

Broke as a joke: Affordable gift ideas

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For Miami Quarterly

Run date: 12 Dec. 2009

It's the holidays again, and that means two things: The Jonas Brothers will make millions with Disney Channel-ified versions of classic holiday tunes (sorry Bing), and you will be expected to buy your loved ones the best present ever. No pressure.

The "best present ever" is not synonymous with "so expensive I'm going to declare bankruptcy," which is a common misconception. You can get that special someone the best present ever without reaching zero balance in your bank account and joining the ranks of America's finest hobos.

Greetings from Exotic T.J. Maxx

Stores like T.J. Maxx, Marshall's, and A.J. Wright are known for their designer clothes and home goods stocked at more-than-reasonable prices. With authentic goods from all over the world lining its shelves, T.J. Maxx is your key to an international gift basket, one holiday gift that never fails to please.

Things like candy, soap, candles, and cookbooks are nothing to write home about, but if they're from Italy or Brazil, they become a horse of a different color. Throw all those things into one spectacular gift basket, and that horse becomes a herd of holiday stallions.

An assortment of goods from T.J. Maxx's international selection can outrank even HGTV's craftiest, especially when assembled personally by the gift-giver. Store-bought gift baskets are uniform and usually made in Taiwan, so ...

The Gift That Lasts All Year

Walgreen's digital photo printing provides myriad services, from personalizing mugs with pictures of your pets to personalizing mouse pads with pictures of other people's pets. Since pictures of pets dressed up as pumpkins and watermelons can only canvas so much desk paraphernalia, Walgreen's also provides a calendar-printing service.

The calendar is like an expansion of the traditional photo collage: Select pictures, images, sayings that best represent each month and collage away. Walgreen's offers both twelve and eighteen month calendars, so get excited for a lot of creative collaging.

Walgreen's provides the service for under \$30, and will deliver you a bound calendar in ten business days. OR, you can make the collages yourself and print out your own calendar pages, using a much less professional mode of binding like staples or love (which isn't as effective as staples)

A calendar is nice because it lasts all year—that way, when the holidays roll back around and you forget to give the calendar-receiver a gift next year, all you have to say is, “Well, you’ve still got a couple weeks left on last year’s gift, so...I mean, you know. What did you get me, though?”

Night-in-a-Bowl

Sometimes the clubs in Uptown Oxford are too crowded, too far, too expensive, or just too familiar. Getting dolled up every Thursday-Saturday night can be a lot of work, and sometimes it’s nice to just chillax at home with some popcorn, candy, and a cheesy movie from your childhood. Why not give such a movie night as a present?

Wal-Mart’s \$5 movie selection offers classics like *The Sandlot* and *The Goonies*, so the movie night gift’s biggest component is roughly as expensive as dirt. Throw in some popcorn and big boxes of candy to create a movie theater ambience, put it all together in a popcorn bowl and you have officially created a Movie Night.

Nights in are just as fun as nights out, and this present proves it. If you have the budget, spice up the presentation with Easter basket grass, fake movie tickets, and any other goodies you might find at Michaels.

A Blockbuster Hit

College students use posters for two very important things: To decorate otherwise bland dorm room walls and as a shortcut to best-friendship. If you walk into a room and someone has a *Flight of the Conchords* poster, BAM: You guys are singing *Sugar Lumps* and planning a road trip to New Zealand.

So what better a conversation-starter poster than a movie poster featuring you? A personalized movie poster invented via Photoshop and printed via Kinko’s is one gift that just can’t be beat. What appears to be the traditional *Wedding Crashers* movie poster is hanging on that wall, but a second look reveals that Owen Wilson is actually a kid from your econ class and Vince Vaughn is the guy whose room you’re in.

Have fun remixing movie titles (*Big Lebowski* becomes the *Big Whatever-their-last-name-is*) and taglines (*Fight Club: Mostly mischief and mayhem, very little soap*) and photo-shopping the movies’ stars’ faces to create an original poster, tailor-made for the poster-receiver.

HELLLLOOOOO, Hollywood.

Coasting Along

a news flash: You're wrong. I wish I could say you're right and that no one cares about coasters, but cup-sized rings on wooden and glass coffee tables are a real problem in America.

Because said rings are causing such widespread panic, coasters are well-received gifts. They are even more well-received if they are homemade—not to mention even more inexpensive. Just buy some corkboard and cut out squares/circles/whatever shape you like, then proceed to decorate them.

Print out pictures, quotes, maybe even favorite all-time Texts From Last Night and glue those on to your cork shapes, cover with wax paper to make it waterproof and voila: awesome coasters. Just think how much better that cup of cocoa will be when it is sitting atop a coaster that reads, “(514): you really need to stop walk of shaming home from theme parties.”
(www.textsfromlastnight.com)

If you're too lazy to actually make coasters, head on over to shutterfly.com. This site provides a set of four coasters with pictures you submit. Then again, if you're too lazy to make something as easy as coasters, you're probably too lazy to get on the internet, too. So ... way to be.

Nothing Spreads Good Will like Goodwill

Goodwill is not a thrift store. It is an adventure store.

If the gift-receiver has a good sense of humor, head on over to Goodwill and pick up the most random objects you can get your hands on: salt and pepper shakers shaped like North Carolina and South Carolina, shot glasses sporting portraits of George Washington, an open box of latex gloves, etc.

If the gift-receiver has a good sense of adventure, head on over to Goodwill for a scavenger hunt. Who can find a pirate sword? A mail-carrier's hat? A pair of keds? A Notre Dame sweater? The list can include whatever you can dream up.

If the gift-receiver has a good sense of fashion, head on over to Goodwill with a guarantee to buy him or her X amount of dollars worth of the best clothes he or she can find there.

Like I said, it's an adventure store. Good times and happy holidays are sure to ensue as soon as you set foot inside Goodwill.

These ideas are just starting points. Don't limit yourself or your creativity—and definitely don't let your poor college student status limit your gift-giving either. You may find that the less money you spend, the more a gift is worth.

SIDEBAR: Miami student examples

Macy's, where she saw similar glasses and thought, "Hm, I could do that." After an inexpensive shopping spree at Wal-Mart including gems, fabric paint, and plain glasses, Winkler will decorate the glasses, making them personal and pizzazz-ified. "I always try to make presents like the glass when I can instead of buying them," Winkler explains. "They're not as generic—plus I'm cheap."

Senior biochemistry major Beau Meyer gives a whole new meaning to the phrase "greatest thing since sliced bread." Meyer will often cook a meal and count it as a gift. "A lot of my Christmas gifts end up being meals made for the important people in my life," says Meyer. He originally came up with the idea his freshman year. With no kitchen at his disposal, Meyer learned to appreciate the commodity of homemade meals. "I love to cook," Meyer says, explaining that giving sweet potatoes instead of socks never gets old. "It's a gift from the heart, and it ends up being a fun occasion for everyone."

Jenna Wright, Junior mass communications major, put her own twist on the traditional giving-your-boyfriend-a-happy-couple picture. "I took song lyrics from songs we both like and put them around the picture frame," Wright says. The black-and-white picture of the couple is framed by lyrics from Graham Colton's "Best Days," Jason Mraz and Colbie Caillat's "Lucky," Jack Johnson's "Better Together" and more. Wright feels that it means more when you take the time to make something as opposed to just buying a gift. Wright feels that making a gift as opposed to just buying something makes the present both more personal and meaningful.



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