

Consumer's guide to downloadable gifts

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This Wednesday, Sept. 28, 2011 file photo shows the Kindle Fire at a news conference in New York. As we become increasingly connected to our smartphones, laptops and e-readers, gifts are going digital, too. You can still buy bestsellers for loved ones who have swapped their paperbacks for an e-reader such as Amazon.com's Kindle, Barnes & Noble's Nook and Sony's Reader. (AP Photo/Mark Lennihan, FILE)

Remember when gifts were objects, purchased or crafted and wrapped with a bow, then presented with a flourish?

Over the last few years, gift cards have become a popular alternative, and now as we become increasingly connected to our smartphones, laptops and e-readers, gifts are going digital, too. Here's what you need to know to navigate a [holiday shopping](#) season without gift wrap or envelopes or even little plastic cards.

- E-books

You can still buy bestsellers for loved ones who have swapped their paperbacks for an [e-reader](#) such as Amazon.com's Kindle, Barnes & Noble's Nook and Sony's Reader. Of the three, Amazon is the only one that lets you choose a specific Kindle e-book to give as a gift. Barnes & Noble and Sony direct you to purchase a physical gift card or send an electronic one via email, either to yourself to print and present, or directly to the recipient.

To buy a book for a Kindle owner, head to the Kindle e-book store on Amazon's website. Click on any book title, and you'll see an option to "give as a gift." Amazon will send an email to the recipient once you finish checking out. When the recipient gets the notification by email, she can click on a link to accept the gift and send the title to her Kindle device. This works the same way for people who use Amazon's Kindle software to read books on smartphones and computers, too. If the recipient loses the notification email, you can go into your own Amazon order history and resend it, for no extra charge. And if it's a book the recipient has already read, she can exchange it for Amazon.com credit.

One downside if you like to get all your holiday shopping done early: Anything you order is instantly delivered.

Here are some relevant links:

www.amazon.com/gp/help/customers/faq/topic.html?nodeId=200555070
[ebooks.custhelp.com/app/answer ... /60/kw/gift/r-id/166](http://ebooks.custhelp.com/app/answer/_/60/kw/gift/r-id/166)
[www.barnesandnoble.com/u/NOOK- ... Gift-Cards/379003182](http://www.barnesandnoble.com/u/NOOK-Gift-Cards/379003182)

- iPads and iPhones

For the uninitiated: Apple's iPad tablet computer and iPhone smartphones can be loaded up with music, movies, games, books and useful (or frivolous) programs called "apps" through Apple's iTunes store. You can buy a plastic iTunes gift card where gift cards are sold,

but you can also send almost all of those types of media as gifts.

You've got to download the iTunes software and create an account if you haven't already. Then, in the iTunes store section, browse for the album, TV series or game of your choice. Next to the button prompting you to "buy this album," there should be a little arrow. Click it and pick the option to give as a gift instead.

There is one major exception: Apple doesn't yet allow you to give e-books as gifts via iTunes. And as with giving Kindle [e-books](#), gifts from iTunes are delivered when you pay for them, making advance holiday shopping a challenge.

Details at support.apple.com/kb/HT2736

- Groupon, LivingSocial and other group-discount sites

Some of the most-talked-about startups are group-buying sites, and Groupon, which just went public, is king of the heap. These companies send emails to their members every day advertising a special deal at a local shop, restaurant, spa or other business, usually something along the lines of, "\$10 for \$20 worth of donuts." Once you buy a deal, it's stored in your account. When you're ready to use it, you can either print out the voucher and turn it in, or you can pull it up using a smartphone app once you're in the store.

The number of Groupon-esque sites is growing by the day; if you're interested but don't know where to start, you can sign up with a deal aggregator like Yipit, which collects all the deals in your area in a single email.

If you see a deal that will make a perfect gift, Groupon and LivingSocial make it pretty easy. Both show "give as a gift" options right on the main

deal page.

When you click to purchase a Groupon, an email goes to the recipient. If you would rather make it a surprise, you can send it to yourself, then print and hand it over later. Groupons are almost all transferable, even though the name of the buyer will remain on the voucher. Just be sure to look over the fine print to confirm. If one of your recipients is all about Groupons, but you don't see a deal you know she'll like, the company also sells gift cards.

With LivingSocial, once you buy a deal, you can also go into your account later and opt to give something as a gift. This site lets you set a date for delivery, making it easier to surprise your recipient. There are some quirks in the LivingSocial gifting process. For one thing, if you say you're going to print out the voucher, but then change your mind, you won't be able to email it as a gift later. Good thing there's a pretty detailed "help" section on the site: help.livingsocial.com/help-topics/gifts

Now, using coupons and discounts to buy gifts isn't new. But when you give the gift of Groupon, the recipient will know you paid less.

- Facebook-based gift cards and mobile apps

Lord & Taylor is among the retailers experimenting with what they're calling "social gifting," which in their case means making it easy to tap friends on Facebook to pitch in for a gift certificate. If you're not already a Facebook devotee, it probably doesn't make sense to join up just for this. But if you already have connected with friends on the social networking site, keep reading.

From Lord & Taylor's Facebook page, you can click a link that says gift cards to install a virtual gift card app. Pick the recipient and the amount you want to spend, and set a date for delivery in the future. Once you

pay for the gift card, you can then invite others to contribute additional money to the gift card. You could tweet or email the link, or the app will help by suggesting friends you have in common, so you can send a quick Facebook message. You could post the plea to your own Facebook wall, too, though the recipient might see that.

On the delivery date, the recipient will get an email or a Facebook message showing how much each person contributed; they can send the gift to their phone or print out a barcode to redeem the gift certificate.

A growing number of other stores, including Starbucks and Target, allow customers to pay via mobile phone apps, and gift cards can be converted for use in those accounts.

- Startups

Several Internet startups are taking different approaches to digital gift-giving. One, KangoGift, lets you send a gift certificate for everything from a basic cup of coffee to a six-week music class by text message to a recipient's cell phone, or right to their Facebook page. Then they can just bring their phone along and show it to the merchant to redeem their gift. Most of the offers are clustered in four cities - Boston; New York; Madison, Wis.; and Chapel Hill, N.C. - but there are some national merchants on board, such as Fandango for movie tickets, that sell things that can be redeemed online.

Another, Giftly, lets you bundle up to three different shops, restaurants or services into a single gift package - tickets at three artsy movie theaters, or pints at three different microbreweries, maybe. You decide the amount and the merchants, then send either by email, Facebook or snail-mail. This makes it easy to customize a gift, even if the merchants themselves don't offer [gift cards](#) or gift certificates.

But the recipient needs to be fairly tech-savvy. To redeem the gift, the recipient actually pays for it herself, then goes online at the shop with her smartphone to get the same amount reimbursed to a credit or debit card she registers with Giftly. (To get around the little matter of not everyone owning a smartphone, the startup is also working on a prepaid debit card that only works at the locations specified on the Giftly.)

More information at www.giftly.com or www.kangogift.com .

With many of these options, one of the biggest challenges is timing. In some cases, the only way to give a gift on the first night of Hanukkah or Christmas morning is to dash to the computer at the right moment to hit send.

But even for the most tech-savvy on your gift list, you might be better served making the presentation more traditional, says Tracy Tuten, an associate marketing professor at East Carolina University who has made gift-giving research her specialty. That's because all the emotions that make gifts an important part of relationships happen when you hand over the neatly wrapped package and not when the person is actually getting the pedicure you bought for her with a Groupon.

And while teenagers may be the earliest adopters, buying them a gift that can be sent straight to their smartphones comes with the same pitfalls as any other type of [gift](#), Tuten says. It must walk the line between proving you have made an effort to understand who they are and what they like, and giving them enough choice that they don't feel boxed in.

Sorry, technology hasn't fixed that problem yet.

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