

Gift Cards

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NEED CASH, NOT SOCKS? SWAP SITES CAN HELP

When grandma's gift card misses the mark, sell it or trade it for something you want, V4



ONLINE



'Memories never go out of style'

Experience gift cards let recipients choose from a wide range of memorable adventures

TRACY HANES
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Christie Schellenberger took a deep breath, screwed up her courage and took "three steps to nowhere."

The 36-year-old mother of two screamed as she hurtled 300 metres downhill along a zip line at Chicopee Tube Park.

"It was totally exhilarating. I went down six times and, by the sixth time, I was enjoying the view and wasn't nearly as terrified," she says.

Zip-lining is something Schellenberger would never have considered trying until her boyfriend, her 13-year-old son and 10-year-old daughter gave her a Samba Days Adventure gift card, which let her choose from 110 exotic experiences in Ontario. The card came in a small box with a gift card and literature explaining each of the options.

"I like consumable gifts and I don't want something else to dust. The

kids and my boyfriend have known that for awhile," says Schellenberger. "I like to make memories, that's a big thing for me. I think they were looking for something creative I could make a memory with. This was perfect."

Although she also contemplated taking salsa lessons or having her golf swing analyzed, Schellenberger opted for zip-lining because it was close to her Kitchener home.

To activate the card, she went online and entered the serial number, then booked the adventure directly with the zip-line outfitters.

"Everyone was so surprised that this was the one I chose, because of my fear of heights. I'm not huge into risk-taking but it was something I wanted to try," she says. "It was so much fun. I want to try some of the other experiences."

"I've told my family, 'Now you know what to get me for Christmas.'

I won't be disappointed to see one of the little boxes under the tree."

Schellenberger is also planning to give an adventure gift card to some of the people on her list, and has inspired at least one co-worker to do the same for his family.

Experience-based gift cards offer choices for many personality types, from sports fans or adventure seekers to culture vultures, wine lovers and spa regulars.

Adventures can range from soft (boat cruises, horseback riding, snowshoeing) to adrenaline-pumping (skydiving, hang-gliding, stunt driving). Learning experiences run the gamut from circus school to salsa dancing to magic lessons.

Costs run from less than \$50 (a Segway tour for one in the Distillery District) to more than \$500 (a luxury hotel stay with meals).

ADVENTURE continued on V2

TOP CHOICE

Gifts of plastic grow in popularity

APRIL FONG
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Originally from Ottawa, Jessica Draker became a big fan of gift cards while working in Toronto the past four years.

The small plastic cards were an easier alternative to mail to friends and family back at home.

"Sending a physical gift wasn't always practical," says Draker, who works in communications. "It's not a replacement gift, but — especially for family and friends, if we're separated by distance — it's a matter of convenience."

Draker isn't alone. Over the past five years, gift cards have been gaining ground, says Rob Daniel, vice-president of loyalty and research at Maritz Research Canada.

"Last year, gift cards were the No. 1 item that people said was on their shopping list. Regardless of all the other things they looked at for the holiday shopping season, gift cards topped the list of a large proportion of Canadians," he says.

According to Maritz's annual holiday survey in 2010, 49 per cent of Canadians planned to purchase gift cards, up from 39 per cent the year before.

The most popular cards are from chain stores that offer a wide variety of products, such as clothing shops, electronics retailers and department stores.

"People tend to buy gift cards where the product choices are more generic, so people can buy what they want," says Frances Ho, co-founder of CardSwap.ca, a website that lets you buy or sell gift cards.

Food and beverage retailers are also high in demand, says Rezart Bajraktari, who founded the discount-card site, Giftah.com, with two other University of Waterloo students.

More recently, people have been opting for electronic download credits from online retailers.

Even though gift cards are often criticized as being impersonal, choosing the right retailer requires more thought than you might think, says Bajraktari.

That's what Draker, who recently moved back to Ottawa, tries to do with every card she selects for her friends and family.

For her teenage siblings, she gives Best Buy cards, so they can choose a DVD or video game. For her friends at her yoga classes, she gives vouchers for Lululemon.

"I thought it was nice because it was related to an activity we did together. And Lululemon's items are a bit pricier, so I can help them buy something that I know they would purchase anyway."

Bajraktari warns shoppers to be cautious with their selections in this troubled economy. For example, he points to the closure of Blockbuster stores.

"People can't do anything with those cards now," he says.

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