

Pick a Present

How to get the most out of your Christmas gift cards

BY ANNE BOKMA



Dress up a gift card with a personal note and a small gift that complements the card.

ANNE BOKMA is a freelance writer in Hamilton who specializes in money issues. Her favourite gift cards are for bookstores and coffee shops. Her daughters, 14 and 11, prefer mall gift cards – naturally.

Gift cards are a \$6-billion market in Canada, but a whopping 15 per cent of them go unredeemed. That's a billion bucks in unused cards! Here are six tips for making sure these plastic presents don't go to waste.

1. PICK THE RIGHT CARD

A Tim Hortons gift card might be the perfect choice for your son's teacher if she's a java junkie, but if she has a green thumb, a card for a gardening centre might be a more thoughtful choice. "You want to show that you've attached some personal thought to it," says Toronto etiquette expert Louise Fox of The Etiquette Ladies. Also, think outside the big-box stores and consider cards for services that might be more meaningful; for example, a massage for a friend who is having a stressful time or housecleaning services for someone who just got out of the hospital.

2. MAKE IT REALLY SEEM LIKE A GIFT

Giving a gift card is really just a notch above handing over a bunch of cash in an envelope. "Put the gift card inside a proper greeting card and write a personal note: 'Enjoy the spa treatment. You deserve it!'" says Fox. Make it look pretty by putting a bow on the envelope or by using a gift bag. Or go one step further by including a small gift that complements the card – an elegant bookmark with an Indigo gift card, gardening gloves with a garden centre card or a packet of chocolate-covered espresso beans with a Starbucks card.

3. CASH IN UNUSED CARDS

You can sell unwanted gift cards for cash at cardswap.ca. Register, post your card and the website will notify you by email when it's sold. You mail the card to the buyer and CardSwap forwards you the money. Discounts range from 10 to 40 per cent off the face value of the cards, says owner Frances Ho. You determine the price you want for the card and CardSwap charges six per cent on the sale price.

4. KEEP ALL YOUR CARDS IN ONE PLACE

Often cards don't get used because they are lost or forgotten. Keep them together, preferably in your wallet or purse, so they are easily accessible when you want to use them.

5. DONATE THEM

Contact a local charity to see if they can use your unwanted cards. Also, CardSwap has a feature on its website that allows sellers to donate their cards and receive a tax receipt in return.

6. REGIFTING IS OK

With gift cards, there's little chance of the original giver finding out. "But remember: Someone might ask you what you bought with the card," says Fox. "So you might need to have a story ready." ■