

It's that time of year again

Last minute online shopping

The holiday season is here. Love it, loathe it, or both in equal measure, the one thing you can't do is entirely ignore it. Happily, nowadays the Internet can make it much easier to avoid winter driving, struggling with the crowds at the mall and getting presents home. Gift-buying can now be done all at home, day or night, in the comfort of your pajamas, and with home delivery, too.

However, to fully utilize these opportunities still takes time, preparation, and safe online practices. For the pressures are even greater these days. With such abundance and variety available, people expect more, and usually for less – gifts that would have been perfectly adequate years ago may seem insufficient these days.

And this year, Internet holiday buying is bigger than ever. 2014 set **records**, a total of \$3.73 billion for Thanksgiving and Black Friday alone, with half of that coming from sales through mobile devices. This year Adobe **expects** an 11% increase over last year, with a staggering \$83 billion spent overall – and with the lowest prices to be on Thanksgiving Day itself.



While one e-commerce website **predicts** online sales will increase 13.7% as people spend more, it's still below the highest levels set in 2010 – despite the recent advent of “buy now” buttons on many webpages that make it even easier.

The price of procrastination

If you've waited until now to begin your holiday shopping online, you're not alone. Last year, slightly less than half of online shoppers got all their buying done by Cyber Monday. But at this point, time and economics are no longer on your side. In order to take full advantage of e-commerce, it pays to order early enough to get the best deals and free or cheaper shipping.

Many people used to wait until the last minute hoping for the best deals. This no longer applies online at all, and even Black Friday sales are declining due to the Internet. Worse: with the holidays fast approaching, shipping can easily cost more than the gifts themselves.

One way to avoid this dilemma is to combine online and real-world shopping. The ease of weighing prices and product features online is a great convenience the Web provides. Sites like **Comparison Shopping** use specialized search engines for each product and service category. And such is the Web today that you can even comparison shop comparison shopping sites – eBizMBA daily **ranks** the top 15 most popular.

These make judging costs simple, but be aware that the prices quoted online may *not* apply to the very same items on the shelves in the chain's brick-and-mortar stores. But you can also use the Internet to find local, nearby providers of unusual gifts. Some websites focus specifically on nearby retailers, like **Yelp** and **Shop Local**.

Such sites, however, often are geared toward national chains. For some reason, Amazon is **shutting down** its own neighborhood shopping guide a week before Christmas, but **Yahoo Local**

is still up and running. And please don't forget SWCP's newly-updated **Epromenade** of fine nearby merchants who are also fellow members.

Weightless gift alternatives

Another way to avoid shipping costs and delays altogether is to give presents that don't require any, or very little. Tickets to upcoming events are a welcome possibility – **Fandango** is already selling pre-release tickets to screenings of the new Star Wars movie, for instance.

Gift cards are a wildly-popular alternative for desperate last-minute Santas: they're very convenient; they don't reflect your personal tastes or how well you know the recipient, giving that person the ability to choose their own goodies; and they can be found in retail locations everywhere. The downside is that they may seem less personal or thoughtful, and the receiver knows about how much you spent on them.

But merchants love them for their convenience and the fact that most are not completely used up by the time they expire. And you can not only buy them online directly from the stores, you can find discount wholesalers online and even sites that will buy your unused ones – and some places, like **Gift Card Granny** – do both.

Software and computer services are another option. But purchasing programs – like buying computer hardware – can be fraught with trouble unless you have a good idea of the intended recipient's system and technical capabilities, as well as interests. In other words, unless you're a geek buying for a geek (or a newbie) don't try it.

Computer *services*, on the other hand, require far less technical knowledge to purchase. And here, **SWCP** can help with gift certificates. We offer computer diagnostics, tune-ups and cleaning up both the machine and the operating system. Plus we can repair or reinstall systems, install new parts and programs, even copy data.

Other possibilities include a personal **domain name registration**, an extra **email account**, even **back-up services**. Call Tech Support or check our **website** for conditions and details. And while you're at it, why not give *yourself* a present from us by scheduling a virus/spyware clean-up? We offer one *free* scrubbing per year to each customer. It's our way of showing our appreciation to the good folks whose continued

support provides our livelihoods. Happy Holidays to each and all of you!



Remember security basics

The holiday period is stressful enough; don't add to your misery by getting snared by a scammer. With all the seasonal pressures, deadlines, and anxieties, it's easy to fall for a fake message supposedly from a bank, store, credit card company – or even us, your friendly, neighborhood Internet Service Provider.

While many spam messages remain crude, with poor grammar or misspellings and content that quickly give the game away, many are becoming surprisingly sophisticated. A good rule of thumb is **do not click on any links in an email** unless you are absolutely certain of the sender.

Whether it's an email reply, a webpage, even a document, it could be booby-trapped. The best practice is to enter the link from memory if you can or from a bookmark if you have one, but get it from Google *only* if you can't remember – because sometimes Google gets fooled, too.

Spammers are always improving their ruses and lately we've seen some spam supposedly from us that ask the receiver to call a phone number about their account, rather than include a link. The strategy behind the scam is not clear, but if a message has any number but the one below, it's definitely *not* from Southwest Cyberport.

If you are suspicious, please forward the message to help@swcp.com and we'll gladly check it out for you. You'll be helping yourself and everybody else on our system out, too.

Also, be extremely careful when using free public Wifi in coffee shops and other locations.

Above all, do *not* order anything online in such a location. Let's stay safe out there.



Southwest Cyberport

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505.232.7992 • swcp.com • help@swcp.com

5021 Indian School NE, Suite 600, Albuquerque, NM 87110

Portal editor/chief writer, Jay Nelson jnelson@swcp.com
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