

Review: Apps to Make Holiday Shopping Easier

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SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Even if you love to shop, it can be a pain this time of year. Stores are crowded, gift options seem endless and it's hard to determine if you're getting the best prices.

If you have a smartphone, though, there's a simple solution: apps. There are tons of mobile apps to help you save time and cash this holiday season. Most of them are cheap or free.

I tried several apps meant to ease holiday shopping frustrations and found a bunch that make the task easier — and a few that make it more fun.

Price Check by Amazon and RedLaser (free, available for iPhone and Android) — With these two apps on my phone, I felt like a low-price-finding machine. Both let you search for items by typing in the name or by scanning a barcode. With Price Check, you can also search for items with your voice or by taking a photo of things like books and DVDs.

RedLaser, owned by eBay, is great for finding items online and in nearby bricks-and-mortar stores. I found myself checking prices on everything from watches to collapsible water bottles, sometimes just for the heck of it. I used it at a local Sur La Table cookware store to compare prices on a set of water glasses before buying them, and was pleased to see the \$19.99 price was lower than at some online retailers and a nearby Bloomingdales department store.

RedLaser also includes a handy feature for making simple shopping lists, and a history feature that records all the items you've looked up, so you can go back and find things later on.

Price Check's layout is slightly more attractive than RedLaser's, though it's limited to the Web since it gives online-only results from Amazon.com and companies that sell through Amazon.com.

I really like the way Price Check displays search results, with the product at the top of the screen and three tabs that let you quickly scroll through prices, a description and user reviews. And if I found an item's price was lower online than in the store, it would be simple to buy it through the app.

The best part about Price Check is the abundance of product reviews (the same ones you see when you go on Amazon.com or use the Amazon Mobile app). They're indispensable for looking up potential gifts and helping me think twice before making purchases.

Gift Plan (\$2.99, available for iPhone) — If you have a hard time organizing your gift

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list, or tend to misplace it after writing it out, you'll like Gift Plan.

The app lets you make elaborate gift lists for family and friends. You can set up lists of potential presents, jot down people's likes and dislikes and — even more helpful for those of us who never remember such things — their clothing sizes. The app's "Occasions" tab shows you upcoming holidays or birthdays, and a "Shopping" tab helps you track gifts you plan to buy.

Gift Plan denotes each gift-giving occasion with a different color, which makes it easy to spot them on the app's built-in calendar, and you can choose when and how often you want to be notified about upcoming events.

Another cool feature: You can set up a passcode to keep sneaky loved ones from snooping at your list.

Shopkick (free, available for iPhone) you hate shopping, this can make a painful activity more fun. If you adore shopping, the app may be harmful to your wallet.

The app shows a list of nearby stores, each of which you get a certain number of "kicks," or points, for visiting. Click on a listed store and you can see available deals and opportunities to pick up more kicks (if I stopped at a local Best Buy, for example, I could get 75 kicks for scanning photos of three different GPS devices). You can also link your Visa debit or credit card to your shopkick account so you'll automatically get points for certain purchases. Collect enough "kicks" and you can get rewards such as gift certificates to Target or Best Buy.

I quickly got sucked into visiting as many nearby stores as possible, including some I rarely enter, simply so I could rack up more points. Somehow, I also ended up buying several items for myself — fleece pajama pants at Old Navy, a white sake bottle and matching cups at Crate & Barrel — even though I was supposed to be buying gifts for others.

Lemon (free, available for iPhone, Android, BlackBerry, Windows Phone) — As you spend, receipts pile up. For me, this means a wad of disorganized paper slips in my wallet and digital receipts lost in the bowels of my email inbox. Lemon offers a sweet solution.

Once you download the app and sign up with its corresponding website, Lemon.com, you can scan your receipts with your phone's camera and the service will automatically identify the name and location of the store along with the amount you spent and the purchase date (if you want to see the whole receipt image, that's saved, too). Lemon is good for online shopping, too: If you buy anything on the Web, you can have online retailers send the receipt to your lemon.com address so they'll be easier to keep track of. And if you want to back up some old e-receipts with the service, just forward them there yourself.

You can use preset labels like "personal" and "credit card" to add details to your receipts, or add your own. I made a "gift" label to identify holiday items and was happy to see I could also view them by category.

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The holidays can be stressful, but with a couple of these apps on your smartphone you'll likely find gift-giving less so. Your wallet might even thank you for it, too.

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