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Shop local this holiday season and beyond

Various components come together to make the holiday season a festive time of year. There's a lot to get done in a short amount of time during the season, and part of that includes shopping for family members and friends on your shopping list. Shopping can be complicated and involve identifying which stores will be the best places to shop. Local retailers make the perfect place to shop for gifts.

According to the American Express Business Economic Impact Study, more than two-thirds of every dollar spent with a local business stays in the community. Indeed, shopping local benefits consumer and community alike. The following are some of the many perks to shopping locally throughout the holiday season.

❄️ **Personalized attention:** Small businesses are known for their personalized customer service and owners and staff are often lauded for taking the time to interact and learn about their customers, a dynamic that is impossible at larger retailers.

❄️ **Meet and interact with people:** Shopping in-person at local stores, you'll see faces from your community and become better known in the local area.

❄️ **Shorter lines:** Local stores are bound to have smaller crowds and thus shorter lines. That translates to less stress and hassle when it comes to getting in and out with holiday gifts.

❄️ **Smaller carbon footprint:** Pollution, traffic congestion, habitat loss, and resource

More than 2/3 of every dollar spent with a local business stays in the community.



depletion may not occur on the same levels when shopping locally compared to patronizing big box stores. That's because local retailers tend to create or source their products locally, whereas many big box stores secure their goods overseas.

❄️ **Easier parking:** This goes hand-in-hand with smaller crowds, as shopping locally does not typically require driving up and down endless aisles at malls or standalone retail stores in an effort to find a parking spot. Local retailers

in town may have on-street parking or closed lots that are convenient to shoppers.

❄️ **Small batch shopping experience:** Consumers can secure items in small businesses that are not carbon copies of those found across the country at major retail chains. When seeking a unique, thoughtful gift, shopping locally is the way to go.

Shopping locally this holiday season provides an array of benefits to consumers, and helps to solidify a strong Main Street in communities.

Planning pointers for holiday hosts

Hosting is a significant part of the holiday season. From late November until New Year's Day, millions of people across North America welcome friends and family into their homes. Whether you're hosting a small gathering with locally based loved ones or welcoming distant relatives into your home for several days, the following are some planning pointers to ensure your home is ready and guests feel welcome this holiday season.

❄️ **Hire a local cleaning service.** The holiday season can be hectic. Holiday functions at school, office parties, community events, and more fill up social schedules between late

November and early January. Busy social schedules leave little time for house cleaning, which is a must before welcoming guests into a home. A local cleaning service can clean the whole house for hosts welcoming overnight guests or focus on a few popular entertaining areas if party guests will be going home at the end of the night.

❄️ **Get an early head count.** Ask party invitees and prospective overnight guests to RSVP early enough to ensure you can accommodate everyone's needs. Additional seating may be required for holiday parties, while hosts may need to arrange for extra bedding for overnight guests. The earlier

you know who's coming, and potentially staying, the more time you have to ensure you can accommodate everyone.

❄️ **Rent items from a local party supply store.** When hosting large gatherings, a party supply store can be the place to go for decorations, seating, food trays, utensils, and more. Such stores also may rent specialty supplies like outdoor heat lamps for cold weather parties or tents and outdoor tables and chairs in areas where the weather is warm during the holiday season. Hosts can often rent everything they need to host, saving them the expense of buying items that may sit in storage the rest of the year.

❄️ **Arrange for transportation.** Whether guests are flying in from distant lands or local friends, relatives or neighbors stopping in for the night, hosts can arrange for transportation to and from their homes to ensure everyone arrives safely and makes it home without incident. Pick overnight guests up at the airport so they see a friendly face upon arrival. When hosting gatherings with local family and friends, encourage others to share how they intend to get home and recruit designated drivers if you intend to serve alcohol.

Hosts can take heed of these planning pointers so guests feel welcome and have a good time this holiday season.

5

fun gift exchange ideas

Gift-giving is a significant component of the holiday season. Families can embrace traditional gift-giving, but those who want to add a touch of whimsy to gatherings with loved ones can consider these five creative and fun ways to exchange gifts.

1. Play the plastic wrap game.

To exchange small stocking stuffer gifts, compile gift cards, cash, small toys, candy, and even some larger gifts (all participants can chip in and one person shops for the gifts). The designated person in charge begins rolling up the gifts in the plastic, adding one every few rolls. Turning the ball 90 degrees while wrapping helps make a more round, finished gift ball. To play, the person with the ball puts on oven mitts and tries to unwrap as much as they can to access the gifts, while the person to the left is attempting to roll doubles on dice. When doubles are made, that person passes the dice to the left and starts his or her own attempts to get at the gifts in the plastic ball. The game ends when all the gifts are revealed, whether everyone has had a chance to unwrap or not.

2. Plan a white elephant gift exchange.

A white elephant exchange is like a secret grab bag. Everyone brings a wrapped gift, and then takes turns choosing a gift based on the number they've been given. When the gift is chosen, the person opens it. The next player can select a fresh gift or steal one of the presents that's already been opened.

3. Host a make-and-take craft party.

With this type of exchange, participants will engage in some form of crafting for the duration of the event, whether it's pottery, painting, epoxy resin pouring, or even knit crafts.



At the end of the night everyone can swap their creations with another or keep their own crafts as gifts.

4. Give the gift of a group outing.

Instead of exchanging material gifts, focus on sharing experiences with friends and family. A trip to watch a sports game or a theater performance can be an excellent way to spend time together, and something a person may not be inclined to do on his or her own. Certain venues will offer discounts on group tickets, so everyone can pool their resources.

5. Host a DIY cookie and cocoa exchange.

Cookies, cocoa and the holidays are a perfect combination. A gift exchange where participants supply ingredients for these sweet treats, share their favorite recipes and then put together the finished products can make for an entertaining and festive afternoon. Each person can fill a cookie tin with baked cookies to take home and mason jars filled with homemade hot cocoa mix and marshmallows can be an additional gift to enjoy later on a chilly evening.

There are plenty of fun ways to exchange gifts during the holiday season.

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Holiday cooking for a crowd made easy

A number of things can be expected during the holiday season. Children will anxiously await visits from Santa and travelers recognize there is bound to be traffic on the roadways and crowds at the airport. And if you're opening your home to guests, those visitors will be expecting some delicious food.

Meals are a big component of holiday entertaining, so much so that holiday hosts may spend weeks pondering what to serve guests. These guidelines can help simplify cooking for a crowd.

Plan make-ahead dishes

Simplifying holiday cooking comes down to spending less time in the kitchen on the day of the festivities. Make-ahead dishes that can be reheated or set in chafing dishes for buffet meals are preferable. There's lots of dishes to choose from, including casseroles, stews, soups, and baked pasta dishes. Avoid fresh pasta offerings, like spaghetti and meatballs, for example. Leftover noodles will get mushy and will not reheat very well.

Ham is a good choice

Ham is a forgiving dish that is quite popular for holiday gatherings. Many hams come pre-cooked and pre-sliced, so producing a flavorful main course may be just a matter of dressing it up with seasonings or even using the glaze that often comes with such products.

Cater a meal

There's certainly pride that comes with offering guests a table full of home-cooked foods. But the expense, effort and time that goes into creating a masterful menu can be taxing. If a lot of people are coming for the holidays, hosts can find out which area businesses offer holiday catering packages and consider them. This frees up more time for mingling with guests. And food establishments often have experience knowing just how much food to have per person, reducing waste and helping hosts avoid having a refrigerator full of leftovers they may or may not eat.



Cooking for a holiday crowd doesn't have to be difficult, especially when hosts employ a few strategies to simplify meal creation.

Delegate some tasks

It's alright to ask guests to bring something to the holiday dinner. In fact, they may be eager to pitch in. If someone brings a salad, another an appetizer and others some desserts, then it is just up to the host to provide the main course and maybe a side or two. This removes a lot of the pressure.

Select familiar foods

Hosts may be tempted to try all of the delicious recipes featured in magazines or online around the holidays. However, sticking with familiar dishes that you have made before reduces the chances



for error. Recipes that can be whipped up by rote will make holiday cooking tasks easier and quicker.



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4 unique holiday party themes



Many people may find themselves hosting everything from intimate gatherings to large family dinners. A fun theme can provide a break from the standard traditions. Consider these four unique party themes when planning holiday parties.

1. Ornament exchange

Decorating the home is commonplace this time of year. Who couldn't use a new trinket for the mantle or an ornament to adorn the tree? Ask all guests to bring a gift-wrapped ornament to the party. Then place numbers in a bowl and have each guest draw a number; this is the order in which they will then select an ornament. After the first person makes their selection, subsequent guests can choose a new ornament from the pile or "steal" one from those already picked. The guest who picked first then has one last chance to keep or steal at the end.

2. Tropical holiday

The weather outside may be frightful, but a tropical island party can be utterly delightful. Give the event an island flair with fruity drinks, grilled kabobs, coconut desserts, and steel-drum music and transform your space with vibrant decorations and twinkling lights.

3. Grinchy party

A party devoted to the Dr. Seuss character The Grinch can be a fun way to pass time together. While the holidays are supposed to be holly and jolly, a Grinch-themed party can put the emphasis on being a little bit more naughty than nice. And who doesn't enjoy an ample serving of roast beast? Have guests come decked out in Grinch costumes or Grinch emblazoned t-shirts or other clothing.

4. Christmas karaoke

Set up the karaoke machine or utilize one of the services available online, and make sure that guests are prepared to belt out their favorite holiday tunes – whether traditional carols or pop hits. A group of ladies can join together for The Waitresses' "Christmas Wrapping" or guests can try their hands at hitting the high notes of Mariah Carey's ubiquitous "All I Want for Christmas Is You."



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Decorate safely this season

Stockings hung by a chimney may seem idyllic, but such decorations can pose a significant safety hazard.

The holiday season wouldn't be the same without decorations, which go a long way toward establishing the festive atmosphere that dominates the month of December.

Injuries and accidents may be the furthest thing from people's minds when decorating for the holidays, but the potential for such outcomes is there. This season, holiday celebrants are urged to keep these safety strategies in mind as they deck the halls.

❄️ **Choose a fresh tree if you're going the natural route.** Some people prefer natural Christmas trees because of their scent and additional characteristics. While it's alright to choose a natural tree, the Consumer Product Safety Commission notes that many artificial trees are fire-resistant, which makes them a good deal safer than natural trees. The CPSC urges individuals who opt for a natural tree to check for signs of freshness before making their decision. Such signs include a tree that is green, fresh needles that are difficult to pull from branches and do not break when bent between the fingers, and a trunk that is sticky with resin. In addition, when bounced on the ground, a fresh tree will not shed too many needles. One that does is dried out, which poses a significant safety hazard inside a home.

❄️ **Inspect lights before decorating.** Holiday lights are another staple of the season, but these, too, can pose a safety hazard. The CPSC recommends inspecting both new and old lights for broken or cracked sockets, frayed or bare wires, and/or loose connections. Discard any damaged lights. When hanging lights outside, make sure they are fastened securely to trees,

Electric lights should never be used on a metallic tree, and all lights should be turned off at night before going to bed or leaving the house.

a house or other structures to protect against wind damage. In addition, the CPSC recommends using no more than three standard-size sets of lights per single extension cord. Electric lights should never be used on a metallic tree, and all lights should be turned off at night before going to bed or leaving the house.

❄️ **Be especially cautious with candles.** Electric candles may not provide the same ambiance as more traditional alternatives, but they are a safer option when decorating for the holidays. If using traditional candles, make sure they are never placed on or near natural trees and keep them away from flammable materials, including wrapping paper and other decorations, at all times. Candles should always be extinguished when leaving a room.

❄️ **Exercise extreme caution around the fireplace.** A freshly lit fire can establish a warm and welcoming holiday ambiance. However, it's essential that individuals emphasize extreme caution around the fireplace. Remove all decorations, such as stockings, from the area surrounding the fireplace. The CPSC also notes the importance of keeping a screen before the fireplace whenever a fire is burning.

Decorations help make the holiday season special. Some simple safety precautions can ensure such decorations don't increase the risk for accidents and injuries.



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How to make a home welcoming for holiday guests

A clutter-free guest room is one way for hosts to make spaces more welcoming for guests this holiday season.



Millions of individuals travel to see family and friends during the holiday season. The automotive group AAA estimated that roughly 115 million travelers planned to travel 50 miles or more during the 2023 year-end holiday travel period, which the organization defined as a 10-day window that began on December 23 and ended on New Year's Day.

The 2024 holiday season figures to be just as busy for travelers as 2023, and many of those individuals will accept the hospitality of loved ones while away from home. Holiday hosts can embrace these strategies as they prepare to welcome guests in the weeks ahead.

❄️ Clear clutter from working spaces.

The pandemic sparked some lasting changes, including a greater number of professionals working from home. Some do so part-time while others have become fully remote workers. That shift has led many homeowners to transform guest rooms or pockets of shared living spaces into home offices, which can make a residence feel a little more cramped once guests arrive. Declutter these spaces prior to guests' arrival so they have ample room to relax and maneuver in guest rooms and to ensure there's no shortage of seating or room to spread out in shared spaces like living rooms or dens.

❄️ **Provide some guest room creature comforts.** Some creature comforts in the guest room can make guests feel right at home. A smartphone charging dock on a bedside nightstand is a nice touch that allows guests to keep their chargers tucked into their luggage, ensuring they won't be forgotten when the time comes to return home. A scent diffuser in the guest room is another nice touch that can help travel-weary guests relax and unwind during their stay. A small handful of books and



Prior to planning a holiday hosting menu, hosts can reach out to guests and ask if they have any food allergies or other dietary restrictions.

magazines left on a guest room dresser so guests have some nighttime reading material is another welcoming gesture that can make them feel right at home.

❄️ **Ask ahead about food allergies.** Cooking is a big part of holiday hosting, as the dinner table is a relaxing setting to catch up with loved ones. Prior to planning a holiday hosting menu, hosts can reach out to guests and ask if they have any food allergies or other dietary restrictions. This small gesture lets guests know hosts are thinking of them even before they arrive, which can establish the welcoming vibe hosts are aiming for.

❄️ **Designate a guests-only bathroom, if possible.** If hosts' homes have multiple full bathrooms, designate one exclusively for guests during their stay. This gesture affords guests some privacy that they're sure to appreciate. Parents can explain this gesture to kids before guests arrive so there's no confusion during their stay.

As the season approaches and hosts prepare to welcome loved ones into their homes, they can create a warm, inviting atmosphere by embracing thoughtful strategies. Considering guests' needs and preferences can ensure a comfortable, relaxing stay that makes the experience memorable for everyone.

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Games add another layer of levity to holiday celebrations

The holidays bring together friends, neighbors and family members to celebrate some of the most festive days of the year. Although celebrants often incorporate traditions they hold dear this time of year, downtime provides an opportunity to embrace new games and entertainment ideas as well.

The following are some fun games to play this holiday season that can help to break the ice and keep everyone laughing.

Reindeer Games

Everyone knows that Rudolph wanted to have fun and participate in “reindeer games,” but he was left on the sidelines. Inspired by the tune, everyone can participate in reindeer games at your home. These types of games can include tests of endurance and dexterity, like fruitcake-eating contests, running races or doing hurdle competitions in the yard.

Candy Cane Home Runs

Participants can see how well they can launch a marshmallow into the outfield by hitting it with a candy cane taking the place of the baseball bat. Each participant gets three swings. The person with the most home runs wins.

Guess the Gift

In this game, party hosts wrap up five oddly shaped gifts specifically for the game (the gifts may be oddly shaped or just the wrapping as a de-

coy). Players take turns trying to guess what is inside and mark down their answers on sheets. One by one the gifts are revealed. If anyone guesses the gift, it is given as a prize. If more than one person guesses a gift, come up with a fun way to break the tie, such as rock, paper, scissors or thumb wrestling.

Present Stackers

Players take turns stacking oddly shaped gifts as high as they can without toppling them over. Each layer increases the challenge, and the last person to successfully place a gift without the stack collapsing wins!

Fishing for Fun

Attach strings to the straight ends of candy canes to create makeshift fishing poles, with the curved ends acting as the ‘hooks.’

Participants take turns trying to ‘fish’ smaller candy canes out of a bowl, using their poles to hook as many as they can within a set time limit.

The “No L” Game

The game referee has a list of a few categories (i.e., food, sports, colors, cars, etc.) and players are split into a few teams. When the category is called, the teams have to jot down as many words as they can pertaining to the category that do not have a letter “L” in them before a timer runs out.

These are just a few festive ways to have fun with friends or family members during holiday gatherings.



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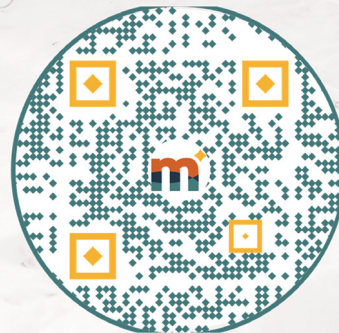
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