



Give a certificate; Get an education

By Maria Puente

For a growing number of Americans, especially the adult variety, the ideal holiday season is one in which there are no brightly wrapped gifts under the tree.

Wine preservation steward from Hammacher Schlemmer (\$199.95) is a hot appliance this season.

No tchotchkes to gather more dust on the shelves. No pointless kitchen appliances you can't give away at the next yard sale. No sweaters with little Santas (groan) dancing across your chest. No torn wrapping paper, boxes and ribbons to take out with the trash.

Instead, there could be dozens of little envelopes pinned to the tree branches, filled with gift cards and gift certificates for such things as groceries, a massage, 50 songs on iTunes, a year of college tuition, a series of Botox injections, even flying-trapeze lessons. Or there's a basket filled with food goodies you can whisk off to the kitchen for breakfast or drink for dinner later.

Call them gifts that go away. Annette McEvoy calls it "the gift shift."

"It's a shift from tangibles to intangibles, including experiences, services, health care and do-gooding," says McEvoy, a consultant to specialty retailers who recently analyzed the trend for a retail forecast conference. "Cash and gift cards are the largest gift category these days, and 10 years ago it wasn't even monitored."

In fact, she says, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics show that by 2003, the value of gifts of education, health and money well outweighed gifts of apparel, home goods and jewelry.

The surge in this sort of gifting, she says, is the result of Americans' never-ending quest for convenience, coupled with a breakdown of the old idea that giving cash gifts is tacky.

"Convenience trumps a lot, especially at holiday time when the female head of household has a lot extra to do."

Also, more people are fed up with clutter in their lives. "There's no space left for all our stuff," says gift guru Alison Deyette of stylebakery.com and a regular on morning talk shows. "Gift cards used to be déclassé; nowadays, they're the right answer. If it seems impersonal, then personalize it — like putting a gift card for Blockbuster in a mini cooler with snacks and candy."

The categories of gifts that go away are expanding:

Prepared by Live Wire Media Relations



- Charity gifts. Websites such as charitygift.com (Its mission: "Waging war against useless gifts") are online shopping malls for charity gifts. You buy a gift card in someone's name, the site notifies them, and the recipient can choose from tens of thousands of registered non-profits to make the donation. "It's a brilliant idea — everyone is a hero," says McEvoy.
- Experiential gifts. This is one of the strongest growth trends in the gift market, topping more than \$250 billion a year, according to marketing trackers JupiterResearch and Unity Marketing. Sites such as gifts.com and excitations.com let you send your loved one on a hot-air balloon ride or for lessons in gourmet cooking, race-car driving or the flying trapeze. Another idea is to give your folks a vacation — a cruise, a weekend in Las Vegas or a whitewater rafting trip.
- Health care services. Maybe she wants to lose the wrinkles. Maybe he needs a fancy wheelchair. Maybe both need hearing aids. Doctors and medical supply companies are only too happy to help you arrange it. In New York, one laser-and-Botox spa, Skinklinic (skin skinklinic.com), even has aestheticians call their clients' husbands or mothers to offer suggestions of what services the client would like for the holidays.
- Consumable gifts. "These will do very well this year," predicts Tony DeMasi, executive director of the National Tabletop & Giftware Association. To the usual baskets of fruit, chocolates, cheeses, nuts, wine or caviar, add the Pancake Breakfast Set from wishingfish.com. And instead of just a few bottles of wine or beer in a paper gift bag, why not drop them in those neoprene totes that are widely available? "It's fun, it's usable and it's under \$40," says Deyette. And for the true wine connoisseur, get a wine preservation steward by Hammacher Schlemmer (about \$200). "You can put an open bottle in there, and it preserves it for a longer period of time," she says.
- Education gifts. If you're rich, you can buy your grandkid a year at college. Or you can give your daughter a summer at a fancy camp. Buy your wife yoga lessons; maybe she'll buy you the dance lessons you sorely need.
- Audio gifts. Give your iPod-addicted teen a gift card to download songs from a pool of 1 million (store.apple.com). At websites such as audible.com, you can buy certificates good for audiobooks (Julia Roberts reading *The Nanny Diaries*), radio shows and audio editions of magazines and newspapers.
- Practical gifts. Here's a gift card virtually everyone these days would covet — a gift card for gasoline. McEvoy says the wealthy are buying their kids cards with up to \$1,000 worth of gas, which should last ... well, not as long as it used to.