

Holidays

FROM THE

Heart:

2023 HOLIDAY GIFT GUIDE

*It's time to get –
something, anything*

You can probably get it produced by someone in the greater Cortland area

BY TODD R. MCADAM
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Every year, it's the same thing: a seasonally induced panic as my wife starts clandestinely stashing stuff in the lesser-used closets.

I, on the other hand, have no idea in the foggiest what to get people for the holidays. A fuzzy sweater, the spouse suggests, but she has so many she'll need two bodies to wear them all.

Cash is good, the offspring points out. Tuition's due. Got it. But boy, does that lack panache. So I hit up the colleagues for ideas. They're a weird and eclectic bunch. Their ideas?

Please see **SOMETHING ANYTHING**, Page A2



Cortland Standard file photo
Jane Conroy, of Trumansburg, displays her handmade holiday crafts in 2017 during a Christmas Bazaar and craft fair at St. Mary's school in Cortland.

Clever holiday shopping strategies

TO SAVE TIME AND MONEY

The holiday season is here again, which means that the time for shopping lists and gift-buying has returned as well. Shoppers long have relied on Black Friday deals to save some money and streamline shopping excursions. But now Thanksgiving Day sales and additional retail holidays like Plaid Friday, Small Business Saturday and Cyber Monday have made it easier than ever to score holiday deals. The following tips can make holiday shopping more fruitful.

KNOW YOUR PRICES

Shoppers who would do well on TV's "The Price is Right" can save money. It's important to have a general idea of what items cost, especially those that will be on holiday lists. Shoppers can set up price alert notifications on the gifts they plan to buy to compare prices in advance of holiday sales. This way



they will have a better idea if the Black Friday/Cyber Monday "deal" is just a markdown on an exaggerated price or if it's a legitimate bargain.

CONSIDER PRICE-MATCHING

Before shoppers run all over to a dozen stores in the name of saving a few bucks, learn about stores' price-matching policies. For example, Best Buy may be willing to give the same price on a printer if you can prove that Staples is offering it for \$30 cheaper. Keep in mind that many stores are even willing to match Amazon's prices.

UTILIZE A SHOPPING APP OR COUPON AGGREGATOR

Online shopping is here to stay, and one way retailers provide deals is with coupon codes. Shopping applications can help shoppers save money and time. Some, like Rakuten, offer cash-back and instant discount opportunities, particularly during the holiday season. Others, like Honey, for example, are apps as well as browser extensions that will automatically search for and apply coupon codes on retailers' sites to ensure a shopper is getting the lowest price.

SHOP AHEAD AND PICK UP

Be aware of retailers who offer a lower online price for merchandise than what the same item sells for in store. For example, a six-pack of socks may be \$9.99 when purchased online, or \$13.99 in store. If the store offers free pickup for online orders shipped to the store, then consumers can use this option to get the discount but avoid shipping fees. Plus, pickup kiosks generally are less crowded than waiting for the checkout registers.



BUY NOW, RESIZE LATER

Shoppers who can't find their needed size or color in clothing or merchandise can buy any size or color on sale day at the discounted price, then exchange a few days later for the item they need.

THINK BEYOND THE USUAL RETAILERS

Lowe's, Home Depot and even pharmacies have lesser-known, but advantageous deals as well. Don't overlook these retailers for holiday decor or stocking stuffers.

Holiday sales shopping is more budget-friendly with some simple saving strategies.



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SOMETHING ANYTHING

FROM PAGE A1

SOMETHING HANDMADE

My mother-in-law loves to crochet, and (don't tell her this) we got her a yarn dispenser at the recent Fiber Fest sponsored by Cortland Repertory Theatre. But it would be a shame if there wasn't something to stuff in it. Fortunately, any number of shepherds have acquired and dyed any amount of wool, available at craft and artisan stores across the greater Cortland area.

And if not that, then maybe something decorative. I have a fondness for cutting boards laminated from exotic woods, or a classic walnut salad bowl — cherry can be good. Or even a painting or locally sourced photo of someplace pretty.

SOMETHING PRETTY

Lily Byrne would love a one-of-a-kind, custom-designed pair of sneakers. A Cortland artist makes them at Bull Airs, but I'll confess that at \$200 or more a pair, Lily's feet are a little outside my

budget. Maybe Seth Rogan or David Arquette could get them for her.

A piece of permanent jewelry would be cool, she suggests. It's actually welded on, rather like my wedding band. Or you could go for something custom-designed; jewelers in the greater Cortland area have won awards for custom pieces, and can offer something in a variety of price points.

SOMETHING EDIBLE

Ah, co-workers after my own heart. The cool part about something edible is that you can give it again next year. Kevin Conlon likes pie, Dutch apple. Or maybe pecan.

I'm partial to organic, grass-fed meats, and those are available, too. Several farm stores sell locally sourced foods, and you can get some straight from the farmers.

I recruited Margaret Mel-lott with the promise of good cheese, and there's plenty to be had. The Finger Lakes Cheese Trail has any number of cheese makers — in Groton, Candor, Interlaken and other places close by. Goat cheeses, sheep's milk cheeses, cheddars and fare more exotic.

Pair it with a locally produced beer — the greater Cortland area has at least six brewers — and you've got a party. Put them together, add a little heat and serve the gooey results over toast, and you have Welsh rabbit. That's a wonderful winter dish by the fireplace. Remarkably flexible. Once you say Finger Lakes, of course, wine comes to mind, and over the

decades, vintners have found the right grapes and the right ways to use them to get a national following.

Margaret also points out that she's from Kansas, and her father would love to have food made from around here: maple syrup. In Kansas, what passes for maple syrup is more accurately called "Mrs. Butterworth's."

SOMETHING PRACTICAL

Jack Lakowsky said his car can get a bit grimy, and having someone else clean it is a great idea. How many people would have their own cars detailed? But they might appreciate it, all the same. I know I can't get the streaks off the inside of my windshield from the last time I tried cleaning it, myself.

And I've been meaning to get someone to paper over the faux-walnut paneling in the living room, maybe a paintable paper. It's a cave in there. But I never get around to doing it, myself. Oh, wait a second. These aren't meant to be gifts for me. Drat.

SOMETHING FUN

The spouse finally seems to have broken her habit of arguing with the cats, a pandemic-inspired interaction born when her office shut down and sent everyone to work remotely. The cats have been increasingly winning the debate.

Instead, she's taken to listening to Broadway musicals. Perfect gift, just skip the Broadway. "My Fair Lady" plays at the Cortland Repertory Theatre next year. A curmudgeon and someone beautiful, kind of reminds me

of my marriage. She's been listening to "Hades Town" and "Six," too, two more recent popular musicals. Both will play in Syracuse.

Concerts, comics and personalities are good, too. She got tickets for us to see Marc Cohn a couple of years ago at the Center for the Arts of Homer, although maybe some country at Cortland Country Music Park or Rose Hall might be more to someone's liking. The tickets to see Star Trek icon William Shatner or Cary Elwes of "The Princess Bride" were way cool, too.

For the outdoors-minded, a round of golf or a day of skiing — downhill or cross-country — might be appreciated. You could try snowshoeing, too.

SOMETHING FOR SOMEONE ELSE

My brother-in-law has so many boats the family has taken to calling it "The Armada." And for someone who really does have it all, giving something to someone else might be appreciated. So consider a gift to a greater Cortland non-profit in someone else's name.

Toys for Tots, of course, is popular this time of year. It prefers cash, because it can buy gifts wholesale, whereas you'd be paying retail, so the dollar goes further. But there are any number of organizations that could benefit from a dollar or two.

At the end of all this, the idea is to get people gifts they'd appreciate. And perhaps they'd appreciate your gift helping other people, too.



How to honor various faiths during a holiday party

The holiday season is a time to gather and celebrate with family. In recent years, families have become more and more diverse, particularly in regard to faith. For example, data from the Pew Research Center indicates that 46 percent of Jewish adults between the ages of 18 and 29 are children of interfaith marriages.

A greater number of interfaith marriages means it's likely holiday hosts will be celebrating among family and friends with different religious backgrounds than their own. In an effort to ensure everyone feels welcome, hosts can consider these ways to honor various faiths during their holiday celebrations.

• LEARN ABOUT OTHER FAITHS.

Knowledge of other faiths can help hosts create a more inclusive and welcoming atmosphere during the holiday season. For example, a Christian host welcoming a Jewish friend or relative into their home for the holidays can learn about the festival of Chanukah prior to opening their home to guests.



• INCORPORATE WHAT YOU'VE LEARNED INTO THE PARTY.

After learning about the holiday celebrations of other faiths, hosts can incorporate that new knowledge into their decor and celebration. When planning the meal, prepare a traditional holiday dish a guest might eat when celebrat-

ing their own faith or culture. This can make for a meal that's both welcoming and more flavorful at the same time.

• LET GUESTS CHIP IN.

Extended family members and friends from different religious backgrounds may be proud of their faith and enthusiastic about

the chance to share it with the people they love most. A holiday gathering is the ideal time to embrace this spirit. Encourage guests from different religious backgrounds to bring something that reminds them of their own religious celebrations. That can be a particular food or beverage,

a playlist of holiday songs or a small gift such as an ornament to incorporate into holiday decor. Guests can then share as much as they would like to about their faith, including any holiday traditions that they typically engage in.

• REDUCE EMPHASIS ON A PARTICULAR HOLIDAY.

When hosting friends and family during the holidays, avoid placing too great an emphasis on a particular religious holiday. It's alright for hosts to offer well wishes and even recite prayers that reflect their faith, but try to emphasize how enjoyable it is for everyone to gather under one roof and celebrate the season together. Celebrating with family is a significant component of the holiday season for people of all faiths, so emphasizing togetherness during this special time of year is something all guests will appreciate.

Holiday hosts can embrace various strategies to make sure guests from all religious backgrounds feel welcome at their homes this holiday season.

Age-based guidelines for buying toys and gifts

The holiday season involves making holiday gift lists and checking them twice, or even more frequently to ensure that gift-givers find the best fit for recipients. While age may only be a number in certain instances, when it comes to gifting, age should be a consideration — particularly when kids are involved.

The Consumer Product Safety Commission reports that an estimated 86,000 children treated for toy-related injuries each year are younger than five. Toy-related injuries are preventable, and prevention often comes down to choosing age-appropriate toys for kids.

Toys can be choking hazards when small toys or those with small pieces are given to children who are too young to use them safely. Kids are curious and often put items in their mouths. Choking is the fourth-leading cause of unintentional death in children under age five, indicates The Emergency Center. Falls, eye injuries, drowning, and motor accidents are leading causes of gift-related injuries. Here's how to select age-appropriate gifts.

• READ THE PACKAGING CAREFULLY.

Most toys and other children's products will come with an age range recommendation. While some kids may be mature beyond their years, it's best to choose gifts that fall within the recommended range. This is particularly the case for infants, toddlers and any child under the age of five.



• AVOID FAD GIFTS.

Children often want the latest and greatest gadgets and toys for gifts even if they are not the smartest choices for their ages. Resist the urge to buy something just to be the "cool parent or grandparent," especially if it isn't age-appropriate. Mermaid tails became popular in recent years, and likely will see increased presence thanks to the home-viewing release of a popular live-action mermaid movie. However, they limit movement and can make swimming more difficult, potentially increasing risk of drowning.

• PROVIDE SAFETY GEAR.

As children age, they may be more interested in gifts that appeal to hobbies and abilities. Scoot-

ers, bicycles, skates, and other items are popular among older children. These gifts should only be purchased for those with proven ability, and even then, accompanied with the appropriate safety gear. This can include helmets, knee pads and eye protection.

• CONSIDER WAITING BEFORE GIFTING CERTAIN ELECTRONICS.

Although children may be able to use devices safely, there are many who advocate for waiting to give young children smartphones and tablets due to the consequences of excessive screen time. The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry says children ages two to five should limit non-educational screen time to about one hour per

weekday and three hours on weekend days. Children should be encouraged to pursue healthy habits that limit use of screens, so gift-givers can look for gifts that help to this end.

Age-appropriate gifts ensure safety for the youngest people on holiday gift lists.

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The holidays are a time of joy and celebration, but they can also be a time of stress. If you're hosting a holiday gathering, you don't want to be so busy running around that you forget to enjoy yourself. Here are five tips for stress-free holiday hosting.

1. PLAN AND CREATE A CHECKLIST.

Start by creating a detailed checklist that includes everything from the guest list and menu to decorations and cleaning tasks. Begin early to allow ample time for preparation and to avoid a last-minute rush. Break down the tasks into smaller, manageable steps and set deadlines for each. Having a well-organized plan will help you stay on track and reduce the chances of forgetting anything important.

2. SIMPLIFY YOUR MENU.

While you might be tempted to prepare an elaborate feast, remember that the holidays are more about spending time with loved ones than impressing them with an extravagant spread. Simplify your menu by choosing dishes that can be prepared in advance or that require minimal last-minute attention. Don't hesitate to ask guests to bring a dish or dessert, making it a potluck-style event, which adds a fun and communal touch to the gathering.

3. SET UP A SELF-SERVE BEVERAGE STATION.

Set up a designated area with a variety of drinks, including water, soft drinks and al-

coholic beverages, if appropriate. Include all the necessary items like glasses, ice buckets and cocktail napkins, so guests can help themselves without constantly asking for refills. This frees up your time and allows you to focus on other aspects of hosting.

4. DELEGATE AND ASK FOR HELP.

You don't have to do everything on your own. Enlist the help of family members and friends or hire temporary help, if needed. Delegate tasks such as setting the table, greeting guests or hanging up coats. Letting others assist you eases your workload and gives them a chance to contribute and feel more involved in the holiday celebration.

5. CREATE A COZY AMBIANCE.

A warm, inviting ambiance can work wonders in reducing stress during holiday hosting. Create a cozy atmosphere with festive lighting, candles and seasonal decorations. Play soft background music to set the mood. Arrange comfortable seating areas where guests can relax and socialize. A relaxed environment will make your guests feel at ease and contribute to the overall enjoyment of the event.

Following these tips will help you host a stress-free holiday gathering that everyone will enjoy. Relax, have fun and enjoy the holidays!



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15 handmade gift ideas



Are you currently trying to figure out what presents to give your loved ones this Christmas? Handmade gifts are becoming increasingly popular! In an age when you can order a gift online with the click of a mouse, taking the time to make a handmade gift is a meaningful gesture. A gift that you make yourself reflects the love and care you have for the person receiving it.

Whether you're skilled in crafts or cooking, here's a list of 15 thoughtful gift ideas you can make for your loved ones:

1. Knitted accessories, like a throw, scarf or pair of slippers
2. Alcohol, such as gin, beer or wine
3. Jewelry, like a bracelet, ring or necklace
4. Bath bombs
5. Scented candles
6. Picture frames
7. Jams or spreads
8. Christmas decorations, such as wreaths or baubles
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Black Friday shopping tips



Retail holidays now dot the consumer landscape throughout much of the year. That shift has made a day like Black Friday somewhat less unique than it was in years past. However, Black Friday remains the unofficial kickoff to the holiday shopping season, and it's still a major day for retailers big and small.

According to Adobe Analytics, in 2022 consumers spent \$9.12 billion while online shopping on Black Friday. A separate report from the National Retail Federation and Prosper Insights & Analytics indicated just under 200 million consumers shopped online and in store between Thanksgiving Day and Cyber Monday, which is the Monday following Black Friday. Such figures indicate that holiday shopping on the weekend of Thanksgiving might have changed, but it's still wildly popular. This Black Friday, shoppers can consider these tips to ensure they find the right gifts at the right price.

- ✓ Do some research before the big day. The spirit of competition is alive and well on Black Friday. Consumers once flocked en masse to store parking lots in the wee hours of the morning in order to get sale items before shelves emptied. Some still do, so shoppers may need to be willing to compete to find the best deals. But some pre-Black Friday research might prove the best way to land the best deals, and it may not require waking up in the middle of the night. Much like shoppers compete with one another to grab sale items, retailers also compete to get shoppers in store or on their websites. As a result, it's not uncommon for retailers early and small to advertise Black Friday sales weeks in advance. Shoppers can research these sales and plan when to visit certain stores in order to land the best deal.
- ✓ Wake up early. Shoppers may not need to get out of bed at 3 a.m. to land the best Black Friday deals, but the early bird still gets the

- worm on the day after Thanksgiving. Plan to shop early in the morning, which increases the chances of finding the right gift at the right price. If an item you've earmarked is part of a doorbuster deal, plan to get to the store or onto the website as early as possible.
- ✓ Establish a budget. It's easy to go overboard when shopping deals on Black Friday. However, busting the budget on the first day of the holiday shopping season sets a bad precedent for the weeks to come. A holiday debt survey from LendingTree found that 35 percent of shoppers took on debt

to pay for their holiday purchases in 2022, with the average consumer accumulating more than \$1,500 in debt. Savvy shoppers devise a budget prior to shopping and stick to that budget. Black Friday remains a wildly popular retail holiday. A little research, a willingness to get up early and some determination to stay on budget is a formula for a successful Black Friday.

Holiday shopping forecast: Not as hot as pandemic's torrid pace

BY AUSTIN FULLER
Orlando Sentinel
(TNS)

The holiday shopping season is usually strong at Park Ave CDs in Orlando, Florida, but the past few years since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic have been especially hot.

It happened because people who avoided restaurants, concerts and travel had more money to spend at stores, and vinyl albums grew in popularity, said owner Sandy Bitman. Inflation has also meant more is being spent by shoppers, too.

"We've always had a good holiday season," Bitman said. "The revenue, I think, has gone up because the price of things have gone up as well."

The National Retail Federation predicts holiday spending in November and December will grow 3% to 4% over last year to between \$957.3 billion and \$966.6 billion. While that will be an overall record, spending is expected to grow slower than in recent years.

Spending jumped 5.4% in 2022, 12.7% in 2021, and 9.1% in 2020.

Before the pandemic, gains were more in line with this year's growth, increasing 3.8% in 2019, 1.7% in 2018, and 5% in 2017.

"It is not surprising to see holiday sales



growth returning to pre-pandemic levels," NRF President and CEO Matthew Shay said. "Overall household finances remain in good shape and will continue to support the consumer's ability to spend."

Record holiday spending follows consumers also going big on Halloween this year. Halloween purchases were expected to reach a record \$12.2 billion.

Jack Kleinhenz, National Retail Federation chief economist, said the holiday season looks good, according to his monthly economic review for the organization.

"This year, a whole new set of dynamics is in place," Kleinhenz said. "The average household remains on relatively solid financial footing despite pressures from

still-high inflation, stringent credit conditions and elevated interest rates. Recent revisions to government data indicate that consumers haven't drawn down as much of their pandemic savings as believed earlier, and savings are still providing a buffer to support spending."

The national forecast returning to pre-pandemic growth rates makes sense for Bitman at Park Ave CDs, who called it the "natural flow of things."

Holiday shopping at his store usually kicks off on Black Friday and really picks up in the two weeks before Christmas, Bitman said.

In addition to vinyl and CDs, the store sells other stocking stuffers such as socks, toys and Japanese candy.

"Our gifts are not big ticket items ... it's always an affordable option that we provide," Bitman said.

In the same plaza, inflation hurt summer business at The Lovely Boutique Market, but a recent boost ahead of the holidays has owner Kim Hellstrom expecting a good shopping season.

"Things are a lot more expensive, so people have been holding back on items for their home or items for themselves," Hellstrom said. "I'm very optimistic. In just the recent weeks our traffic has been higher. I feel like people are a lot more excited to spend money because they have a purpose with it being the holidays."

Customers come in to find outfits to wear to holiday gatherings and then end up picking up gifts for their friends or co-workers, Hellstrom said. It's a good place to do both as The Lovely offers vintage clothing as well as coffee mugs, books and martini glasses.

Elsewhere in Orlando, Steve Rausch is also optimistic for business at his Colonial Photo & Hobby. With his brother Mike, he owns the store in the Mills 50 neighborhood selling cameras, model trains, and other potential gifts.

"For us, we've been more busy this year than we were last year," Rausch said. "I think more people are liking shopping local."





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and indulge someone special, be it your partner, father, mother or child, with high-quality items they can cherish forever.

PRESTIGE AND QUALITY

Luxury is synonymous with high-end brands and exceptional quality, both of which justify the high price tag. Look for items the discerning recipient will recognize at a glance.

To inspire you, here are a few gift ideas for exclusive or top-of-the-range products:

- Watches
- Jewelry
- Handbags

- Lighters
- Sunglasses
- Kitchen knives
- Perfume
- Spirits
- Coffee machines
- Works of art
- Pens

To make the most of your prestigious gifts, wrap them in chic materials, like wrapping paper with elegant prints, lustrous fabric ribbons, or pretty, reusable wooden boxes.

A genuine pearl necklace, 25-year-old Scotch, designer perfume; what luxury gift will you give this Christmas?



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An etiquette expert

answers your questions about holiday gifts, hosting

BY ANA SOFIA KNAUF
The Seattle Times

Between flurries of festive activities, party-hopping expectations, and reminders of gnarly family relationships, the holidays can be an incredibly stressful time.

Although most of us know how to be on our best behavior when seeing loved ones or meeting new people, there's always a chance we make a misstep as a host or guest that sours an otherwise wonderful gathering.

Those moments are avoidable, said Arden Clise, who's been an etiquette coach in Seattle for over a decade.

"Etiquette isn't always fair," said Clise, founder of Clise Etiquette, which offers all-ages classes and coaching for individuals and workplaces. "It's about making other people feel comfortable."

"Come with a gracious mindset," she said, "one where you see the effort and appreciate what people are doing, rather than focusing on what didn't go well or something you feel slighted about. It's a wonderful gift to get together with friends and family. Find the positive in that."

Ahead of the fall-to-winter holiday rush, we asked Seattle Times readers to throw all your holiday etiquette quandaries at us. Then, we sent several of your unique questions Clise's way to learn how a manners maven might navigate such situations. We share her suggestions, edited for concision, below.

I host Thanksgiving for a dozen friends and family members. That includes grocery shopping, paying for ingredients, cooking all the food — and that's before I clean the

house and take out the nice plates and linens! After all that work and expense, I feel like I've earned the leftovers for my family! Am I rude if I don't dish out the scant leftovers for my guests?

This person is obviously putting a lot of work and time into their meal. I wonder if she's asking guests to bring anything? If [cooking] is a burden and you don't want to share [the leftovers], I think it's appropriate to ask people to help you by bringing side dishes to contribute.

As a host, it's our job to help people feel welcome, included, and important. If having leftovers is important to your guests, absolutely put together a platter of leftovers — although it doesn't need to be a big foil pan. It's in the spirit of the holidays as well — sharing the bounty.

Is it rude if my guest brings wine to share and then takes home any leftovers of that wine?

Yes, it is rude. When we bring something to the host and hostess, it's a gift to them. In fact, they don't even have to serve it. We shouldn't expect or ask for any part of [what we brought] in return.

Should I always bring a host gift to a party I'm invited to?

There's a couple of exceptions, but you should always bring a gift, whether it's some nice chocolates or a jam you made. (I don't suggest cut flowers because [gifting them] pushes the host to stop what they're doing and find a vase.)

If it's a potluck and you've been asked to bring a dish, however, a gift is not required. Especially around the holidays when we are giving gifts, you don't also have to bring

[another] hostess gift. If [you're attending] a big party, make sure to include a card with your hostess gift so if they're not able to get to it right away, they're not wondering later "Who gave me this?" It's also always best to hand the gift to the person who invited you.

How do you teach young kids and teens who haven't had any table manners training how to do the basics like chewing with their mouths closed, cutting their food in appropriate-sized bites, etc.?

Whether you're the grandparent, the aunt or uncle, or friend, unless you are the parent, it's not your job [to correct the kids]. It isn't anyone's business besides the parents'.

As a parent, it's important to teach your children manners and to praise them when they get it right. Parents tend to correct and give negative reinforcement like "Stop chewing with your mouth open!" Getting some praise in there makes a big difference.

I manage a team of 10. I normally buy gift cards and a small gift for each of them. Now, two of the team [members] are remote so I can't drop off a present like candy on their desks. Should I just give gift cards to everyone?

A lot of people see being remote employees as a perk, but it's hard to make everyone feel included. Keep doing what you're doing and mail [the candy and gift card] to your employees. The more you can include them and make them feel engaged at work, it makes a difference.

For larger organizations, check in with your employees a little more often. If your remote employees are



Cortland Standard file photo
Santa bearing gifts for kids in 2015, including Calob Caulkins, 6, of McGraw, as they visited the Loaves and Fishes Christmas dinner at Grace Episcopal and Holy Spirit Lutheran Church in Cortland.

out of state and you can't get them into the office, have some sort of online gathering, whether that's an occasional online staff meeting or for the holidays everyone gets a gift and celebrates online together.

In these not-quite-post-pandemic times, if you've been in contact with someone who tests positive for COVID, what is the best protocol if you have holiday plans with loved ones?

If you have been in contact with someone who tests positive for COVID it's polite to ask your host if they are OK with you still attending the function. Offer to test the morning of the event and, if you are negative, to wear a mask dur-

ing the get-together.

If you choose to wear a mask to a gathering and get flack from a loved one, how do you respectfully tell that person to stuff it?

Remain polite and calm and say something along the lines of any of the following:

"It sounds like my mask is really bothering you. Why?"

"Whether I wear a mask or not is really none of your business."

"Are you feeling OK? Because what you said is really hurtful to me."

The same advice would apply to someone who wants to debate politics or discuss another touchy subject.

What to gift a Christmas host

Have you been invited to a Christmas party at someone's home? To make a good impression and break the ice, ensure you don't arrive empty-handed. Here are a few examples of host and hostess gifts that are sure to please.

- **A FLOWER ARRANGEMENT.** Be environmentally conscious by choosing locally grown species. Ideally, you should also gift your host or hostess a vase so that they can quickly display your superb flowers.
- **A LUXURY CANDLE.** Look for handmade soy or beeswax candles scented with essential oils. Unless you know the specific tastes of your host or hostess, opt for a classic scent like pine or citrus.

- **A SWEETS BASKET.** Gifting your host or hostess a delicious assortment of local gourmet products is a winning choice! The gift basket could include hot sauces, flavored oils, spreads, chocolates, sweets or beers.
- **A HOUSEWARE ITEM.** Look for a useful, high-quality accessory, such as an organic cotton Turkish towel, a pair of crystal wine glasses, an elegant throw, a set of stone coasters or a linen tablecloth.

Once you've bought your gift, wrap it beautifully and include a thank-you card.

5 random acts of kindness for a meaningful Christmas

Christmas is a season of love, joy and giving. What better way to embrace its spirit than by spreading kindness to others? Here are five random acts of kindness to make this holiday season truly meaningful.

1. **GIFT OF WARMTH.** As the winter chill sets in, consider donating blankets, coats or warm clothing to local shelters or organizations supporting people in need.
2. **SURPRISE TREATS.** Prepare a batch of homemade cookies or

treats and share them with your neighbors, co-workers or even strangers you encounter during your day.

3. **HELP THE ELDERLY.** Reach out to senior citizens in your community who may be spending Christmas alone. Offer to run errands, decorate their homes or simply spend quality time with them.
4. **SECRET SANTA FOR A CAUSE.** Organize a Secret Santa gift exchange among friends or colleagues, but

with a twist. Instead of gifts, each participant donates to a charity.

5. **SPREAD POSITIVITY.** Write heartfelt letters or cards expressing gratitude and love to individuals who have made a difference in your life. Whether it's a mentor, friend or family member, your words of appreciation will brighten their day and strengthen the bond you share.

By performing these random acts of kindness, you can create cherished memories and inspire others to do the same.

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It's unlikely that anyone aspires to be a last-minute holiday shopper. Putting off holiday shopping until the last minute can make for a stressful home stretch to the season, and there's no guarantee store shelves won't already be picked clean or that gifts purchased online will arrive on time.

Despite how unappealing last-minute shopping can be, it's still a fact of life for millions of holiday shoppers. As the clock winds down this holiday season, shoppers can look to these ideas for inspiration.

- **GIFT CARDS:** Gift cards may never earn a distinction as the most sentimental item to give a loved one during the holiday season, but they are surprisingly sought-after. In fact, a survey from the Nation-

al Retail Federation found that 54 percent of participants identified gift cards as the most-wanted gift of the 2022 holiday season. Chain retailers, small businesses and restaurants are among the many establishments that sell gift cards, so shoppers are bound to find a card to please anyone on their shopping list.

- **FOOD/BEVERAGE:** The holiday season is a popular time to indulge in some great food and wash it down with a favorite wine or another adult beverage. That makes food and beverages a great holiday gift. Shoppers can take a loved one out to a favorite restaurant, prepare a homemade treat or purchase a favorite dish from a local specialty grocery store or eatery.

Pair the food with an appropriate beverage and this accessible last-minute gift idea is sure to be a hit.

- **TICKETS:** Tickets to a movie, sporting event, live theater performance, or concert are another gift idea that likely won't be gobbled up by early bird shoppers. People of all ages enjoy experiences, and a 2022 survey from the travel booking platform GetYourGuide found that 50 percent of survey respondents indicated they would enjoy tickets to a concert or show.
- **BOOKS:** Books make an ideal holiday gift for everyone from young kids to grandparents. Traditional print books are small enough that they can likely arrive on time even if they're purchased just a

few days before Christmas. E-book sellers enable gift givers to pick the perfect time to notify loved ones they have received an electronic book. Audiobooks which can be downloaded to a smartphone or given as a CD, make an ideal gift for loved ones who spend a lot of time behind the wheel.

Last-minute holiday shopping can be stressful. However, various sought-after items can be secured at the last minute, ensuring gift givers' loved ones have a happy holiday season.

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