

Consumer Awareness

Sticking To A Holiday Budget Without Being A Grinch

(NAPSA)—You may already be feeling it—that perennial “urge to splurge” that strikes just as the holiday catalogs hit mailboxes and in-store Santas appear. This year, though, that urge will be sorely tested: On the one hand, 65 percent of consumers say the economy will affect their holiday plans, according to a recent survey by the National Retail Federation, with 84 percent of them planning to spend less.

On the other hand, who wants to disappoint those on your holiday list? While it’s unrealistic to cut spending completely, the gloomy forecast simply means you need to shop smarter. Here are several ways to approach this holiday season without burning up your bank account:

Think Like a Retailer: Stores are hoping to avoid a repeat of last year’s holiday fire-sale prices, and the National Retail Federation anticipates that “many sales may only be offered to a retailer’s most loyal customers.” That means if you haven’t done so already, sign up for e-mails from your favorite stores to be alerted to special discounts. Keep in mind that most retailers have lowered their inventories by an average of 10 percent from 2008, according to recent Standard & Poor information.

Plan Ahead: Drafting a list of who you’re shopping for will keep you focused and on budget. Using the Internet to research gift ideas and compare costs is a great way to prepare before hitting the stores. And when you head out to shop, have your list handy so you stay on track.

The Mighty Widget: Some of the best deals can be unearthed without waiting for a discount e-mail to arrive in your inbox. By placing one of these store icons on your computer desktop or embed-



Gift cards can help you stay on budget this holiday season.

ding it on your personalized home page—widgets are downloadable from many retailers’ Web sites—one click gives you access to all the specials.

Consider Gift Cards: Gift cards can be a stress-free solution to getting that perfect gift that recipients really want, and because you set the value upfront, they also help keep you from going over budget. But not all gift cards are created equal—many have expiration dates and hidden fees. This year, if you’re on the receiving end of a fee-laden gift card, you can exchange it for a better one. Visit www.ReturnThatGiftCard.com for information on how to swap a card with fees for an American Express Gift Card, which has no post-purchase fees and funds that never expire.

Season’s Eatings: Unfortunately, it’s impossible to buy gifts for everyone. An easy, inexpensive way to acknowledge others beyond family and close friends is by baking a large batch of cookies and gifting small, wrapped portions to acquaintances, co-workers and neighbors.

That’s a Wrap: At the end of each holiday season, stock up on marked-down wrapping paper, gift bags and greeting cards for next year and put everything in a box with tape and scissors. You’ll be one step—and several dollars—ahead.