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By Caitlin Crawshaw

Use care when giving gifts at work

Inappropriate presents have consequences

Gift giving for family members is hard enough. Finding something your aunt might enjoy--and that you can actually afford--can be mentally exhausting. But when you're shopping for a professional associate, etiquette issues can make gift giving treacherous.

After all, workplace gift exchanges, such as Secret Santa, may be fun but they're still office events. **It's business with social undertones--but it's still business," says Linda Allan, a business etiquette expert based in Toronto.**

To that end, much thought should go into gifts you give professionally. The cost, quality and nature of the gifts must be carefully considered, even if you're already stressed by other holiday errands. "People are overburdened at this time of year and sometimes they don't think it through," she says.

But sloppy, cheesy or downright inappropriate gifts at work have consequences. Allan recalls a person who wrapped a bottle of liquor for a colleague with a reputation for overindulging at work functions, much to the recipient's embarrassment.

Because every workplace has a different culture, what's appropriate at one workplace may not be at another, which makes gift giving somewhat subjective. However, it is never appropriate to give a gift with a sexual or sexist connotation. It's also never appropriate to go over the agreed-upon price limit-- which can shame those with limited funds. It's also important that the price limit chosen works for everyone. "It has to be an amount that won't stretch anyone's pocketbook, whether it's the assistant's assistant or the president of the company," Allan says.

Rather than stretch the dollar by buying more lower-priced items, she advises people should go for fewer but higher-quality items. "You can get a great, beautifully wrapped 12-or eight-pack of chocolates that are handmade and in beautiful packaging or go to some department store and get a tin of something. The better one is what's unique and a little different," she says.

Secret Santa is a great game for workplaces since it includes everyone. Another option can be re-gifting, in which people give their colleagues gifts they've been given in the past but have no use for.

If your workplace doesn't have an inclusive gift-giving event and you choose to give selectively, discretion is crucial. Try exchanging presents out of the office, such as during lunch or while getting together after work.

While selective giving is tricky, don't feel compelled to give to your boss. Allan stresses that "no one should ever feel the need to give a gift to their boss. If anything, it's incumbent on a boss to give gifts to their staff." Giving a gift to your boss may also seem as if you're trying to buy favours, so it's better to organize a gift from the whole group.

If you're in a larger company, it's best to consult your company's code of conduct before giving gifts to anyone, including colleagues, bosses and clients. Sometimes there are formal guidelines that need to be followed, especially when company funds are involved.

The same is true for the self-employed. "A consultant should always know the compliance and gift-giving guidelines for all of their clients," Allan says. Either check their code of conduct or give something small, as a modest token of appreciation.

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