



Plan to be stress-free this holiday season

The holidays always seem to be just around the corner. It won't be long before families are exchanging presents. Holidays and gifts can take a big bite out of your budget so planning ahead will help keep your budget under control.

It is important not to get caught up in the last minute emotion of the season and spend more than you planned. Holiday overspending ruins many festive occasions and can result in long repayment schedules.

Instead, at the start of the year, determine how much you will spend for the holidays. Put aside money each month to achieve your goal.

The following are suggestions to help relieve holiday stress and keep expenses low:

- **Shop early for gifts.** Take advantage of sales, specials and bargains. Don't over buy or forget you have already shopped for someone.
- **Make your own gifts.** Use skills you have to sew, bake, paint or make crafts.
- **Don't be a "One gift for you...one gift for me" shopper!** And...don't be tempted to give your gifts early lest you buy more!
- If you have a large family, **consider drawing names to exchange gifts.**
- **Shop your local craft fairs and shows for specialty items** - you'll find some great gifts. Sometimes you can bargain with the vendor.
- Family members would appreciate **an IOU to mow the lawn or wash the car** in the spring.
- If you plan to fill stockings or bags for the children, **try putting a few pieces of fruit (apples & oranges) in the bottom first.** Also, coloring books and scratch pads make great inexpensive fillers
- **Know your merchants' return policies** before buying.

- **Don't forget to plan ahead for rarely considered expenses** like holiday decorations, special candies, baking supplies, increased utility bills, food consumption and wrapping paper.

SHOPPING SAFETY

Keep your eye out for theft and fraud. Follow these simple rules.

- **Keep a list of all credit and charge card account numbers, with company phone numbers, in a safe place, not with you.**
- **Keep all receipts in a safe place.**
- **Never sign a blank receipt.**
- **Keep your credit card in view at all times when using it for a purchase.**
- **Always notify the creditor immediately if there is an error on your billing statement.**
- **Know the company before ordering and giving your credit card number over the telephone or internet.**





It's Always a Good Time for a Financial Checkup

Now is a great time to take stock of your personal financial situation. Here are some tips to get started.

Create a New Budget

List your income and expenses. Include 'savings' as an expense. Keep expenses low so you have money available to achieve your goals.

Review Your Goals

Write them down. Goals should be specific (how much and how long), measurable (how you will know that you're moving ahead), reasonable and realistic.

Get a Handle on Credit Cards

Do you have too much credit card debt? Put yourself on a credit card diet.

- Reduce spending to find extra money
- Pay more than the minimum monthly payments
- Pay down the cards with the highest interest rate first
- Use cash for new purchases



Adjust Your Wage Withholding

If you get a large refund from Uncle Sam each year, consider adjusting your W-4 with more exemptions. Increased money in your paycheck can help you achieve your goals throughout the year.

Organize Your Tax Information

Keep good records throughout the year to make tax time painless. Create a folder called 'this year's tax information.' Include paid bills, donation receipts, W-2s, 1099s, and other documents that you or your tax preparer will need.

Calculate Your Net Worth

List and add up the total of all of your outstanding liabilities (what you owe) and subtract it from the total value of your assets (what you own.) The result is your net worth. Calculate it once a year.

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