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Present Tense

What does a financial adviser give to the client who has everything?

By [CHARLES PASSY](#)

For three decades, Richard Bermont sent his clients the usual tchotchkes as holiday gifts, from umbrellas to crystal items, all bearing his company's logo. But this past year, the Coral Gables, Fla., wealth manager decided the times called for something different.

He and his partner, Adam Carlin, made donations in their clients' names to needy nonprofit organizations, including a women's homeless shelter.

The response was nothing short of stellar. Many clients called the two principals at their SmithBarney affiliate to thank them for their thoughtfulness. Mr. Bermont's only regret is that he didn't start this earlier. After all, he says, "how many umbrellas can you have?"

It's a situation many wealth managers face: They want to send a token of appreciation to their affluent clients. But their clients mostly can afford to buy anything they really want. Moreover, in a year during which most have seen their portfolios crumble, any hint of extravagance could be taken the wrong way. The best gift for many might simply be knowing their manager is working hard to restore value to their accounts.

"Most of our clients have enough 'stuff,' " John M. Thomas, vice president of [Stearns Financial Services Group](#) in Greensboro, N.C., says in an email. Instead of sending gifts, Mr. Thomas says he invites clients to special seminars and events to help them "deal better with tougher times."

Sense of Timing

For some managers, the solution is to move past predictable occasions -- and gifts. "Sending a generic gift basket on a client's birthday will show that you know when their birthday is, but it doesn't show any great understanding of who they are," says Carol Fabbri, managing partner of Fair Advisors, a financial firm in Denver.

So, Ms. Fabbri rarely sends trinkets or observes standard occasions. She gives gifts of a unique or practical nature, and writes personal notes when an unusual opportunity arises. When she saw a client was profiled in their university's alumni magazine, she had the article matted and framed for display. When she heard a client's child enjoyed a soccer triumph, she sent the child a note.

"I think the personal things mean a whole lot more than a few under-ripe pears," Ms. Fabbri adds.

Other wealth managers employ similar approaches. Michael E. Goodman of Wealthstream Advisors Inc., a New York-based firm, says giving gifts on holidays is "cheesy." But he's a fanatic about clipping articles, or sending copies of

segments from television news, that relate to a client's hobbies and interests. "That's priceless," he says.

Book Entries

Celia Santana of Personal Risk Management Solutions, an insurance and financial advisory firm in New York, says she doesn't acknowledge birthdays. She acknowledges special events: When a client's son was accepted into the same Ivy League school the client attended, she sent them matching baseball caps from the university. When a client became a grandparent for the first time, she sent two children's books.

"She was thrilled that I took the time," Ms. Santana says.

Such thoughtfulness also makes good business sense, says Jacqueline Whitmore, an etiquette expert based in Palm Beach, Fla.

Extravagance "is just passé," says Ms. Whitmore, noting that clients might suspect "the cost is ultimately being passed on to them." And gifts bearing a company's logo smack of self-promotion, she adds.

Tailoring gifts to the client or occasion, on the other hand, "shows you took the time and did your research," she says. The client then not only sees the financial adviser as someone who cares about them, but also as someone who's smart enough to make the right sort of effort in a personal or business sense. Ms. Whitmore also likes the idea of gifts to charity in a client's name, especially in these troubled times. It positions a company as "socially responsible," she says.

Dinner Engagement

Some say there are still occasions when an over-the-top gift might be merited, even for a wealthy individual. George Wells, president and founder of Legacy of America Inc., a wealth-management firm in Auburn Hills, Mich., hosts lavish tribute dinners for such occasions as a client's retirement or milestone birthday. Held at an upscale Italian restaurant, the "celebration-of-life" party, as Mr. Wells dubs it, is attended by the client's closest friends and family. Mr. Wells oversees every detail, from sending out the invites to creating biographical displays of photos.

Mr. Wells insists that no business be discussed as part of the evening. But he's well aware of the message the party sends -- not so much to the client, but to the invitees, who will inevitably make comparisons with their own financial adviser.

"They're thinking, 'Well, my guy doesn't do anything like this,' " says Mr. Wells.

Favors and Gags

Sometimes the best gifts don't involve money at all. At Evensky & Katz Wealth Management in Coral Gables, advisers are known to look after their elderly clients, whether by helping them buy a car or putting up their storm shutters when a hurricane threatens. "It's about understanding the holistic nature of financial planning. We care about the whole person," says Chairman Deena B. Katz.

Other times, there is no substitute for cash. Dan Danford, chief executive of the Family Investment Center in St. Joseph, Mo., likes to show his clients the money on their birthdays. He sends each of them a \$2 bill enclosed in a birthday card every year.

It's a gag, naturally, but one that clients love. Mr. Danford says he hears regularly from his investors about how they've collected the bills as keepsakes over the years. "You might think people would like a bill with a larger number, but it's really funny how much something like this means to them," he says.

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