

# connect locally

It might seem like something out of a Norman Rockwell painting, but hitting downtown to do some shopping really can help put you in the Christmas spirit and provide a deeper connection with your local surroundings.

Most towns decorate the downtown streets, and many shops do holiday-themed window displays to attract shoppers. Yes, you should spend some money while you're out (it helps the local economy, after all), but just hitting the streets to do some window shopping is a great way to bond with your family and friends during Christmas.

## Hit the streets

When you're ramping up your Christmas shopping strategy, set aside a Saturday, or afternoon, to park (or walk, if you're close enough) to your closest shopping district and start exploring. You might find a store you've never seen, or at least make an effort to visit a store you don't frequent very often. It's a great chance to look for unique gifts, while also getting to know your own town a little bit better.

## Make it a family bonding experience

Even if you don't actually pick up any gifts while the kids (or spouse) are with you, hitting the local stores to scout out gift options is a great way to just spend some time with your family. Tell your kids stories about unique finds in the antique store, or let them make a list of gift options while perusing the aisles at a downtown general store.

If you're shopping for adults, it can also give you a chance to glance into local downtown boutiques.

## It just feels like Christmas

Walking the streets in downtown, with a chill in the air in November or December, as the Christmas lights twinkle around the street lights and in the windows, just feels quintessentially Christmas. It evokes the visuals and emotions from classic holiday films like *Miracle on 34th Street*, and is just a great tradition to add to the Christmas season.

## local gift cards

If you're totally stumped for a gift selection, there's nothing wrong with snagging a gift card and tossing it in a greeting card. There's no rule that says you have to buy a card from a chain restaurant or big box store. Think local for an easy gift solution.

### Check local shops

Some local stores have started offering gift card options for customers, be it a rechargeable card or just a gift certificate signed by the manager. Regardless, it can make for a more personal gift than just a generic gift card. If you find a store you think your loved one would really like but can't find the perfect gift, just get a gift card and let them enjoy shopping and picking out their favorite items on your dime. A gift card to a local store can be a much more personal gift, and it also takes some of the guesswork out of gift-buying. Plus, it supports a local business.

### Don't forget restaurants

Most local restaurants also offer gift cards, and a free lunch is a great gift. Aim high on this one; pick out a place you really think they'll like, and let them indulge with a nice meal as a gift from you.

### Coffee shops, bakeries

If you want to offer a bit more of a snack, pick up a gift certificate to a local coffee shop or bakery. Just make sure the place is good (maybe test out a few pastries before you pick up the card). A \$20 or \$30 gift card can stretch a good distance at a coffee house or bakery.

## use cash

One important step to remember before heading into town and hitting all those lovely, local shops to buy Christmas gifts: Hit up the ATM first. Shopping with cash has myriad benefits, but it can really be a huge help for small businesses around the holidays.

It's so much easier to know what you're spending when you can literally look at the cash in your wallet or purse. Pull out what you've budgeted for gift-buying and get to shopping. By setting your limit and not bringing any extra cash with you, it can help you stay focused while shopping and help you stay on budget.

