

## More holiday wish lists go digital

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Holly Riefke's two small children still write letters to Santa Claus. Or rather, they print their names on letters Riefke has written on their behalf, and together they drop them into a festive red Macy's mailbox designated for North Pole correspondence.

But while keeping the tradition alive and well, Riefke also is enlisting high-tech help to streamline the gift-giving process.

The 29-year-old stay-at-home mom has built digital holiday wish lists for her 3-year-old daughter and 4-year-old son on the Toys R Us website, which lets kids register for toys just as adults register for baby shower and wedding gifts, complete with a scanner gun.

"They feel that they're in charge of it and that they're involved," Riefke said. "It's not just mom sitting there with a piece of paper writing everything down."

Digital wish lists, which have been available for several years for kids and adults, are growing more widespread and sophisticated as more holiday shopping moves online and consumers embrace the convenience.

"A digital wish list is a win-win," said Michael Silverstein, a senior partner in the consumer practice at Boston Consulting Group. "It allows the giver to know what the receiver wants. It permits the receiver to avoid a trip to the store for a refund. It's classier than cash."

While they have yet to achieve mainstream popularity, Silverstein

predicts "the next three holiday seasons will see tremendous growth in demand and usage," as long as retailers make their wish list tools highly visible.

Thirty-two percent of holiday shoppers plan to find gift inspiration on wish lists this year, up from 28.8 percent last year, according to a National Retail Federation survey.

As retailers beef up their digital strategies, more are launching wish list tools, and those that already have them are rolling out enhanced features.

Target, which has offered various wish list capabilities over the years, this season introduced an interactive mobile app that lets kids create an avatar and virtually go through Santa's workshop to select from hundreds of items rolling by on a conveyor belt.

Toys R Us, which has offered an online wish list since 2008 that functions like its baby registry, last year launched a mobile holiday wish list app with a bar code scanner so families can go through a physical store and upload items to their digital lists with their smartphones.

Gap this year started an online wish list that lets shoppers add up to 30 items across five of its brands - Gap, Old Navy, Banana Republic, Athleta and Piperlime - and share their lists via email, Facebook or Twitter, so "you mix and match your favorite styles for any occasion and at any price point," the company said.

And Amazon, a pioneer when it launched its wish lists in 1999, this season introduced the Twitter hashtag #AmazonWishList, which lets customers add items to their lists directly from Twitter.

The idea of sending links to the exact products desired has rubbed some the wrong way. Rebecca Little, a 36-year-old Chicago-area mom to

4-year-old and 2-year-old boys, said she understands the convenience factor, especially for kids over 8, when it gets harder to guess their tastes. But, "it seems too much like shopping than receiving a gift," she said.

"I like the idea of a kid requesting a gift in a letter to Santa or even writing up a few wishes, but something about browsing a website and making a wish list that way just seems like 'Here, buy this for me,' not 'Here are some ideas to send you on your way,'" said Little, who writes the shopping blog [PinwheelChicago.com](http://PinwheelChicago.com). "There's an entitlement behind it that bugs me."

But Riefke, who also uses digital wish lists for her kids' birthdays, says the tools help organize and disseminate information that relatives will ask her for anyway.

Her children still go through the Toys R Us toy catalog and circle what they want, but inputting their requests into the digital registry allows her to easily share them with family members spread across the country and avoid duplicate gifts, as the registry automatically updates when someone makes a purchase.

"We're trying to find a way to meld our traditions," said Riefke.

Lauren Phillips, 34, started using digital wish lists after too many Christmases spent having to pretend to like gifts she didn't and then take pains to return them.

She started with Amazon wish lists for herself and her husband. This season, with their family grown to include a 4-month-old daughter, she has put all of their gift requests into [Myregistry.com](http://Myregistry.com), which lets shoppers add items from any store website via a button they download on to their browser tool bar.

With money tight and space at home limited, "I think it's really important to give people what they really want versus what I think they might want," said Phillips.

"You have to get over the stigma a little bit," she said, "but if you're being realistic, this is the way to go."

Phillips said she only sends the registry link to people who ask her for it. It isn't a mandate, she added, but a way to communicate gift ideas. For people who prefer not to use the registry, she said, it can at least give hints on color preferences and sizes.

She has persuaded many of her family members to make holiday registries for themselves, too.

"All of us, I swear, are happier at Christmas because we're opening things we really want," Phillips said.

Nancy Lee, president of Myregistry.com, a universal registry platform for a range of occasions, said holiday wish traffic was slow when the company launched in 2005 but it started picking up in 2011, and since then it has doubled every year.

Increasingly, she said, [holiday shoppers](#), like brides and grooms, are creating wish lists on retailers' individual websites, where they often get incentives to do so, and then importing their varied lists to Myregistry.com to give family and friends a single destination for their requests.

Retailers like the system, Lee said, because "chances are (their products are) not coming back Dec. 27 in the return lines."

Myregistry.com features an app with a [bar code scanner](#) to upload items

from any store, the ability to input items from physical stores without websites, and a system to track who bought what to facilitate thank-you notes.

Many people share their registries via e-cards, Lee said, but others post them to Facebook or Twitter so it feels less like they are asking and more like they are just letting people know the list exists.

"We're all too busy to be running around trying to find the perfect gift for someone these days," Lee said.

Sebastian DiGrande, leader of Boston Consulting Group's West Coast Technology, Media and Telecommunications practice, says that as digital wish lists evolve, they won't be created solely by the people requesting gifts. In the future, he says, retailers will aggregate data from social networks, geolocation, and other digital and physical activities to pre-populate wish lists for shoppers, or on behalf of the people they shop for.

But some shoppers would prefer wish lists go back to basics.

Kelly Pleva, a stay-at-home mom, for several holidays created [wish lists](#) for her four children using TargetLists, an online tool that let shoppers create a list and add any item in the store using an in-store scanner. She was grateful that it saved her the hassle of following them down the aisles handwriting their requests in a notebook.

She had a system: The kids would upload their desired gifts using Target's scanner, and then she would go home and edit their lists online, removing inappropriate items - a \$400 moped, makeup for a child not yet old enough for it - before sending it to family and friends.

"Other people knew what was purchased," Pleva, 39, said. "It was

awesome."

Pleva was disheartened when she discovered Target this year did away with the scanners for its TargetLists and introduced iPad kiosks and iPod touch scanners for wedding and baby gift registries. Unable to install Target's new avatar-driven wish list app to her phone because it requires more storage than she has available, Pleva decided to get creative.

This season, Pleva's relatives receive Target wedding and baby registries for her four children, ages 11, 10, 8 and 7, so the kids can keep using a scanner.

"It's kind of funny, because it says my son is 'groom' and then I put myself as 'partner,'" Pleva laughed. "For the 'big day,' we put Christmas."

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