

# Mission Impossible?

An expert shopper helps take the angst out of holiday shopping

by Cari Wira

Photographs by Tova Rose Baruch

**EVEN IF YOU LOVE TO SHOP**, heading to the mall during the holidays can be a headache. *WD* Reader Panelist Tracy Hill teamed up with shopping expert Robyn Freedman Spizman, author of *The Giftionary: An A-Z Reference Guide for Solving Your Gift-Giving Dilemmas...Forever!*, and headed to Atlanta's Perimeter Mall to find the perfect holiday gifts without depleting her bank account and losing her mind.

Tracy, 30, is celebrating her first Christmas as a newlywed and has a budget of \$800. "I want to get my family something that they'll love instead of the same old sweater for Dad and slippers for Mom. But I can't afford to spend a penny over."

## Before Heading to the Mall

Robyn and Tracy got together a few days before going shopping to strategize. Tracy made a list of everyone she needed to shop for and double-checked it to make sure it was complete. "Last-minute gifts for people you forget about, such as your hairstylist, often rob you of time and end up costing more money than you had planned to spend," says Robyn.

Robyn also encouraged Tracy to shop catalogs, brochures, newspaper circulars and magazines first to get ideas and inspiration for what she might like to buy.

Tracy's parents just retired to a beach house, so she thought that a metal detector would be a fun gift for



Tracy, left, and Robyn tackle Tracy's shopping list at the mall.

## TRACY'S CHRISTMAS SHOPPING LIST

Name	Budgeted	Gift	How Much She Spent
Ed, husband, 33	\$230	TiVo	\$225
Sandy, mother, 58	\$75	Cosmetic mirror	\$50
Roger, father, 60	\$75	Metal detector	\$129
Tami, sister, 33	\$75	Milk steamer	\$40
Lynn, aunt, 57	\$75	Vera Bradley bag	\$75
Dianne, mother-in-law, 55	\$50	Personalized stationery	\$40
Ed Sr., father-in-law, 57	\$50	Tool kit for car	\$40
Christy, sister-in-law, 28	\$50	Handbag	\$20
David, brother-in-law, 28	\$30	Cookbook; salt & pepper shakers	\$33
Tanner, nephew, 8 months	\$30	Playskool Ball Game	\$25
Kathi, best friend, 33	\$30	Bracelet	\$35
Melissa, niece, 7	\$30	Stationery; letter-writing book	\$20
Extra gifts: 2 travel alarm clocks			\$20
Total budget: \$800			GRAND TOTAL: \$752

her dad. To save time scurrying from store to store, Robyn called several stores in the mall ahead of time to see if they carried one. Radio Shack had one for \$129, so Robyn put it on hold. She and Tracy decided that they'd pick it up last. "You don't want to drag around heavy items all day," says Robyn. "Running back and forth to your car to drop off gifts will only slow you down." Other tips:

**Do your homework.** "Pay attention to what people in your life like. Ask what they want, and if they won't tell you, ask their spouse, mom or friends."

**Go online.** Tracy's sister, Tami, mentioned how much she'd like a milk steamer. Since it's an unusual item,

Robyn and Tracy saved time by finding one in Tracy's price range online at [www.appliances.com](http://www.appliances.com).

**Look for coupons.** While they were online, Robyn logged on to specific store web sites, such as [www.bestbuy.com](http://www.bestbuy.com) and [www.williams-sonoma.com](http://www.williams-sonoma.com) to see if there were any current sales or printable coupons.

**Consider a personal shopper.** Before you go to a store, call ahead to see if it offers personal shopping services. "Usually for a nominal fee, these shoppers save you time by lining up your choices beforehand. When you call, set up an appointment and let the shopper know who you are shopping for and your budget," says Robyn.



## At the Mall

The first thing Robyn and Tracy did was stop by the concierge desk to see if the mall offered any coupons or store discounts. "Some malls have a preferred shopper card that gives you discounts every day," says Robyn. "The concierge also has a map of the mall, which can help you plan your attack."

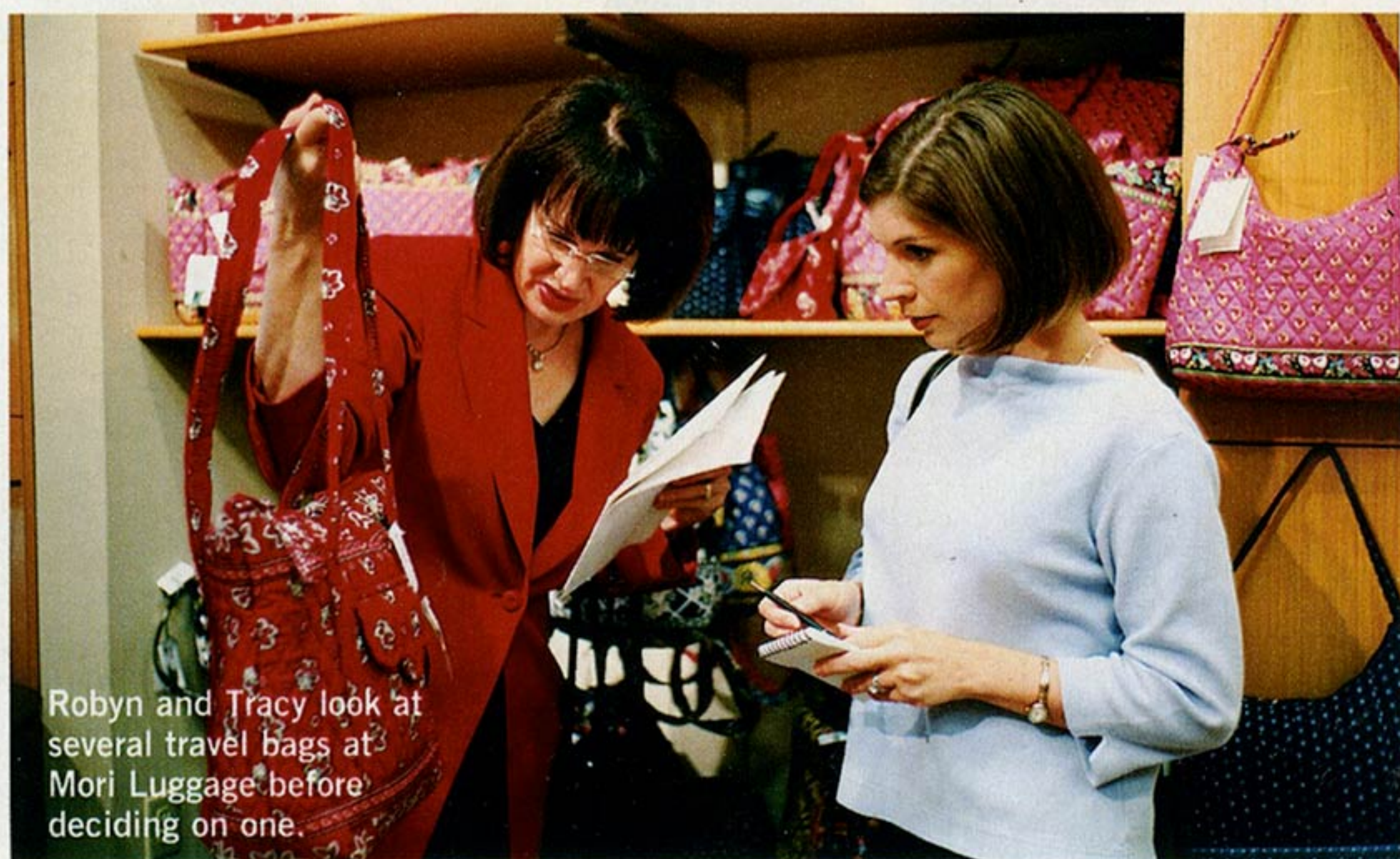
After looking over the map, Robyn grouped together gifts on Tracy's list that were similar and in the same price range. "You'll save time if you shop for a few people at the same place," says Robyn. Her other suggestions:

**Think about your recipient's favorite things.** Since Tracy's Aunt Lynn loves to travel and her favorite color is red, Robyn suggested a red Vera Bradley bag (\$75). The store offered complimentary gift wrap, so Tracy took advantage of it. "You'll save time and money if your gift can be wrapped while you're shopping," says Robyn.

**Look for a good imitation.** Tracy wanted to get her best friend Kathi a keepsake but couldn't spend a lot. "If you can't afford gold jewelry, opt for sterling silver," suggests Robyn. Tracy chose a sterling silver bracelet from Brighton. Or instead of buying semi-precious stones, such as amethyst or peridot, consider well-made crystals from Austria or the Czech Republic, which may be cheaper.



A super-stylish Vera Bradley bag is the perfect present for Aunt Lynn.



Robyn and Tracy look at several travel bags at Mori Luggage before deciding on one.

**Make use of salespeople.** "You can spot good clerks in a second," says Robyn. "They're there to help you, so don't be afraid to ask." At Brookstone, she and Tracy observed one salesman who really seemed to know his stuff. They told him a little bit about the people they were shopping for. He showed them the perfect items: a magnifying mirror (\$50) for Tracy's mother and a travel tool kit (\$40) for her father-in-law.

**Buy a few extras.** While at Brookstone, Tracy spotted a cute travel alarm clock by the register for \$10, but couldn't think of anyone on her list who could use it. Robyn told her to buy it anyway. "Stock up on inexpensive extra gifts in case you need something at the last minute."

**Ask for a gift receipt.** Ask about the store's return policy and be sure to get a gift receipt (it doesn't show the price), which will save the recipient from having to take a reduction if an item goes on sale.

**Personalized stationery that's beautifully packaged is sure to wow Tracy's mother-in-law.**

**Get creative.** Robyn suggested getting stationery (\$10) along with a book on

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how to write thank-you notes (\$13) for Melissa, Tracy's niece. "You have more options than just toys or clothes for kids," says Robyn. "Think outside the box!" **Splurge wisely.** Tracy wanted to get her husband, Ed, a TiVo (it automatically records your favorite television programs). "But even though it's what he really wants, how can I justify spending \$225 on one gift?" asks Tracy. Robyn believes in getting the perfect gift when you can afford it, even if it's a splurge. She suggested that Tracy get other gifts on sale so she could juggle money around in her budget. "Also, cut back on daily indulgences, such as that three-dollar cappuccino, to raise money. Or you can always buy on lay-away," says Robyn. WD

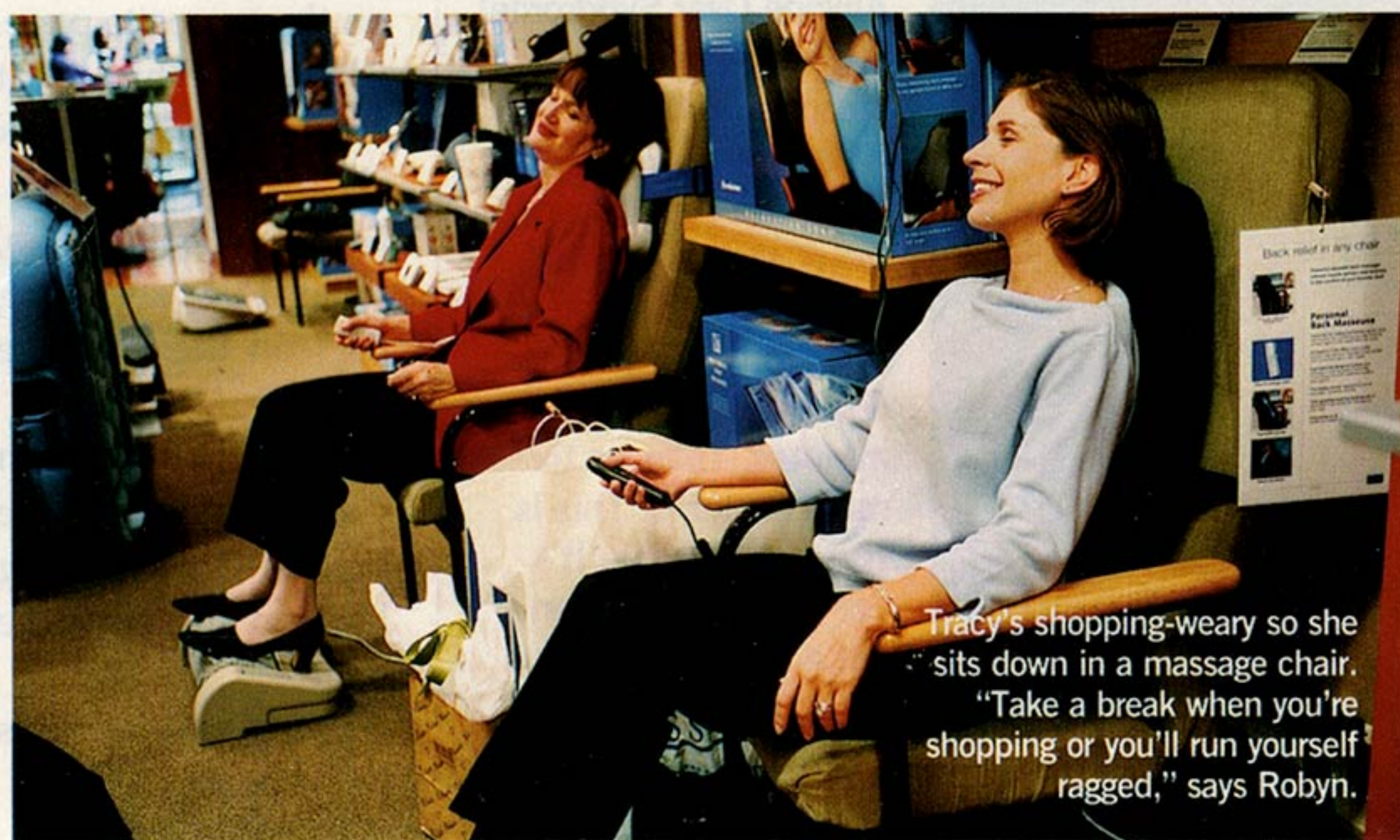
## GIVE THE PERFECT GIFT

**If someone likes an expensive brand name**, such as Coach or Dooney & Bourke, get something smaller, such as a key ring or makeup case that's less pricey.

**Find out about free monogramming** to personalize an address book, slippers or a handbag.

**If you're planning to take a pie or casserole** to someone's house, put it in a beautiful dish she can keep. If you're taking wine, add a bottle stopper or a corkscrew.

**Include a witty saying** to make your gift more personal. Give some gourmet coffee and write "I love you a latte!" on the gift tag. If you're at a loss for words, log on to [www.bartleby.com/100](http://www.bartleby.com/100) for a timeless quotation.



Tracy's shopping-weary so she sits down in a massage chair. "Take a break when you're shopping or you'll run yourself ragged," says Robyn.

## CASH-SAVING TIPS

**Comparison shop.** Know what something costs by researching it before you go shopping. In some cases, a store will either match or even beat a competitor's price.

**Avoid impulse shopping**, incentives you don't need and purchasing a gift because it's a great deal. Buy what someone wants and what reflects her taste, not just something that's a super savings.

**Save money by going in together with family members or friends.** A group gift often saves everyone money (and time), and you can give something really special that's on your recipient's wish list.

**Consider giving a zero-cost gift.** Some ideas: a library card, an envelope filled with clipped coupons or a basket filled with cosmetic samples.