

FIVE THINGS *NOT* TO DO AT THE MALL THIS HOLIDAY SEASON

Retailers have their red mark-down pens out earlier than usual this year, meaning that many consumers will begin taking advantage of bargains in advance of the traditional Black Friday rush.

As consumers hit the malls this holiday season, some are experienced shoppers, having weathered many years of finding just the right gift at just the right price. Nonetheless, whether novice or seasoned veteran, it's always smart to arm yourself with timely shopping tips.

The National Foundation for Credit Counseling (NFCC) reminds consumers of five things not to do at the mall:

- **Do not carry your checkbook or more credit cards than you will use during that shopping trip.** If your wallet is lost or stolen, this will limit the damage. *Tip:* Make a copy of the front and back of all credit cards, and put the list in a safe place at home. In an emergency, you will have easy access to a list of all your cards, the account numbers, and the bank's Customer Service number to report the incident.
- **Do not carry large amounts of cash.** Even if you are committed to paying for your purchases with cash, be aware that pick-pockets take advantage of crowded areas and distracted people. *Tip:* Instead, make frequent trips to the ATM to replenish your stash of cash. Or, consider using your debit card for transactions, being sure to hang onto receipts and record in your check register to avoid overdrafts.
- **Do not shop while in a hurry or at the last minute.** You'll end up spending more than you should simply to be able to mark the item off your list. *Tip:* Block out a specific time for shopping. Make your first trip a leisurely one, simply getting an idea of what's available this year and at what price. Take notes, and once back at home, get organized for the actual buying adventure.
- **Do not shop without a list.** Santa thinks it's a useful tool, and so should we. *Tip:* Make your list specific. Don't just include the names of those for whom you need to purchase a gift, but also include the specific item you're looking for, and most importantly, the amount you intend to spend. Having an overall holiday budget floating around in your head isn't good enough. Without a plan, you'll likely get caught up in the hype and overspend in the blink of an eye.
- **Do not pile new debt on top of old.** Some people are still paying for 2009 holiday expenses as they enter the 2010 buying season. Don't make your financial situation worse by being one of them. *Tip:* Think about it, you're buying for friends and relatives who will be the first to understand if you need to cut back. If you are in a tenuous financial situation, it will only be made worse through irresponsible spending. Consider writing a heartfelt note to those on your list, being sincere about your feelings toward them and why they mean so much to you. Most people can't recall what they received last Christmas, but this will be a treasured gift remembered for years to come.

The holidays can be particularly difficult for those unemployed or facing foreclosure. However, even if your situation is not that serious, we're living in tough economic times, and no one should be spending money they don't have. Being financially responsible this holiday season is a gift to yourself and to those you care about.