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An Adventure Begins With the Unwrapping

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Someone once said that life is not measured by how many breaths we take, but by the moments that take our breath away.

Some people live their lives by that attitude - how else to explain all those rock climbers, bungee jumpers and extreme sports enthusiasts out there? And then there are those who buy gifts that embody that attitude.

To understand, imagine the following two scenes:

Scenario A: Stock car fan opens gift box to find tickets to a NASCAR race.

Scenario B: Stock car fan opens gift box to find certificate to don a driving suit and helmet, whip 15 times around a speedway solo, then ride shotgun with a professional NASCAR driver for another heart-stopping five laps.

Now if you're shooting this holiday season to be crowned Best Gift Giver Ever, check out the new breed of Web-based businesses that have popped up in the U.S. recently offering Scenario B-type goodies. Two Virginia-based companies, excitations.com in Great Falls and wallbounce.com in Arlington, launched in the last month or so.

They're called experiential gift-giving companies and represent one of the biggest growth trends in the U.S. gift market,

according to Pennsylvania-based consultant Unity Marketing Research.

"The trend is moving away from material things," says Kim AuBuchon, 45, chief operating officer of excitations, which sells the NASCAR driving experience for \$325. "The gift of experience is easy to give and very exciting to receive ... It's a personalized gift without all the work behind making it personal. We've done all of it for you."

Big in Britain, other European countries and Africa, these businesses operate on the idea that it's not enough to present someone with a cashmere sweater. Why not go one better by giving the life-long memory of getting that sweater - while on a shopping excursion with a celebrity stylist who also will teach the recipient how to apply makeup, get a good haircut and choose the right clothes?

The experiential gift can be as simple as a trip to the spa or as elaborate as a big-city dining experience with a restaurant's superstar chef.

At Excitations, which also has a kiosk set up at Tysons Corner Mall, you can choose from experiences that run from as little as \$50 to as much as thousands of dollars, such as the \$6,335 Captain for a Year gift, which allows the recipient a chance to chart his or her own course on a sailing yacht or powerboat for 12 months on the Chesapeake Bay.

Or you can purchase one of their color-coded packages that offer a menu of experiences.

While excitations focuses experiences on the Washington, D.C. area, priced for both big and small spenders, rival wallbounce has its sights set on the person who already has everything they want in life.

Its least expensive gift, priced at \$175, sends a stylist from the 5-star Peninsula Hotel in New York City to the home or office of the recipient for hairstyling and make-up help before a big event. Its priciest gift is a \$15,000, one-week Chilean Whitewater Rafting Tour for six people.

Both companies partner with various businesses, buying the experience package at wholesale prices and then marking it up to sell to customers.

Unlike excitations, wallbounce requires buyers to register for free memberships and offers experiences in regions beyond the East Coast. Shark Diving in Mexico for four, anyone? It's only \$12,000.

"Our members are what we describe as cultural creatives. We define them as people who are between 25 and 50, empty nesters, singles with lots of money or people who want unique experiences," says Robin Wilson, 35, the founder of wallbounce.

"They don't want to visit Rome on a tour bus; they want a fantastic, unique memory."

Neither company will say how many experiences they've sold since launching. Wilson says that since Nov. 1, wallbounce has signed up members in 17 states and Britain.

Joanne Levin, a 50-year-old Bethesda mother of two teens, is a fan.

Levin figures she can give boring gift cards or she can give like the true thrill-seeker that she is. She and her family have gone to Alaska to watch the bears feed on salmon, parasailed in the islands and helicoptered to glaciers.

When she spotted the excitations kiosk at Tysons Corner recently, she knew immediately: "It was our kind of thing."

So for her son's 18th birthday, she bought him a \$200 Blue Circle Package to hang-glide off the side of a mountain. Ten days later, she bought the same gift for her husband.

"It doesn't have to be for the person who has everything," Levin says. "It can appeal across the board. They're exciting little adventures all set up in nice, neat little packages. They loved it."