

It's the Thought That Counts

Let's be honest, giving Christmas gifts isn't easy in a recession. So here are some economical ways to make your presents creative and meaningful.

☒ Recession-plagued consumers have sacrificed a lot this year. Those most affected have lost jobs, faced home foreclosures and piled up personal credit-card debt. Even the most financially solvent consumers have been looking for ways to stretch their dollars.

Most Americans are willingly giving up "luxuries"—such as a salon manicure for a do-it-yourself version or a round of golf at the country club for nine holes at a city course—in anticipation of continuing economic unknowns.

Yet there's one sacred cow we've been slow to put out to pasture, no matter how bad things have been: Christmas gifts. We complain about them, but few of us could imagine the Yuletide season without them.

However, this holiday season our sacred cow could become a fatted calf. According to the findings of a 2009 survey conducted by Harris Interactive, American consumers want to spend less and save more this Christmas. The pollsters discovered that:

- About half of U.S. adults (54 percent) said they planned to spend at least \$300 on holiday gift-giving this year. That's down slightly from November 2008, when 60 percent reported that their typical holiday spending was in that range.
- About one in 10 U.S. adults plan to keep their pocketbooks closed altogether this Christmas (11 percent)—a 4 percent increase over last year.
- Saving more and spending less for the rest of 2009 was a top priority of 41 percent of those surveyed.

- Roughly a third said they wanted to build up an emergency fund (37 percent), pay down debt (35 percent) and save for retirement (34 percent).

In August, the *Consumer Behavior Report* on the Web site reported that 75 percent of consumers are more concerned about the cost of holiday gift-giving this year due to the recession.

The economic pinch is causing some Christians to flinch at the thought of total retail dependency this holiday season. Many instead are unwrapping their own creativity and coming up with out-of-the-box ideas for gifts that are both frugal and meaningful.

Handmade Resurges

When looking for inexpensive gifts for teachers and coaches, Angela Folds Fox found a recipe for online chai tea, bought the dry ingredients in bulk and premade the powdered mixture. Friends got together, filled Mason jars with the mix and printed the Greek symbol for chai, or “life,” onto fabric using a computer. Fox purchased the jars on sale at the end of canning season and collected \$5 per friend who walked away with unique teacher gifts.

“It’s the little touches such as a ribbon or handwritten note that show you wanted to invest your time in a person,” says Fox, the founder of and co-author of *Chocolate Covered Friendship*. “Getting together with friends to create the gifts only adds to the spirit of the holidays.”

Paper crafting is another way people are saving money on gifts and doing it as part of a social event. Classes on making handmade Christmas cards fill up within days of being announced, says Toni Ballesteros, a demonstrator for rubber stamp and craft company Stampin’ Up.

“People like that there’s no investment on their part,” she

says. "They come to my home, use my supplies and go home with 12 one-of-a-kind cards for \$15, using popular techniques like 3-D and origami. They can't buy them in a store for that cheap."

She encourages people to use supplies that they have at home—adhesive, rubber stamps and ink, decorative stickers, and even construction paper—for children's projects. Children looking to create gifts can check out craft magazines such as *Family Fun* or the book *Making Great Papercrafts, Origami, Stationery and Gift Wraps* by Kate Lively.

"With the decline of our economy people are moving back to our roots of getting and receiving handmade items," Ballesteros says. "There are certain hobbies that you hope will be handed down and not die out."

People appreciate the personal touch of a handmade item, says Natalie Zee Drieu, senior editor for online magazine , and adds that knitting and crocheting have seen a resurgence with a whole new generation who appreciate heirloom pieces.

"In our digital age, more people are discovering crafts for the enjoyment of making something tactile with their hands," Drieu says. "I think we'll be seeing more crafts being given as gifts this holiday season, not only for the money-saving aspect but for the personal touch you can add that just can't be store-bought."

Men, who typically struggle with what to get and when to get it, are re-evaluating this season the value of spending versus sentiment. Early in his marriage, Michael Huff, a Christian products industry consultant, cut out and sewed a Christmas stocking for his wife.

"She got a really ugly, misshapen, hangable—as long as there was nothing in it—custom-made stocking that cost me nothing but about a half day's labor," Hupp says. "Each Christmas she brings it out with a giggle, a smile and a kiss and even tells

everyone who visits during the holidays that I made that for her.”

Other men have more practical gifts in mind for their wives.

“I have given, and plan to continue giving, her something that typically does not have monetary value,” says business owner Dwight Robinson. “That is ‘the gift of time.’”

“This year, I plan to give my wife the gift of time to relax, refresh and renew. And maybe I’ll throw in a day at the spa for good measure.”

Gifts That Keep on Giving

One of Jenny Ridgway’s cherished Christmas memories springs from the time she unwrapped a china set that had belonged to her 97-year-old friend Grace. Grace had decided to give away her prized possessions so she could see the people she loved enjoying them.

“Grace comes over for dinner and experiences the joy that her dishes bring to our family,” Ridgway says today. Her extended family of 22 adopted Grace’s philosophy for gift giving.

“Each picks a name and gives that person something that belongs to them—not just something they are looking to get rid of, but something they know that person would enjoy,” Ridgway says.

This year her brother Jared will receive her recycled copy of Donald Miller’s *Through Painted Deserts*, a book about a guy who takes a road trip with a friend in a Volkswagen van.

“I read it and knew he should read this,” she says, adding that Jared is the proud new owner of an old Volkswagen van. “It makes sense giving him a gift that is so perfectly suited for him rather than buying a gift just for the sake of having a gift.”

Sandra Joseph, a full-time mom for 25 years, speaker at Hearts at Home and creator of the blog Recognize & Remember () encourages others to recognize God's faithfulness, record it in some manner and remember how faithful God has been when the hard times come.

Every year on her three daughters' birthdays, Joseph claimed a Bible verse for them and wrote it into a journal she created for them, and also wrote down the presents they had received. When her 25-year-old left home, she gave her the journal.

"She didn't really care what the presents were, but what she cared about was what was on my heart," Joseph says, adding that such a journal could be given as a Christmas gift.

Digital scrapbooks can be used to create tribute, prayer or recipe books, or books for kids' artwork, but these can be costly. The major chain drugstores often run specials of two books for \$20. Last Christmas gave away a free book, up to \$20 in value. Their incentive? That you would use that as a starting point and add more expensive books or features.

"Interview the older people in your life and put their favorite Scripture verse in a digital scrapbook to give to them and one to keep," Joseph suggests. "Someday the access to the Scripture and freedom we have now won't be here. Little stories will be incredible tools of God's kingdom if we are still here."

When her dad turned 80, Joseph and her sisters made him a tribute book with each daughter selecting a verse and including why it made her think of him.

"We have been fed a lie that if we are sitting with piles of presents around us at Christmas then we have been successful," Joseph says. "Our culture has said if a gift costs more, its worth more, and that is such a lie. These are the presents that people will cherish."

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MORE GIFT IDEAS

For other great do-it-yourself gift ideas, and to share your own creative DIY gifts, go to .

Keeping It Special for Your Kids

Getting only a few gifts under the tree need not stop your children from enjoying the deeper meaning of Christmas.

Like other eager-to-please parents, Rick and Joy Hughes spent hundreds of dollars for years on must-have gifts of the season for their preteen son Mason. But when their business folded in 2008 they were forced to rethink Christmas gifts. Wrapped under the tree that year was a book written for Mason, *A Christmas Without Presents*, with the message that Christmas is about more than stuff.

Family friend Shannon Holt donated her time to do the artwork for it. She personalized its pages by including nuances about the family's past Christmases and traditions, and painted accurate depictions of Mason, the family dog and even rooms in the Hughes' home.

Joy purchased a red book from a used bookstore that had the title only on the spine. She gutted the inside and spent less than \$20 printing her pages at an office supply store.

Today the book serves as a reminder of God's love through success and failure. "Mason totally got it that it was our

story,” Joy says.

Financial and children’s experts agree it’s a story that must be told, in age-appropriate ways. “You do not have to share every detail with them,” says financial expert Dave Ramsey. “Explain to your children that your family is going to have to cut back on expenses and will not be able to spend as much money on presents this year. By being honest with your children, they’ll ... not feel as though you are taking away their toys and pleasures for no reason.”

During talks with kids about finances, it’s an ideal time for discussing the use of “time, talents and treasure.” It’s also good to share with them that there are some things that money, or the lack of it, can’t change.

“Children get a great amount of security from routines,” practical-parenting specialist and best-selling author Mary Manz Simon says. “Assure them with: ‘We will still bake Christmas cookies, hang our favorite ornaments and go to the living Nativity.’ ”

A Quick History of Gift Giving

Once upon a time, oranges and nuts were top Christmas gifts.

The Magi who came from the east of Israel to greet the baby Jesus in the manger with their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh can be regarded as pioneers in the gift-giving tradition.

But Western culture has since played an important role in the emphasis on exchanging gifts among friends and family.

In the United States, gift-giving began in the 1820s and by the 1840s had become a mainstream practice in American society. It received a huge push in the 1930s when the Coca-

Cola company incorporated Santa Claus into its marketing campaign.

Presents in those days sometimes were toys and candies dangled from the Christmas tree or hung in a stocking from a fireplace mantle or bedpost. Oranges and nuts, rare treats, were given only during the holidays. In early America, the do-it-yourself mentality reigned: Dads hand-carved harmonicas, doll beds and sleds while moms knitted scarves, socks and mittens.

How times have changed.

Last year video-game systems or handheld video games were the leading gifts (57 percent), followed by computers and software (53 percent), cellular telephones (38 percent), CD players (32 percent) and DVD players (31 percent), according to KidzEyes' 2008 Holiday Wish List and Habits survey.