

Forget the fruitcake: Give skydiving lessons

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A screen grab from Groupon's web site is shown Monday, Dec. 12, 2011. In the uncertain economy, presents like massages and cooking classes play into a growing desire to seek out comfort and treasure cozy moments with family and friends. It helps, too, that it's become much easier to buy these types of gifts, thanks to the growing popularity of online deals sites like Groupon and LivingSocial. (AP Photo)

(AP) -- Forget the material things - reindeer sweaters, clunky toys, stocking stuffers that end up as, well, stuff. How about a skydiving lesson, a spa pampering or a night at a cozy bed and breakfast?

This [holiday season](#), a lasting memory is worth a thousand knickknacks.

With less money to spend in the weak economy, and with daily-deal sites like Groupon growing in popularity, more Americans are giving

experiences instead of glitzy gifts. Think comfort and joy, not five golden rings.

Instead of sneakers or electronic gizmos, Denice Bailey and her husband are treating their two [teenage boys](#) to a Dallas Cowboys game, dinner at a steakhouse and a family night in a hotel.

Because it's sure to cost hundreds of dollars, the parents let the boys choose between the night on the town and store-bought gifts. Bailey was surprised by their decision.

"That said a lot to me, that they are wanting that memory, that experience," says Bailey, from Abilene, Texas. "That family time is for me as a mom the most precious gift I can have."

There's no reliable way to track how much shoppers are spending on experience gifts this year compared with last. Restaurants, spas and other businesses don't always know if people are buying their services as gifts or for themselves.

But shoppers are expected to spend \$80 million to \$100 million on deal sites over the holidays - as much as 10 times more than last year - according to an estimate for North America from Yipit, a site that collects daily deals from across the Web.

"Deal sites get a lot of credit for bringing new and unusual experiences to the attention of people who might not have thought about them," says Dan Hess, CEO of Dealradar.com, another site that aggregates deals.

Groupon, the biggest deal site, sold 650,000 of its "Grouponicus" deals - the name is an apparent play on the secular "Seinfeld" holiday of Festivus - in the four days after Thanksgiving, six times as many as last year. The company wouldn't give dollar amounts.

LivingSocial, the No. 2 deal site, sold more than 281,000 vouchers during the first three days of its "12 Days of Giving" promotion - about one and a half times what it sold last year. The number given as gifts has more than doubled.

For those ready to take the plunge, there are as many options for experience-giving as Santa has elves.

In New York, LivingSocial had a \$100 deal for a wine-tasting and meatball-cooking class taught by the chef of Little Owl restaurant. It sold out in an hour. In Austin, Texas, Groupon offered a package of classes valued at \$2,300 for \$999. Included: a five-hour pyrotechnics workshop, a stunt driving course and hand-to-hand-combat training. In Toronto, it offered dog-sledding lessons for two for \$74, half off.

While there's no way to tell how many of them were given as gifts, Sheri Bridges, a marketing professor at Wake Forest University, says experiences are the best gifts for the person who has everything.

"Something time-starved people don't have is quality time with people they love," she says.

Kevin O'Connor, 26, of Overland Park, Kan., found a spa massage on Groupon to give his girlfriend for Christmas. It normally goes for \$132 but cost him \$62. To add suspense, he plans to put the printed Groupon in a big box.

"She saw it on there but didn't want to buy it because it was some extra thing she didn't want to spend money on," he says.

Kristen Vannice bought her boyfriend flying lessons on a glider, a small plane that runs without power using air currents. For \$99 from the Soaring Society of America, she got him a lesson, instruction materials

and a few months' membership to a glider training group.

"He always talked about it kind of longingly, and I knew it was just the kind of thing he probably wouldn't get around to taking the initiative to do himself," says Vannice, 29, a doctoral student at Johns Hopkins School of Public Health in Baltimore. "We rarely pamper ourselves with nice or new experiences."

Still, as with any gift, givers of online daily deals have to proceed with caution.

They come with expiration dates, and if your brother keeps hectoring you about whether you've taken that hot air balloon ride, it can get awkward. Plus, you can always take a necktie back, but returning a day of zip-lining is tricky without a time machine.

And the deals are basically coupons, which can carry a stigma. LivingSocial offers what it calls virtual gift wrap - the recipient gets his or her deal in a fancy envelope, and without seeing what the giver paid. Groupon recipients only see a description of the offer, and sometimes the regular price of the experience.

Then there are other gift faux pas to consider.

Aaron Cooper, whose job title is chief of gifting at Groupon, said givers should make sure to tailor their gifts to the person so it's something they can use. Not, say, skydiving lessons for 86-year-old Aunt Bertha.

Maire Griffin, a LivingSocial spokeswoman, agrees: "You're not going to give anyone Botox. If you are, you're not going to be their friend anymore."

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