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Gifting at Work: What's Right? What's Wrong?

By Rachel Zupek, CareerBuilder.com writer

When the editorial staff at her high school newspaper held a White Elephant gift exchange, Katie Schroder gladly participated. She ended up with a can of Popeye brand spinach instead – a contribution from the editor-in-chief.

"She told me it was 'a reminder to be a strong, fearless writer,'" Schroder, now a print publicist for a division of Random House Inc., remembers. "Seven years and several moves later, that can of spinach is still sitting on my desk next to my keyboard. It's a token of how far I've come in my career, and a reminder to keep applying that strength in my writing."

Not every employee looks back on gift exchanges with co-workers as fondly as Schroder. In fact, holiday gifting remains one area of the workplace where workers should tread lightly.

"One rule of thumb ... is to be sure it [the gift] is appropriate," says Jo Bennett, a partner at Battalia Winston International, a New York-based executive search firm. "Thoughtful, tasteful and neither too expensive, nor too cheap."

Check out these gift-giving guidelines from our experts to find your co-worker the perfect gift this holiday season.

Finding the perfect gift

Before buying a gift for a co-worker, it's important to be "in the know," says Robyn Freedman Spizman, author of "The Giftionary" and "Make It Memorable: An A-Z Guide to Making Any Event, Gift or Occasion ... Dazzling!" Consider what the person values, whether it's a pet, children, family or staying healthy.

"Avoid gifts that are high risk," Spizman says. "Some people are allergic to smells and on diets. It's not a steadfast rule, but best to be safe or get the facts and know what the individual appreciates."

First, consider the purpose of the gift and then think about the gift itself, Bennett says. Are you giving a gift for a holiday or to celebrate a life event for your colleague? Contemplate whether the gift is meant to be funny or if it will embarrass someone.

What's appropriate ... and what's not

Many workplaces have instituted gift-giving guidelines, which are important to observe so as not to upset colleagues. To avoid offending your boss or co-worker with a present, find out the office protocol and follow it, Spizman advises.

"If you are giving a humorous gift, make sure to stay away from anything vulgar, obscene, racist or sexist," Bennett says. "Not only might you offend the recipient, but you may offend your co-workers if it's a group affair."

Avoid giving the following gifts to your boss and colleagues:

- Intimate apparel
- Perfumes, body lotion or highly scented items
- Flashy jewelry
- Food (some are restricted by certain cultures and religions)
- Art (or other items that are in your taste, but not necessarily anyone else's)

Deem the following items suitable for co-workers:

- Picture frames
- Gift cards
- Books
- CDs or DVDs
- Something for their pet or kids
- Useful desk objects

Creative gifting

To alleviate the pressure of gifting in the office, there are many ways to creatively give to colleagues without offending or excluding anyone.

A department lunch in place of a gift exchange alleviates pressure all around, Bennett suggests. Secret Santa exchanges, when co-workers put their names in a hat and draw to see who is buying a present for whom, are acceptable in most cases, but Bennett suggests making sure employees opt in to it.

Spending limits should be established, too. "It's only fair to expect that some employees will not want to spend more money on top of the usual holiday spending pressure," Bennett says. "Others, especially the younger staff, simply may not have the extra cash. If that's the case, you could be creating a very stressful environment for your employees."

To avoid spending at all, Spizman suggests a "sweet-tooth day." "Instead of gifts, have each employee bring a goody. Then, give everyone a container to fill up and take home to their families."

Dos and don'ts

Spizman and Bennett offer the following 10 dos and don'ts of holiday gifting in the office:

Do be careful about buying gifts for your boss. He or she may think you're trying to gain favor. Don't give he or she a gift unless others do so.

Don't indicate an inappropriate relationship by giving a gift that is too intimate.

Do ask human resources about gifting policies. There may be a dollar-amount limit or gift giving might be prohibited altogether.

Don't make a big scene when presenting the gift. The purpose is not to show off for others.

Do give co-workers something that reflects their interests, values and tastes.

Don't give liquor unless you know the recipient drinks.

Do consider giving a work-related gift, like a nice pen or new planner.

Don't try to outdo anyone or impress people by spending a large amount of money.

Do remember that gift-giving is risky and sometimes awkward.

Don't give worthless gifts to co-workers or employees. It's insulting.

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