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Ties and cologne too tame?

Online companies offer adventurous, elegant gifts

By AARON KREMER

This Father's Day, dad may not need another gift certificate the gift that says, "I want to give you cash, but I know I shouldn't do that." And even if he needs money for groceries and gas, he probably doesn't want a tank of mid-grade from his eldest daughter.

Instead, you might let him hang glide or maybe give him a lesson in cooking.

A new Washington company called Excitations hopes such experiences become the "it" gift for any celebration.

"I kind of stumbled on it by accident. I was searching Google for creative gift ideas and Excitations was the first hit," said Katie Cooper, a Northern Virginia teacher who bought her parents in Richmond an experiential gift for their 40th anniversary.

Cooper said she spent hours surfing through the site's offerings -- amazed to see 12 categories of options and as varied as a spa pampering to white-water rafting at the New River Gorge in West Virginia. She then called her two sisters to see what would be the best gift for her parents. Perhaps skydiving. Maybe a cattle drive. Better yet, how about a picnic at one of four Virginia wineries?

She and her sisters decided the winery picnic was perfect.

While sons and daughters have always treated a loved one to a ballgame or a fancy dinner, companies that pre-select giftable activities and offer a one-stop portal are relatively new.

Excitations launched its Web site and opened kiosks in Washington and New York in 2005. The company plans on going national, with openings in Boston, Philadelphia, San Francisco and Chicago in the works.

Arlington-based WallBounce sells a similar product around the world. The company's Virginia patrons can shop privately in a designer clothing warehouse or DJ at XM Satellite Radio for an hour.



Popular gifts of experience include river outings and turns at the wheel of a Formula One race car.

"In Europe, this idea is probably 20-something years old," said Ian Landy, Excitations' co-founder and chief executive officer.

Here, popular activities revolve around white water. "If you can make something like this work in the U.K., where there are no mountains and the rivers don't flow very fast, you can certainly make it work in the U.S."

According to Landy, an amateur race-car driver who moved to the U.S. from England 14 years ago to work in the telecommunications industry, the average purchase is around \$250. This Father's Day, NASCAR ride-alongs and vintage biplane rides are the hot tickets, he said.

Prices for outings range from \$75 for a cruise in Baltimore Harbor to nearly \$3,000 for three days of Formula One racing.

Excitations relies on the Web to showcase its product. "People's willingness to buy online is the catalyst that enables this business to work," Landy said. "You rely on the Internet to make it happen."

Gail Dutton of Maryland purchased a day of NASCAR for her family: Her husband drove, her sons waved the checkered flag and she got to drive around the oval in a van to experience the steepness of the banked turns. "I just went online, chose what I wanted and picked the date. My first option was the one I got.

"We've already tried to look into it to see when we could do it again," she said.

Cooper's parents said they were delighted to receive a red box in the mail with the Excitations logo and a card inside detailing the available wineries and instructing the couple how to contact Excitations for reservations.

As for that person on your list, if hang gliding or cooking lessons aren't the right fit, Excitations sells gift certificates, too.

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