

Unwrapping gift cards

Here's how to know the terms and avoid surprises when you give or receive a gift card.

When you give a gift card

As you shop for a card, for yourself or to give as a gift, pay attention to whether the card is displayed or labeled as a gift card. Typically, gift cards are for a specified amount and after the money is spent, the gift card is not usable.

Other types of cards (often called prepaid cards, reloadable cards, or prepaid debit cards) let you add money to them and can be used on an ongoing basis, but those cards are subject to different rules. For example, they might charge monthly service fees.

When you give a gift card, give the terms and conditions and the receipt too. The terms and conditions are sometimes included in the original packaging.

When you get a gift card

- Protect the card like cash. You might not get your money back if your card is lost or stolen.
- Write down the card number, security code, and customer service phone number when you first get the card. Register the card if you can.
- Take a look at the terms and conditions that came with the card to see what happens if the card is lost or stolen.



- Keep the card until you're sure you won't return anything you bought with it. Some stores give refunds only on the card used to purchase an item.

Types of cards

Store gift cards

Store gift cards carry the brand of a single store, online merchant, or group of stores. They can be used only at those locations.

Network-branded gift cards

These cards have a logo such as American Express, Discover, Mastercard, or Visa. They can be widely used.

Avoid surprises

When you get, or give, a gift card, understanding the way the card works can help you avoid surprises.

No fees for one year

Federal rules say that gift cards cannot charge inactivity or service charges for 12 months. After that first year, these fees could start to eat away at your card's value.

Expiration dates may not mean the end

Under federal law, a gift card cannot be sold that will expire in less than five years. If you have a gift card that has an expiration date, a note on the card should tell you how to access the money. Your state may provide additional gift card protections and rights.

About us

The Consumer Financial Protection Bureau regulates the offering and provision of consumer financial products and services under the federal consumer financial laws, and educates and empowers consumers to make better informed financial decisions.

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