

Preparing For the Holidays: Ho Ho Ho... or Bah Humbug!

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By Kathy Paauw

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Some of my clients dread the holiday season because it often represents stress, pressure, expectations, guilt, disappointment, pain, loneliness, exhaustion... and the list goes on.

This is a choice. We choose who we spend time with. We choose what activities we say yes and no to. We choose where we go. Your holiday season can be as simple or as elaborate as you choose to make it, and it can be a lot of fun if you plan accordingly.

Take some time this week to think about what's most important to you this season, and then do a little planning. Here are some suggestions to help.

==> Create a list of holiday rituals that are important to you.

Seek your family's input on holiday decisions. Ask family members what they liked and disliked about last year's holidays. Write down the most important elements and activities you wish to include this year, and plan to make it happen.

Keeping time-consuming and irrelevant traditions or rituals "just because we've always done it that way" can increase stress. Keep only those traditions that have meaning to you, or create some new ones.

Give yourself permission to be in the moment and enjoy the smells, sounds, feel, and tastes that are unique to this season of the year.

==> Make a list of those you want to spend time with during the holidays.

Who nourishes you? Who are the family members, friends, and colleagues you enjoy being with?

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Do you want to do any entertaining? If so, when and with whom? Plan ahead and ask for help if you want it. True friends and loved ones will not care how many hours you slaved over the stove. Spending time with you is what they'll cherish most. You don't have to be Martha Stewart to throw a great party!

Are you invited to holiday parties that you really don't want to go to, but you've gone in the past because you should? Be at choice — don't play the victim! This is not about whom you should see, but rather whom you choose to spend time with.

==> Mail your greeting cards, holiday letters, and packages early.

Some time-saving tips:

Write a short holiday letter that covers the highlights; copy it on holiday paper and add a note at the end to personalize it. Make a collage of pictures to photocopy on the back side of the letter.

Use self-adhesive return labels. These labels are inexpensive and often come with festive holiday designs. One great online source for these is Walter Drake at

Colorful Images

is another source. They can be reached at 800-458-7999.

If you have your addresses on a computerized database, consider printing out your mailing list on clear address labels. Years ago, an old college friend commented that she thought it was tacky to use address labels on holiday cards and letters. I told her that my choice was to either use labels or not mail our annual holiday letter to the 250 people on our list. Now that she has a young family, I've noticed she has started using address labels, too!

E-mail a holiday letter to those with whom you correspond electronically. You can easily personalize this for each recipient. Attach color photos highlighting the past year. Another alternative is to create a holiday web page, and include the link to it in a personalized e-mail message.

Mail packages early to avoid longer lines at the post office and ensure they will arrive in time. Or, better yet, sign up with Stamps.com and avoid the lines altogether. You can mail large packages without standing in any lines — as long as you have an accurate way to weigh them before you purchase postage online.

==> Thoughtfully plan your gift-giving.

Give from the heart... not out of obligation. Decide whom you choose to give to and make a list. This will help you avoid overspending through impulse buying.

If you think back to the most cherished gifts you have received, they are often homemade or from the heart. A gift of time — such as a gift certificate redeemable for an activity you can do together — can be very meaningful. Among the most prized gifts I've ever received have been homemade cards with a

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heartfelt note written inside. Value goes far beyond the cost of the gift.

A great resource for homemade gift ideas is a book called *The Perfect Mix*. It contains creative edible gift ideas, including wrapping suggestions and tag instructions, along with a source guide for supplies. The book offers more than 90 recipes for soups, breads, muffins, cookies, and other gifts. The gifts I've created from this book have been very well received and appreciated.

Instead of exchanging gifts with friends, consider having a holiday or post-holiday party with them.

Avoid parking hassles, gridlock traffic around the malls, and long lines at the register by shopping online and through catalogs. A number of retail stores now offer merchandise online, as well. If you are purchasing a gift that needs to be mailed, you can arrange to have it sent directly to the recipient, thus avoiding the extra steps of wrapping, labeling, and mailing the gift.

Spread out your purchase of gifts over the weeks of November and early December. It's easier on the budget, and less stressful than waiting until the last minute.

Wrapping gifts can take a lot of time. Instead of wrapping all of them, use a gift bag with a nice bow tied at the top, or use a decorated gift box.

Consider giving an alternative gift to a friend or loved one by giving to a charity in their name. One of my favorite charities is Heifer Project International. Through living gifts of animals, HPI is helping

families worldwide to become self-reliant. You can buy an animal that can change the life of a hungry family and at the same time honor family and friends. Visit HPI's "gift catalog" at

==> Spread the holiday cheer with those in need.

Volunteer to serve a holiday meal to the homeless, work in a soup kitchen, or work at a food bank.

Adopt a family for the holidays and provide them with gifts or holiday foods. Many churches and non-profit organizations can match you with a needy family.

Look for a Giving Tree in your local retail stores. The tree is filled with cards that list a specific gift desired by someone in need. You select a card off the tree, purchase the suggested gift listed on the card, and return the gift to the tree with the card attached. The store wraps the gift and delivers it to the intended recipient.

The end of the tax year is a great time to review your budget and consider a year-end gift to your favorite charities. This can represent a significant tax deduction if you itemize, while doing great things locally and globally.

==> Use your calendar.

Now that you're clear about your intentions, calendar them in. Writing them down for follow-up on a

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specific date will help you to remember to do it and will keep things from falling to the last minute. Here is a list of activities you can pencil in on your calendar: Schedule family meeting to discuss plans and intentions for the holiday season Make airline, hotel, and rental car arrangements (if traveling out of town for the holidays)— ASAP! Holiday decorating (indoor, outdoor, office, etc.) Finalize holiday entertainment plan and guest list Mail invitations or call to invite others to events you have planned Meal planning and preparation (can some cooking be done ahead of time and frozen?) Prepare gift list Holiday gift making/holiday baking Gift selection & purchase Gift wrapping Prepare mailing list or database for holiday cards/letters/e-mails Prepare holiday cards, letters, e-mails, Website Mail cards, letters, packages Gather information about volunteer opportunities and calendar in activities you choose to do Finalize charitable giving plan for 2000

Happy holiday organizing!

Kathy Paauw, President of Paauwerfully Organized, specializes in helping busy executives, professionals, and entrepreneurs declutter their schedules, spaces and minds. She is a certified business/personal coach and professional organizer. Contact her by visiting her website at

and learn how you can Find ANYTHING in 5 Seconds – Guaranteed!

HOW TO HUNT FOR MARKETS—OVER THE HOLIDAYS

By Dr. Erika Dreifus

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Chances are, you'll be busy over the next several weeks. Between preparing for, celebrating, and unwinding from the holidays it may be difficult to maintain your regular writing routine. And if researching potential homes for your work is part of that routine—as it is for many of us who regularly submit stories, essays, poems, articles, and reviews for publication—you may be worried about falling behind.

But it's time to put those worries to rest. In truth, there are many ways to keep up with your market-hunting over the holidays. Here are just four possibilities:

- 1) When you visit friends and family, peruse the magazines they may have on their coffee tables or stacked in their recycling bins. They may subscribe to some that you don't receive. Who knows how many new markets you may discover? (Just be sure to ask for permission before you start rummaging!)
- 2) Be bold with your gift list. If someone close to you should ask what you might like for the holidays, go ahead and say it. Go ahead and tell that person: "I'd like you to bring me/send me all the magazines you've received for the past six months—and haven't yet thrown out." That person won't need to shop, and you will be able to spend the rest of the winter researching markets.
- 3) If you'll be traveling, take advantage of any complimentary publications that may come your way:

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inflight magazines, morning newspapers at hotels, and so on. Again, these may provide you sample issues for markets that you haven't considered before.

4) If you're visiting anyone out-of-town, stop by the local library, and check out the magazines the library keeps stocked. It's quite likely that you'll discover some—especially regional publications—that you won't be able to research as easily back home.

Can you think of other possibilities? Add them to the list! Happy holidays, and happy market-hunting.

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