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OFF INTO THE WILD BLUE YONDER

Company sells experiences as an alternative to traditional gifts

By CATHY JETT

John Corradi revs up his 1942 Waco and heads down the airstrip at Culpeper Regional Airport.

The radial engine roars like a dozen Harleys as it takes off, but the noise is muffled by the helmets and headsets his customers wear.

As the red and cream biplane climbs, they can see the countryside below spread out like a map. On a clear day, they can spot the Chesapeake Bay.

"They all start out a little apprehensive," said Corradi, an affable former United Airlines pilot with a handlebar mustache, "but I've never had anyone end without grinning ear to ear."

Rides in Corradi's Waco are among the popular activities available through Excitations, a two-year-old company specializing in what it calls "experiential gifts."

In the Washington metro area, they range from a \$50 nighttime sail aboard a legendary Baltimore clipper ship to a \$12,995 two-night stay in the presidential suite at the Mandarin Oriental in Washington. A ride with Corradi costs \$295 for a 30-minute, low-altitude flight or \$450 for a trip to the Shenandoah Valley and back.

"These are the perfect Father's Day gifts because fathers don't want ties," said Kim AuBuchon, Excitations' co-founder and chief operating officer.

"We have dads who want to drive 150 miles an hour in a race car, dads who want to ride in a biplane with an open cockpit," she said. "We have a dad who just went to the glass artwork experience. He loved it so much, he's now a member at the art studio."

Giving experiences as gifts is a hot trend in the United Kingdom, but is just starting to catch on in the United States. The potential, AuBuchon said, is enormous. Gift-giving is a \$253 billion market in the U.S., and the average adult's annual gift budget is \$2,062.

"The hardest thing is that people don't know what I'm talking about when I say 'experiential gift-giving,'" she said. "But when I talk to customers, they say: 'This is the best idea. I never know what to get my dad.'"



Pilot John Corradi, owner of Blue Ridge Biplane Rides, flies his biplane from Culpeper Regional Airport.

AuBuchon and Ian Landy, Excitations co-founder and CEO, came up with the idea for the company several years ago after Landy sold Lightspeed International, an innovator in voice signaling translation technology, to Cisco for \$194 million in 1998. AuBuchon was Lightspeed's vice president of marketing.

"Both Ian and I wanted to do something we were passionate about," AuBuchon said. "It's hard to get passionate about a router or a switch. Now, every single day, I'm out meeting with the most interesting people to line up new experiences."

Her favorites have included everything from private curry cooking lessons to a spin around a racetrack in a stock car to a ride--along with her parents--in Corradi's Waco.



Tim Hagen gave his parents, Walt and Mae Hagen, a trip in a biplane as a Father's Day present.

Excitations, which is based in Great Falls, has a staff of 18 who research the most exciting experiences in the Washington and New York City metropolitan areas. They then market them through a Web site, [excitations .com](http://excitations.com), and a kiosk in Tysons Corner Mall.

"We visit with all of the providers; we check their credentials, their references, their insurance," AuBuchon said. "Clearly, there are things that are dangerous and no amount of checking you can do will prevent an accident, but we vet and find the best of all the people who do dangerous things."

Excitations can package a gift order in a red keepsake box that has a space on the front for a picture of the experience and information inside about the gift.

Gift-givers who wait until the last minute, however, can send Excitations gift certificates by e-mail.

Heather Widener of Reston plans to give her husband, Michael Widener, one of those red boxes tomorrow for Father's Day. Inside will be a certificate for a \$95 photo safari of Washington's monuments and memorials.

"I'm always looking for something different to give my husband for a gift," said Widener, who discovered Excitations at its Tysons kiosk. "It'll be a big surprise, but I think he'll like it. It's not something normal. We don't like normal, boring stuff."

She said it's also the perfect gift because her husband, an amateur photographer, is in the Foreign Service and the family has to move a lot because of his job.

"We have limits on the stuff we can own," she said. "This isn't like a 200-pound TV."

Gail Dutton of Bel Alton, Md., has already given her husband a \$95 ride around a track in Dover, Del., in a NASCAR car, which she found on Excitations' Web site after seeing a segment about it on the evening news.

"He loved it. He was so excited," she said. "We have three small children and they got to wave the flag. It was something for everybody. Guaranteed we'll do it again."

Excitations started in the Washington area in 2004, offering experiences within a 250-mile radius.

"We wanted to make it so it's doable," AuBuchon said. "You don't have to book a train or plane to get there. You can actually book the experience and go."

Excitations has since added New York City, and plans to add six or seven other metro areas by the end of the year. These will likely include Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, Philadelphia and San Francisco, AuBuchon said.

One incentive for businesses to offer experiences through Excitations is that it gives them additional exposure. Corradi's Blue Ridge Biplane Rides, for example, has already been featured on TV news shows as an example of an Excitations experience.

"My business has doubled to three or four trips a week, and sometimes I'm busier than that," he said earlier this week. "I've flown four out of the past five days."

But raising awareness about Excitations' partners is only half of its job, AuBuchon said. The other is to make sure customers have a good experience.

"It's so critical. My best outcome is that you go, have a great time and tell 10 people," she said. "Now you know that Excitations solves a lot of your gift-giving, and now others do, too."