

'Tis the season for holiday shopping. We understand that the gifts, family meals and decorations all put a strain on your wallet. Creating a holiday budget and sticking to it can help keep you on track. Here are some budgeting tips for the busiest shopping season of the year.

Make a List and Check it Twice

Creating an effective holiday budget means including everything you plan to spend. Budget for decorating, new outfits you plan to buy, food estimates, and travel costs alongside the gifts on your expense list. Be sure to include any money you plan to receive, too. Does grandma give you \$50 every year like clockwork? Include that in your calculations. Will you be buying a joint gift and then receiving cash from the others going in on it? Include that, too. The best budgets encompass all of the spending and saving you do throughout the holidays, not just how much you spend on gifts. If you're not sure where to start, look up what you spent last year as a good jumping-off point.



Keep Track

The most important key to remember with your budget is to not forget about it after you create it. Keep track of all the purchases you make, especially ones made with cash, and adjust your budget if need be. It is a good idea to hold a weekly "reckoning" meeting, especially if you're not the only one making the purchases for the year. Sit down and check your real spending against your planned spending (the budget). If you've gone over in one area, these meetings give you the chance to adjust by lowering the amount set aside for another area to make up the difference. That way you'll keep your overall spending on track.

Save your Budget

After the holidays, don't throw away this year's holiday budget. Save it and use it as a model for next year's shopping. Make notes of where you deviated from the original budget, so that next year's is more accurate. You can also use the gift lists from year to year. If you know well in advance what items you want to buy, you can shop for them during the season when they're cheapest, rather than during the holidays.

Setting and sticking with a holiday budget will help you enter the New Year without any added financial stress, making the holidays that much more enjoyable