



THE PRESS ASSOCIATION – CHRISTMAS SHOPPING 2005

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By Lisa Haynes, PA Features

:: For more information on the John Lewis personal shopper experience, please contact your local branch. For more information on buy:time visit www.buy-time.co.uk (with pictures)

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It's the time of year when shopaphobics face their worst nightmare and shopaholics relish in bags of guilt-free spending - the Christmas shopping spree.

The festive hunt for presents is big business. Over 19 million people expect to spend a record 56 hours or more shopping in the build-up to Christmas, according to a Royal Mail survey.

But despite hordes of shoppers hitting the high street, 14 million people cite shopping as their least favourite festive task.

Super-shopper Coleen McLoughlin may think nothing of indulging in a £10,000 spending spree, but when it comes to Christmas, many of us are left craving a seasonal sherry to calm the nerves.

"There is a lot of running around to do when you're Christmas shopping," says Claire Brynteson, managing director of Buy:time, a concierge company specialising in buying gifts for clients.

"Being organised is key. It's essential that you have a working list and start early. We all tend to spend more when we're rushed, stressed and panic buying."

:: WAYS TO SHOP

More than eight in 10 people in Britain show symptoms of stress while Christmas shopping, according to the British Heart Foundation. Only 3% of shoppers say the seasonal shop doesn't stress them out at all.

Over half find crowded shops and long queues the most stressful part, but there are other options, according to Brynteson.

"It's nice to enjoy a bit of the festive feeling by getting out there on the high streets and coming home laden with bags - but that only applies to those who enjoy shopping and many don't," she says.

"A mix of high street, catalogues and the internet are the most effective mix for Christmas shopping, with an emphasis on the latter two for convenient, stress-reduced shopping."

Delivery vans and modems are fast replacing chimneys and Santa's sack. Instead of braving the busy high street, many people are logging on to the simplicity of shopping online.

Brynteson says: "It's a good idea to use the internet - mainly for ideas and researching products and prices. If you're familiar with the web, buy as much as possible online and that way you have most of your presents delivered right to your doorstep."

Check out price comparison websites like kelkoo.co.uk and pricerunner.com to ensure you bag the best bargains. If you choose to embark on an internet shop, never buy from a site that doesn't display a returns policy, and ensure the company displays its full contact details.

:: SHOPPING TIPS

Whether you're a savvy shopper or the sort of person who comes out in a cold sweat near a shop, most people could do with a helping hand when it comes to Christmas.

Janice Webster, a personal shopper at John Lewis, has this advice:

:: Take the time to make a complete list.

:: Set a budget and stick to it.

:: Don't leave your shopping too late and miss all the interesting ideas. The really clever gifts have sold out by the last two weeks before Christmas, so shoppers are faced with fewer choices and panic buying sets in.

:: If you're thinking of buying personal items, say for a partner, do some research before you shop. Find out their correct size by taking a discreet look in the wardrobe and check out their favourite fragrance and cosmetic brands on the dressing table.

:: Buy the big, important gifts first - the rest will follow more easily. Remember, a really good gift idea can work for several different people.

:: Pace yourself and allow breaks for coffee and lunch.

:: If traipsing the shops fills you with dread, opt for a big department store with a huge variety of ideas under one roof.

:: Don't leave in the morning with a heavy heart. Enjoy the day and get in the festive spirit.

:: INGENIOUS IDEAS

A lack of inspiration can be a big stumbling block in the quest for Christmas presents. Brynteson says there are ingenious ideas around that you can purchase from the comfort of your sofa.

"Sending friends out for a meal is a lovely present," she says. "It's a real treat for all the time-starved people who never stop to relax. Book a table at your favourite restaurant and give a credit card number for the meal to be paid for.

"There are also new services that deliver fantastic home-cooked meals or a personal chef for the evening to spoil friends in their own homes."

Try companies like personalchef.uk.com (07929 232 025) or dining4you.co.uk (07939 718 686).

Brynteson also suggests buying a friend a day with a personal shopping stylist, a spa day, sport coaching sessions or tickets for a concert or sporting event. These gift ideas can all be arranged by simply picking up the telephone.

If you're still stuck in a present rut, browse for gift ideas using the internet. Sites like coolgiftsforkids.co.uk, kidspcgames.co.uk and www.hamleys.co.uk are great for children's presents.

Companies such as iroco.co.uk, buyagift.co.uk, www.greatgifts.org and needapresent.com provide some adult gift inspiration, and if presents are a must for pets look at www.petplanet.co.uk or boneonline.co.uk.

But if you're seeking seasonal inspiration for stocking fillers, opt for a cheap and crafty Christmas. Local craft fairs and farmers' markets are the perfect place to for unique gifts and home-cooked goodies. Visit www.craft-fair.co.uk for information on local events in your area.

:: CHEAT'S GUIDE TO CHRISTMAS SHOPPING

If the prospect of Christmas shopping really leaves you dreading December 25, there's always the option to cheat and have yourself a stress-free little Christmas.

Take advantage of a personal shopper - your very own Santa's little helper - to do the hard shopping slog for you. All you have to do is provide a list of friends and family to buy for.

Janice Webster explains how the free service works at John Lewis: "Using the list, we discuss potential present ideas then the personal shopper makes a selection of three possible gifts for each recipient and shows them the options.

"Once the choices are made, we take all the delivery details and purchase the gifts on the customer's behalf. We can giftwrap them and either make them available for collection, or deliver them to the door of the recipients."

Many department stores also hold special events in the run-up to Christmas such as gift wrapping masterclasses and Christmas gift clinics.

To really shop in style, head for the capital. London Gift Consultancy (0870 420 2841) offers a VIP Christmas shopping trip where you can sip champagne, avoid the crowds and let a personal gift shopper do all the running around. There's even a chauffeured car to transport you around London's top shops.

If you prefer to sit tight at home, findmeagift.com has a personal shopper page. Simply type in details about your recipient and their interests and the site conveniently conjures up a list of innovative options.

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