

REAL DEAL



GERRY KAHRMANN/POSTMEDIA NEWS

To reduce holiday stress, do your gift shopping online from the comfort of your home.

Stress-free holiday shopping

Skip the long lineups and crowded parking lots by buying gifts online

LISA EVANS

The holidays may bring goodwill and cheer, but they also draw packed parking lots, long lines and bustling crowds. The good news is that you can do all of your holiday shopping from the comfort of your home — or office — and save money at the same time.

“A lot of stores that have a bricks-and-mortar location often have better deals online than they offer in stores because they don’t have to store that product on the shelves,” says Kerry K. Taylor, money blogger at Squawkfox.com and author of 397 Ways to Save Money. Shopping online can yield great discounts. Here’s how to take advantage:

Most retailers offer free shipping on orders over a certain dollar amount (typically \$50). If necessary, choose a retailer you can buy multiple gifts from to meet the free shipping requirement.

BECOME A PREFERRED CUSTOMER

Sign up for store newsletters and email blasts to reap the benefits of exclusive offers, but be sure to unsubscribe after you’ve made your holiday purchases to avoid impulse shopping during the year. “They’re going to keep filling your inbox and enticing you to spend more money,” says Taylor.

FRIEND YOUR FAVOURITE STORES

Join your favourite retailer’s Facebook page and follow them on Twitter. “A lot of times brands will tweet out a flash sale or time-sensitive coupon that only social media followers can act upon,” says Taylor.

PROMOTIONAL CODES AND ONLINE COUPONS

Most checkout pages have a spot to enter promo codes.

These codes are a great way to get your shopping bag for less. Sites such as RetailMeNot and RedTag Deals advertise dozens of online promotional codes and discount coupons.

AVOID SHIPPING FEES

“(The price of) shipping can erode the sweetness of a deal,” says Taylor. Search for free shipping codes. Most retailers offer free shipping on orders over a certain dollar amount (typically \$50). If necessary, choose a retailer you can buy multiple gifts from to meet the free shipping requirement. Place your order at least seven to 10 days before Christmas to ensure it arrives on time.

COMPARISON SHOP

Free apps such as RedLaser, Amazon Price Check, PriceGrabber and Snoopa allow you to find the best in-store or online deal instantly. “I’ve saved instantly 10 to 15 per cent just by looking for competitors online,” says Taylor.

GIFT OF CHARITY

Many charitable organizations offer online gift donations and provide a gift card to the recipient. Canada Helps (canadahelps.ca) sends an email to the recipient advising them of the gift certificate they’ve received and allows them to choose the charity they want the donation to go to. Oxfam Unwrapped (oxfamunwrapped.ca) and Heifer International (heifer.org) allow givers to choose between buying a goat, sheep, tree and more to help a community in need.

PICK YOUR PLASTIC

Many credit cards offer points that can be redeemed for freebies. When shopping online, make sure you’re using a credit card that will pay you back in the future.



JULIE OLIVER/OTTAWA CITIZEN

Finding a parking spot at the mall during the busy holiday season can be next to impossible.

Tree: Cut fresh

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“We’ve had people bring back a tree, and then a dog lifts his leg on it,” says Thomas, who does not permit them.

For a list of cut-your-own tree farms, visit the Christmas Tree Farmers of Ontario website at christmastrees.on.ca.

TREES THAT GIVE BACK

IKEA is selling four- to seven-foot balsam firs for just \$20. That bargain-basement price also gets you a coupon worth \$20 on any IKEA purchase over \$75 from Jan. 2 to Feb. 28, 2013. A portion of revenue from tree sales goes to Tree Canada.

The Kiwanis Club of Manotick is selling Fraser firs and some balsam and Scotch pine next to the Home Hardware in Manotick Mews. A seven- to eight-foot Fraser fir costs \$55. The club hopes to raise \$18,000 to \$20,000 for community groups, like the Boy Scouts.

The club’s Bob Simpson says the quality of the trees is so reliable that they are sold still wrapped the way they arrive from the grower. There is a return policy if a customer is unhappy, but he can remember only one instance of that. “The customer brought the tree back, took another one and the minute he left, someone else came along and bought the tree; the second guy said it was beautiful.”

The Gloucester Lions Club is selling trees at The Wholesale Outlet, 1877 Innes Rd. and at Capital Golf Centre, 3798 Bank St. Proceeds go to various community causes, including the Ottawa Food Bank.

Some cut-your-own tree farms also fundraise. The Cedar Hill Christmas Tree Farm in Pakenham (cedarhillchristmastreefarm.com), for instance, sells “Snowman Poop” for \$1. The fancy packages of miniature marshmallows make great stocking stuffers and proceeds go to the Carleton Place Food Bank. The farm also donates trees to local churches.

NOT AS FRESH

Trees sold at grocery chains and big-box stores typically come from major producers in Quebec, Ontario and British Columbia. They are cut as early as mid-November and won’t be as fresh as a tree cut just before Christmas. Prices range from about

Needles on a fresh tree will flex, not break, when you bend them and stay on the tree if you pull the branch lightly between your thumb and forefinger.

\$20 to \$60.

While trees are sold in the ByWard Market, the small tree lots at neighbourhood gas stations or community centres that many of us remember fondly from our childhoods have pretty much gone the way of the dodo. “They can’t compete with the big-box stores,” says Shirley Brennan, executive director of the Christmas Tree Farmers of Ontario.

THE DROUGHT

Christmas tree farmers say that while this summer’s drought combined with last winter’s scant snowfall killed many trees planted in the past couple of years, the bigger trees being cut for this holiday season are mostly in good shape.

Claude Smith, co-ordinator of horticulture programs at the University of Guelph’s Kemptville campus, says that most coniferous trees weathered the drought because they transpire less than deciduous trees. Heavy rain in the fall also replenished their moisture.

As always, when choosing a tree look for one with fragrance and a rich green colour, says the Christmas Tree Farmers of Ontario website. Needles on a fresh tree will flex, not break, when you bend them and stay on the tree if you pull the branch lightly between your thumb and forefinger.

POST-CHRISTMAS ROUNDUP

The City of Ottawa collects Christmas trees in January as part of its curbside garbage pickup. They’re ground into mulch and other natural products. For information, go to ottawa.ca/online_services/recycling/items/129_en.html.

WATCH a video of tree farmer Gary Thomas explain how to know if a tree is fresh at

OTTAWACITIZEN.COM
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FOTOLIA

SUPERMARKET SAMPLER

Holiday cookies

You know it’s the holidays when the boxes of candy canes appear on store shelves. The red-and-white striped treats are a perennial favourite for sweet toothed of all ages.

Simply Food is getting into the holiday spirit with its Candy Cane Creme Chocolate Cookies. Peanut-free with no trans fats or artificial colours, the tasty confections feature peppermint-flavoured icing sandwiched between two crunchy chocolate cookies.

In a word: Yum. If you are a fan of candy canes, you won’t be able to eat just one.

Nutrition facts: For two cookies (28 g): 140 calories, 6 g fat, 140 mg sodium, 1 g fibre, 10 g sugars

Cost: \$3.49 for 350 g at Shoppers Drug Mart



Ornaments: \$10 and under

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FESTIVE TRIO
These glass acorns topped with gold glitter prove three is not a crowd. **\$9.99** at Home Outfitters.



HEART ON A STRING
Bring romance to your holiday spread with a tin embossed heart. **\$2.99** at HomeSense.



BEADED BEAUTY
Made in India, this detailed dove sparkles with gold beads and faux pearls. **\$10** at Ten Thousand Villages.



SWEET TREAT
No chance of gaining weight with this decadent frosted cupcake. **\$6.99** for a box of four at IKEA.



BOUND FOR BETHLEHEM
Set against a blue velvet background, the three wise men follow the star to the Messiah. **\$8** at Bombay.



STAR OF THE SHOW
This 3-D star from Fruits & Passion smells like frosted berries and cedar wood. **\$7**

FOUND Sugar & spice

The folks at Method (methodhome.com) are making it fun — and festive — to wash our dirty hands and dishes with a new line of holiday soaps.

The Sugar + Spice and Evergreen Nice collections include a hand wash, foaming hand wash and concentrated liquid dish soap in several sweet scents, including gingerbread, sugared mint and frosted fir.

Made with natural essential oils, the biodegradable soaps come in pump bottles made from 100-per cent recycled plastic. The colourful designs and festive greetings on the bottles make them ideal for holiday decorating.

Cost: Hand soaps are \$4.39; dish soap \$4.59 each. They’re available at Shoppers Drug Mart, Canadian Tire, Home Outfitters, Pharmasave, Metro, Sobys and Loblaws.

