



COVID considerations for holiday shopping

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we have had to be flexible when making everyday purchases. As stores struggle to stock shelves, many retailers placed purchasing limits on cleaning products, meats, and nonperishable food items. If shopping for essentials such as toilet paper, hand soap, and rice was difficult in 2020, you should expect similar challenges when buying nonessentials this holiday season. Be a prepared holiday shopper this year with these COVID-specific considerations.

Shipping delays

Online shoppers and gift-givers should expect shipping delays this fall. The United States Postal Service acts as a central mail distribution hub for several major shipping services. The USPS often does “last-mile deliveries” for other parcel companies. That means the other companies handle the long-distance portions of a shipment, and the US Postal Service handles the last few miles. Your mailperson then delivers the packages along normal routes.

How does this affect you? If you order through a company that transfers last-mile deliveries to local post offices, that might delay your package. The volume of packages the USPS ships is up almost 50% since 2019. People avoid going out now and rely more on online shopping and delivery. The USPS is facing other challenges such as worker shortages, financial strains, and organizational restructuring. Seasonal demand on local mail systems may exceed their ability to deliver.

If you plan to receive or mail packages this holiday season, give yourself plenty of time. Start your shopping early, pay careful attention to estimated delivery dates and shipping surcharges, and track your packages. Also, with shipping rates on the rise, estimate what it will cost to mail your package ahead of time with your preferred carrier. Build this into your holiday budget.

Reduced stock and reduced-capacity retailers

If you plan to shop in-store this holiday season, it is also important to plan. Stores have shortened business hours and reduced the number of shoppers inside stores at a given time because of social distancing requirements. These restrictions may make it harder to shop in-person for holiday gifts. To avoid waiting in line to enter a store, shop during off-peak hours when possible. Avoid lunchtime, evenings, and weekends when crowds may be heaviest. Also, social distancing rules mean you are more likely to wait in longer checkout lines. To sidestep this, some stores have smartphone apps that allow customers to scan selections as they shop and then pay online, bypassing the checkout register.

With manufacturing shortages and back-ordered items, there is no guarantee of stocked store shelves. To help with COVID crowd (and virus) control, many retailers are encouraging shoppers to browse in-store inventory, purchase items online, and pick up their purchases curbside. This shopping strategy is a way to avoid shipping uncertainties and make selections from what is available. This holiday season use technology to your advantage by checking retailer websites before heading to the store to see what items are in stock before you buy.

Thinking outside the (mail)box

To avoid hassles of COVID-related shopping this year, think outside of the box — and the mailbox. Try these additional tips for holiday shopping in 2020.

- Send digital holiday cards instead of printed ones.
- Give electronic gift cards that you can buy directly from a retailer’s website and email to a person’s inbox.
- Celebrate Christmas in July! Or any month. Postponing traditional holiday celebrations gives you scheduling and shopping flexibility, as well as something to look forward to in the new year!
- Gift a low- or no-cost experience, like a museum, park, or DIY day, instead of a tangible gift.
- Give your time to someone who would appreciate it more than another “thing.”
- Shop small and support local retailers by buying from their in-stock inventory.
- Be a smart online shopper using these tips from the MoneyWi\$e newsletter at <https://fcs-hes.ca.uky.edu/files/2019-12-moneywise-newsletter.pdf>

Reference

US Postal Service. “U.S. Postal Service Reports Third Quarter Fiscal 2020 Results.” Aug. 7, 2020. (Retrieved Sept. 8, 2020) <https://about.usps.com/newsroom/national-releases/2020/0807-usps-reports-third-quarter-fiscal-2020-results.htm>

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