

Gifts with universal appeal best for office

Play safe, secret Santa

By Tim Rausch | Staff Writer

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We're a dozen days away from the traditional start of the holiday shopping season, and that means the e-mail regarding this year's secret Santa gift exchange will soon be circulating in the office.

The challenge of buying for the co-worker gets added to that of buying for the rest of family and friends.

"People don't like to get a bunch of little inexpensive gifts from co-workers, nor do they feel like they want to go out and take the time to spend and wrap and present gifts to everybody," said Sherri Athay, the author of *Present Perfect: Unforgettable Gifts for Every Occasion*. "But then there are people who love it and want to participate."

The office environment dictates the level of celebration. Knowing the business's gift-giving culture is key, says shopping expert Robyn Freedman Spizman, the author of *The Giftinary*.

Political correctness and the desire not to offend have done away with a lot of business-sponsored holiday celebrations. A gift-giver doesn't need the confines of a secret Santa exchange or the annual holiday party to satisfy the spirit of giving.

"You might want to start a tradition," said Ms. Spizman, who appears weekly on an Atlanta television station with shopping advice.

Personalize it

Personalized gifts are better because they convey that some thought was put into them.

Personalization can be as simple as putting the recipient's initials on the item, or they can be tailored to the recipient's likes.

"You can look at someone's desk and learn so much about them," Ms. Spizman said.

Got a gum chewer? Wrap \$5 in gum in a box with a snappy note such as "couldn't chew a better co-worker."

It's not expensive, yet personal.

"They're going to enjoy it," Ms. Spizman said.

If it is hard to find something that fits the co-worker, it is appropriate to get something for the co-worker's children or pet.

The experts recommend staying within the price limits of the exchange.

Not too personal

Personal is good, but don't get too personal, Ms. Spizman said. Lingerie, for example, will not go over well.

The jokesters in the office, she said, need to realize that not everyone shares the same humor.

"If it is bad taste, it is a no-no. What's funny to one person is not always funny to the next," Ms. Spizman said.

If gag gifts fit in the office culture, choose funny gifts that use humor in a positive manner, she added.

The gift-giving experts believe the better gifts are the ones that are more useful, not trinkets that will collect dust on a shelf, even if they were funny at the time.

For the boss

The employees have all chipped in \$1. What should you buy?

"The first thing to do is determine what the boss values," Ms. Spizman said. "You've got to observe your boss, got to pay attention like a Sherlock Holmes, notice the likes and dislikes."

In other words, the gift should fit the supervisor.

A boss who loves to save time could get a time-saving service as a gift.

"Do something fun. Go out to get the takeout menus that are near the office. Put those menus together with the gift card," Ms. Spizman

said.

Ms. Athay said pooled resources allow for enough money to get a coffee table book for the boss.

"There are books on every interest, and some of them are expensive," she said.

Ms. Athay recommends that gifts for a boss come from a pool of employees so the boss doesn't feel uncomfortable getting a present from just one person.

"Generally, you wouldn't give you boss a gift as an individual unless it is a small office or you've worked for them a long time," she said.

Gifts for everyone

Larger offices often will not promote gift-giving because not everyone will get one, leading to hurt feelings.

"If you want to do something and you're in the spirit of giving, bake a tray of sweets for the office," Ms. Spizman said.

This is a moment where gift baskets aren't really out of style. Just make sure it is big enough for everyone to get something from it.

Ms. Spizman has heard of employees pooling resources to give to charity or assist the homeless -- even help one of their own in a time of crisis.

Universal appeal

In an office environment where the gifts are randomly exchanged, it becomes difficult for people to find an item that would have universal appeal. For those occasions, Ms. Athay recommends office toys, something that's small and can fit in a drawer.

"Toys are always nice for the office; it is good to have a break," Ms. Athay said.

When going for desk accessories, such as paperweights and clocks, make sure there is something special about it.

"Go for something a little quirky, more artsy than the plain old safe kind. You want to have some reason for the person to replace the clock that's already on their desk," Ms. Athay said.

Other ideas include a candy jar, with the candy to fill it.

Gifts of warmth are always good for holidays, Ms. Spizman said. Anything cashmere would fit.

When all else fails, gift cards are a good fallback. Gift cards don't have to be store-specific. Ms. Spizman said American Express, for example, has a gift card that is usable anywhere.

Reach Tim Rausch at (706) 823-3352 or timothy.rausch@augustachronicle.com.

DUD GIFT? TRY THIS

- **Return it:** Without a receipt, most store representatives will try to give you store credit. Before you accept, ask to speak with a manager about your options. He or she might be able to offer you cash back or another form of payment. If you have a receipt, you'll probably have your choice of options -- cash back or store credit. Whether you're returning or exchanging, ask a store representative if your refund will be discounted. Some stores take a percentage off the price of returned items or automatically refund the lowest price if an expensive item has since gone on sale.

- **Auction it.** If you think that aluminum tree from Aunt Edna is tacky, and the turkey- and gravy-flavored Jones soda from your cousin Joe is just gross. Surprise: You might not want these items, but others will. Both items are going for big bucks on auction Web sites such as eBay. The site allows you to sign up free and auction off your items (for a nominal fee).

- **Swap it.** Even gift certificates can be exchanged. Visit www.swapagift.com, where you can register free to view listings of available gift cards. It costs \$3.99 to post a listing, whether your gift card is for \$5 or \$500. You can choose to swap your gift card for one from another store, or you can hold out for cash -- most always less than the gift card is worth.

-- MarketWatch

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