

Stay out of the red: How to survive the shopping season -- with your budget intact. [News & Observer (Raleigh, NC)]

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Nov. 23--The Christmas Countdown has begun. Black Friday--is five days away. For the next month you will be charmed, pitched and enticed. Your emotions will be tugged upon. Eyelashes may be batted. And that's just from retailers. There's no telling what your loved ones may try just to ensure that their wishlists are fulfilled.

We know about wishes. We also know that many budgets are tight -- and even if they're not, who doesn't love a bargain? So as an early Christmas present -- or Hanukkah or Kwanzaa if you prefer -- here are some tips that could make the next few weeks easier on your budgets.

Consider Layaway

Sears has brought it back. Kmart has never forgotten it. And small local retailers think it's a fine thing, too.

Layaway, the original frugal way to buy, is being rediscovered by those who have been seduced away by credit cards.

There's a lot to like about it -- like no interest charges. A side benefit is you don't have to worry about snoopers finding their gifts early.

Most stores that offer layaway require a small down payment that's usually a percentage of the total and a fee upfront, usually around \$5. Some have a cancellation fee. There are restrictions, like no beer or wine, perishables or plants. Some stores won't let you layaway pricey electronics or obvious Christmas items after a certain date. Sears has a list of things you can't layaway and requires all items be picked up by Dec. 23. It won't accept any new layaways after Dec. 22.

You have to sign a contract and you have to pick the items up by a certain date.

Others offering the service include chains such as Marshalls and Burlington Coat Factory and local boutiques Galatea and the Eclectic Garden, both in Raleigh.

Eclectic Garden, which offers a variety of funky gifts, requires 50 percent down and gives you 60 days to pay it off. You can pay in increments as small as \$2, said co-owner Chrissy Pressley. The store originally offered the layaway option only on its furniture. Now anything can be put on layaway. They don't do refunds but if you change your mind you can convert what you've paid into store credit.

Galatea, which sells women's apparel, has offered layaway ever since it opened 12 years ago. You'll need to put 30 percent down and you have two months to pay it off.

If you're not sure a store offers layaway, just ask.

If you do choose layaway, check for: fees on returns or cancellations, make sure the item is set aside, find out how refunds are handled as well as price adjustments (can you get the better price if it goes on sale?).

Always read the terms carefully and make your payments on time.

Plan ahead

If your gift doesn't fit, is the wrong size or doesn't work, your gift recipient will be ever so grateful if you've taken return policies into consideration.

Most stores have 30-day return policies, but find out if they're extending those terms for the holidays. Most policies are posted on the store receipt but if you've already bought it that's too late. If the return policy is not posted, go to customer service and ask.

Also request gift receipts, and remember to include them with the gift. If the item you're buying has a warranty, make sure it doesn't expire before the gift is unwrapped.

Try haggling

Retailers want sales this year, so if you have a lower price in mind, see if they'll accept your offer. Ask for the manager as most clerks don't have the power to negotiate. Never haggled before? Just smile and ask if a lower price would be entertained. Be polite and don't make an offer that's insulting. If your offer is refused, ask if you can be contacted if the item goes on sale.

Be careful of gift cards

You've heard it before: make sure there are no hidden fees and check expiration dates. This year, there's the added concern that the retailer may not be around long enough after the holidays for the cards to be redeemed. Others have closed stores and restaurants that are considered low-performers, so if you do buy a gift card, make sure the recipient will be able to use it.

Don't count on instant credit

In years past, stores have offered instant credit with zero percent interest rates or 90-day-same-as-cash financing in hopes of getting you to buy everything from pricey cosmetics to big-screen TVs.

But this year, banks are clamping down. That means that if you have a blemish on your credit record, you may not qualify for such "instant" deals.

Target, for instance, is cutting credit lines and granting fewer increases in available credit to shoppers who have Target credit cards. One store that says it hasn't tightened lending standards is Best Buy. It's offering 18 months of zero-interest credit for purchases of more than \$499. The credit is offered through HSBC Holdings. But there are more strings attached. If you don't make the minimum monthly payment of \$10, the interest rates starts to add up.

If you want to avoid a little embarrassment at the checkout line, check your credit in advance with one of the credit rating bureaus: Experian, Equifax or TransUnion. To get the report instantly, you'll have to go online to [www.annualcreditreport.com](http://www.annualcreditreport.com). By phone (877-322-8228) or mail (Annual Credit Report Request Service, P.O. Box 105281, Atlanta, Ga. 30348-5281) takes 15 days. Not enough time for Black Friday but it could come in helpful before Christmas. If you haven't already checked on it this year, there's no charge.

If you find out you don't qualify for more, look on the bright side: It's one less bill that will come due. And with interest rates rising, it will take only one missed payment to put you in an interest rate that keeps spiraling up.

Go online

That doesn't mean buy online -- though it can. Use the Web to research products and prices before you buy.

Turn to it to find sites that keep you informed of deals, coupons and promotions:

--Dealnews.com publishes a round-up of price-checked deals and online specials. It recently showcased New Balance shoes for \$15 and up.

--Dealtaker.com offers advance notice of Black Friday sales.

--DealAlert.com, run by Consumer World, lets you shop for thousands of products, from electronics to clothes, and allows you to set price alerts so you know when it's offered at the price you want to pay. It also compares prices across several Web sites so you can buy the product now, or wait to be notified via e-mail if the price drops.

--PriceSpider.com searches hundreds of stores for electronic items like DVD players and flat-screen TVs and shows you a chart of its price history, along with reviews and links to retailers.

--FatWallet.com and SlickDeals.net offer forums, coupons and links to deals that may not be widely advertised.

--Shipgooder.com compares shipping rates from major carriers like the U.S. Postal Service, FedEx and UPS. Just plug in your zip codes and how much your package weighs and it'll help you find the best deal.

--CyberMonday.com aggregates online holiday sales from 600 companies. Its parent, Shop.org, gets a percentage of sales made through the site.

--Propertyroom.com lets you bid on stolen property. The items were recovered by law enforcement agencies in 47 states. After a state mandated waiting period, the agencies are allowed to put the loot up for bids. Recent steals included a Cannon digital camera for \$31. There are an abundance of grow lights and lots of bling.

If you'e signed up with retailers to get e-mails open them, many are pushing coupons and specials and online only deals.

There also are good deals to be had on sites such as overstock.com. Remember, most online sites don't charge taxes unless they have a physical presence in a state so that's another way you save -- at least initially, the state would like you to pony up those taxes when you file your income tax return.

However, if you're worried about sizes or styles, you might be better off sticking with area stores where the item can be easily returned.

If you do buy online, watch out for shipping and handling costs. Those charges can easily wipe out any savings. Look for free shipping and free gift wrap, too.

Think strategically, part 1

Some retailers are as worried about money this year as you are. They've pushed discounts earlier and been careful with inventory. That could affect the availability of what you want to buy.

For instance, if you absolutely must buy clothes, then size matters. And there are no guarantees that the size you need will be there if you wait for prices to go down. Better to buy now and be sure. But check to see if the retailer has a "lower-price guarantee." The way it works: if an item goes on sale within a specified time -- usually two weeks -- after you buy it and you still have the receipt -- the store will make up the difference.

Electronics, however, will be worth the wait. If plasma TVs and other big-ticket items are slow to sell, they'll come down in price.

Think strategically, part 2

Is your holiday gathering after the holidays? If you're not seeing your your siblings, your in-laws, your parents or your great-Aunt Martha until January, wait to buy their presents. True, it means braving the after-Christmas sales, but it will be well worth it. That's especially true if it's a slow holiday season for retailers -- they'll be looking to unload more right around Christmas by cutting prices.

Speaking of family gatherings, if yours is big, see if the other members are willing to draw names. Set a price limit.

--Black Friday refers to the Friday after the Thanksgiving Day holiday. As one of the busiest shopping days of the year, Black Friday is said to turn the retail industry's bottom line from red to black.

**ADDITIONAL STRATEGIES: DEALS ON ELECTRONICS**

--Be careful about gift cards. Watch out for any hidden fees, and always check the expiration dates.

--Don't count on instant credit. As banks clamp down, a spot on your record could shut you out.

--Use the Internet to research products and prices. Keep informed about deals and promotions.

--Think strategically. Retailers are. They've pushed discounts earlier and are watching inventory.

--Having your gathering after the holidays? Wait until after-Christmas sales to buy gifts.

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