

SPECIAL FEATURE

'Tis the Season

Show your appreciation to key clients without blowing your budget. Use the creative ideas in our holiday gift-giving guide to make a lasting impression.

FORTUNE SMALL BUSINESS

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In an uncertain economy, it's more important than ever to show clients you appreciate their loyalty. And there's no more natural time to do so than the holiday season. But if you're like many small business owners, you may be facing a Catch-22, because your budget right now may be very tight. So how do you thank your customers without going into hock? By thinking creatively. These ideas will help get you started.

Personalize it The best gift isn't necessarily the most expensive item you can find -- it's one chosen specifically for the recipient. For instance, for a golf-loving client you might opt for a set of high-quality golf balls and emboss her initials on them. Laurie P. Selzer, national director of marketing in the Houston office of Metro Networks, a radio network, likes giving stationery items imprinted with the recipient's name. *Tip:* If you haven't gotten to know major clients well enough to select gifts based on their interests, make a mental note to have lunch with them in the coming year, so next year's shopping is easier. "Speak with the people you're giving a gift to, find out their interests," says Adrian Gostick, director of corporate communications at O.C. Tanner, an employee recognition company headquartered in Salt Lake City, Utah. "You want them to know you've spent time and effort thinking about the gift."

Pay attention to packaging. Using creative wrapping techniques helps add flair to inexpensive gifts. David Little, president of the website, www.nouveautesusa.com, which sells marketing and promotional items, had a client who manufactured plastic tubes used as packaging for golf balls. He had the client place his logo on the tubes and fill them with candy. Tory Johnson, president of Women For Hire, a producer of career fairs for professional women in New York, gave customers coffee mugs imprinted with, "Smart Women Thirst For Knowledge," making sure each one was beautifully wrapped. Even gifts clients can eat can be personalized. Nouveautesusa.com, for example, will sell you chocolate with your product or logo sculpted into

the chocolate. These types of gifts stand out but won't put you into hock.

Give something lasting. Many business owners send small gifts to all of their accounts, but spend more on key patrons. For a significant client, you may want to invest in a high-quality desk clock, writing instrument or picture frame.

Who to Give to and How Much to Spend

There's no hard-and-fast rule as to who should get a gift, but consider including all of those who work with you regularly. Johnson sends the same gift to her roughly 500 clients, but gives more personal gifts to people she interacts with frequently, such as those at her bank and accounting firm. The amount of money you have available to spend, of course, will determine how many people you thank. Establish a set budget and then add 10 or 20 percent because you'll always add people to your list later on, recommends Robyn Spizman, an Atlanta gift consultant. For an idea of what some companies are spending, corporate gifts bought at Mrs. Fields Cookies typically run \$50 to \$65, says Jodie Erickson, the company's brand manager. Colleen Goudie, vice president of corporate gifts at upscale pen maker, Montblanc, says this year the most popular gifts are in the \$100 to \$200 range. With the right amount of imagination and flair, however, creative entrepreneurs can get their message of thanks across for much less.