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Talk about spending

December 7, 2008 at 7:48 am by Kristi Gustafson



This weekend's Life 3.0 column, [inspired by a reader:](#)

"So," I said, sitting down next to the boyfriend on the couch while "The Little Drummer Boy" played in the background. "We should set a spending limit on Christmas."

"I agree," he said, looking over at me. "How much are you thinking?"

I hadn't been stressed about having "the talk," but money conversations can be uncomfortable for many, experts say. Despite the potential awkwardness, discussing — and setting — a holiday spending limit with family, friends and significant others may be even more important now than in years past, due to the struggling economy.

Consumers plan to spend at least \$50 less this year than they did last year, according to The Conference Board, a New-York-based research organization that surveyed 5,000 consumers.

Last year, many families spent an average of \$471 on Christmas gifts. This year, those families plan to spend about \$418.

But numbers are fluid, and different surveys focus on different spending patterns. Another poll, which Visa did of 1,000 consumers, found men plan to spend an average of \$1,061 this season. Women aren't quite as quick with the cash, Visa said, and plan to drop \$816 on gifts this year.

Whether you're spending \$400 or \$4,000 on presents, talking with your family, friends or romantic partner prevents resentment and disappointment, says Paulette Kouffman Sherman, author of "Dating From The Inside Out: How to Use The Law of Attraction in Matters of the Heart."

The talk has other advantages for couples.

"If people are in a long-term relationship (pre-marriage), it can be good practice to learn to discuss potentially uncomfortable subjects like money," Sherman says. "It's good practice to discuss your needs, desires and limitations and come to a solution that works for both of you. It is also good to be proactive so your partner knows that your spending limit stems from your circumstances and is not a reflection of how much you care or a lack of effort."

Not every expert thinks you should come out and ask, like I did.

That direct approach can be tacky and cause us to lose the meaning of the holiday, says Debbie Mandel, a Long-Island-based author of several books, including "Addicted to Stress: A Woman's 7 Step Program to Reclaim Joy and Spontaneity in Life."

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“Gifts have become a monetary barometer of love and affection,” says Mandel. “It seems highly competitive to say, “All of us have a limit of ‘\$...’, so no one can spend more than that. Isn’t this once again becoming focused on the monetary value?”

Instead, she says, say something like this: “In the spirit of the holiday, let’s give each other simple, heartfelt gifts, even experiential ones like giving a redeemable coupon of the self, ‘This entitles the bearer to a picnic with me.’ ”

Base the present on what the receiver needs or loves. Such gifts require more thought and creativity, but are also more meaningful.

Kristi Gustafson can be reached at 454-5494 or by e-mail at kgustafson@timesunion.com. Check out her blog at <http://blogs.timesunion.com/kristi>.

Give from the heart

Make someone feel cherished without spending a chunk of cash:

Create a photo collage of the two of you.

Write a poem.

Make a mixed CD or playlist on iTunes.

Cook a special dinner.

Create a spa day complete with massages, foot rubs, bubble bath and aromatherapy.

Serve a home-cooked meal in bed.

Make a card listing the top things you appreciate about the person, and all he or she has taught you. Make it even more relevant by picking one thing for each year you have known one another, or some other number significant to you.

Learn about his favorite sport or her favorite store/designer, then talk about it with him or her — in depth. Yawning is not allowed.

Source: Paulette Kouffman Sherman, author of “Dating From The Inside Out: How to Use The Law of Attraction in Matters of the Heart”; Times Union research

Having the cash chat

Visualize your goals: How do you envision your perfect holiday? For some, a holiday isn’t a holiday without piles of gifts. But for most, the holidays are about family, friends, fun and peace. Imagine how you can bring those values into your celebrations. Then stand by your goals.

Get your mind and priorities in order. Do not give what your mother believes she deserves, a gift equal to what your sister-in-law gave you last year or whatever unrealistic measure might lure you into overspending. Would your loved ones want you to suffer financially to give them a bigger gift? Surely not.

By phone or in person, let friends and/or family know you want to make the holidays more meaningful in light of the economic climate. If you’ve set a price level, provide that amount. Make sure to explain it goes both ways — you don’t expect to receive any more than you are giving.

Source: Ethan Ewing, president of Bills.com

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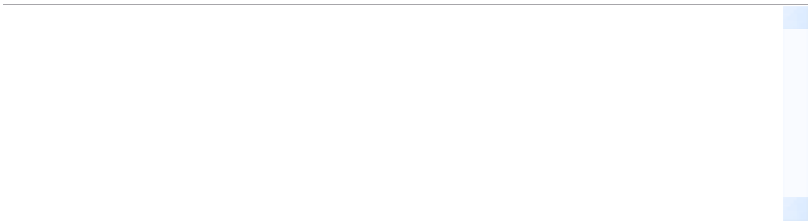
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