

# CONSUMER ADVISORY

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## Happy Holiday Buying: Tips for Holiday Shopping

As holiday shopping becomes a 24-hour, seven day a week proposition for more and more retailers, consumers need to be on guard 24/7 when shopping for holiday gifts online, by phone or by mail, or through local brick and mortar stores.

### Ads & Sales

- Read store ads carefully. Is the store offering sale items at a limited quantity? Can you get a rain check if it's an out-of-stock sale item?
- Take the ad with you when you go shopping to make sure you find the right item at the price advertised.
- Focus on bottom-line prices, not discounts. Discount claims may not reflect real savings, if the seller inflated the original price of an item and then discounted it to make the "discount price" appear as a bargain.

### The Seller

- Buy from a seller you trust. Whether the seller is down the street or across the country, know who you're buying from. Be wary of online retailers that don't disclose contact information, including a phone number and physical address.
- Understand the seller's return and refund policies. How long do you have to return the item? Will you get a full refund, store credit, or nothing? Is there a restocking fee? Do you need a receipt and the product packaging? If the seller ships an item that you later decide to return, who pays for shipping?
- If you're making an online purchase, make sure it's a secure website. Secure sites use an "https://" prefix. The "s" stands for secure, which means the site is not secure without it! Don't email financial information, such as credit card or bank account numbers.
- If ordering online or by phone, use a credit card because credit cards generally offer consumers better protections in cases of fraud or disputes. Only give credit card numbers to sellers you know and you called. And review your monthly statements to ensure the charges are correct. Avoid using a debit card, because debit transactions draw directly from your bank account. Don't wire money or send cash.
- If it's a mail or phone order, the merchant is required to ship the item within 30 days of the order, unless the seller clearly discloses a longer wait in advertisements or catalog. If the merchant cannot meet the 30-day deadline, the seller must disclose it to the customer and offer the option of a cancellation and full refund.
- If you're buying through a layaway, be sure you understand the policies, including any additional fees or restrictions, and cancellation policies.

### Warranties & Extended Warranties

- How long does the seller warranty the product? Does a seller's warranty go beyond the manufacturer's warranty?
- Think carefully about extended warranties and service agreements. Be sure to understand the terms, including what is and is not covered. Extended warranties often mean add-on profits for sellers, but they can also offer peace of mind for the buyer and convenience if the product breaks during the warranty period.

### Gift Cards

- Understand the terms. Does the merchant charge a gift card purchase fee? Does the merchant charge an inactivity fee (which is allowed after 12 months of inactivity)?
- The card must clearly disclose the expiration date, and fees must be clearly disclosed on the card or its packaging. Gift cards must be good for five years from the purchase date, or from the last date any additional money was loaded onto the card.
- Urge the recipient to use the card sooner rather than later to avoid loss, theft, and future inactivity fees. And keep your receipts, or give the recipient a receipt in case of problems down the road.