

## 10 ways for Christmas gifts to reflect your values

Heidi Schlumpf | Dec. 15, 2012

Perspective

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I was still eating leftover pumpkin pie for breakfast when friends started posting pictures of their fully decked Christmas trees on social media. "Whew, all done with my holiday decorating," one declared the day after Thanksgiving. Another boasted that her cards were all ready to be mailed. Several said they nailed down most of their shopping during Black Thursday and Friday -- or at the very latest on Cyber Monday.

Hey, I'm all for being organized, but isn't this a bit overzealous -- not to mention contrary to the spirit of Advent?

In contrast to the stores that fill their shelves with trim-a-tree before trick-or-treat, Nordstrom has turned the fact that it delays holiday decorating until after Thanksgiving into an ad campaign proclaiming, "Happiness is celebrating one holiday at a time." Too bad I can't afford to shop there.

It's true that budget-minded folks will probably avoid a store where the top-rated gift list includes a \$500 purse and a \$100 bathrobe. But if the 99 percent really want to send a message to the 1 percent who control corporate capitalism in this country, I suggest putting our money where our values are.

What better time to shop with a conscience than Christmas, the spiritual-gone-secular holiday that has sadly (and ironically) become synonymous with "shop till you drop"? I'm not suggesting that anyone give up gift-giving or only make charitable donations in recipients' names (though there is something to be said for the latter idea). Instead, I've made a list -- and checked it twice -- of 10 ways to have a less commercial, more meaningful gift exchange this Christmas.

**1** Shop at small businesses. Sure, it's convenient to get gifts for nearly everyone on your list plus ingredients for Christmas cookies, not to mention socks and motor oil, at the SuperTarget, but if you lament that such behemoths have forced cozier retail shops out of business, support small businesses when you shop for gifts. Yes, prices may be a little higher, but the service is usually worth a little extra. And here's an idea: Buy less. Our family recently went to the "one gift per person" rule. If you're just getting one thing, that one thing can be a little nicer. And, just like their big competitors, many small businesses allow you to shop online.

**2** Give experiences, not stuff. What to get the person who literally has everything they want or need? Don't jump on the latest invention (i.e., the Snuggie) or add to their collection of useless junk. Instead, give experiences. Some of my favorite gifts to receive are certificates for things I can't justify splurging on: manicures, massages, tickets to a play. Even better, give an experience you share with the recipient, such as tickets to an event you'll both attend or a class you'll take together.

**3** Create your own gifts. Fear not, those of you who are not crafty. Even if you can't sew on a button, you can give a little bit of yourself in some sort of handmade or creative gift. Bottle your own beer, design business cards or a website, grow plants from seed. For years I've been giving homemade toffee, which is really quite simple once you buy a \$10 candy thermometer. (You can find my family's recipe here: [spiritualknitter.blogspot.com/2006/12/sweetness.html](http://spiritualknitter.blogspot.com/2006/12/sweetness.html))

[1].) When I was a teenager, my sister learned my favorite song on the piano and got up to play and sing it for me as my Christmas gift. As the commercial says: "Priceless."

**4** Have your kids get crafty. That same sister started a tradition with her children that I have adopted with ours. Each year the kids make gifts for their grandparents and godparents. When they were little, it was handprinted sweatshirts that said, "World's best Grandma, hands down," but as they've gotten older they've evolved into homemade bath salts or handpainted silk scarves. It takes some effort on the parents' part, but a wide selection of kits can help out the craft-handicapped.

**5** Buy from others who are crafty. You can still give one-of-a-kind gifts, even if you don't make them yourself. 'Tis the season for craft fairs, where you can find lovely gifts and support the smallest of small businesses, usually one-person operations in which women add to their family income by working from home. The online selection of handmade items also has exploded in recent years, with [etsy.com](https://www.etsy.com) [2], [artfire.com](https://www.artfire.com) [3] and other sites offering artisans a place to sell their wares.

**6** Give books and subscriptions. As an author, this is one of my favorite suggestions. With the demise of Borders, why not support an independent bookstore? Most offer gift cards and online ordering, just like Amazon.com. Or show your support for Catholic media by giving books and newspaper or magazine subscriptions, most of which -- including *NCR* [4] -- offer specials during the holidays. Or match subscriptions to your recipients' interests. There's a magazine for every hobby out there (says the aunt who has given *Inside Lacrosse* magazine).

**7** Buy "nearly new" or gently used. A marketing professional once told me that every time a consumer buys an item off a shelf, a message is sent to the producer to make another one. If you don't think the world really needs more plastic, but your gift list includes a Lego aficionado, consider buying gently used toys from thrift stores or consignment shops. With [craigslist.com](https://www.craigslist.com) [5], you can shop secondhand from your laptop. Or join a [freecycle.org](https://www.freecycle.org) [6] network, and you may even find gifts for free.

**8** Combine gift-giving with charitable giving. For-profit businesses aren't the only ones selling gift items these days. Many nonprofit organizations, such as Catholic Relief Services through its "Work of Human Hands" catalog, raise funds by selling fair trade coffee and chocolate or handcrafts made by artisans in the developing world. Nonprofit museum gift shops or even for-profit fair-trade retailers like Ten Thousand Villages also offer alternatives for more ethical shopping.

**9** A picture's worth a thousand words. A photo holiday card has become de rigueur, but these expensive greetings often end up in the trash. Put that family photo in a nice frame for a longer-lasting gift, one especially appreciated by doting grandparents. These days you can create photo calendars and books or slap a photo on everything from playing cards to blankets.

**10** Give the gift of time. We all know deep down that stuff doesn't make us happy and that relationships are what's really important. Yet when it comes to Christmas gift-giving, we automatically think a present must be something that can be wrapped and put under the tree. Instead, give gift certificates for "services" such as babysitting, leaf raking or basement cleaning, or for dinners, date nights or other time together. That's the true Christmas spirit.

[Heidi Schlumpf teaches communication at Aurora University in the Chicago suburbs. Her book *The Notre Dame Book of Prayer* would make a lovely Christmas gift for anyone on your list.]

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