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Marc A. Hebert's 'Money \$ense': Creating a budget will help manage your holiday spending

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WITH STORES starting the holiday season ever earlier and bringing “deals” to you sooner, now is the time to consider your holiday spending.



As with spending in general, developing a holiday budget will be a big priority. You might want your family involved so everyone is on the same page in terms of gifting dollars. The holidays don't just include gifts though – the food, drink, travel, wrapping paper, decorations, cards and even the tree can be expensive. Set the amount you are willing to spend on each item. Use cash if possible, but if you are using credit, spend no more than you can pay off in one payment.

The next step is to get organized. You will need a way to track your spending, otherwise the budget you have set up so carefully becomes meaningless. Doing this will help you understand what you have done so far for the holidays and how much you have left to do. A budget will help you avoid impulse purchases.

If you are going to use credit cards, you might want to check if there are any rewards. Perhaps there are points for travel you could use. Are there cash-back or gift cards available? These could help you control your spending.

Use online shopping to your advantage. You might be able to find apps that will give you cash for shopping online or find coupons for the goods you wanted to purchase anyway. Taking advantage of price-match guarantees becomes much easier with online tools. Be sure to check reviews, privacy and

security features first.

Gifts can be the most expensive part of the holidays. Check the sales and have a plan before you go out gift shopping. It's a good idea to go alone. You might want to give experiences for gifts — how about a spa day for someone? Maybe a photo book of your new baby for the special grandmother. Along with some homemade cookies, it could be the perfect gift.

Larger families might consider doing a Yankee swap or secret Santa. These activities are not only fun but also make the gift-giving process more efficient and manageable. Perhaps your family might want to forgo gifts entirely and give the funds to charity, making another's holiday special in the process.

Food is another area that can get pricey. It pays to watch for nonperishables that go on sale around the holidays. Maybe your favorite store offers a free turkey when you spend more than a certain threshold.

High-end consignment stores might also be a good source. Decorations, wrapping materials, and party supplies may be purchased at the deep discount store for much less.

Keep in mind that the holidays are one of the busiest times of the year to travel. If you can be flexible, you might be able to save on costs. Using carry-on luggage will help avoid airline fees. Be sure to use fare-tracking apps and compare the different costs of travel.

You might want to consider starting a new holiday tradition. For example, consider hiding small gifts around the house and letting the children find them. Perhaps a drive around the neighborhood looking at Christmas lights could be a fun activity.

Other examples of holiday activities you might enjoy doing together are making ornaments, tree trimming, baking a gingerbread house or making holiday cards.

If you believe you just can't make ends meet, you might want to take a short-term holiday job to help you through. Many local businesses hire seasonal help just for the holidays.

Once the holidays are over, consider starting your savings for the next season. Getting a head start can make the next year a lot less stressful.

Marc A. Hebert, MS, CFP, is a senior member and president of the wealth management and financial planning firm The Harbor Group of Bedford. Email questions to Marc at mhebert@harborgroup.com. Your question and his response might appear in a future column.

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