



3 ways to save your budget this holiday

'Tis the season for overspending! Finance pro Nicole Lapin tells you how to gift well without adding your name to a credit card company's naughty list.

Former CNN anchor Nicole Lapin is the author of the financial best-seller *Rich Bitch* and one of the stars of the new CW show *Hatched*.

I WANT TO TELL YOU A CHRISTMAS TALE I always hear from women. It goes like this: A smart, hardworking gal (such as yourself) walks into a store full of glitzy displays. She has a gift list, but thanks to her big heart and the new possibilities, she ends up blowing her budget. By January, she's penny-pinching, and she's not alone. Americans collectively drop about \$600 billion each year on holiday shopping—that's some major overspending, people! But it happens to the best of us, because flash sales and sparkly store windows wear down our good judgment. So consider these savvy pointers my not-so-secret Santa gift to you.

1 Stop price-matching. No, not the kind where you find a lower price elsewhere and ask your retailer to match it—I fully approve of that one. I'm talking about feeling the need to spend equal amounts of money on everyone on your list. For example, let's say you spend \$50 on a wool scarf for your uncle, because he walks to work. Next you find an iPhone case for your aunt (who *always* drops her phone) for \$25. But compared to that scarf's price tag, her gift now feels small, so you also grab a pair of \$30 gloves. You know what I say to that? Bah humbug! The price differential doesn't matter as long as both parties will enjoy and use their gifts. In fact, a University of Chicago study found that gift recipients often assumed that lower-priced gifts were more generous than higher-priced ones. So stop playing the comparison game. I promise it will save you oodles of money, and everyone will be just as thankful—especially *you*, when you actually want to buy things next year.

2 Don't trip up over tipping. Now is a great time to show the people who help you out throughout the year some gratitude, but it's tough to know how much to give, and that can lead to overtipping or not tipping at all (both bad). Here's the breakdown: If you have a housekeeper, babysitter, dog-walker, or any other person who is regularly working in your home, it's kind to tip them a day's wages in cash. For your child's teacher, a small gift worth \$20 is a good idea. If you have a regular hairdresser and you're the "every four to six weeks" type, consider giving 3 to 7 percent on top of your usual per-visit tip. If you can only afford a minimal tip, remember that a handwritten note never goes out of style. (Girl, no matter how busy you are, you can take five minutes to write something cute on a card.) Yes, cash is awesome, but a few kind words can create a warm feeling that stays with people long after that money is spent or saved.

3 Play favorites! With your smartphone in hand (and, seriously, when is it *not*?), you'll have access to great deals. On many social apps, it pays to keep track of your best-loved brands. If you've liked a company on Facebook, for example, deals and coupons can appear in your Notifications tab when you're near that store. Another app, Shopkick, lets you earn "kicks" for store visits and purchases that can be traded in for gift cards. You can also scan items with RedLaser, an app that tells you if a product is cheaper elsewhere. And even if you're late to the game this year, look for last-minute sales (especially on toys) on Free Shipping Day (December 18) and Super Saturday (December 19).