Department of
CITIZEN SERVICES
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HOLIDAY SHOPPING TIPS

Finding the right gift at the right price can be challenging, but a little pre-shopping preparation can go a long way to reducing the stress of holiday shopping.

Use Caution at Pre-Holiday Sales Events

"Black Friday," "Cyber Monday" and other pre-holiday sales promise big savings, and sometimes they deliver. You can't just assume, however, that everything on sale during these events is being offered at the best price. Comparison shopping is still the rule for getting the best price. And, don't worry about missing a sale. Another one will come around before the season ends.

Gift-Cards Are Easy But . . .

They need to be used. Federal law requires that gift cards carry expiration dates of at least four (4) years. While that seems like plenty of time, it is estimated that 25% of gift cards go unused. So try to buy gift cards only from stores that you know your recipients like and are located near them. In addition, gift cards are not protected if an issuer goes bankrupt. So, encourage the recipient to use the gift card it sooner than later.

Fees vary depending on the kind of card you buy. Gift cards issued by banks can generally be used anywhere credit cards are accepted. While purchasing these cards takes the guess-work out of deciding which store to buy from, store-specific cards are the better deal.

- In Maryland, stores that issue their own gift cards cannot charge the recipient inactivity or other service fees.
- Federal law, however, allows inactivity fees to be assessed on bank-issued cards if the card has not been used within a year.
- In addition, bank card issuers often charge you a fee to buy gift cards. For example, expect to pay $3 to $7 for an American Express gift card.

So, when does a gift card make sense? If you know that your sister, friend or neighbor LOVES a particular store and is likely to use the card soon after the holidays, a gift card from that store is a great gift. Otherwise, give cash – it never expires and is good anywhere.

Be Prepared for Extended-Warranty Pitches

Extended warranties are almost always bad deals since many repairs are already covered by the standard warranty that comes with the product. Products seldom break within the extended warranty period and when items do break, the repairs, on average, cost about the same as the warranty. Some credit cards automatically extend the manufacturer's warranty on anything purchased with them, so check you card's website.

What's the Store's Return Policy?

In Maryland, a store can have any policy it wants for the return of non-defective items, including "no returns" or "store credit only." Some companies also have different return policies for in-store, online, or mail-order purchases.

While some retailers relax their policies during the holidays, don't count on it. The store's return policy must be disclosed on a sign prominently displayed in the store, on the goods or on the sales agreement, but if you don't see a policy posted, ask about returns before you make your purchase and keep the receipt. If the store provides a special gift receipt, include that with your gift.

Remember, however, that defective goods can ALWAYS be returned for a replacement or refund.

Look Out For "Restocking Fees"

Many items, especially electronics and special orders, are subject to restocking fees that range from 10 – 25 percent if they are not returned in a factory-sealed box. Find out whether such fees are charged before you make your purchase. If they are, make sure you tell recipients not to open the package unless they are sure the want the item inside. In addition, items such as computer software, music CDs, and movie DVDs generally aren't returnable if the seal is broken, unless the product is defective.

To obtain this factsheet in an alternative format, please contact the Office of Consumer Affairs at 410-313-6420(voice/relay) or email us at consumer@howardcountymd.gov.