



USA WEEKEND'S GIFT GURUS RETURN

This year, our exclusive panel of experts helps find the perfect present for the new person in your life.

By Dennis McCafferty

Every year it seems there's someone new in your life — an in-law, boss, co-worker, poker-playing buddy or cabernet-loving oenophile whom you've bonded with lately. And every holiday season you wrestle with the dilemma: What is the appropriate gift for someone you're still getting to know? Too little may result in an early relationship setback. Too much may seem crass or perhaps signal a desperate need for acceptance.

But there are many ways to find the right gift for that deserving new person. For ideas, USA WEEKEND assembled its annual panel of gift-buying gurus to weigh in: Robyn Freedman Spizman, author of *Make It Memorable: An A-to-Z Guide to Making Any Event, Gift or Occasion ... Dazzling!*; online gifting expert Suzanne Ellis of RedEnvelope; Neiman Marcus' holiday catalog queen Ginger Reeder; and Hollywood celebrity shopper Allana Baroni, who has been dispatched to buy gifts for Clint Eastwood, Jim Carrey and countless others. Here's what they had to say:

How do you avoid disappointing this new someone when buying a gift?

Baroni: The more the gift speaks to your

Pick a gift that will let you interact with the receiver when the holidays end.

shared experiences, the better. A TV actress contacted me to find a gift for a new co-star. The show had been on the air for years, and she wanted the newcomer to feel at home. So we gave her a photo album filled with cast and crew photos through the years and copies of the annual gag reel. And we got her a digital camera so she could be in charge of the next season's album.

Ellis: Photo albums are an inviting way to bring someone in. Also, you could welcome a new member of the family with a croquet set and make plans for a big gathering to break it in.

What if there's an entire group of new people in your life — like when you join a book club — and you're unsure what the gift-giving traditions are come holiday time? Do you just bring it up at a gathering?

Spizman: Well, not in front of everyone. That feels mechanical. But every group has its "historian," the person who knows all the expectations and traditions. You need to take that person aside and get a read on what people generally do. And, of course, in this kind of situation, the

Homemade holiday cookies are always a winner when you are giving to a large group.

small homemade gift is always a winner, like a big batch of freshly baked cookies with the recipe duplicated for the gang.

Reeder: And don't forget that you always can use the shared interests of the group as inspiration. If it's a book club, what's safer than an Amazon.com gift certificate?

Suppose you single out one person in that group for a special gift. Is that OK?

Spizman: If it's for a special reason. If you got a ride to the book club on a steady basis from someone there, then it's very appropriate. Group dynamics allow for this, especially if you provide, say, a CD download of songs the two of you like, along with a note saying, "You're a novel friend — riding with you is music to my ears. Thanks for all the rides."



What if the new person in your life is geographically far away? Like a new brother-in-law in the Army who's stationed in Germany and living there now with your sister?

Reeder: You can't go wrong by giving them something that reminds them of home. That's a gift that will bring the two of you closer together. Go buy a coffee-table picture book of his hometown. Send a cookbook from the state where he comes from.

Ellis: I know about this sort of thing firsthand. My boyfriend is Swedish, and when I visited his family over there, I didn't spend as much time with them as I would have liked. So I had to listen carefully to their conversations and pick up hints. One family member told me how much he loved *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* So I picked up on that, and the next holiday season I bought a bunch of CDs of bluegrass music and sent them to him. It demonstrated that I was really paying attention and appreciated his interests.

What if the person is very, very new but still someone you need to buy a gift for — like a partner in a romance that's going really well?

Spizman: That's when it's time for a "together" gift. Something from Tiffany for the woman or an expensive watch for the man may be a bit too much. But going

Showing you know what that special person loves will speak volumes.

Tickets to a special show or event are a great way to say you care.

to the trouble of getting tickets for a hot show is very appropriate.

Are there any surefire don'ts when it comes to giving to a new person in your life?

Reeder: Not doing your homework. You may think you're giving this new person a wonderful, yummy surprise with your world-famous peanut-butter and chocolate cookies. But the new person is allergic to peanuts! Or, you may spend time researching and buying a great bottle of wine — and the new person doesn't drink. This can be a bit awkward.

Are there any can't-miss gift-giving tricks?

Baroni: Of course! My favorite thing to do is to give to that person's children. There can be no disappointment when you do this, especially if this new person wasn't expecting gifts for the kids. I worked with an actress who wanted to give a gift to her new BFF, but it couldn't be too over-the-top because that's *sooo* Hollywood. So

we sent gifts to her BFF's two little girls instead. We found a tricycle and a wagon, and we loaded a piñata filled with toys, charms and treats into the wagon. It was a huge hit!

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PURSUING "HAPPYNESS"

BY FRAPPA STOUT

For actress Thandie Newton, planning ahead helps make her holidays jolly.

Thandie Newton is one of those holiday shoppers who makes the rest of us look bad: Instead of barreling through stores over the next few weeks, she'll be at home in London, relaxing with family.

Her secret is not a do-it-all personal assistant. Newton starts her Christmas shopping two days after the holiday. "I'm not kidding — if I see something fabulous or read about a book that's amazing, I'll get it and put it aside in a box in my closet and keep it until the next year," says the actress, 34, who is married and has two daughters, Ripley, 6, and Nico, almost 2. "If I find something for a 4-year-old, I will save it for two years for my baby."

Newton is a fitting cover girl for our annual Gift Guide, not only because she's a conscientious shopper, but also because Newton, last seen in 2005's Best Picture, *Crash*, stars in what promises to be a holiday tear-jerker.

Opening Dec. 15, *The Pursuit of Happyness* is the true story of a down-on-his-luck San Francisco man struggling to raise his son. Even with Mr. Happy-Go-Lucky Will Smith in the lead role, it's very dark, says Newton, who plays Smith's ex. "My character leaves her child and [the father] with no money, and they end up homeless," she says. "It starts so far down that where it takes you is such a thrill, to see someone overcome the terrible situations life can deal."

The daughter of a Zimbabwean mother and British father, the actress (whose name is pronounced TAN-dee) grew up in Zambia until she

was 3 and the family moved to Cornwall in southwest England. When a teenage injury ended her dreams of being a modern dancer, Newton turned to acting. She rose quickly, landing major roles in *Beloved* and *M:I-2*.

Newton, who holds a bachelor's degree in anthropology from the University of Cambridge, enjoys "more penetrating" activities, such as yoga, meditation and reading.

The best gift she has ever received, she says, is a book, *The Drama of the Gifted Child*, by Swiss psychologist Alice Miller. "I was becoming a parent, and it's just invaluable for anybody who's at that point and also trying to understand the way they were parented and the profound effects that has on us," she says.

For Christmas, the avid environmentalist says she wants everyone to plant a tree through organizations like the International Tree Foundation (internationaltreefoundation.org) to "put more oxygen back into the atmosphere." Of course, if her hubby, British filmmaker Oliver Parker, insists on exchanging gifts, she wouldn't mind a pair of proper wine glasses ("maybe from Tiffany") or a pair of burnished gold peace-sign earrings from her favorite jeweler, Solange Azagury-Partridge. She'd also love a pair of shoes by Georgina Goodman. The British designer's ballet flats have become one of the actress' signature gifts.

Newton still has to crochet beanie hats as gifts for each of her daughters this year. Then, she and her husband will decorate their tree with antique baubles and bells. For the holiday dinner, they will eat their favorite dishes. Last year, daughter Ripley had a prawns-and-tomato sauce concoction called "spaghetti in a bag"; her husband opted for caviar on a baked potato; and Newton feasted on shaved white truffle over pasta. "It was exquisite," she says.

