



marketing minute

Gift-Giving Conundrum If the gift-giving season makes you groan, here are some pointers from the experts to help ease your holiday stress.

BY JULIE K. SILVER, MD



Every year I am faced with deciding what holiday gifts to purchase for hardworking

staff members and people who refer faithfully to my practice. Something special, memorable and meaningful. Not too expensive, but high quality. Personal, but not too personal. Essentially, the perfect gift.

There is no doubt about it, gift giving is a tricky business. What is a delight to one person may be a disaster to another. So, in keeping with this festive time of year, I have polled several marketing experts to find out what they tell their clients to buy during the holiday season.

Before you read too far, you should know that nearly all of these experts suggested that gifts, particularly for referral sources, should NOT be given in the month of December when they will be lost among the other gifts that a practice routinely receives. Judy Bee, the president of Practice Performance Group in Long Beach, California, suggests giving gifts at Thanksgiving—a traditional time of thanks.

Andrea Eliscu, the president of Medical Marketing Inc. in

Orlando, Florida, favors giving gifts on Valentine's Day—close enough to the holiday season so that colleagues don't think they have been forgotten, but far enough away so that the gifts don't get lost in the pile.

Keith Borglum, the vice-president of Professional Management and Marketing in Santa Rosa, California, has another approach altogether.

Borglum recommends giving gifts spontaneously at opportune moments throughout the year. He says, "I collect gifts all

year and then wait for the right opportunity [to give them]." Borglum thinks that his "personalized and off the cuff" approach makes the gifts more meaningful to the recipient. For example, he suggests approaching a colleague who is a sailing enthusiast with, "I saw this sailing book and thought you might like it."

Staff appreciation

Regardless of when you give your gifts, you want them to be meaningful and to carry the message that you appreciate your staff's efforts and colleagues' referrals. Eliscu counsels, "Anything that you do for your own staff must be homespun, have heart, and be personal." In the fast paced, often faceless high tech world

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that we live in, Eliscu says, “Life is not offering that kind of personalization anymore.” She suggests a catered lunch, a museum outing, or hiring someone with a special talent to come to your office and hold a seminar. Eliscu recalls a particularly successful employee gift when “One practice offered a woodworking clinic for their staff.”

In her book, *The Perfect Present*, Robyn Freedman Spizman writes that asking employees what they want is perfectly acceptable. Spizman notes, “[...]employees] usually aren’t too shy to answer “money” or “a gift certificate.” She also notes that employers should “be sensitive to their wants and likes...” A couple of Spizman’s suggestions for gifts include hiring a limousine that takes staff members to an “elegant lunch.” Another rather novel idea is to take an ad out in the local newspaper to thank employees (or referral sources) for doing an outstanding job. According to Spizman, “They’ll love your affirmation of their talents and appreciate the public display of your approval.”

For staff gifts, Borglum advises thanking employees with “group gifts,” otherwise you may “curry favoritism.” Borglum also recommends that gifts to staff members should be done strictly to give thanks and build morale, not to market the practice. For example, if you’re giving an athletic bag, leave off the company name and logo. In keeping with his “all year long” theory, Borglum gives the example of one of his clients who has “Final Friday” on the last Friday of every month. On this day, the practice buys tickets for the employees to a special event in town. Generally this is a group outing and is done during a slow time in the practice. Employees, however, are compensated for their time and it is done during work hours, so that they don’t have to choose between spending time at home with their families or out

with associates from work.

Thanks for referring physicians

For referral sources, Borglum suggests “create buzz.” By this he means that the gift should be exciting enough that the medical community looks forward to it and talks about it. One of Borglum’s clients does this by throwing an annual party. The party has a different theme each year (e.g., luau) and is very grand in scale. Borglum says, “everyone refers to him just so they can go to his party.” If you are inclined to have more intimate gatherings, Borglum suggests hiring a pilot and a small plane to take selected colleagues for an outing somewhere special or renting a limousine and going on a wine tasting tour.

Eliscu had a thoughtful idea for referral sources—consider sending a child to summer camp on a scholarship. If the practice is a specialty group then choose a camp that fits with their interests (e.g., sponsor a child to go to a camp for diabetics if the group consists of endocrinologists). Eliscu advises sending a letter to the physicians and explaining that a scholarship has been awarded to a child “in honor of all of our referring colleagues.” You can also ask the organization sponsoring the camp to write the letter and send it to you. You can then send their letter along with a personal note.

If you love the sights and sounds of Christmas, you can do what Judy Bee and her partner do each year—they order Christmas wreaths that are delivered around December 1st. These wreaths are hung in the offices of their physician clients and “the smell of pine is outstanding.” Judy also recommends ordering big barrels of popcorn or a gift certificate for a smoked turkey out of a catalog.

Giving the unusual

If you are more ambitious, Judy gives the

example of one physician in Topeka, Kansas, who bakes banana bread and hand delivers a loaf to all of her referring doctors. Bee says, “It wasn’t great or grand, but it was homemade and delicious!” Attached to the back of the bread was the recipe and her business card.

For more unusual gift ideas you might want to check out a book on the subject. In the book *Finding the Perfect Gift*, authors Lisa Hullana and Karl Preston suggest the following: a magazine subscription to an unusual magazine, books on tape, a first aid, disaster, or earthquake kit, exotic spices, or gourmet coffee or tea. If you are feeling morbid, apparently the Los Angeles County coroner’s office sells a number of different items including toe tag key chains, baseball hats, tote bags, T-shirts, and more.

If you enjoy nostalgia, Suzanne Singleton, the author of *Clever Gift Giving*, recommends giving a jar full of penny candy. Singleton writes, “Just a few of the ancient ones—fireballs, wax lips, candy cigarettes, rock candy, shoestring licorice, and licorice pipes.” Another of Singleton’s suggestions is to purchase a personalized engraved brick for a local zoo, museum, or park in honor of the doctor(s) you wish to thank.

Sandra Wilson, who wrote *Giving the Perfect Gift*, notes that one of her favorite gifts was a stepladder—an unusual gift that she frequently uses. Wilson also tells readers, “Present a gift of many ingredients. This idea is not only a gift but an event, a happening. Give a recipe with the right pan and the non-perishable ingredients [or] videotapes with popcorn.”

Eliscu also had some interesting gift ideas. She suggests buying “travel offices” for co-workers or colleagues. These are small cases that contain tape, stapler, ruler, paper, pens, etc. and fit nicely into a briefcase or suitcase. Eliscu calls this a “functional gift.” Other functional gifts include a nice gym bag or backpack—

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these can be filled with items or given empty. For example, giving a gym bag with a bottle of water, towel, and sports watch makes the gift more exciting. If you haven't much time to plan, she recommends giving a phone card that employees or referral sources can use when they travel. You can purchase these with or without your logo on the back. And if you really want to go all out, Eliscu proposes giving a case of wine with your own logo as the label. Specialty companies can personalize almost any item.

No matter what you decide to do for the holidays, all of the consultants advise us to give "thank-yous all year long." Eliscu says, "You can't do this once a year. You have got to be living it." ■

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