

ONLINE SHOPPER

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Wedding Wishes Fulfilled Over the Web

A PACKAGE arrived in the mail a few years ago. Inside was a curious object: a fat ceramic cat with what appeared to be a cranial tumor. Because the mysterious package had no return address, I wondered who might have sent it. Closer inspection revealed that the tumor was really a knob that enabled you to lift off the top of the cat's head. I ruled out the Unabomber.

Since I was engaged to be married at the time, I figured that the cat was actually a wedding gift. (Cookie jar? Savings bank? Planter?)

Like many greedy brides-to-be, I had hoped to avoid the whole ceramic cat scene by registering at a local department store for a dizzyingly long list of gifts. But in those pre-Web days, it wasn't easy for guests — especially the distant acquaintances or third cousins of my mother's best friend's college roommate who had been invited for reasons of protocol — to get hold of my gluttonous wish list. The only piece I received of the ridiculously expensive china pattern I picked out (called Chateaubriand) was a pickle dish.

Now, I would never encourage anyone to buy stock in CeramicCats.com, but last month I received a wedding invitation from a couple who had registered online at Wed-

dingChannel's Dellaweddings.com. I learned how convenient it has become to give (and get) the loot that an engaged couple actually want.

Along with WeddingChannel, other online registry sites like Theknot.com and Theweddinglist.com have recently created free services where brides and grooms can register online and guests can view a comprehensive list of items that the couple crave, plus information about the

Win-win shopping: the couple get gifts they want, and the givers are spared a trip.

prices of each and whether the gifts have already been purchased.

This is a case where the Internet has taken a wedding guest's tedious and inconvenient afternoon's chore — to go to the store where the couple registered, stand in line to get a printout of the list, then walk around looking for an in-stock item in the appropriate price range — and virtually eliminated the pain.

"This is one kind of gift where most people who are buying don't feel like they have to go to the store," said Lindsay Loudon, a spokeswoman for WeddingChannel. "It's one kind of gift that people are going to

be buying off a list, so they might as well be buying it off the list online."

Normally, I would complain that such a clinical approach robs a gift giver of any sense of personal interaction or real warmth toward the person for whom a gift is intended, but let's face it, the whole \$19-billion-a-year wedding gift business is a racket. It's the only instance I know of when a gift recipient specifies quantity, color, U.P.C. code and price and is not considered tacky.

It turns out that there's a historical reason that this brazen greed is considered socially acceptable. In the very beginning, said Robyn Freedman Spizman, an etiquette consultant who specializes in gift giving, "the idea was that the bride was starting a home and she had nothing."

"Guests could contribute to building the household," she continued, "by giving something that fit in, one good goblet or a place setting, and feel as if they were helping the couple create something permanent."

With that in mind, engaged couples trying to decide which online registry to use should know that each site offers slightly different services. Theknot.com, for example, operates like a department store where engaged couples can specify more than 10,000 products that guests can purchase through the Web site. At Theweddinglist.com, a couple agonizing over whether to choose bone china or porcelain can chat online

with a consultant and can choose receive gifts in a single large shipment.

After seeing a comprehensive group of engaged couples' wish on WeddingChannel, I found my musing over why Whitney and J (projected wedding date: 2/10/01) needed 11 mixing bowls and was heartened to learn that Mindy & Cole (wedding date: 11/4/00) wanted a three-quart fondue pot. (Fondue lives!)

WeddingChannel.com is more an online mall. Engaged couples register for items from more than 100 retailers, like Crate & Barrel, Bloomingdale's and Williams-Sonoma, and guests are steered toward the actual retailer's Web site to purchase online.

The last time my husband and I shopped together for a wedding, we started bickering in Bloomingdale's and ended up buying a calendar for a couple who were vegetarians. At WeddingChannel, the atmosphere was less emotionally charged probably because my husband and I were in separate offices, in contact only by instant messages. Arriving at Dellawedding.com's home page, we each clicked on the Enter Here button under Wedding Guests, searched through 1.2 million registries by entering the bride's name and then clicked on Crate & Barrel's eyeball the wish list.

I sent an instant message to my husband: "Table settings?"

"What's that?"

"Plates. Stuff you eat off."

"Like that pickle dish?" He caught a grudge.

Within five minutes we agreed fully outfitted picnic basket for two (Does anyone other than an engaged couple ever acquire such an item?)

My husband clicked on Buy, entered his credit card number and filled in a touching gift card to accompany the package: "Susan and Joe, since they allow 55 characters, hope you have a wonder!"

I can't wait to see the thank-you note.

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