

# Shop till you strop?

Five ways to ensure your Christmas gifts arrive safely from outside the EU



'Return to sender' could prove to be the new headache facing Christmas shoppers – and those expecting gifts from outside the EU – as new customs rules and charges bite.

Many people have already run into difficulties getting parcels delivered in recent months after the rules – which govern the delivery of goods into the EU – kicked in last July. Some people have been waiting weeks for parcels since the rules came in – with some items not being delivered at all and instead being returned to sender. Others have had to cough up for unexpected tax bills to secure delivery – because of a change around Vat.

Before July 1, 2021, you could avoid Vat when ordering something from the UK (or other non-EU countries) by keeping the value (including cost, transport, insurance and handling charges) of any item ordered below €22. Since then, however, this exemption is gone so Vat will have to be paid on all items ordered from the UK (and other countries outside the EU), regardless of their value. More parcels will be hit with customs charges as a result and it could cost you more than you expect to order something from the UK. Be aware too that other customs charges (typically custom duty and excise

duty) may also apply and these fees must be paid before an item can be delivered.

There is a “great deal of confusion” among Irish consumers around the new customs rules and charges for items coming in from the UK and other countries outside the EU, according to Jen Maiers, international trade and logistics manager with DPD Ireland. “There is a huge amount of information and detail involved in customs charges and it’s not always straightforward for the average consumer,” said Maiers. “The change in the Vat rules this summer made it more confusing for consumers.”

With Christmas fast approaching, the number of people running into these headaches will likely increase. So what can you do to avoid such customs predicaments?

### **1) Make sure the right information is on the parcel**

Under the new custom rules, anyone sending you a parcel from the UK or outside the EU must provide additional electronic customs information. So before something is posted to you, check the sender has completed all the right documents for each parcel being sent. Otherwise, the parcel could be returned to the sender.

Some items posted to Ireland from outside the EU, and in particular from Britain, “don’t have any of the required electronic customs declaration attached – or what is attached is incomplete”, said a spokeswoman for An Post. “These cannot be processed by customs and An Post has no option but to have them returned to sender. The customer may have received notification that the item is in the country, but wouldn’t be aware the item is without the necessary electronic customs declaration data.”

Many of those who are not sending the right electronic customs information with a package are individuals or small businesses who are unaware of the new rules, according to An Post.

It’s worth getting up-to-speed yourself on the customs information that must now be sent with parcels being posted from the UK – and then relaying this to any UK-based relative who will be posting you a gift for Christmas, or to any retailer you are dealing with who is not aware of the rules. Ask them to ensure the new rules are followed when they are posting the item.

“The biggest challenge to a parcel being customs cleared as quickly as possible is data,” said Maiers. “If there is an incorrect commodity code (the customs codes used to classify all goods), an incorrect value given, or a mandatory piece of data not provided, it will stop a parcel from being customs cleared and will result in the parcel having to be returned to the sender in the UK or the non-EU country. If a parcel has been delayed due to missing data, unfortunately there isn’t anything that can be done in that situation – the consignment will be returned to the sender for the sender to rectify the issue and provide necessary data.”

## **2) Shop local**

To avoid customs charges and headaches, shop local – or from EU-based retailers. You will also get the protection of EU consumer law when doing so. Check the shop’s business address to determine where it is based. “Don’t assume that the trader behind a dot.ie website is Irish-based – if you order something from a dot.ie website, it may still be shipped from the UK and charges may apply,” said Dr Cyril Sullivan, director of ECC Ireland.

## **3) Be choosy with your retailer**

Before ordering from an online retailer based in the UK or outside the EU, check if your item will be delivered duty-paid (that is, where all duties, taxes and customs clearance fees are paid at the online checkout) – this should ensure you don’t face any unexpected or large bills when the item is delivered. You can usually find this information in the terms and conditions – or delivery information – on the online retailer’s website. The online store of the UK retailer Next (next.ie), for example, states: “Our terms of sale to our customers in Ireland are delivery duty paid. That is to say, the amount paid by you is fully inclusive of delivery to the specified delivery address and all duties, taxes and customs clearance fees.”

An Post has arrangements in place with a number of UK retailers – including Marks & Spencer, River Island and Amazon – where items are delivered duty-paid. “Almost all the large non-EU retailers, including large British brands, have worked with An Post to provide a simple and clear facility at the online checkout to pay all Vat and customs charges upfront and these parcels can come straight through customs for delivery – no complications,” said a spokeswoman for An Post.

#### **4) Brush up on banned goods**

Another reason a gift or online order could be returned to a sender based in the UK is if the item is restricted or prohibited under EU customs rules. Be sure any UK-based relative, friend or retailer is aware of the list of restricted and prohibited items before sending you something. These items include indecent or obscene goods, medicines, certain types of food and illegal drugs. Some of the items seized by Revenue in the last year for this reason include fireworks, cosmetics and endangered species of flora and fauna.

#### **5) Ask your relative not to spend more than €45 on your gift**

Any relative living in the UK (excluding Northern Ireland) may avoid triggering customs charges when posting your Christmas gift if they keep the value of your gift (including any insurance, freight and postage costs) below €45 and play by a number of other rules.

These rules include that the gift be correctly declared, that the gift is for your own personal or family use, and that you have not paid for the gift.

Be careful that these rules are not overlooked. “While gifts from family and friends up to €45 in value (including the cost of postage) are exempt from customs or Vat charges, the gifts must still comply fully with customs declaration requirements,” said a spokeswoman for An Post. “Otherwise the gifts cannot be processed by customs and will be returned to sender.”

Furthermore, ask your UK relative not to send you alcohol, cigarettes or perfume as such gifts are not exempt from Vat or excise duty, though they may be exempt from customs duty if within specific allowances.

Yes, most of us don't want to look a gift horse in the mouth – but customs rules and charges may force you to.