

How to make your gift count

By JANE SCHORER MEISNER · jmeisner@dmreg.com · October 10, 2010

The holiday countdown has begun: only 75 more shopping days until Santa makes his rounds. Retailers are hoping for booming seasonal sales, of course, but many consumers still are feeling an economic pinch. And those who will be spending money on gifts want to spend it wisely.

So how do you give a gift that you're certain will be appreciated by its recipient?

"There's no magic shortcut; you have to know your audience," said syndicated advice columnist Carolyn Hax, author of "Tell Me About It," which appears in The Des Moines Register. "Some people receive a gift card and think, 'Why did they even bother?' and some think, 'Cool, I get to go shopping.'"

The worst mistakes in gift-giving occur when people give with guilt-strings attached or buy others what they want themselves, Hax said, and when recipients choose to feel insulted by bad gifts instead of just accepting that the givers did their best.

"With the new economy we are living in, it has never been more important to present gifts with sensitivity and caring," said Patricia Tice of West Des Moines, owner of Etiquette Iowa.

Buy the best gift you can afford without breaking the bank, she said - and keep in mind that people will feel terrible if they learn you overspent on them.

"Most people have more stuff than they know what to do with," said Pam N. Woods of West Des Moines, a certified professional organizer and owner of Smart WorkLife Solutions. "If the average person stops to think about things in the past that bring back happy memories, it's not related to the stuff. It's about an experience."

So money well-spent on a gift might be for tickets to a play or a pass to the zoo.

But not all good gifts require expenditures of dollars, Woods said.

"There is nothing more precious in today's world than giving of your time," she said. "Babysitting, or helping someone else with a project they've been putting off."

Tice agreed. "Offer to take someone on errands, and use the time to have a nice talk," she suggested. "Or, if there are tasks to do around the house, and you have the talent around a hammer or other tool, offer

to help. Sometimes, these extra hands mean a lot to someone who really needs the assistance."

People spend money on two things, Woods said: needs and wants. Right now, the primary focus for many people is on needs.

"The things people are not spending money on are their wants," Woods said. "Those are the things they're doing without these days."

Don't feel sorry for people who are down on their luck, Tice said. "Rather, listen to them, and ask how you can help out. Then, be sure to follow through."

And be careful not to insult a person who may be struggling.

"A case of canned vegetables is likely to end up as part of the recipient's bad-gift lore, no matter how well-meaning it might be," Hax said. "'Practical' gifts so often fall flat. Small items like canned goods and crew socks can seem more like charity than an exchange between equals; and large items, like vacuum cleaners, can leave a person feeling more useful than loved. What's more, they're unnecessary.

"Buy your out-of-work friend something fun, but get it at a variety or big-box store that sells everything from milk to auto parts, and include a gift receipt. Then, make it absolutely clear that you and your feelings have no stake in this, and s/he is free to exchange the gift for anything else. Think of it as a 3-D gift card."

If what you really want this year is to end a holiday gift exchange - because it's become a burden for you or you suspect it's a burden for the other party - the graceful way out is to be forthright, gentle and kind, Hax and Tice said. And don't shift the blame.

"Yes: 'I can barely make ends meet, so I can't be part of the gift exchange this year; I'm sorry,'" Hax said. "No: 'I think it's ridiculous that we're all grown up and have our own families, and we're still doing a gift exchange.'"

Tice recommended simply asking friends upfront if a gift exchange is too hard for them. Then suggest an alternative, such as meeting for monthly coffee instead.

"The important thing to do is to check it out with your friend," Tice said. "People have pride and sometimes do not want to admit they are struggling. It is important for them to know that you care."

Give an experience

Need a unique gift idea? Try giving an experience they'll remember:

Outdoor activity: Giving the gift of an outdoor trip doesn't have to be expensive and can be especially attractive to seniors on your list. Interesting day trips for less than \$100 led by Polk County Conservation include Music on the Mississippi (a cruise down the Mississippi River while listening to classic oldies) or the Loess Hills Fall Foliage trip, while the popular two-day trip to the Platte River near Kearney, Neb., to view the migration of 500,000 sandhill cranes on March 26-27 is \$140. Call Polk County Conservation (515) 323-5300 or go to www.mycountyparks.com to register.

Cooking classes: Places with regular classes: Cooking with Alessandra, 333 E. Grande St., (515) 508-9474, www.cookingwithalessandra.com; Country Club Market with Chef Terrie Koh, 2624 N. W. 157th St., Clive, (515) 987-5957; Kitchen Collage, 430 East Locust St., Des Moines (515) 270-8202; Perry Washburn, Waukee, (515) 537-4594 or www.perrywashburn.com; Wooden Spoons and Apron Strings, 303 S.W. School St., Ankeny, contact Deb Cazavilian, (515) 577-9937.

Season tickets for kids: For younger ones on the list, a four-show season ticket package to the Civic Center of Greater Des Moines is \$32. Four u

coming shows to be enjoyed by those ages 4 to 10 and include "Strega Nona," a musical tale of a witch; the Mermaid Theatre of Nova Scotia's latest production, "Darwin the Dinosaur;" and "Fiesta Mexican" from Sones de Mexico. Go to www.CivicCenter.org, (515) 246-2300.

Bed and breakfast: For couples, a night at an Iowa inn or bed and breakfast not only gifts a breather from routine but introduces a loved one to a quiet part of the state to explore. For a real riverside treat, the historic Mason House Inn is affordable (a gift certificate for \$88.20) and interesting. The antique inn was built in 1846 by Mormon craftsmen along the banks of the river in Bentonsport and was also a station on the Underground Railroad. One of the Villages of Van Buren County, Bentonsport was among Southeast Iowa's first settlements. The country breakfast is darn good, too. Call (319) 592-3133.

A flying leap: For the adventurous young adults (or crazy older adults), what could beat jumping out of an airplane? The Des Moines Skydivers (www.desmoinesskydivers.com) offer a \$199 tandem jump with an experienced skydiver strapped to your back. Screaming is on you. (515) 243-1711.

Plant a tree: And for those who want to give to others for generations, a commemorative tree can be planted at a Polk County park with an attached plaque bearing the receiver's name for \$150. It can be enjoyed for years to come even if it isn't a memorial. Go to www.greatoutdoorsfund.org.

- Mike Kilen

Best gifts they ever got

We asked readers to share the best gifts they ever received. Here's what worked for some:

The perfect picture

During a summer vacation in my hometown of Clearwater, Florida, I took my sons on a tour of my old neighborhood to give them an idea of my childhood. As we stood on a bluff overlooking the palm-edged view of Turner Street dock and the expanse of bay and gulf beyond, I explained that it was my meditation spot. For Christmas that year (37 years ago), my then 15-year-old son Mike gave me a photograph of my meditation spot. Not only did the picture bring back happy memories but my son recognized me as a person and gifted my spirit. — Dora Ward, Windsor Heights

'Voice quilt'

The most thoughtful and meaningful gift I ever received was for my 70th birthday this year. My siblings gave me a "voice quilt." This is a box that looks like a large music box (they put a very young picture of me in the lid) and when you open it, it plays messages from people in your life. All of my children, grandchildren, siblings, their spouses, nieces and nephews and even some of their children left me a special memory of me and my life. Plus they included songs and birthday wishes. I also had messages from other relatives, friends and even old schoolmates. — Marlys Maahs, Rockwell City

A gift to share

My sister (Buzzy Vickers of Greene, Ia.) knows how passionate I am about the work the Family Crisis Centers of Northwest Iowa does for victims of domestic violence. Two years ago, we were in the process of building a new shelter and she was able to walk through it with me. A few weeks later, I received a birthday gift from her. It was a large box and I didn't have a clue what might be in it. When I opened it, I couldn't help smiling. It was filled with boxes of new table and card games intended to be shared with the women and children who stay at our shelter. She knew I really didn't need any more "stuff" and I was so proud of her for giving me a gift that I could share with others. — Char Krahling, Sioux Center

The gift of no gifts

I have been an elementary school educator for over 25 years. Every Christmas I have received many lovely, thoughtful gifts, and appreciate the thoughtfulness of the families who have given them. ... A gift, by definition, is never required. At this

point in my life, I have everything I need and most of what I want. For the past several years, I have recommended that parents take me off their gift lists. If they really felt strongly about giving, I suggested

that they consider a donation to Habitat for Humanity, The Salvation Army, or a charity of their choice in my honor. Several parents took me up on the suggestion. What better gift than the honor of knowing I had vicariously made a difference. —Heidi Vansteenburgh, Northwood

Memories of 'Cousins Camp'

We have 11 grandchildren, ages 13-26. For many years, we invited them, when they were ages 5-10 years old, to attend "Cousins Camp" in August. That week they went to the Day Camp at the Twin Lakes Christian Center on North Twin Lake, which is where we live. After 3 p.m. they spent the rest of the day doing special activities with us and just having fun with their cousins. Day Camp always had a theme and I purchased T-shirts displaying the theme for each child. Our Christmas gift two years ago, created by our daughter and two daughters-in-law, was a T-shirt quilt, made of 12 different T-shirts from those fun-filled weeks. —Jean Prescott, Rockwell City

'Gift of Love'

Several years ago, when our children were starting families of their own, we decided we wanted to change the way we celebrate the Christmas season. Rather than buying presents for us, we asked our kids to give a "Gift of Love" to someone else instead. The only guidelines were that they find a way to give of themselves, and they involve their children. That first Christmas Eve we gathered around the Christmas tree and a member of each of the three families took turns telling us about their "gifts of love" and showing us photos. Our oldest son's family made cut-out Christmas cookie ornaments and gave them to residents at a local nursing home. The residents enjoyed having visitors as much as receiving the gifts. Our second son, his wife and children knew of a family with both parents in the National Guard; one had just returned from active duty and one had just been deployed to Iraq. They committed to mowing the military family's lawn and shoveling their sidewalk for a year. Our daughter's family heard about a single mom who was having a hard time making ends meet. They put together a care package of clothes, food and toys and delivered them to the family just in time for Christmas. We have continued this tradition for eight years, and every year we have been inspired and humbled at the amount of time and thought that went into each gift of love. —Steve and Mary Steele, Spencer

Gifts you can create yourself

Gift basket: Fill a gift basket with specialized food items the recipient may not splurge on. Think gourmet cheeses, fine olive oil or exotic spices.

Gift pot or pan: Fill a new pot or pan with ingredients for making a specific food. For example,

buy a pasta pan (8-to-10 quarts is perfect) and fill it with pasta, sauce and pasta fork. Often, young adults who are just setting up housekeeping don't have a pot large enough to properly cook pasta.

Your easiest budget recipes: Put together a recipe book or recipe card box filled with your favorite easy-to-make or budget-friendly foods. Include your tips for making meals go further or complementary sides.

Mix CD: Create a music CD with songs that you choose especially for the recipient. Design a cover and place it in a jewel case, or download a beautiful free case to print yourself at www.benignobjects.blogspot.com/2009/12/benign-objects-holiday-freebie.html.

Recorded bedtime story: Record yourself reading stories for a grandchild or other special child, and upload it to a CD. Give a copy of the book with the CD so the kids can follow along. If you'd like a little less "do-it-yourself," pick up a recordable storybook at a local Hallmark store.

Give of your garden: Donate a portion of next season's garden to the recipient. Include photos or

a description of their future bounty so they know what to expect. You could even include a new kitchen knife, serving bowl or garden-themed gadget.

Coffee and a chat: Jazz up a phone card by tucking it into a mug and including a package of gourmet coffee or cocoa to make catching up even more relaxing.

Silhouette portraits: Create a silhouette of a recipient's child or children. Follow a tutorial, such as www.suite101.com/content/how-to-make-victorian-silhouettes-a34853.

Switch it up: Make up your own "____-of-the-Month Club." It could be as fun as a "Book of the Month" or as practical as "Diapers of the Month." Schedule your delivery each month, and make sure to follow through. Other possibilities: coffee, meals, cereal, haircut, dog food.

— Paula Reece and Tom Perry