



Shop Smart This Holiday Season ... and Get a Good Start on Your Finances for the New Year!

Three Easy Budgeting Tips:

No one wants to still be paying for holiday gifts well into the new year, so take control of your holiday spending budget with these three pointers:

- **Plan ahead:** Start putting more money aside by cutting back on “extras” or non-essentials and putting those dollars in a savings account or other safe place. Shop early so you won’t feel time-pressured to buy something that’s more than you wanted to spend.
- **Make a list ... and stick to it:** Write a list of for whom you plan to buy and write down how much money you have to spend. Then stick to your budget!
- **Pay in cash:** If you pay for all of your holiday purchases in cash, you’ll be less likely to overspend. Check your receipts after each shopping trip to keep track of what you’re spending.

Exchanges and Refunds

Although you may think you are the perfect gift-giver, take a moment before you buy something to learn the store’s refund or exchange policy.

- **Check the policy:** Stores can establish their own refund or exchange policy, but it must be displayed clearly where you check out. If stores do not post a policy, you have a right to a full refund within 30 days in the same manner in which you paid.
- **Beware of “restocking fees”:** Many retailers, especially electronics stores, charge fees for restocking items returned, particularly in opened boxes. These fees, which vary, must be disclosed.
- **Get and keep your receipts:** Always get a receipt and save it. In NYC, you are entitled to a receipt for purchases over \$20. Receipts must show the total amount paid including a separate statement of tax, date, business name/address, the make/model of the items you bought, and, if applicable, the business’ DCA license number. Also ask for gift receipts so the person who receives your gift can take advantage of return and exchange options.

Gift Cards & Credit Cards

Gift cards have become big business — but before you buy one, look for any fees, expiration dates or limitations.

- **Fees and limitations:** It is illegal for retailers to charge any retroactive fees against the balance of gift certificates/cards or charge monthly fees that deduct from the value on cards that are used within one year of their purchase. Stores must post any rules and requirements on a visible sign that says “Terms and Conditions Are Applied to Gift Certificates/Cards.” Certain important terms and conditions, like fees or expiration dates, must also be printed on the gift card.
- **Use credit cards carefully:** If you must pay by credit card, read the fine print, know your credit limit, and pay your balance in full. If you exceed your credit limit or pay late, some interest rates can skyrocket to 30% or higher.
- **Watch your bank balance if you use your debit card:** If you spend more than your current bank account balance when you use your debit card, you could end up in debt, paying high “overdraft protection” fees. Keep a close eye on your balance, and what you have available to spend.

Online Shopping

Shopping online can help you save time and avoid long lines, but first find out if the seller is reputable.

- **Know from whom you are buying:** If you aren't already familiar with the company, do some quick Web research on the company, including reviews from other buyers. If you can't find a working phone number on the site, take your business elsewhere.
- **Can you return the gift?** Read the online refund policy and find out retailers' return window – some may extend the time while others may shorten it. Know whether you have to pay for the shipping, and if the gift can be returned to a "brick-and-mortar" store nearby.
- **Keep a paper trail:** Print and save all records, including the online transaction receipt, the product description, expected delivery date, and any e-mail correspondence. Check your credit card statements as soon as they arrive to make sure the amount charged is correct.

Sales and Delivery

The holidays mean lots of sales, but don't get tricked by bogus ads and sales offers.

- **Bait and switch:** Watch out for "bait and switch" offers that promise too-good-to-be-true savings but aren't actually available when you get there. Such advertising is illegal. Also, anything listed as "on sale" must also display the pre-sale price clearly.
- **Special sales:** Consumers should be aware of sales that say "quantities limited" or "not available at all stores." Special sales in NYC, including "Going out of Business" or "Liquidation" sales, must be licensed by DCA to ensure they're legitimate.
- **Delivery dates:** Secure a delivery date in writing before you leave a store. If retailers don't specify a "ship by" date for your online purchase, they must ship within 30 days.

Protecting Personal Information / ID Theft

Identify theft can be a financially devastating experience, so don't let the hustle and bustle of the holidays distract you from keeping your personal information safe.

- **Safeguard your information:** Never give out your Social Security Number, mother's maiden name, or former address online. Avoid doing business with online retailers that insist you provide any potentially compromising personal information.
- **Shop with companies you know:** Be wary of companies online that don't offer a phone number or address where you can get more information. Many companies post their privacy policy on their site. It should disclose the information being collected on the site and how that information is being used.
- **Guard your ID:** Photocopying identification can increase the risk of identity theft. By law, if a retailer requires a copy of a consumer's personal identification in order to use a credit card, this demand must be stated in the store's credit card policy and displayed clearly. DCA strongly advises consumers not to allow retailers to photocopy information from their driver's license or other personal information.

Special Recall Tip

To check if a gift or toy has been recalled, visit the Consumer Product Safety Commission at www.cpsc.gov and click on the recall section.

How to Contact DCA? Call 311 or go online to www.nyc.gov/consumers