

Gift Ideas

Tips For Buying And Using Gift Cards

(NAPSA)—Shopping for gifts can be a real dilemma. Just what do you get the person who has everything, your finicky Aunt Mary, your co-worker or your child's baby-sitter? Gift cards may be the answer: One size fits all, and the recipients can get exactly what they want. But before you buy a wallet full of gift cards from your favorite retailer or your local financial institution, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), the nation's consumer protection agency, wants you to know that some strings may be attached.

Some cards can be used only at the retailer's store locations; others can be used at any retailer and online. Some have expiration dates. Some let you "reload" or add money to the balance on the card. And some have fees that can reduce the card's value, like activation fees, transaction fees, monthly maintenance fees, inactivity or nonuse fees, replacement fees for lost or stolen cards, or balance inquiry fees.

Store cards sold by retailers are usually issued free of charge. But banks often charge a fee to buy their cards. Some bank gift cards come with a Personal Identification Number (PIN) that lets you withdraw cash from an ATM.

Other things you should know before you buy a gift card:

- Read the fine print. If you don't like the terms and conditions, buy elsewhere.
- Ask about expiration dates and fees. This information may appear on the card itself, on the accompanying sleeve or envelope, or on the issuer's Web site. If you don't see it, ask for it. Make sure that whatever the salesperson tells you is in writing.
- Check on purchase exceptions. For example, can you use a



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store-specific gift card at both the physical store and the store's Web site? Can an "all-purpose" card really be used to buy groceries or gasoline?

- Treat gift cards like cash. If your card is lost or stolen, report it to the issuer immediately. You may be out the entire amount on the card. Some issuers will not replace the cards, while others will replace them for a fee.

- If your card expires before you've had a chance to use it or exhaust its value, contact the issuer. They may extend the date, although they may charge a fee to do that.

For more smart shopping tips, visit ftc.gov/consumer. The FTC works for the consumer to prevent fraudulent, deceptive and unfair business practices in the marketplace and to provide information to help consumers spot, stop and avoid them. To file a complaint or to get free information on consumer issues, visit ftc.gov or call, toll-free, 1-877-FTC-HELP (1-877-382-4357); TTY: 1-866-653-4261.