

Great sites for holiday shopping

We checked out dozens of online stores so you don't have to! Plus, tips to save you tons of time and money.



SERVE IT UP
We found these cool Andy Warhol flower plates at PlumParty.com, a great place for gifts and fun party supplies.

you probably already have a few go-to sites for gifts, like RedEnvelope.com or PotteryBarn.com. This year, get a little more creative and give your friends, family members, and co-workers a real treat. We scoured the Web for sites with fun and quirky gifts for everyone on your list. And you can feel good about ordering at these sites because they were screened by experts at our Consumer Reports WebWatch division, a watchdog group focused on raising Web-site standards. We made sure each site complies with our guidelines for customer service and disclosure of important information, including complete contact info (the owner's name, phone number, and physical address) so it's easy to track down the company if something goes wrong. We ordered all the great gifts pictured here so we could check them out, though we did not test them in our labs. We also looked at return policies and shipping fees. In addition to these 14 great Web sites, see our tips for saving money and time at Amazon, eBay, or anywhere else online.



For your significant other

History.com

What guy wouldn't love a WWII documentary (the site has 296 DVDs on that subject alone, including Ken Burns' latest, "The War," and the "Ultimate World War II" set, \$42, above) or one of the History Channel's rugged series like "Ice Road Truckers." There is also Toys & Games section. (You can pick up the PlayStation2 Civil War video game, \$40, for the kid in him.) Don't know what he'll like? Click on the "Gift Finder."

Shipping \$2.95-\$8.95; free for orders over \$200

Returns Within 60 days of ship date

Last day to buy for Christmas One week before with expedited shipping

BuyDig.com

If your guy is a gearhead, look no further. This site has everything: cameras, GPS navigators, big-screen TVs, and more. In addition to a wide selection, it has good prices. We found an XM satellite radio receiver for \$56 (below); another site had it for \$80. The search functions make shopping easy.

Shipping Varies by product

Returns 30 days

Last day to buy for Christmas 48 hours before (check site closer to the holidays)



For the kids

AllPosters.com

What teen doesn't want to decorate his room? Here you'll find a huge assortment of movie posters, like the one for cult classic "Shaun of the Dead" (only \$8.99; get it framed for \$29.99). Or do a little sleuthing to figure out your kid's favorite band and click on "Music" to buy a framed CD with its cover art for \$49.99. (See the example at right.)

Shipping \$3.99-\$39.99, depending on size

Returns 30 days

Last day to buy for Christmas

Depends on item (see site for details)



Oliebollen.com

You'll love the adorable clothes like Paul Frank hoodies with detachable sleeve puppets for \$50 (right) and funky tees for tots. The site also has fun kid gifts like a marble maze construction set with wooden blocks (\$75). The site makes shopping super easy by organizing several product categories by age.

Shipping Generally, \$6-\$9, depending on a product's weight and dimensions

Returns 30 days for refund; 60 days for credit or exchange

Last day to buy for Christmas Dec. 18



For your girlfriends

Loccitane.com

This French company's body-care products look—and smell—upscale but can be surprisingly affordable. Pick four travel-size products, including the Almond Delicious Paste Body Treatment (\$8), and they'll come in a little tote. Or choose packaged sets, like the Grape Shower Oil & Beauty Milk combo (\$44, left).

Shipping \$8 for standard FedEx ground
Returns 14 days for refund; 14-30 days for store credit; product must be unopened
Last day to buy for Christmas Dec. 13 for standard shipping; Dec. 20 for overnight shipping



PlumParty.com

Don't be fooled by the emphasis on theme parties; go straight to the "Plum Boutiques" for cool gifts like Andy Warhol flower plates (\$22, below), lipstick cases (\$22) from Tepper Jackson, and vintage-inspired dish towels (\$32). Don't feel like browsing? Check out the site's picks under "Gifts to Go." And before you check out, be sure to hit the "Party Stuff" section for holiday wrapping paper and greeting cards.

Shipping \$6.95-\$27.95, depending on cost of item
Returns 60 days from order arrival; product must be unopened
Last day to buy for Christmas Dec. 10



For your parents

NapaStyle.com

Find great gifts for the everyday gourmet, from etched glasses (\$58 for six, below) to rare salts. Assemble a cook's package—and print out recipes (Lasagna of Roasted Butternut Squash) to tie in with featured products (NapaStyle Toasted Spice Rub, \$8.50).

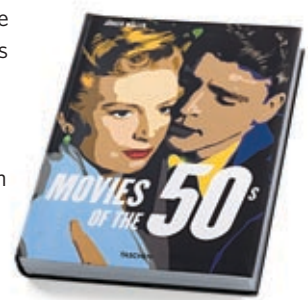
Shipping \$6.95-\$25, depending on gift price
Returns 30 days
Last day to buy for Christmas Dec. 20 with overnight shipping



Taschen.com

For culture vultures, this site offers lots of gorgeous coffee-table books on art, film, design, travel, and more. You can pay \$1,000 and up for limited editions, but there are also plenty of beautiful, more affordable books like "Movies of the 50s" and "Great Escapes Around the World" that only look like they're a thousand bucks (they're under \$50).

Shipping \$5.95; free on orders over \$50
Returns Depends on item
Last day to buy for Christmas Dec. 14



For the people at work

Illuminations.com

What's the best gift you can give an overstressed colleague? A little soothing aromatherapy. (See page 60 for info on essential oils.) The site offers a huge array of candles in yummy scents like crushed ginger and apple cider housed in frosted glass jars (\$4.95 to \$21.95, below). Or choose a gift set of feng shui candles (\$35).

Shipping Starts at \$5.95
Returns Anytime
Last day to buy for Christmas Dec. 21



Crane.com

Really, it's not as stuffy as you might think. The old stationer has classics like traditional Waterman pens for a conservative boss, as well as fun stuff like zebra-print Post-it pad holders (\$15). For disorganized colleagues, we like the fabric memo boards (\$24) and the posy memo holder (\$10, right).

Shipping Starts at \$5.95; free for orders over \$75
Returns Up to 60 days for nonpersonalized items
Last day to buy for Christmas Dec. 17



Be an Amazon woman

GET THE MOST FROM THIS ONLINE POWERHOUSE—AND SAVE BIG

If you can't find a gift on Amazon.com, you're just not looking hard enough. The giant site sells millions of items ranging from clothing and makeup to computers and appliances. These five tactics will help you dig up the best deals.

AVOID DISAPPOINTMENTS. Amazon's huge network of merchants is great if you're looking for a hard-to-find product. But don't assume that every seller is as reliable as Amazon. See if you're buying from a third party by checking under the item's price at the "availability" description. If it's a seller you don't know, look at its feedback rating (a 99 percent or higher is best, and watch out for persistent complaints) and check its Better Business Bureau rating (go to www.bbb.org and click on "check it out" and then "business"). Also type the name of the site, along with the words "scam" or "rip-off," into a search engine to check for complaints. And before you click buy, hit the seller link for shipping charges and return policies.

GET FREE SHIPPING. Super Saver shipping is a great way to save money—as long as your order is over \$25. But what if you're spending only \$21.99? That's where the Amazon Filler Item Finder (www.filleritem.com) comes in. Enter the amount you're short, and the site searches Amazon for items that match that price so you don't have to spend more than you need to.

SAVE CASH. Got piles of loose change lying around? You might hesitate to dump it into the Coinstar machine at your local supermarket because of the 8.9 percent processing fee. But you can avoid the charge by opting to receive an Amazon gift certificate instead of cash. Just follow the prompts, and the gift certificate will be printed on your receipt. (Coinstar will also let you swap your cash for certificates you can use at other merchants, including Circuit City and Old Navy.)

COMPARE PRICES. Amazon offers a mobile version that scales down its display to fit most Web-enabled cell phones. Use it to compare prices while browsing at your local store. Go to www.amazon.com/gp/aw/h.html.

SAVE ON BOOKS. This is one tip that Amazon.com may not want you to follow! Using the Firebox Web browser, download BookBurro (www.bookburro.org). Your computer will automatically check to see if books you're perusing on Amazon are available at other online booksellers that might sell them for less. Soon the tool will be able to check local libraries, too, to see if the book is on the shelves.

ALL WRAPPED UP

We ordered gift-wrapped items from five major Web sites to see what you can expect for those extra few bucks. The wrapping ranged from plain to funky (not necessarily in a good way). It'll probably be different for the holidays, but here's what we got.



Amazon

Well, what do you expect from the Internet megamall? (Wrapping cost: \$4.99)



Barnes & Noble

Another book? Boor-rring! (Wrapping cost: \$3)



Nordstrom

No wrapping paper to tear off (bummer), but nice bow! (Wrapping cost: \$5)



Target

A sack? (Wrapping cost: \$5.95)



Toys 'R' Us

Sorry, Geoffrey the Giraffe. We prefer leopard spots (Wrapping cost: \$4.95)



For your siblings

PatinaStores.com

This stylish home, bath, game, and accessories shop claims to put the kitsch in kitchen, and it isn't kidding. Check out the set of six nesting bowls in tropical colors (\$16.95, shown on the cover) and the trout stapler (\$16, above). Click on the "Our Favorite Picks" link to see products such as pencil-thin magnetic vases (\$40) that stick to a tablecloth with invisible magnets.

Shipping Starts at \$5.95; free for orders over \$100
Returns 14 days for refund; 15-30 days for store credit
Last day to buy for Christmas Dec. 17

Ebags.com

No matter what your bro or sis is into, he or she probably needs something to haul gear. Find hundreds of reasonably priced bags here, including the Holly Aiken Turbo tote (\$155, below). Also, check out the collections of cool messenger bags and iPod and iPhone cases.

Shipping Free to \$14.99 for most items
Returns 60 days for refund or exchange
Last day to buy for Christmas Dec. 18



For your grandparents

Crosleyradio.com

Think nostalgia! This retro online music shop has old-school radios, record players, music boxes, and mini jukeboxes—many costing less than \$100. There are even telephones inspired by decades past, like a 1930s "kettle desk phone" (\$59.95, below). Check the "Specials" section for deals.

Shipping Varies by item; \$8.95 for a CD jukebox
Returns 90 days from sale date
Last day to buy for Christmas Dec. 14



LiquidPlanet.com

Click "Shop" for French press mugs, (\$28.99, below), teakettles (\$40 and up), espresso cups (\$49), loose teas (prices vary), and more. Or sweeten up drinks with organic syrups (\$10).

Shipping Varies by item; free for orders over \$60
Returns 30 days for refund
Last day to buy for Christmas Dec. 19



BEAT E-TAILERS AT THEIR OWN GAME

Sidestep sneaky gotchas like these at online shopping sites

GOTCHA You left an item in your shopping basket. Now it costs more.
Your move Uh-oh. You're a victim of a little trick called "dynamic pricing." If you leave an item in your shopping basket, the seller knows you're interested and may raise the price, hoping you'll buy anyway. To avoid being duped, use price-comparison sites such as Shopzilla.com and Froogle.com to make sure you're getting the best deal. Or try another computer, say your work PC. And periodically clear out "cookies" (little electronic footprints left by Internet searches) from your browser.

GOTCHA The item is broken or poorly made, but the seller won't respond.
Your move If you used a credit card, you're in luck. Write to your card company within 60 days after the charge appears on your bill. Request that your card issuer remove the charge while it investigates.

Checks and money orders are a heck of a lot tougher. If you've tried unsuccessfully to get in touch with the company by using contact information listed on the site, try logging on to www.networksolutions.com/whois/index.jsp. There you'll find out to whom the Web site is registered so you can track down someone to complain to.

GOTCHA You got socked with outrageous shipping fees.
Your move It's a frustratingly common problem. A survey by Harris Interactive showed that 71 percent of U.S. shoppers consider high shipping fees to be a leading drawback of shopping from home. To avoid disappointment, dig up the numbers before you buy by clicking on the "customer service" or "help" link, where fees should be listed. Or try using a price comparison site, such as Shopzilla.com or Shopping.com, that calculates fees for you.

eBay Cheat Sheet

5 TIPS FOR SAFER BIDDING AND BUYING

You can't eliminate risk when buying from strangers, but you can lessen it with these simple steps.

CHECK BUYER FEEDBACK. For any item, look at the right-hand side of the page. The "Meet the Seller" box will show the seller's rating. Try to buy from sellers who have at least a 99 percent positive rating.

LOOK AT SELLER LONGEVITY. A "member since" date tells you how long the person has been conducting transactions. If the seller ID has changed within the past 30 days, which might be a bad sign, an icon will appear on the listing page.

LEARN TO SNIFF OUT SCAMMERS. Test the e-mail address shown for the seller by sending a question or a request for additional photos. Try calling the phone number if one is listed. If you don't get a response, stay away; you might be dealing with a scam artist.

AVOID OVERPAYING. To make sure those Prada pumps are really a bargain, do a quick price check on a site such as Shopzilla.com or Froogle.com. You may be able to get the shoes cheaper elsewhere and avoid a bidding frenzy.

BID SMART. Establish a top price and stick to it. Remember that your desired object may turn up again, unless it's one of a kind. "Proxy bidding" is a neat tool that can help you stick to your budget. Simply enter the maximum price you're willing to pay, and whenever a competitor posts a higher bid, yours is automatically bumped up just enough to put you in the lead. The drill is repeated until you've reached your ceiling or won.