

## Gift Giving Protocol

11/19/07

With the holidays coming up fast, I was wondering if you had any suggestions on gift giving protocol. My business is mid-sized, located in Northern Westchester, and we have both employees and customers to think about. Our employees seem to celebrate either Jewish or Christian holidays; my customers, I don't really know. Any hints would be helpful.

Most companies have 4 groups of people to think about when it comes to gift giving. The four groups are employees and subcontractors, customers, vendors, and supporters including referral sources and others who helped out during the year. There are two challenges to saying thank you to everyone who has helped make your year happen. The first challenge is finding ways to equitably and appropriately say thank you to everyone. The second is keeping the costs within budget. Let's get started!

Begin with a plan, that's always my motto. How much do you intend to spend, overall, and how many people do you want to reach? Most folks will probably answer, "I don't know how much to spend", and, "There's a long list of people to thank". That's normal.

Start by estimating how much you would like to spend, in total. For some, that may be \$100, for others it may be in the \$1,000's. There's no right or wrong answer,

other than that you don't want to risk the financial health of the company. Then estimate how big your list may be. If you're like me, the longer you work on the list, the bigger it gets. Once you know how much and how many, simple math will tell you your average gift budget.

If your list is long and your funds are limited, one creative way to handle gift giving is to make a donation to a charity. Send out notices to everyone on your gift list that you've made a donation in lieu of gift giving. Include information on what the charity stands for, as people may be interested. If you think that isn't enough, you may want to include a gift card for something small, such as a latte at Starbucks or Dunkin Donuts. While I generally like to promote entrepreneurial companies, with gift cards it may be better to select a company with multiple locations so people can shop in their own back yard to redeem the gift card.

There are a few ways to give gifts to employees. One way is to have Secret Helpers, where everyone draws a name and shops for one other person. Then at a holiday party everyone exchanges gifts. Another suggestion is to give a gift basket to each employee. I generally recommend the same size gift for each person. This can help you avoid political ramifications and gossip about who sits where in the pecking order.

Whatever you do, don't confuse holiday gift giving with employee bonuses or company profit sharing. They are three different things and should be treated very differently. Gift giving is strictly for saying "thank you" for a year of help.

If you plan to give gifts to clients and vendors, you want to be sure that you're within the guidelines acceptable to the other company. Ask your key contact, or the company's human resource department, if there are any restrictions. Keep a log of who you've check on, and what restrictions apply, so you can use the research again next year.

There are some gifts that are more risky than others, and may require some personal knowledge. Religious gifts are appropriate only if the recipient is of the religion implied by the gift. Liquor and wines are appropriate for some people and totally out of place for others, as are cigars, candy and some foods. For example, some people don't smoke, some are allergic to chocolate, and some don't eat ham, even though those three items have historically been given as gifts.

If you know something about the person you're giving to, you may want to personalize gifts. For example, you may ask your sales and customer service people to submit ideas on what to give customers. You could give them



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a list of 3 or 4 items to choose from, to keep the selection process manageable.

Personally prepared gifts, if well done, can have the greatest impact of all. A basket of home made cookies, or anything that you or your staff personally take the time to prepare or assemble, and in the process add your own touch of caring, can say thank you in a very personal way. Of course, if you have a lot of gifts to give, you may not have the time to personally prepare every gift. It's a trade off.

Looking for a good book? Try *The Language of Gifts, The Essential Guide to Meaningful Gift Giving* by Deanna Washington.

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