

“ There are two types of people in this world. Ones who view returns as a triumph; a best of wills and emerge feeling refreshed. The second type covers at the cashier. They feel ashamed and anxious. They doubt their right to return. — *Danielle Kubes*, personal finance writer

PERSONAL FINANCE

BY DANIELLE KUBES

The wind blows crisp and cool at dawn. A sip of coffee warms me. I've left my parka at home — I can't afford the extra weight.

A crowd is rapidly gathering behind me. Anticipation is ripe in the air.

The doors suddenly open. Boxing Day begins.

Navigating this most special of days, the one I consider a true holy day during this season, is no joke.

Those who do not take it seriously are cursed to live out the next 12 months paying more for goods that they could have gotten for less.

By following these commandments, honed through years of apprenticing at my mother's knee and then sharpened through trial and error, you too can learn to best take advantage of this season of sales.

1.

THOU SHALT NOT ASSUME BOXING DAY HAS THE BEST PRICE

The first rule of Boxing Day is not to fall for Boxing Day. Boxing Day should be considered the opening act of the sale season. As January goes on, deeper discounts often reveal themselves, so you may want to wait to do the bulk of your shopping then.

But you can still get a great deal on Boxing Day if it's a door crasher, a heritage brand like Crane stationery that rarely goes on sale or if you don't want to take the chance that the item will be sold out later.

2.

THOU SHALT RESEARCH

Case the mall a few times between September and November. Leave the money at home, though — this is by far the worst time to buy anything, since you've just missed the August sales and the January ones are still months away.

Instead, bring a notebook. The goal is to figure out what you want, determine the rhythm of the sales and figure out a target price for each item.

Once you do a few in-person research trips and decide what's on your to-buy list, compare in-store prices with online. You may be surprised to know that retail stores with an online presence often have completely different pricing. It's a mystery I have yet to crack, but many books and other merchandise are cheaper, for example, on the Indigo website, than in the bricks-and-mortar store.

By the time Boxing Day comes around you'll be able to get in and out quickly. You know what you want, you'll dismiss fake sales and only pay attention to items that have hit a price at you feel is worth paying.

Take some time, though, to write down the promotions for the stores you frequent. You can use this information for planning purposes next year, as they tend to be similar year to year.

3.

THOU SHALT NOT FALL FOR FALSE SALES

Retailers know that a sale sign to shoppers is like honey to bees. To capitalize on the psychology of the sale, they've begun several borderline-dishonest practices.

The most common one is having a constant stream of sales. If there's always a sale, then the sale price is the actual price and the sticker price is fake. At that point, it becomes a matter of finding the best sale. You think you're getting a deal for buying one and getting the second half off, but just last week you could have gotten 30 per cent off the whole store! Large American retailers like Ann Taylor

and Bath and Body Works seem to be especially guilty of this.

For example, the sticker price on a three-wick scented candle at Bath and Body Works is \$22.50, which I seriously doubt anyone has ever paid, since there is a constant rotating weekly promotion of either buy two candles for \$25.50, or buy three candles and get three free. If you ignore the noise and do the math, it's easy to see that all these so-called sales all end up having almost an identical price of each candle being \$11.25 or \$12.75. Therefore, it would only be a real deal if you could get the price lower than their best fake-sale price.

(This is possible, by the way. One day a year, in December, each can-

dle is just \$10.50. If you ask a salesperson for a coupon for \$10 off any \$30 purchase, which they usually carry in their aprons, you can buy three candles for just \$7.17 each. Now that's a real steal!

Another popular tactic is writing a price on the tag that the retailer never intended to sell the item for, and then putting a "sale" price on it — which is actually the real price they intend to sell it at! You think you're getting a deal but you're really paying full price. A class-action law suit was recently launched by Californian shoppers against Kate Spade for such "illusory discounts," and Michael Kors was recently ordered to pay consumers almost US\$5 million for years of making up

prices on clothing tags in its outlet stores.

To avoid this trap, it's essential you get to know the store well. If, during your research phase, there seems to be a different promotion every week, it's highly likely the store is engaging in false discounting. En garde.

Another way to avoid this is to only buy items on the clearance racks. This is merchandise the store is desperate to get rid of and thus will be on a sale for real. If it's already on clearance and the store also has a promotion where you get an additional discount on the price, you may be able to score the ultimate deal. It's worth your time to carefully parse through the rack.

4.

THOU SHALT NOT SLEEP IN

Door crashers are the real prize on Boxing Day. TVs for hundreds of dollars off, major appliances at half price — these are advertised to draw consumers in, but are only offered in limited quantities. It's worth it to arrive at least an hour early to nab one.

Stores will also often give out gift cards to the first 50 or 100 people in line, and some discounts are only applicable before noon. You can sleep in on New Year's.

5.

THOU SHALT PREPARE THYSELF

Go to bed early. Bring a water bottle, a granola bar and a light sweater. Running shoes are appropriate. Unless you have a car that you can stash it in, I would leave the coat at home. Your goal is to make yourself as comfortable as possible so you can shop at your leisure. Aching feet, for example, will make you want to give up and leave.

Lines for both the change rooms and the checkout are going to be long, so bring headphones and an upbeat playlist. In fact, if you aren't a modest person, it's best to avoid change rooms entirely and wear leggings and a white tank top. You can try anything on over those thin layers.

Leave your friends at home. Besides, it will be more fun to gossip over drinks in the evening about all the great finds you scored.

6.

THOU SHALT NOT BE AFRAID OF RETURNS

There are two types of people in this world. Ones who view returns as a triumph; a best of wills and emerge feeling refreshed. The second type covers at the cashier. They feel ashamed and anxious. They doubt their right to return. If one thing goes wrong, like a tag falls off or they lose the receipt, they abandon all hope of getting their money back and simply stuff the unwanted item to the back of their closet.

The first person needs no tips from me. They know all it takes to return an item is to demand the store do so. (An unused item, friendly policy and available manager always help, of course.)

To the second person: Remember that neither the store nor the cashier wants to make your life harder. In fact, as a valued customer, they want to please you. If returning something will make you more likely to shop at the store again, it makes them happy. Hopefully this will assuage any guilt you have about returning. If that doesn't work, remember that the store is likely making an annual net profit of several hundred million dollars and probably marked up the item you're returning by at least 50 per cent.

Keep in mind that the worst a store can do is say no. If they refuse a full refund, ask them about any possibility of an exchange or store credit. You'd be surprised at how flexible most stores can be.

Try to only shop at stores with friendly return policies. Large American retailers and department stores like The Bay or Express have the most generous return policies. I once returned a worn pair of sunglasses to Loft a full year after purchasing! I only got the current sale price on a gift card, but still, better than nothing.

Whether it's a gift receipt included in a card or acquired directly from the cashier, put the receipt in your wallet immediately. I suggest declining an email receipt. First, do you really want them to have your email? Secondly, print always speaks louder than digital, and it's fun to wave it around to emphasize your point.

Make a note in your calendar a week before a return policy expires so you don't miss it.

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