

Why Should I Think About Christmas in January?

Seven Santa Strategies

I think some folks have it made. They don't celebrate Christmas until after December 25th. What a wonderful opportunity to take advantage of those Boxing Day sales. However, for a large part of the population December 25th is our target date. So be it. Let's take a moment to remember what Christmas is really about. The celebration of a birth, the coming together of friends and families, time to rest, relax, be thankful and rejuvenate.

My sister is always ready for Christmas. At any given time during the year – you could tell her that she needs to have gifts sorted out for all her family and friends – and she is just about ready. Why – because she is always shopping and thinking about Christmas and other gift-giving occasions. She doesn't actually have a budget for Christmas – but she does have a list. And yes, she checks it twice. All year round – she comes up with ideas for gifts for either birthday or Christmas. She is already bothering me for our "Christmas Lists". She truly loves giving gifts and has to wait till December to dish them out.

My other sister? She's not like that. She vaguely starts thinking about "that time of year" in early December. Then she usually panics a bit and then spends too much money on inappropriate things because she's in a rush and feeling guilty about not starting sooner. And then come the credit card bills.

And how much is appropriate to spend on Aunt Ethel or Mom or the two year old in your life? There are no correct answers. If you were Bill Gates – you could spend anything you wanted – buy another house, start another trust fund. But the rest of us aren't in that position. So we have to be sensible. Here are seven strategies that Santa recommends:

1. Have family members draw names so that you only need to buy one gift instead of ten individual ones.
2. Chip in together to buy something a bit larger that might be really needed that the parent(s) will have to buy anyway. For example – a car seat for the new baby, soccer or hockey equipment, swimming lessons, etc. This way people can contribute what they can afford and together it will hopefully be enough.

3. For people struggling to make ends meet – perhaps a gift card at the grocery store or for gas. Do any of us really need another sweater or a DVD?
4. Time. That is my favourite gift. For anyone with a child, take their kid for a Sunday afternoon – now, that's a gift. You could make up little gift certificates for afternoon outings or evening babysitting so the parents can have some time together. A young friend of mine got a fishing trip with Uncle Arthur for an Easter present. My young friend got "time" – the most precious gift of all. Donate to an organization rather than buying gifts for everybody. Send everybody a card telling them you have given money to a worthy cause in lieu to buying gifts.
5. Labour. This, of course, goes together with time. My sister gave my mother a fabulous mother's day gift. She took the curtains down in my mother's apartment, washed the curtains, washed the windows and hung the curtains back up. For my arthritic mother – that was an enormous gift. My sister got huge thank yous and she had sent her partner to do the work. My sister is very clever as she only had to come up with the idea.
6. If you are handy with cars, change somebody's oil, do their brakes, wash their car, detail their car, mow their lawn, shovel their walk, stack their wood, vacuum their house, cook them a meal. If someone is just recovering from surgery or the birth of a baby or a death in the family – roast them a chicken with all the trimmings and deliver it at 5:30pm. That's a major gift. (Of course, the family has to know its coming). For all these things, write up or draw little certificates and wrap them up and put them in a box.
7. Just stop. Some people have chosen to simply forego the annual ritual of a Christmas gift. How many more sweaters or appliances does my 77 year old mother really need? After a certain age many of us actually have everything we need. And frankly – if there is something we want, we often just buy it. Remember when you were a kid and you had one jacket, one good outfit, one good pair of shoes, one pair of everyday shoes and a pair of sneakers and those small closets in the house were big enough? In this age of recycling and environmental awareness – perhaps less is more. Or perhaps less is enough. What is often more meaningful to some people is the thought, the gesture. Make or send a card, pick up the phone and call, send a photograph in a frame. All these are cheaper alternatives.

Having considered all these things, perhaps you have decided to buy some gifts anyway. Perhaps just for children under 16 or perhaps just stocking

stuffers or something with a dollar limit. The festive season will still cost you some money. You can avoid some of the “January blues” by planning ahead.

Let’s assume that you are going to buy some gifts. Like Santa, make a list and come up with a dollar amount that you will spend on each person. Factor in the other stuff like the special meal, the tree, decorations, extra food for visiting etc. Then you come up with an amount that you will need on or before December. Either start buying the gifts year round or at least set aside one twelfth of that amount each month starting in January. Unless you get a bonus in November or December, your paycheque does not magically increase at that time of year. Some people save over the course of the year from payroll deductions on a Canada Savings Bond and use that in November to do all their shopping. That is an excellent idea. Or you could simply start an automatic withdrawal at your financial institution for a fixed amount per pay and set that aside for the holidays. Or maybe have a big yard sale every fall and save that money for your holiday spending. Whatever you decide – think ahead. It’s all about planning.

You don’t really think that Santa and his elves can really make all those gifts in the four weeks before Christmas, do you? I have it on very good authority that while the rest of are looking for Boxing Day sales, Santa and his staff (and Mrs. Claus, of course) are busy working on preparations for next year’s Christmas.. Maybe that’s what we should all be doing.

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