

THE RIGHT GIFT

How to Determine What's Appropriate

BY VICKY KATZ WHITAKER

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You have the holiday gift list down pat for family and close friends, but when it comes to choosing the best present for a co-worker, your child's teacher, the letter carrier, in fact, a whole string of people you want to acknowledge this time of year, let your budget, etiquette and ethics be your guide, experts say.

"The act of gift giving during the holiday season is often a highly anticipated tradition among family members and close friends. But toss in the decision to 'gift' a boss, fellow colleagues, a dinner party host and a few distant neighbors and gift giving can quickly become a hassle and an expensive chore," observes Diane Gottsman, a nationally recognized etiquette expert and owner of The Protocol School of Texas, a company specializing in corporate etiquette training. Worrying about who, when and what type of gift to give in these circumstances is not uncommon. "Your budget is the final yet most important deciding factor," she says.

In some instances, a monetary tip is an appropriate way to express gratitude to those special people who provide you with loyal service of time, effort and dedication throughout the year, says Gottsman. That translates into \$20 to \$100 for a hairstylist, \$5 to \$10 for the person who delivers your newspaper on time, a week's pay if you have a housekeeper, and \$50 to an apartment doorman. Giving cash or a gift card to your letter carrier is another matter.

Like other government and quasi-government agencies, the U.S. Postal Service prohibits letter carriers from accepting cash gifts or gift cards, says spokesman Mark Reynolds. That doesn't mean you can't offer your carrier a nominal plate of cookies and a cup hot chocolate. But, says Reynolds, "the best gift you can give is to make sure the walkway is free from ice."

Federal, state and local govern-

ment employees are generally barred from receiving cash, gift cards or anything else of intrinsic value. For others – such as teachers, co-workers and the hosts of holiday parties to which you've been invited – small gifts are fine.

If you expect to be party hopping during the holiday season, you might want to bring along fresh flowers, wine or candy. Here are some other gift ideas for the host or hostess:

■ **Personalized recipe cards:** Between the Sheets Co. (www.BetweenTheSheetsCo.com), a Texas-based online custom and personalized paper goods company, can provide a package of 20 personalized recipe cards in 13 different patterns for \$11. Allow seven to 10 days for production plus shipping, because each order is custom-made. Allow extra time if you're placing your order once the holiday season is going at full throttle.

■ **Butter Bell:** L. Tremain Inc.'s Antique Butter Bell crock keeps butter fresh and spreadable – without refrigeration, odors or spoilage – for up to 30 days. The butter is protected by an airtight seal of water at the base. The crock comes in five colors. Suggested retail price is \$27.95. It's available at www.ButterBell.com and select gourmet housewares retailers nationwide, including Sur La Table.

Co-workers may appreciate one of these modestly priced gifts:

■ **Monogrammed fabric pen:** For \$13, online retailer CCC Gifts will make up personalized pens with monogrammed fabric inserts. Choose from nine patterns and an assortment of thread colors and monogram styles. For Christmas, order by Dec. 12.

■ **Notepad set:** Selected and coordinated by award-winning, visually impaired Ketra Oberlander, the notepads, \$15 for a set of three, are among items sold by the Art of Possibility Studios, which exclusively represents physically disabled artists. To look at the full collection and to order, visit www.aopstudios.com.

And for your child's teacher?

■ **Personalized key ring:** Also a luggage tag, you can personalize this laminated key ring in the shape of a classroom chalkboard that's exclusive to Personlizationmall.com, an online retailer. At \$8.95, it comes with a velvet drawstring bag. (CNS)

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The Antique Butter Bell crock can keep butter fresh without refrigeration for up to 30 days.