

When choosing gifts

Plan ahead, trust your judgement

Even those of us who start out early with the best intentions somehow wind up searching frantically for last-minute presents at 6:00 P.M. on December 24th, and buying anything that can be wrapped up and given away. And that usually takes all the pleasure out of giving. Although buying and selecting presents for loved ones should be among the happiest moments of the holiday season, indecision, bad weather, lines and crowds of harried shoppers can get you down.

So what's the best way to keep from getting frazzled during the holidays? A few simple gift shopping tips should help keep your spirits up.

One common mistake Christmas shoppers make is concentrating too much on the specific interests and hobbies of the person for whom the gift is intended. Rest assured, your friend, the cat lover will have plenty of kitty calendars and posters and probably prefers to select her own anyway. Your athletic pal has more tennis tie clips than he knows what to do with, precisely because everyone thinks they're the "perfect gift."

And, don't try, for example, to find an instrument or other piece of equipment for your musician friend unless you know exactly what you're looking for. He already will have very specific ideas about what model and brand of equipment he needs and, more than likely, it will be too sophisticated for you to afford. Unless you know for sure that he wants exactly this microphone over 100 others on the market, chances are you'll get him the wrong one.

However, if you stay away from your friends' areas of expertise, there really is no "wrong" gift. Remember, few people have only one interest in life, and most of us enjoy receiving the little luxuries we ordinarily deny ourselves. If you make use of your own knowledge and interests, you have a much better chance of choosing a gift that will be appreciated. The silk scarf you found on sale is just your color? Maybe there's another shade that would suit a friend.

Although we usually rely on our own judgment when shopping for ourselves, it's amazing how little faith we have in our own taste when choosing for others. Just because you've never seen your college roommate wear purple doesn't mean it won't look smashing on her. Ask yourself first, "Do I like it?" Then consider why it may or may not be suitable for someone else.

Still unsure? If it's a good buy and a

gift that might please more than one person, go ahead and get it. You'll thank yourself on December 24th when you need a last minute gift for someone you forgot. Even if you have enough presents for everyone, if you like it, you won't be unhappy keeping it for yourself.

Another tip is to buy multiples of an inexpensive, sure-to-please item, like an organizer or a drawer sachet and wrap them before the season gets busy. This precaution is a life-saver when your colleagues show up at your Christmas party—and you've forgotten their wives and husbands. Of course you're not obligated to give them gifts, but it certainly makes exchanging presents less awkward when one person isn't left out. And think how touched and grateful the outsiders will feel when you include them.

When selecting presents for children, especially other people's children, it seems impossible to keep up with the trends in "in" toys and gadgets. Children are actually much choosier than adults. You may have hit on the latest hot toy car, but buy it in blue when Johnny's favorite color is red and you've got a disappointed tot on your hands. Since children develop at different rates, it's best not to give a toy that's for a specific age group.

If you're really at a loss, as most of us are, ask the salesgirl at your local toy store what the hottest sellers are, or watch a child for a few minutes. Observe what he or she picks out or even ask him what he wants from Santa. If nothing else is gained, the Christmas spirit may be infectious.

With a little ingenuity, you'll spend your time off during the holidays relaxing instead of running around. People will admire not only your thoughtfulness, but your holiday cheer as you give, eat, drink and are merry.

The birth of the Christmas card

While Christmas cards are taken for granted today, as among the most established of holiday customs, their use actually only dates back to the last century.

With the advent of the Industrial Revolution—which made possible the mass production of printed matter, such as Christmas cards—and the invention in Britain of the "penny post" in 1840—which allowed people to correspond with family and friends relatively inexpensively—the stage was set for the creation of the Christmas card.

The date of the first Christmas card is probably 1846, when Sire Henry Cole asked John Calcutt Horsley to design an illustrated card which contained greetings of the season. This card, in triptych form, depicted three scenes. Two involved charitable deeds—giving garments and food to the poor. The third showed a family celebration, with each member toasting the occasion with a glass of wine.

One thousand copies of this card were printed and sold—the first step taken in what has become an extremely profitable business venture, and a ubiquitous holiday time tradition that, over 150 years young, shows no sign of waning in popularity.



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Who'll be the first foot?

There are many fascinating customs associated with the Christmas season. Among them is the tradition of "first-footing," which hails from the British Isles.

On New Year's Day, in Scotland, and Christmas Day in rural England, the first person to enter the house is of utmost importance. He or she is considered to have "let in" the holiday, and the fortunes of the family who reside therein are dependent on this being done properly.

If a woman is the first person to enter,

according to superstition, the results would be disastrous. Thus, in some places, families hire men as "first-footers," to make sure everything occurs according to tradition.

These men, however, should have dark hair; they cannot, under any circumstances, be redheads, as that would be unlucky (red is the color of Judas Iscariot).

There are certain actions associated with first-footing, as well. The first-footer must enter the home through its front door, walking through it and exiting

in the back.

He usually bears a twig of evergreen—a symbol of life in the midst of winter's barrenness. And, while within the house, in many locations he is given a token gift—usually salt or bread—as a symbol of hospitality.

What is the aim of all this elaborate ritual? An old carol offers one answer, when it recounts "a pocket full of money and a cellar full of beer, and a great fat pig to last you all the year."



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