

Dos and Don'ts of Last-Minute Holiday Shopping



Many stores will open early and close late to accommodate last-minute shoppers before Christmas.

If you've put off holiday shopping for yet another weekend and still can't get through your growing holiday to-do list, make sure that you're not paying a premium for last-minute gifts. Shopping at the last minute may be your only option, but there are still steps you can take to keep costs down and share the holiday spirit under budget.

Here are some dos and don'ts of holiday shopping at the last minute.

Do: Ask about free gift-wrapping services. Many stores will offer free gift-wrapping services on in-store purchases, so you'll have that gift ready to go the same day you buy it. You'll save time, or course, but you'll also save money on gift wrap and assorted supplies. It really does pay to ask if the service is available, especially if you are buying multiple gifts a few days before a holiday event.

Don't: Go shopping without a list. When you're on a tight budget and don't have the option to splurge, make sure that you're armed with a shopping list and plan to keep your spending on track. It's easy to get derailed once you're in the store and on the hunt for gifts. Your list of must-

haves will keep you focused on your task (time is running out, after all), and your list will help you stay on budget.

Do: Check the store or shopping center schedule. Many stores will open early and close late to accommodate last-minute shoppers like you. This means that you can avoid the after-work traffic jam by arriving later in the evening or rising early to get your holiday shopping done before work. Check the mall and store hours to confirm opening and closing times and plan accordingly. Consider that many holiday shoppers may not be willing to shop at the crack of dawn, either. If you can make a trip out earlier in the day, you may be able to beat last-minute crowds.

Don't: Forget about your local grocery or convenience stores. Many grocery stores, drugstores and convenience stores are stocked with holiday items that make for great last-minute holiday gifts. From boxes of chocolate to gift baskets filled with goodies, stocking stuffers and smaller gifts may be available at low prices at your local grocery or hardware store. Keep an eye out for in-store specials and markdowns as Christmas draws near. These stores will need to clear inventory as quickly as possible, so you may be able to get a good deal before the after-Christmas sales.

Do: Make use of smartphone apps for last-minute deals. Whether you're heading to the electronics store, a gourmet food store or your favorite big-box store, use shopping apps, such as SlickDeals, RetailMeNot and Coupon Sherpa, to get the latest coupon codes, coupons and other discounts on online and offline purchases at the last minute. You'll rarely have to pay the full retail price on gift items once you've checked these apps for deal alerts and the latest coupons.

Don't: Worry about Christmas Eve crowds. If you're the ultimate procrastinator who left the holiday shopping until Christmas Eve, there's still hope. Most people are already home for the holidays – and at home for Christmas Eve – so if you still have a few gifts to round up for Christmas Day celebrations, now's your time to shine. Just keep in mind that many stores close early on Christmas Eve, so you will need to head out earlier in the day to pick up those gifts.

Do: Consider food gifts. If you've been baking away this holiday season, consider wrapping up some of those treats in an attractive gift tin or food gift box as a last-minute holiday gift. Cookies, brownies, cupcakes and other baked treats can make the perfect gift for any foodie on your gift list. Even better? They are an easy gift to put together at the last minute. If you don't have any time left to be in the kitchen, you could also put together a mini gift basket of holiday candy, boxed cookies and other treats you already received or purchased to give away as a last-minute gift. Regifted holiday treats may not be the most thoughtful gift to give, but this late in the season, there's not enough time for thoughtful.

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