

**ENVIRONMENT**

# In a Tight Holiday Season, Some Turn to Barter

By MIREYA NAVARRO DEC. 22, 2010

This holiday season, Mellissa Spitzer is doing what was once unthinkable for her: presenting used toys to her children, niece and young sister as gifts.

“I’ve talked to relatives and asked if they would mind, and they said no,” said Mrs. Spitzer, 31, a stay-at-home mother of three in Mitchell, S.D., whose husband lost his computer engineering job last year and found another at half the salary. “Some people are not so accepting of secondhand items, and I wouldn’t want them to get offended.”

She rounded up the items — monster toy trucks for her sons, a tutu for her daughter, toy horses for a niece — at **ThredUP.com**, a Web site for swaps of children’s clothing and toys that she joined after she and her husband declared bankruptcy.

Bartering, an age-old mode of commerce, has taken hold this year as the recession draws a broader spectrum of people trading everything from designer clothes to guitar lessons.

The phenomenon is rooted partly in environmental concerns about crowded

landfills and the energy consumed in manufacturing as well as a mainstream embrace of recycling. Social media like Facebook lend momentum to the swaps as people join forces to trade, share or negotiate better deals from retailers.

“There’s a social piece here as well as a feel-good piece,” said Perry M. Lowe, who teaches marketing and social media at Bentley University in Waltham, Mass.

But experts say that the primary incentive remains economic. “It’s really about shifting from consumption to the reality that we can’t spend the way we spent before,” said John Gerzema, a consumer behavior consultant in New York and co-author of a new book, “Spend Shift: How the Post-Crisis Values Revolution Is Changing the Way We Buy, Sell and Live.”

Some retail experts see a cultural shift in the making as government deficits, high unemployment and the mortgage crisis depress living standards. While retail sales have lagged, they note, secondhand sales are flourishing: the National Association of Resale and Thrift Shops reported that net sales were up 13 percent this year from 2009, the strongest growth in five years.

Although Americans who barter are still in the minority, Britt Beemer, chief executive of the survey firm America’s Research Group, said his polls had found that up to 26 percent of respondents said they were bartering products and skills, more than double the percentage in 2000, when the question was first posed.

“People are going to get a lot less squeamish about a lot of things,” said Howard Davidowitz, chairman of Davidowitz & Associates, a retail consulting and investment banking firm.

The proliferation of Web sites with names like Swap.com and SwapMamas have moved swaps from the home and the community center to online bazaars with millions of users. No industry figures exist on the number of for-profit startups, but officials at one of the largest, Swap.com, said they had more than a million registered users and an inventory of 15 million items at any given time.

ThredUP opened for business in April as a clothing exchange site and

expanded this month to toys. Mrs. Spitzer signed up as a member in August.

She said she used to buy new clothes for her three children, all under 7, every couple of months and then give them away as her children outgrew them. But after she joined ThredUP, she began viewing her children's hand-me-downs as currency.

She started packing "gently used" items from her closet into cartons that she could trade for boxes of similar items in the right size. Thirty-one boxes later, she said she had saved more than \$400. "Oh, God, the money I save," Mrs. Spitzer said. "Especially with my daughter. She wants to wear dresses all the time."

Emilie Hyams, 30, a lawyer who directs immigrant affairs in the New York City office of Senator Kirsten E. Gillibrand, is more motivated by environmental and charitable factors.

This month she held a swap in her small apartment on the Upper West Side of Manhattan where eight friends traded suits and purses. Each also agreed to donate a minimum of \$10 and any leftover items to a battered women's shelter.

"For me it's a hybrid," said Ms. Hyams, who turned the Sunday swap into a wine and champagne cocktail hour with trays of cheese and fruit. "It's a fun way of recycling and a fund-raiser for an organization."

The event was organized through [SwapforGood.org](http://SwapforGood.org), a grass-roots effort founded last spring by two environmentalists from San Francisco who were concerned about budget cuts for groups that help victims of domestic violence.

Shira Golding, 30, a graphic designer in Ithaca, N.Y., said that as a child of the 1980s, "I never thought of bartering — our culture was very consumer-driven." But over the last year and a half, she has helped organize 13 community swaps and 3 giveaway events in the Tompkins County area with the environment in mind.

The swaps, sponsored by a volunteer group called [Share Tompkins](http://ShareTompkins.org), can draw up to 300 people who trade not only goods but also their skills and time — creating a window installation for a massage therapist, for example, or trading a cello for

guitar lessons.

Collaborative consumption is based to some degree on trust, and groups like Share Tompkins say that face-to-face trading is the best way to avoid glitches.

Still, some sites foster transparency through rankings and reviews similar to those used by eBay. Mrs. Spitzer said that when she found stained shirts in one of her ThredUP boxes, she used the site's star rating system to express her disapproval and wrote the sender a letter to give her a chance to make it up to her.

As she saves hundreds of dollars, Mrs. Spitzer said she doubted she would ever go back to her old ways even in a better economy. She has been trolling other Web sites for discounted gift certificates for restaurant meals, meats and produce to give as holiday presents to relatives.

But some still draw the line when playing secondhand Santa.

Jenya Rose, 38, a lifelong thrift store shopper and book swapper from Dundee, Ill., said she, her sister and her mother enjoy exchanging inexpensive used gifts, if only because they net more presents that way. But outside the family circle, she worries, not everyone may be so elated.

Ms. Rose said she had toyed with the idea of giving her boss a used copy of "Lonesome Dove," the Larry McMurtry best seller, for Christmas but was wavering.

"I wonder if he would be icked out," she said. "He washes his hands a lot."

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