The Act of Giving Makes a Nice Gift, if Done Correctly

By ALINA TUGEND

THE message is everywhere: This holiday, give the gift of giving. Do good and feel good. The perfect gift is a gift to charity.

It's not as if the thought hadn't crossed my mind. But in the past, every time I considered giving - or even asking for - charitable donations as gifts, I hesitated. I feared coming off as self-righteous and even a bit of a party pooper.

Was there a right way to do this? The more I thought about it, the more I realized I needed the help of etiquette experts.

Judith Martin, more widely known as the newspaper columnist and author Miss Manners, is definite in her opinion on the matter.

"It's very nice to give people presents and it's very nice to donate to charities, but let's separate these two things," Ms. Martin said crisply.

By donating to charity as a way of giving a gift, you're "doing a twofer," she said. "There is no real present. I give to charity and I say this is a favor to you."

An exception might be in a memorial situation, she said, but even then, make sure you donate to a cause supported by the family.

What about requesting charity contributions instead of presents? Still a no-no.

"Asking people to give you things - and this will be news to many people - is rude," Ms. Martin said. "The idea of gifts has been widely sabotaged in recent years. It's turned into an exchange of shopping lists. The idea of a gift is to show you've thought about someone. You may not always get it right, but that's why we say it's the thought that counts."

Peter Post, great-grandson of the etiquette maven Emily Post and the director of the Emily Post Institute, disagreed politely.
"I think it's wonderful. I don't have any problem giving a charitable donation. That can be a very meaningful gift."

Mr. Post warned, however, that one shouldn't use the gift as a way to proselytize for a cause.

His advertising agency made a charitable donation last year to a children's center in the name of corporate clients rather than send the usual wine or chocolates.

"Just do it for the right people," Mr. Post said. "What can be appropriate for one person can be inappropriate for another."

Well, if I agree with Ms. Martin, then it's off to the mall - perhaps to buy her new book "Miss Manners' Guide to Excruciatingly Correct Behavior (Freshly Updated)" (W. W. Norton & Company). But if charity donations still appeal to me as a gift, it's time to search online. And finding the perfect charity certainly couldn't be easier these days.

A number of Web sites, like www.charitynavigator.org and www.guidestar.org, offer information about the almost one million nonprofit groups registered with the Internal Revenue Service.

For example, Charity Navigator examines how much of the money donated to a charity goes to program expenses, administration and fund-raising. It also rates charities based on financial health, efficiency and capacity to sustain services and grow.

Other organizations have also made it easier, and even festive, to donate. Two nonprofits, www.justgive.org and www.networkforgood.org, offer convenient "charity gift baskets."

For example, you know Aunt Helen is nutty about animals. Click on "animals" and up pop names of several nonprofit groups devoted to protecting them. A few more clicks, and Aunt Helen will receive a notice that you've donated to the charities in her name.

You can do the same for the environment, hurricane victims, the elderly, children, the homeless and a variety of other causes. These sites mention the convenience of giving through their organization; you donate to numerous charities or to various recipients using one credit card, and therefore have one record at the end of the year for tax purposes.

Network for Good and Just Give pass on all the money to the charities chosen, except for a 3 percent transaction fee the charity would need to pay anyhow.

Katya Andresen, vice president for marketing for Network for Good, which was founded by Yahoo, Cisco Systems and America Online, says picking a charity can be just as heartwarming as choosing just the right sweater or pair of earrings.
"As long as you're selective, and think about what they believe in, it can be one of the most kind and thoughtful gifts I can imagine," she said.

For those who worry about looking crass - or cheap - the notice that is sent to notify the recipient doesn't state the amount donated, unless the giver chooses to do so.

Typically, Ms. Andresen said, donations made on behalf of another person account for 20 percent of all donations through her organization; however, that climbs to about 40 percent in December.

"This year we weren't sure what to expect," she said. "There have been an unusual number of crises, with the tsunami, Katrina and the South Asian earthquake. There might be compassion fatigue, or people might want to give more."

Early signs bode well, however; this year Network for Good is registering significantly higher giving than at the same time last year, Ms. Andresen said.

And there's always a huge spike on Dec. 31.

The flip side of giving charitable donations is asking for them. Increasingly, Web sites are providing opportunities for people to post their charity "wish list." Ms. Andresen said her organization expects some 6,000 people to create "favorite lists" this year, asking friends and family to donate to charities on their behalf.

Donna Zaccaro helped create www.whatgoesaround.org, which is devoted solely to assisting people in making donations on behalf of friends and family, or letting those friends and family know what charities you want them to contribute to.

The site also offers donation opportunities for children.

"We're about changing consumer behavior," said Ms. Zaccaro, who is president of the organization. "Over the past few years, people have been moving toward gift certificates because they hate buying people stuff they don't want or need. This is a logical extension of that."

Eventually, Ms. Zaccaro said, her group hopes to combine the two and offer gift certificates allowing a recipient to donate to the charity of his choice.

There are, of course, other ways of doing good at the holidays aside from giving to established charities. You can volunteer your time, buy presents from nonprofits (www.greatergood.org offers suggestions) or, do as we've done the last few years and adopt a local needy family to buy presents for.

And I have to admit, I'd hate to see the tradition of gift giving disappear. Besides the actual presents, I like the bright wrapping paper, the bows and the idea that someone has thought about what I want.
I also like giving presents. I enjoy finding the perfect item, then surprising a friend or relative with an unexpected treat.

So, this year our sons will receive some of the gifts they've been hankering for - and each will also get a letter from a child we've sponsored for them through the charity Save the Children.

"We hear a lot from people who say, 'we got a lot of stuff,' " said Mike Matchett, director for marketing for the Heifer International Project, a 61-year-old humanitarian assistance organization. "They say, 'I don't want to give my uncle something that he'll return.' I think most people don't need another sweater. On the other hand, some would like that Xbox 360."

To make donating more fun, his organization (www.heifer.org) offers a gift catalog that allows donors to "buy" an animal or part of an animal to assist needy families around the world. For example, you can purchase for yourself or on behalf of someone a pig for $120 or a share of a pig for $10. Three rabbits are a bargain at $60. And if you're feeling ultra-generous this year, check out the "Joy to the World" collection: two sheep, four goats, a heifer and two llamas for $1,500.

To all those who read my column on the Do Not Call registry and wanted to know if there is a similar Do Not Fax registry: No such registry exists, but in July Congress passed a Junk Fax Prevention Act. The Federal Communications Commission plans to issue regulations to carry out the legislation by April 5, 2006.

Unsolicited commercial faxes currently are prohibited under law. The act allows companies to send faxes to customers with whom they have an "established business relationship"; that is, if the customer has bought, leased or rented a product from the business within the last 18 months. But the law also requires senders of faxes to include a notice and contact information on the first page of the fax telling the recipient how to opt out of future fax advertisements from the sender.

If you have a complaint, file it at www.fcc.gov/cgb and click on the "online complaint forms" or call (888 225-5322).

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