

Holiday gifts that won't break the bank

By ADINA GENN

As 25-year veterans of the gift shop business, Monica Berke and Linda Krasner have weathered several economic storms, so they have a good feel for what business people will be looking for in holiday gifts this year.

"People are more worried about finding gifts. They've already come in to shop for overview to see that they could find things," said Krasner, co-owner of Vogue & Vintage in Great Neck.

That's why the shop offers a mix of antiques, jewelry, lacquered boxes, picture frames and other items that range in price from \$10 to \$2,500. This year, the partners have made a point of offering five or six categories of gifts for less than \$30.

Regardless of price, the presentation is the same. There's a choice of giftwrap and gold ribbon, at no additional charge. And the partners are there to advise customers on getting the most bang for their bucks.

"We do gift baskets, but we try to discourage them," Berke said. "You'll get more for your money with a regular gift. I feel

you pay more for the labor and cellophane."

It's the kind of expertise business owners could find useful this season as they seek cost-efficient ways to send holiday cheer to clients, employees and vendors. Some may choose the sort of gift available at a retailer like Vogue & Vintage. Others look for creative ways to show their appreciation at the end of the year.

Holiday gifts to key players are a way to acknowledge that they are all part of a team that help drive a company's achievements, said Sue Fredericks, owner of Westbury-based On Purpose Performance Consulting.

But a meaningful gift is not necessarily monetary or materialistic, she added.

"The philosophy of the gift should reflect meaning about the relationship," Fredericks said.

For instance, there is the gift of time, something employees might savor in their

struggle for work-life balance.

"You can give employees time off to shop or prepare for the holidays," Fredericks said.

There is also the service-as-gift approach. "Have management donate services as gifts. Do it as a raffle and offer babysitting, baking a cake, washing someone's car or giving a staff member a reserved parking spot.

"It's very successful when a manager takes the time and gives in the process by shopping and preparing something in a loving way, creating something in his or her home to give to a colleague," Fredericks said.

That's a strategy that Keith Banks, executive vice president of Lloyd Staffing in Melville, initiated last year.

"We ran a program internally to thank employees called the '12 Days of Lloyd.' We held a raffle for 12 days during the holidays, and management offered their services to employees. Prizes included having a manager wash your car, cook a gourmet meal and stand on line to return

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Christmas or Hanukkah gifts," Banks said. "This was our way of giving the gift of time and appreciation to employees without breaking the bank. It was a unique concept that went over well with our staff."

In addition, the company offered ticket giveaways as part of the raffle prizes. Susan Safran, Lloyd's director of financial staffing, won tickets to a Long Island Ducks game, to which she took her son.

"It was a real morale booster," Safran said. "It wasn't just one day of opening gifts, but 12 days of wondering who was going to win. People were hysterical, and everyone was excited for me."

Banks is still deciding on a program for this year's holiday gift and is considering running the "12 Days of Lloyd" again.

Bruce Libman, national director of Woodbury-based Preferred Provider Network, a networking group for entrepreneurs, likes to send gifts to each of the group's members.

Last year he sent leather portfolios, which he said ranged in price from \$10 to \$15. The portfolios were stamped with the organization's name.

For this year's gift, he's considering a business card holder. And he may also send out festive baskets with "post-its, pens and tchotchkes."

"They're not expensive gifts, but they show how much I appreciate people's support this year. And it comes back tenfold. People call to say thanks. They appreciate that I would take the time to send them something. It shows I'm thinking of them and that they are on my mind," Libman said.

"Just calling and wishing people happy holidays, they don't forget that. It shows that the relationship is more than transactional."

Fredericks agreed. "When the chairman or president places a call to employees or clients to thank them for their partnership and wish them happy holidays, it makes it personal."

She also suggests taking the altruistic path. "Choose a charity that's reflective of the values of the organization and then donate the money to that charity. Use the money you would have spent on gifts as a team. Do the same for clients and vendors and make the donation in their name. The message means more when you know you're making a difference."

Still at a loss? Set up an employee committee and come up with ideas and implement a strategy.

"Make your staff part of the solution," Fredericks said.