

At this time of year, small and medium-sized companies are looking for ways to say “thank you.” But whether you've got the budget for an elaborate holiday plan or are hoping to do a lot with very little, you can show your appreciation by infusing some extra care into your gift-giving.

## **What to give clients: Maple syrup, or a goat?**

**Shelley White**

Mark Graham, president of Toronto-based Rightsleeve, puts a great deal of thought into the gifts his company sends to clients each year. The goal, he says, is personalization, style and a bit of surprise.

“It's all about perceived value,” he says. “If I give out an item that cost me 'x,' I want it to be something that's going to be at least three times that amount in the customer's mind. Like, 'Wow, I saw this for retail for \$50, and you're giving this to me?’”

Rightsleeve makes branded merchandise, so holiday gifts are an especially important way to promote the brand, Mr. Graham says. This year, the company designed a scarf, custom-woven with the company's logo, and delivered it to clients personally or by courier. In addition to the scarf, clients will receive a second gift, a glass water bottle filled with candy canes, at Rightsleeve's holiday open house. The event is another way to thank clients, Mr. Graham explains.

“There's probably 150 people coming. We're going to have a caricature artist on site, we've got a photographer, open bar, food,” he said. “We really want to make sure that if clients are coming to the office, because they're taking time out of their day, that they're rewarded and they get fed and they have a real, feel-good time.”

At this time of year, small and medium-sized companies are looking for ways to say “thank you.” But whether you've got the budget for an elaborate holiday plan or are hoping to do a lot with very little, you can show your appreciation by infusing some extra care into your gift-giving.

First, consider any gift policies that your clients may have, recommends Diane Craig, a corporate etiquette expert and president of Toronto-based Corporate Class Inc. Some companies prohibit their employees from accepting gifts, or put a dollar limit on gifts they might receive.

“In fact, we've received letters from two of our clients saying ‘If you wish to give your contact in our organization a gift, please ensure it's no more than \$50,?’” she says.

In general, Ms. Craig says, expensive and extravagant gifts are a thing of the past. Food and drink are good ideas, especially if you can send something that carries a personal touch.

“For example, for our U.S. clients, we're going to send them something very Canadian – raspberry maple syrup,” said Ms. Craig. “We always try to find something that's not sold everywhere.”

Small businesses should give clients something that is memorable but appropriate, said Christian Codrington, senior manager of operations at the British Columbia Human Resources Management Association. “There are so many creative and non-controversial options out there,” he said.

Mr. Codrington suggests spending time with clients by taking them to lunch. If you prefer to give a gift, he suggests tickets to a movie or play for the group (or a voucher toward this), a gift certificate to a coffee shop so they can have a group coffee break “on you,” a certificate for a massage therapist or esthetician who will come to their office, or a package of artisanal food items made by a local business.

Another of Mr. Codrington's favourites is a gift certificate for Kiva, a non-profit organization that facilitates micro-loans in developing countries.

Many companies are moving toward gifts that are more in keeping with the spirit of the season, says Ms. Craig. She recommends ZOE Alliance, a company that encourages artisanal production in impoverished communities in Canada and abroad. They offer such items as leather portfolios, coasters and table games made in places such as Haiti, India and Guatemala. Every ZOE gift comes with a card that gives information about the community and how funds are shared.

“It's something that's been really well received,” said Ms. Craig. “[Clients] get something, but they know it's also helping someone else.”

Another option is making a charitable donation on behalf of clients. It's a good way to navigate tricky gift policies, said Roger Musselman, marketing co-ordinator at Oxfam Canada. A section of the organization's website is dedicated to corporate giving.

“People can give a gift in honour of a client and the gift itself goes to a family that needs it in places like Ethiopia and Mozambique,” said Mr. Musselman. “And it's everything from sheep and goats and chickens to emergency water supplies or planting an organic vegetable garden to help people earn an income.” At Oxfam, the amount you need to spend can vary from the lowest-priced item, a chicken (\$15), to emergency supplies and latrines costing hundreds of dollars.

If client gifts aren't in your budget this year, a festive holiday message can be just as effective, Ms. Craig says, as long as businesses take the time to do it with a personal touch. She warns against the hastily sent card or e-mail blast.

“A lot of people send out a mass e-mail, and I don't know how much people really care about that,” she says. “Some say it saves trees, but to me it is not a very personal way of sending your best wishes, because in this day and age, when you receive a handwritten note, it's big.”

When sending out holiday cards, check your list twice, Ms. Craig recommends.

“Don't forget your suppliers,” she said. “They're the ones who make it possible through the year to deliver projects on time. These are very, very essential people and it's important to acknowledge them.”

© 2011 The Globe and Mail Inc. All Rights Reserved.