

FINANCIAL SECURITY PLANNING SERVICES, INC.SM



Market Outlook and Holiday Shopping Tips

October 2014

Here is a short video from Brad McMillan, Chief Investment Officer at Commonwealth Financial Network, offering an update on the difficult quarter-end for the markets, international volatility, and the status of the U.S. economy.



Market Thoughts for October 2014

Tips and Tricks for Smart Holiday Shopping

As the end of the year approaches, shopping malls and online stores will soon be bustling with bargain hunters on a mission to check items off their gift lists. Yes, the holidays



are just around the corner, and, according to the National Retail Federation, the average person will spend about \$740 on presents, decorations, and the like this year. Although the thought of crowded parking lots, long lines, and sold-out items may be daunting, these smart shopping strategies can help you ease the

Wishing you a **Happy** and **Safe** Halloween!

stress of gift-buying.

Plan ahead

It may seem obvious, but planning ahead is key to efficient holiday shopping. Knowing what you want from different stores and how much you can spend will help you make quick work of your list. Here are a few ideas for getting organized before the rush starts:

- **Make a detailed list.** There's nothing worse than forgetting someone and having to make a last-minute trip to the mall. In addition to friends and family members, think of any coworkers, teachers, or neighbors you'd like to acknowledge this year.
- **Set a budget.** Before you spend a dime, ask yourself how much you want to shell out overall. (Be sure your total is realistic.) Then, break out costs for each individual on your list.
- **Do your research.** It's helpful to compare products and prices online before heading to the mall. Making a game plan for what you want to buy and where can help you avoid rushing from store to store looking for the items on your list.
- **Get there early.** Some retailers program their registers the night before a sale, so shopping after 6:00 P.M. the night prior can be a great way to take advantage of advertised discounts before the crowds descend.

Try shopping online

Visiting brick-and-mortar stores during the holiday season often means waiting in traffic and searching for scarce parking spaces, all to get inside and wait in another line at the register. Although some of the best deals may be found in-store, buying gifts online has its advantages. Here are some factors to keep in mind:

- **Consider the time value of money.** It's safe to say that browsing products online is much less time-consuming than wading through crowds at the mall, especially if you're not sure what you want. Staying home and hopping on the Internet can save you time (and gas money), at least until you've figured out what you're buying and where.
- **Weigh your shipping options.** Many online retailers can ship your purchase to a different location than the billing address. This can be a useful feature if you're traveling and want to send gifts directly to your destination. Some merchants also let you buy online and pick up the item at the store.
- **Check return policies.** Stores' policies vary significantly, so before you buy anything online, get the details on returning and exchanging items. For instance, who pays for return shipping? Can you return an item you order online to your local retail store?
- **Stick with trusted retailers.** It's best to do business with merchants you know and to avoid any too-good-to-be-true online promotions. If you're interested in an item on an unfamiliar website, look for the site's security and privacy seals or check out other customers' experiences at www.bizrate.com.

Find creative ways to save money (and time)

Whether you plan to shop online or at the mall, saving a little money here and there can really help stretch your holiday budget. For example:

- **Compare prices on the go.** If you need to check prices while you're out and about, consider using a smartphone app like Red Laser, which lets you scan a product to see if it's available anywhere else for less.
- **Use cash.** Shoppers who pay with credit cards are likely to spend more than those with cash in hand. It's all too easy to buy on impulse this time of year, and making cash purchases may help deter you from blowing your budget.
- **Outsource gift wrapping.** Many charity groups offer gift-wrapping services in malls and stores. For a small donation, you'll save yourself some time, not to mention the cost of supplies like ribbon and tape.
- **Don't overlook coupons.** During the holidays, coupon specials abound. Browse your local newspaper supplements, and look online for deals from retail stores you plan to visit. Apps like Coupon Sherpa can even deliver discount offers to your phone.

Make a post-shopping to-do list

After you've finished your shopping, there are still a few things you can do to avoid last-minute hassles:

- **Keep track of purchases.** Save your store receipts and print out confirmations for online purchases. This can come in handy when checking your credit card or bank statements, and also if you need to return or exchange items.
- **Include gift receipts.** As you wrap your packages, enclose a gift receipt so recipients can easily return the item, if necessary.
- **Get to the post office ASAP.** If you plan to mail any packages, it's best to do so as soon as your shopping is done. The U.S. Postal Service and other shipping companies only get busier and busier as the holidays draw near.

Here's to a more peaceful season!

The holidays shouldn't be stressful, but they certainly can be if you wait until the last minute to finish your shopping. We hope these tips will help make your preparations a bit more pleasant-and give you more time to celebrate with your loved ones!

My staff and I deeply appreciate the continuing opportunity to work with you. Please let me know if you have any questions or requests. Thank you.

Sincerely,

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