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## Are Gift Cards a Good Idea?

By Peggy Betourney

Peggy Betourney won't have to worry if this Christmas purchase will fit.

"It's a wonderful way for me to please everyone," she says.

Betourney bought a gift card at the University Mall that can be used at any of the 70 stores there. An easy purchase for Betourney and one she knows her kids will like.

"Even though I'm retired now I still have too many things to do and too few hours," she says. "It gives my children a chance to come in and pick and choose what they want to do."

Convenient. And it turns out gift cards are the most requested Christmas presents.

But are they a good idea?

As some large stores struggle financially, some shoppers worry retailers won't be around when gift card recipients try to cash in on their presents.

"Shoppers should make decisions they are comfortable with," says Tasha Wallis of the Vermont Retail Association. "I think there are very few risks. Stores don't disappear overnight."

The Vermont Retail Association says most gift card purchases are a safe bet.

Do your homework, though. Make sure businesses in bankruptcy will still accept them.

"It takes a long time to go through the liquidation process," Wallis explains.

Gift card purchases are expected to be down about 6 percent this year. The Vermont Retail Association says shoppers will be looking for sales instead, trying to stretch their dollars further.

"Gift cards don't go on sale," Wallis points out. "And now we are seeing across the board discounting on many items. So a shopper worried about stretching that dollar might go buy that sweater for Uncle Joe for 25 dollars that they thought Uncle Joe might purchase with a gift card anyway."

But some local businesses, like the Vermont Flannel Company, expect gift cards to sell like hotcakes.

"With the economy the way it is we are getting a lot of people coming in and saying they want to buy something locally made, so that's working well for us," says Mark Baker of the Vermont Flannel Company.

The best gift card purchases may be the kind where you get more than you pay for. For example, some stores sell gift cards for \$25 and you get \$50 in merchandise or food.

But again, do some research.

"You have to compare it to what the sales are like," Wallis advises. "It's another form of promotion or sales that's out there. It's like getting a coupon."

"I'm not worried about the shops here," Betourney says of the University Mall.

And the Vermont Retail Association says she shouldn't be worried.

Malls and downtowns offering gift cards to use at a variety of stores could be the best and safest gift card buys; with more stores to spread the holiday cheer and the risk around.

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