

The Free Lance-Star

Break Out of the Box — Present Your Loved Ones With Experiences This Holiday

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By Ben Sellers

Picture the whole family gathered around the fire, opening presents. In her stocking, Little Sis discovers a boa constrictor. When Junior pulls his ribbon, a parachute deploys. Mom opens her package of feng shui, and Grandpa's box reveals a salty sea captain piloting a yacht.

In years past, this scenario might have spelled holiday disaster. But as more and more American families feel the urge to declutter their closets of useless material goods, experiences may soon be the hot-ticket item on the retail market.



For Northern Virginia-based company Excitations, experiential gifts aren't only memorable, they're also easy to wrap. The company began selling them this year through its online site and at kiosks in Tysons Corner Center and Union Station.

The idea was based on similar shops in the United Kingdom, said Kim AuBuchon, Excitations co-founder and chief operating officer.

Though giving experiences may seem familiar to anyone who's ever purchased extra tickets to a concert or ball game, the benefit of companies like Excitations is their convenience, selection and presentation, said AuBuchon.

Currently, the company partners with about 100 area businesses to offer experiences ranging from reptile encounters to secret-agent driving lessons to overnight resort getaways.

They present the activities in keepsake, red-leather boxes containing all the necessary booking information, a detailed description of the event and personalized gift card.

"We try to make that gift a tangible gift," said AuBuchon.

While the packages vary in price from \$50 to more than \$6,000, most fall between \$75 and \$500.

The company also offers six Circle Choice Packages, which allow recipients to select from a variety of activities in the same price range.

At the \$75 level, for example, participants may book one of eight choices, such as a Segway tour of Washington, a one-hour horseback ride through The Plains or a paintball session in Bowie, Md.

All of the locations are within a 250-mile radius of Washington. "We wanted to focus on experiences that were attainable and reachable, things that were right here," said AuBuchon, who estimates that she's tried 20 to 30 of the experiences herself, including a wine-tasting tour of Virginia's vineyards.

Many businesses in the Fredericksburg area can make the holidays memorable for the people on your gift list as well.

Ned Wulin, an instructor for first-time jumpers at Skydive Orange, said nearly a third of the company's sky-diving gift certificates are sold during the holidays.

"Some people know they're going to get a skydiving gift, other people just figure they have adventurous friends," he said.

Wulin said many of the gift certificates go to new jumpers. A tandem first-time jump costs \$245, though most choose to have the experience photographed or videotaped for an additional \$75.

Wulin said the idea of giving the experience as a gift doesn't seem novel at all. And he's not worried that demand is linked to the shopping season.

"Skydiving's not gonna sit around gathering dust--it's something that people tend to remember fairly well," he said.

But Terri Finnerin, director of operations for Central Park's Ambiance Day Spa and Salon, said 70 to 80 percent of the spa's annual business is done in gift certificates.

Giving spa treatments is so popular at this time of year, in fact, that Ambiance created a special, seasonal spa package for the holidays. It includes an 80-minute massage, Aveda aroma bath and a gift package, all for \$245.

"We do probably more in December than we do in the whole year combined," said Finnerin.

Because of the demand, she also recommends that gift-buyers get there early, or order online or by telephone.

"It gets really busy, so you have to stand in line for quite a while if you wait till the last couple weeks," she said.

AuBuchon has her own advice for those putting together experiential gifts:

"The best thing to do is to give a gift that will delight the person--something you know they love or the option to choose gift that they love."