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Surviving the post-holiday rush for sales

by Priscilla Lister

December 26 — the time to return gifts and find bargains — is one of the biggest shopping days of the year.

But don't let Santa's bounty turn you into the Grinch as you maneuver through crowds you never imagined. Follow these shopping tips to make those post-holiday sales the stuff of your dreams, not nightmares.

First things first: Get to that shopping center early.

It really does pay to start out early in the morning on those holiday shopping days, if only because you want to find a parking place without tripping your temper.

The earlier you enter, the easier the parking, and that will start your shopping day on the right foot.

If you are returning gifts, be prepared with as many receipts as you can collect, or at least with the sales tags from the stores themselves.

Many stores today, in pursuit of top-notch customer service, will take anything back with proper sales tags on it, even if you don't have receipts which, of course, is common with gifts.

Make a list of gifts you might wish to buy for family celebrations throughout the year. The bargains you may find after the holidays will make such early-bird preparation a good deal, indeed.

Look into credit-card options at department stores, so you can have the option of spreading out those payments over the coming year, much like those celebrations will be. Sometimes when you apply for a department store's credit card, you will also get an additional discount on that first day's purchase.

But beware of too much credit: Know what your budget can handle.

Write down the sizes of your loved ones to take with you, especially if you're shopping for many relatives. Men's dress shirt sizes, for example, can be easy to forget, as can those of your nieces and nephews who keep growing.

Plan ahead and clip stores' post-holiday sale advertisements from the newspaper for the items you may want to buy, and take those clippings with you to show salespeople what you're seeking.

Your search will go faster and you can double-check the promises.

And don't forget to stock up on such gift staples as wrapping paper, ribbons and cards, almost all of which go on sale at this time of year. You'll probably be glad you have last year's wrap when you see next year's prices.

And definitely wear comfortable clothes and walking shoes, because you might be engaged in this activity for hours.

You might also consider carefully exactly where you want to shop on that busy day. Designer outlet centers and off-price retailers don't really have post-holiday sales because their prices are always discounted, so crowds might be smaller at these stores than at your local mall. They'll also be smaller at neighborhood shopping areas, including many downtown, and those shops will be just as anxious for your business with after-Holiday sales, too.

Virginia's McArthur/Glen Group, a developer of designer outlets typically located just outside major U.S. metropolitan areas, which feature designer merchandise at substantially reduced prices, offers some general shopping tips that might prove especially useful on that day after Christmas:

- Wear low-heeled shoes that can be slipped on and off easily, especially if you're looking for new shoes.

- Leave your purse at home and carry money and credit cards in a jacket pocket or money belt. And carry several pieces of identification, especially if you plan to write checks.

- If you're shopping for new wardrobe items, wear clothes that are basic and neutral. A white blouse that will look good with all kinds of skirts, pants and jackets is especially appropriate.

- Ask the salesperson what merchandise is most current, so you can get an idea of what's new in fashion.

- Bring pictures of a "look" you're trying to achieve so the salesperson can better serve you.

- Take a large, hefty shopping bag with you. One large bag is easier to carry than many smaller bags.