



Step one to a great holiday season: avoid overspending

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You know it's coming. You've been waiting for it. It'll hit you at your weakest, when you are too full of turkey to avoid temptations.

It has ruined fun and pleasure for an entire year. It can ruin your retirement. It can force you to tell your children they cannot attend college. It can put you in the poor house.

Yes, overdosing on holiday shopping can bring you and your family to your knees.

Join me as we sift through ideas to safely tread this year's holiday season. You can save your finances while simultaneously delivering the unique creative gifts your loved ones will be talking about among all others. You can make their holidays awesome!

How? With *the plan*. But you need to plan now, before Black Friday, before Small Business Saturday, before Cyber Monday, before the shopping gets into full swing.

Find the holiday budgeting app that fits you.

Christmas List or Christmas Gift List or Christmas Gifts and Budget let you enter a budget line for each person on your list, and the gifts that make up that budget line. Install it on your phone and/or laptop. As you shop, these apps will track your progress. You can see if you are sticking with your overall budget or spending too much. You can find a deal on one gift for a person, spend a bit more on another gift for that person, and know you are staying within budget.

Have you ever received an unexpected gift from a friend and immediately realized you had not planned on getting them anything? These apps let you add new people to your list directly from your contacts. You can store photos of gift ideas, enter notes by each person or by each gift idea, and save links to gift ideas or directly link to your online stores.

Let's work through an example: Say you have budgeted \$750 for gifts and entertainment for the holidays.

You plan to spend \$150 for that party night at a hotel with friends. The hotel has a discount coupon for a meal special you plan to use, so you enter that link on the budget line in your app. You plan to allocate the remaining \$600 among the three people on your list: hubby, mom and dad. You will spend \$200 for each person. Set up those three people, and enter \$200 on their budget lines in your app. For mom, let's assume you plan to give her a \$50 gift card, plus a \$150 red and blue block tunic top that she will absolutely love. You enter those two items under her entry, plus the link to the retail store's online website for the tunic.

You can then enter the link for your go-to discount gift card website, such as Zeek or Savvee, to check if you can find the gift card for less. You will do the same with the detailed gift items for your husband and dad.

Pre-load your wish list or cart at online retailers.

Next, scroll down your app, and review all gift ideas, identifying which of those you will likely purchase online unless you get an awesome Black Friday find! Consider using the "wish list" at your favorite online retailers to let you research and tag the exact item you want ahead of time. Or, if the online retailer does not have a wish list function, load those in your cart, but just wait to click on purchase.

Take a look at the Honey or Wikibuy browser extensions, both of which have some cool features. If you are shopping in a physical store, you can use one of these apps to check competitor prices. If those prices are lower, ask the store if they match competitors' prices. If there is a discount coupon that applies to your order, these apps automatically inform you and auto-fill as you are making online purchases.

Or you might prefer to use Quick Scan or ShopSavvy apps to scan barcodes of products as you walk through stores. These will give you nearby competitor prices. Amazon has a similar app, Amazon Price Check, to scan the barcodes of products you see in a physical store.

Use Price Alarm, an app to set prices you are willing to pay for gifts. If a retailer – online or physical – has a terrific holiday sale, it will notify you that the price has dropped to your target.

What's the plan?

All of the above efforts let you come up with: (1) a list of physical stores you need to visit; (2) the gift ideas you are going to scope out at each store; (3) the online retailers you will pull up, and (4) the gifts you will purchase there. Gifts may be on more than one list, but you will know whether to snap up an item at a discount price, or wait until you get a better deal at the next store, whether a physical store or an online site. You will know whether to buy it now because it's at a decent price and you don't want to spend more time shopping.

Finally, how should you pay?

If you have saved funds for this all year through a Christmas budget fund at your bank, use that account.

Otherwise a debit card on your bank checking account, which immediately debits your account, will give you incentive to avoid overspending. If you use a credit card and pay off the balance each month, use the card that gives you cash back or earns reward points.

If you have limited funds, avoid running up that credit card balance and instead give experiences, not stuff. A certificate for five hours of handyman work is priceless. A certificate for four hours of apartment cleaning is priceless. A certificate for two weeks of dog sitting is priceless. A friend once knitted an afghan with the colors of my choice; it is priceless to me.

Be a smart holiday shopper! Avoid the spending overdose, and the ensuing financial hangover. Enjoy the season instead.

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