

A Dozen Ways to Combat Black Friday and Beyond

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As a Professional Organizer, I spend my days helping people decide to get rid of stuff they no longer want or need. The relief they feel when they lighten up and let go is immeasurable. So this year, as we're faced with a challenging economic climate, why not think a little differently?

1. **Buy Nothing.** The day after Thanksgiving is also National Buy Nothing Day. If you have the day off, resist the urge to hit the mall, and do something fun with the family instead. Sales often begin the following Monday anyway, and it's much less stressful to shop online (think Cyber Monday). Just make sure you don't get caught up in the ease of ordering and buy more than is absolutely necessary.
2. **Gift Cards are Great!** Teachers already have plenty of mugs, picture frames, photo albums, and candles. Consider VISA/MC/Amex gift cards or gift certificates to a favorite restaurant. Also check out www.SpaFinder.com and www.WellnessPossibilities.com. On the former, the giver determines the amount of the gift and the recipient can choose the location and type of service. The latter works in a similar way, only the recipient is able to choose from a network of service providers ranging from Acupuncturists to Work/Life Balance Coaches.
3. **Make Memories, not Credit Card Payments.** Consider gifts of experience instead of just another tchotchke to put on a shelf or sit in a closet. Great ideas are tickets to a show or an event, membership to a museum, or taking a day trip to a special location.
4. **Think Low-Tech.** Kids don't really need or even want all the expensive molded plastic toys and electronic games they receive. For example, when my daughter was younger, she was constantly receiving Barbie dolls. Know how they wound up? Naked and headless in a heap on the floor of her room! Of course it's fun for kids to open a package with their name on it, and it's fun for adults to watch them with hopeful anticipation, but how many times do they open the gift and then play with the box?! Personally, I think board games are a cool gift. They don't cost much, aren't electronic, won't mess up kids' eyesight or cause repetitive stress injuries to their thumbs, and encourage social interaction. When the kids tire of them, they can be encouraged to donate them to a hospital or other place where others would be able to enjoy them, provided the games are still in decent condition, of course. In our house, we've recently developed a taste for Clue. Mrs. Peacock in the Dining Room with a Rope!
5. **Get Grounded.** If anyone is feeling positive about the current economic environment, I'd like to meet them. Every day there are headlines about thousands of people losing their jobs. I think there is a definite trend toward back to basics, buckling down, and expressing our core values. OK, money is great, but as we've all heard, no one says on their death bed, "I wish I'd spent more time at the office." Why do we work? For the basics of food, clothing, shelter, and good health of course, then the "fun" stuff – whatever else we do with our money. What do we really need? What do we really want our lives to be like? What do we value? Are we living according to those values? What can we do/live without in order to create the deeply fulfilling lives we want? Ask yourself these questions before blindly running to the mall and buying the latest gadget.
6. **Think altruistic.** One of the teachings of many religions is to help others who might not be as fortunate. Rather than spending money on "stuff" that accumulates on shelves and in closets, basements, and attics, think of people out there who could benefit from a hand up. Many people affected by Hurricane Sandy and the subsequent nor'easter would really appreciate the opportunity to rebuild their lives. Another thought: make a donation in honor of the recipient to their favorite charity or a cause they believe in. De-cluttering and not sure where to donate the goods? Visit www.justgive.org or call a Professional Organizer to facilitate the process. We are tapped in to a myriad of wonderful charitable destinations. Visit www.naponnj.org to find a PO in Northern New Jersey.

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7. **Shop At Home.** If you're gathering for the holidays in the home of a family member who is getting on in years, there are great opportunities for givers and recipients. If you're the host, you've been in your home for a long time, and you want to avoid fighting among children and grandchildren over who gets what upon your eventual passing (or you're imminently downsizing from the family home and want to begin the process sooner rather than later), go shopping in your house. If you're moving to a senior residence, decide what furniture and keepsakes you might want to take with you, then ask family members to pick out/ID items they would like to have themselves. Their choices might surprise you. If they are not in everyday use, have family members take their choices with them when they leave. If they are being used every day, earmark them by putting a colorful dot on or near the item, using a different color for each family member. Try not to feel badly if the family does not want to keep very much.
8. **Cure the Paper Plague!** Catalogs are coming fast and furious in the mail. For anyone who already has issues with paper coming into the house, this is especially challenging. Those glossy pictures and "sales" look so enticing, but they are designed to make us part with money we don't have to buy things we don't really need. My advice: bring in the mail, sort out the catalogs, and immediately recycle them. Let go of feeling guilty over not even looking at them. Register on www.catalogchoice.com or visit www.greendimes.com to stop them from coming at all. If there really is something you wanted to order from a certain catalog, flip through it, pull out the page showcasing the item, then recycle the rest. Keep the pages in a folder, then schedule time to visit the websites. Set a timer to stay focused on gift ordering only.
9. **Look Within.** I'm hearing that this economic climate is motivating people to derive comfort and support from their religious beliefs and cultural practices. Now that's quite a gift, especially for a child. It's free and relatively easy – it just requires a little extra effort. It may mean checking out books from the library (also free!) on one's own religion/culture or on a culture one would like to learn about, then investing time to read them. It's the gift of understanding one another, a gift one can give to the world. It might mean attending religious services once a week or trying a different house of worship or denomination. Create a new tradition with your family. Sounds simple? It is. If you do have a budget for gifts, consider a donation to wherever you worship or practice.
10. **Do a Talent Swap.** Got a talent for one thing and a friend has a talent for something else? Consider giving each other the gift of your talent and do a Talent Swap. It could be as simple as watching another couple's young children at your house for a few hours so your friends can have an at-home date in theirs. Or say you love to organize but detest cooking, and your friend is an unofficial gourmet chef. Create gift certificates for your talents and swap them with each other.
11. **Go Green!** Give a gift to the Earth. Plant a tree (visit www.arboday.com or www.jnf.org). Sponsor a farm animal to end hunger through Heifer International (www.heifer.org) or a similar site. Volunteer with a clean-up agency. Build a house with Habitat for Humanity. Think of the satisfaction you'll get from knowing you used your time, energy, and financial resources to better the world rather than contribute to a landfill.
12. **Easy Seasons' Greetings.** Got piles of holiday cards to send and little or no time to send them? Check into the services of a Virtual Assistant. The International Virtual Assistants Association says, "A Virtual Assistant (VA)... provid[es] administrative, creative, and/or technical services. Utilizing advanced technological modes of communication and data delivery, a professional VA assists clients in his/her area of expertise from his/her own office on a contractual basis" (see www.ivaa.org). Use a website such as www.SendOutCards.com to upload your contacts to the site, customize real paper greeting cards (100% recyclable), and create campaigns to send them. Another simple way is to send electronic greetings. They might not be as personal, but they save trees, cut down on post-holiday clutter, and ease the guilt of feeling like one has to save every greeting card ever received.



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