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Gifts to share

More families expected to limit holiday shopping this year to 'household presents'

Jaclyn Trop / The Detroit News

Unwrapping gifts this year may be a group effort for many Michigan families.

"Household presents" such as furniture and television sets are expected to replace individual gifts come the holidays as families streamline their budgets and strive to make quality time more comfortable, analysts say.

"There may be one purchase, and that's it," said retail analyst Ken Dalto of Kenneth J. Dalto & Associates in Farmington Hills. "It's a phenomenon we've never seen before."

The degree of "pre-arrangement" among consumers deciding what and whom to put on shopping lists is unprecedented, according to Dalto. He said he has heard from many shoppers who have decided to opt out of exchanging gifts with friends, coworkers and extended families.

"There will be gentlemen's agreements to not buy each other gifts this year," he said. "I think this will be the worst holiday period in 30 years."

At Art Van Furniture stores throughout Metro Detroit, the showrooms are beefed up in anticipation of increased demand for family gifts such as television consoles and sectional and modular couches this year. "We'll see people who say, the TV is a gift for my husband and the console is for me," said spokeswoman Chris Morrisroe.

Shoppers are "setting up family theater rooms with an eye toward anything that makes hanging out at home with each other more comfortable," Morrisroe said.

The store has given twice the amount of floor space to television consoles compared to last year and increased the space devoted to sectionals by 14 percent. "We've doubled the amount of real estate, which is huge for furniture stores," she says.

Shoppers also are veering toward mid-priced "smart investments," including durable materials

such as leather, noted Bernie Moray, CEO of Gorman's Home Furnishings, which has four stores in Metro Detroit.

"They're making an investment in something even if it is just a chair," he said. "They're going to spend a reasonable amount of money to get decent quality. They're not buying the least expensive item out there."

Families who are limiting themselves to one larger gift this year may be sharing a single item like a new DVD player or television or an experience like a dinner out.

A National Retail Federation survey indicated many shoppers plan on economizing when it comes to family gifts. Respondents reported plans to spend an average of \$466.13 on family members, down from \$469.14 last year.

Shoppers plan to spend an average of \$832.36 on holiday-related shopping, up 1.9 percent over last year's \$816.69.

"We believe that's in large part because families would be most understanding when it comes to cutting back," said spokeswoman Kathy Grannis.

However, children used to tearing into stacks of presents on Christmas morning may not be as empathetic when they find they will have to share a gift this year.

"Their experience is matched at school and among playmates, but with small kids, it's probably not going over so well," Dalto said. "Kids who are 6, 7, 8 -- they understand because their father is suddenly home. It's a tangible thing."

Many families plan on sticking to a draconian budget but then chicken out just before Christmas, said Gerri Detweiler, credit adviser for credit.com.

"It seems to be the gifts for the kids are the last to go," Detweiler said.

Vacations and experiences that create memories are "much more valuable than something that gets used and discarded later," she said. If buying a single-ticket gift for the holidays, however, the family should reach a compromise on an item that everyone can share.

"Ideally, it could even be something that you pick out after Christmas for extra savings."

A family gift and other coping strategies in lean times offer an opportunity to teach children to appreciate simple pleasures and avoid a lifetime of debt, according to Matt Wallaert, a behavioral psychologist at Thrive (www.justthrive.com), a start-up financial advisory service.

"Some of the big winners from this may be young people," Wallaert said.

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