9 Online Shopping Tips

❄ Know who you're dealing with.

- Confirm the online seller's physical address and phone number before you buy. It comes in handy if you have questions or problems later.

❄ Know what you're buying.

- Read the seller's description of the product and even though it can be painful, the fine print.

- Check out the terms and conditions. Can you return the item for a refund if you're not satisfied? Who pays the shipping costs? Is there a restocking fee? Print and save records of your online transactions, including all emails to and from the seller.

- Buy gift cards from sources you know and trust. Avoid buying cards from any online auction sites because the cards could be fakes.

❄ Be stingy with your personal information.

- **Don't give out your credit card** or other financial information in exchange for an offer of the newest tech toy, a free gift card, a seasonal job or a holiday vacation rental.

- **Don't email your financial information.** Email isn't a secure way to transmit numbers— your credit card, your checking account, or your Social Security number.

- **Don't click on a link in an email.** Legitimate companies don't ask for your financial information via email or pop-up message.

❄ Check the privacy policy.

Really. It may be long, but it can give important information: for example, what personal information the website collects, why, and how the operators are going to use it. If you can't find the privacy policy—or understand it—consider taking your business elsewhere, and letting the site know what you think.

❄ Shop around.

Having an item's manufacturer and model number can help you compare "apples to apples" among merchants. Some retailers match, or even beat, a competitor's prices. Many merchants are offering free shipping this year, but not all—so factor the cost of shipping into the total cost. Or if you order online and pick up at the store, consider the cost of parking or public transportation.

❄ Should you buy on public WiFi?

Don't assume that public "hot spots" are secure. Unless you can verify that a hot spot has effective security measures in place, you may not want to send sensitive information like your credit card number over that network.

❄ Pay by credit or charge card.

They offer the best consumer protections. Under federal law, you have the right to dispute charges under certain circumstances and withhold payment temporarily while the creditor is investigating. And if your card is used without your authorization, your liability generally ends at the first $50.

- Wiring money can be risky. It's just like sending cash—once it's gone, it's gone. You can't get it back. Buying online using cash equivalents—debit card, personal check, cashier's check, or money order—can be risky. Use them only if you know the party you're doing business with.

❄ Free can be costly.

Free screen savers, e-cards, or other seasonal downloads could carry dangerous viruses. Keep your anti-virus and anti-spyware software current along with your firewall.

❄ Monitor your financial accounts.

Read your statements regularly, making sure they reflect the charges you authorized.