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## Retail Roundup: Find out retailers' rules before returning items

### Make a list and check it twice before rushing to store with unwanted gifts

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Now comes the season of the ho-ho-ho headache, those days after Christmas when you and everyone else in the universe take back the shirt that's a size too small, the computer game that's a tad advanced for your PC or the 300-piece train set that came with 298 pieces in the box.

According to a recent survey by Consumer Reports magazine, 35 percent of gift receivers expect they'll be taking at least one gift back to the store.

The stores know you're coming. And they say they're ready.

"Our stores are more than adequately staffed after the holiday," said Macy's Sacramento area spokeswoman Michelle Champoux.

Joshua Thomas, speaking from Target Corp.'s Minneapolis, Minn., headquarters, said that big box retailer has doubled staff for the holidays, "and the days that follow."

But are you ready?

Many retailers have tightened up their policies to combat returns fraud, expected to cost the industry \$3.7 billion this holiday season. Some merchants charge restocking fees of 10 percent or more.

So before you head to the store with that duplicate pair of slippers, consider these return tips from Greg Daugherty, Consumer Reports executive editor:

- Know the store's return policy. You'll save yourself time and disappointment if, for example, you don't have the receipt the merchant requires to take back an item.
- Speaking of receipts, always bring them with you to increase the odds that the store will take the items and that you'll get full purchase price back.
- Don't open unwanted items. Unopened packages are easier to return.
- When opening gifts, disturb the packaging as little as possible and repack items before you return them to the store.
- Some online purchases can be returned to a store while others have to be shipped to a specific address. Make sure you know where your return should go.

And while we're talking about returns, it only seems right to mention another billion-dollar "R" word: rebates.

Retailers and manufacturers offered about \$6 billion in rebates this year, according to the Promotion Marketing Association in New York City. Consumers redeemed a relatively measly \$486.5 million.

According to a survey by Integer Group, a New York City-based retail promotion firm, about one-third of shoppers buy electronics because of rebates and sale prices. About 45 percent go unclaimed.

Some of the hottest holiday gift items this year included rafts of rebate offers. So check the receipt for rebate terms on that new camera, TV and laptop computer. It could be worth \$100 or more on high-ticket items, said Bonnie Carlson, president of the marketing association.

"Make sure you understand the terms of the offer," Carlson said. "Be sure that you've got all the documentation, including the UPC label off box."

If the terms allow you to redeem the rebate online, do it. Otherwise collect all the documents, fill out all the forms and mail them – promptly.

"Don't procrastinate," Carlson said. "You'll put it off and then the deadline for redeeming the rebate will pass."

Rebates often take several weeks to process, so Carlson suggests putting a reminder on your calendar. If your rebate hasn't arrived in, say, six weeks, call the manufacturer.

"The hangup is probably at a processing center, but the manufacturer cares very much about keeping a happy consumer," Carlson said. "They'll put in a call to the processing center, and they have more clout than you do."

## **Information, please**

As mobile phone technology becomes more sophisticated, more consumers are using the devices for on-the-go information about stores and other businesses while they shop.

With that in mind, Roundup thought it might be interesting to peek into the search habits of Sacramento-area phone users during the holiday shopping season.

We asked V-Enable Inc., a San Diego firm whose voice-activated mobile phone directory service sends detailed business information to a caller's phone screen, to cull the top local searches through its system.

The company responded by mining the data from searches by 20,000 MetroPCS and Alltel subscribers in the greater Sacramento area, according to Craig Hagopian, V-Enable's chief marketing officer.

"We pulled from enough area ZIP codes that we covered a population of 2 million people," Hagopian said.

MetroPCS users make up the majority of the phone searchers, he said. That's significant because that company's unlimited local calling plans attract younger subscribers who often don't have a separate land line at home.

"We're talking about the generation that has cut the cord," Hagopian said.

The Sacramento phone search profile generally falls in line with the rest of the country. Wal-Mart tops both lists. Starbucks, GameStop, Pizza Hut, Target and McDonald's are among the top 10 locally and nationally.

The national list continues the restaurant/retail theme through No. 15.

The Sacramento list, however, has some surprises: Planned Parenthood, No. 8, and the Sacramento County jail, No. 10. Local cell users made Motel 6 the 15th-most searched business in the area.

Hagopian declined to draw any conclusions from the data.

"I'm not going to make any comments about my customers," he said. "But I will say that we've got enough subscribers that I'm very, very comfortable that we have a good representative sample."

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