Revenue Service catches on.

Taxes, of course, are no laughing matter. Serious consequences await those who fail to file, falsely file, knowingly underreport or otherwise throw spitballs at the system. Just ask Willie Nelson, who lost the best little golf course in Texas to back taxes. Simplify your taxes and get your refund faster.

File online.

Still, every year Americans try to shave what they owe on their personal income tax returns by pushing the envelope and letting their certified public accountant make the line calls.

"If you're going to be aggressive, deductions are where you're going to do it. You're not going to do it in the area of income; you want to report all your income," says Frank Howard, CPA and principal of Howard and Waltrip in Dallas. "I go ahead and apply the smell test. Most of the time, they're just throwing everything up against the wall to see if it sticks."

Old argument invalidated

As any accountant will tell you, the rewards of cheating on your taxes are never worth the risk. And even if you find a tax pro willing to push the limits, the Treasury Department says when it comes to

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"potentially abusive" tax moves, the old "my tax adviser said it was OK" argument will no longer work.

"We are raising the stakes for taxpayers who fail to disclose potentially abusive transactions to the IRS," stated Treasury Assistant Secretary for Tax Policy Pam Olson in announcing the tougher rule on Dec. 30, 2002. "Too many tax advisers have counseled clients against disclosing their transactions with the expectation that the advisers' opinions will allow the clients to avoid penalties."

By removing that argument, tax officials now believe taxpayers' risk-to-reward calculations will be more judicious, eliminating what Olson describes as "inappropriate tax avoidance transactions."

Still, it's a good bet that as April 15 approaches, many taxpayers will do — or at least try — th