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Something new for the bride and groom

By KARALEE MILLER - McClatchy Newspapers

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Each summer, wedding season revs into high gear.

The perfectly tailored dresses arrive, the tulle and lace applied just so. The toppers wait in the wings, ready to adorn the divinely sweet multi-tiered confections. Vows are fine-tuned, with brides and grooms discreetly editing their words of love.

On the flip side of all the "I do" details are the wedding guests. A few hundred people for each affair must decide what fabulous way to honor the couple as they enter into wedded bliss.

Traditionally, gift registries have been the salvation for guests at a loss. Registries are the bride and groom's way of electronically saying "here's what we want."

However, in recent years, more and more couples are skewing away from SKUs and requesting gifts outside the norm. Gone are the usual suspects of fine linens, elaborate china and sleek stemware. In their place are outside-the-gift-box options that cater to the couple's essential needs, ultimate adventures and atypical desires. Here are a few new ideas for "something new."

MONEY

Ask couples what they really would like for a wedding gift and many will tell you cold, hard cash. But is that appropriate and, if so, how do you politely convey that request?

"It is acceptable," says Anna Post, spokeswoman and author of "Emily Post's Wedding Parties." "In recent years, couples have expressed that this might be the most useful gift for them."

Post stresses that relaying the money message - or any gift request, for that matter - should never appear on the wedding invitation. Rather, it should solely come through word of mouth, by family and close friends.

"They could say, 'The couple isn't registered, but what they would really love is a donation toward x, y and z. But, of course, they'll love anything that you get them,'" Post says. Also, Post says, the bride and groom should use words like "ask for a donation," "ask for help with" or "ask for a contribution toward."

"People want to know they're giving to the ultimate gift," she says, whether it be a down payment for a home or honeymoon expenses. "They feel more comfortable with that than they do just sort of padding your bank account."

As with any request, though, know that "the choice of a gift is always, always up to the giver," Post says.

CHEERS

Give the newlyweds a head start on their personal wine cellar with a membership to a wine-of-the-month club.

"It's the gift that keeps on giving," says Megan Howard, editor-in-chief at Gifts.com, a gift recommendation and advice Web site offering 1,500 wedding-gift options. "You can give a three- to 12-month membership."

Prices range from \$108 to \$408. You also can opt for the Wine of the Season Club (for about \$150), where a new wine is delivered four times a year.

Another wine option, Howard says, is going to a local wine shop and asking the store experts which wine would ideally mature in 10 years. Then, gift that wine and wish the couple a "long and lasting marriage," she says.

Also, personalized champagne flutes are always a lovely gift, Howard says. Depending on the material, you could have them monogrammed or inscribed.

QUICK GETAWAY

Consider giving a gift certificate to a bed and breakfast (www.BnBfinder.com). For couples who like to get away, these certificates are accepted at more than 1,000 bed and breakfast inns and small hotels across the country.

This thoughtful option is not typically something you'll find on a wedding registry, Howard of Gifts.com says.

"People are broadening their scope of requests," she says.

If you prefer to gift the couple while they are on their honeymoon, you may want to indulge them with services at their hotel. Room-service treatments, couples massages and room upgrades are all wonderful ways to honor the bride and groom, Howard says.

"This type of gift can't be replicated, doesn't collect dust and doesn't have to be transported," she says.

A win-win for everyone.

UP, UP AND AWAY

Match the couple's soaring love with a romantic hot-air balloon ride for two (www.excitations.com). The rides (about \$200) are available over different areas of the country nationwide.

"The rides are topped off with a champagne toast and sometimes a picnic," Howard says.

LIGHTS, CAMERA, ACTION

Moving beyond kitchen whisks and bed linens, couples love receiving new, shiny electronics.

"Camcorders are great gifts, and they allow couples to start building memories together," Howard says.

Consumer Reports selected the Canon ZR800 as a "great all-around choice." The MiniDV camcorder (\$249 at www.usa.canon.com) has 35x optical zoom and a FireWire port.

GIFT CARDS

Give the couple a jump-start on cultivating their own media library. A gift card to Web sites like Amazon.com allows the couple to build their CD, DVD and book collections, says Darcy Miller, editorial director of Martha Stewart Weddings and blog writer for www.thebridesguide.com.

"Couples are looking for more diverse gifts and registry ideas," she says. "A lot of people like to give gift certificates because they give the couple a choice."

GIVING BACK

More and more couples are registering for charities in lieu of traditional gifts. Through sites like Idofoundation.org, guests can make online donations in support of the couple's selected organization.

"Couples are very much conscious of giving back," Miller says, "especially couples where this is their second wedding."

MAKE IT PERSONAL

The common gripe for wedding guests when dealing with registries is that it feels "impersonal," Miller says.

"But you can work from the registry, adding personal touches that show you put some time and thought into it," says Miller, who offered some wonderful examples.

A cake stand or baking dishes: Include a favorite cake recipe from your family.

Cake knife: Attach a list of all the birthdays (and other key dates, if you like) of the couple's family members.

Champagne flutes: Package the set with a bottle of wine from the year they met or the year they were born.

'08 WEDDINGS BY THE NUMBERS

16 number of months for the average engagement

26 age of average bride

28 age of average groom

92 percentage of first-time weddings for brides

87 percentage of first-time weddings for grooms

166 average number of guests

Source: The Wedding Report, a Phoenix-based wedding-industry research firm

HOW MUCH DO I SPEND?

Determining how much to spend on a gift can be a source of wedding-day jitters for guests.

Wedding guests will spend an average of \$96 this year per wedding gift, according to the Wedding Report. (That's down from \$106 in 2007.)

Does that mean if my gift cost less than \$96, it's a waste?

"There's no set dollar amount, no number you can measure yourself against," says Anna Post, spokeswoman and author of "Emily Post's Wedding Parties." "You should base it on your own budget - and you don't need to apologize for your budget - and your relationship to the couple."

That barometer, Post says, can be used for all gifts, not just wedding presents.

"You need to make an effort that shows you care, but caring doesn't have a monetary value," she says.

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