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Haven't Shopped Yet? Pros Offer Tips

By **ANDREA PETERSEN**

With just hours to go before Christmas, this is crunch time for shopping procrastinators.

People with gifts still to buy face crowded stores, tired and testy salespeople and ridiculously high overnight-shipping charges. So how do you avoid going into a panic and grabbing a pile of generic and boring gifts?

We asked personal shoppers and professional organizers for their best strategies for tackling last-minute shopping.

Make a Plan.

The worst thing to do is head online or to the mall without preparation. "That is when people make bad choices," says Amanda Wiss, founder of Urban Clarity, a Brooklyn, N.Y.-based organizing service.

First, Ms. Wiss says, make a comprehensive list including not only friends and family but all the other people, such as children's teachers, dog walkers and hairdressers you want to acknowledge but may easily forget in the shopping swirl. Make note of all holiday parties you'll be attending, so you can pick up hostess gifts. And make sure to add an extra item or two so you'll be able to reciprocate if you receive an unexpected gift.

Ms. Wiss suggests storing your list—noting the gift actually bought and the price—on your PC so you can refer to it in following years. (She keeps hers on an Excel spreadsheet.)

That way you can avoid, say, giving your aunt slippers two years in a row.

Wait Until Dec. 24.

By Christmas Eve, even most procrastinators have finished their shopping so stores are less hectic, says Sara Rogers, the personal shopper for the big Mall of America in Bloomington, Minn. But if you still stumble across long lines at department-store registers, Ms. Rogers advises heading to a cashier in the men's or home departments, which are likely to be on the quieter side. Of course, if your kid has his heart set on a certain hot toy, you may be out of luck at this point. Keep in mind that, while stores often have extended hours in the days leading up to the holiday, many shops close early on Christmas Eve.

Give Gifts That Disappear.

Choose food or wine. Not only are consumable goodies almost universally appreciated, if you make them yourself they can be inexpensive and thoughtful, too. Another big plus is that they won't contribute to your recipients' household clutter. Laura Leist, the president of the National Association of Professional Organizers, says dealing with extraneous gifts is one of her clients' biggest organizing challenges: People often don't have the space to store the items, but feel too guilty to give them away. Home-made brownies, for instance—tied up with festive ribbon, of course—won't pose that problem.

Give Experiences or Services.

Make up your own gift certificates redeemable for a few hours of babysitting (for a new parent), tackling a dreaded chore (such as organizing a spouse's desk) or a fun event (theater tickets for the play of the recipient's choice or dinner at a hot restaurant, for example). Ms. Leist gives her nieces a "Day with Aunt Laura" for their birthdays. The girls are taken out to lunch and then shopping where they can pick their own gift. Not only are these kinds of gifts personal and thoughtful, but all you need is a card or piece of paper. And you get to avoid the stores altogether.

Shop in Your Own Home.

Re-gifting may seem gauche. And no one wants your old crystal candy dish. But maybe that dress you've never worn will better suit your sister.

Giving away your own stuff can work particularly well for children. Ms. Wiss's aunt once opened up her jewelry box and told her she could pick a bauble as her gift. "I was 13 or 14 and thought it was awesome," she says.

Avoid Department Stores.

While large department stores might sound like a good bet because they carry items for all genders and ages, at this point their offerings are "extremely picked over," says Ella Goldin, founder and president of Chic Inspiration, a New York-based personal-shopping service. Big stores also get "hectic and stressful," she says. "You actually might spend more time looking and finding less."

Instead, Ms. Goldin advises sticking to smaller boutiques, which, she says, tend to get new items daily and have shorter lines, more attentive staff and prettier gift wrapping. She particularly likes museum shops, which typically carry more unusual gifts, she says.

Skip Clothing.

Even under optimal circumstances, clothes are tough to get right, Ms. Goldin says. And when you're rushed and desperate, you're even more likely to buy a dud gift. At this late date, a lot of sizes will be out of stock anyway.

Embrace Gift Cards.

Sure, some people say they're a cop-out. But who doesn't want a shopping spree at a favorite store? The key is to "jazz it up a little. Don't just give them this piece of plastic. Put a little effort into it," says Jennifer Burton, founder of JBstyles, a wardrobe-consulting and personal-shopping service in Chicago. If you're giving someone a Starbucks' gift card, for example, put it in a coffee mug, she says. Tuck a Barnes & Noble gift card into a beloved book. Ms. Burton also likes giving gift certificates from Charity Checks. The recipient gets to choose which charity to apply the gift to. If you don't have time to snare a physical card, many online retailers let you send virtual cards instantaneously via email.

Pare Your List.

The easiest way to get through your shopping list quickly is to knock people off it. Ms. Leist says every year she and a few friends agree not to give each other gifts. Instead, they use the money to go out to dinner together. If you do go that route, however, make sure your soon-to-be-ex gift recipients are on board. You're trying to pare your gift list, not your friend list.