

Gift registries: No imagination, thought or manners required

Jennifer Campbell, Citizen Special

It used to be that registries were for brides. A young woman, certainly with her mother and possibly her prospective mother-in-law in tow, went to a china shop to choose a silver pattern, place settings and crystal.

The bridal registry at the century-old McIntosh & Watts started some time in the 1950s but really got going a decade later, says Peter McIntosh, great-grandson of the co-founder of the Ottawa-based chain.

"It was the traditional idea behind the bridal registry," says McIntosh. "It was thought of as a time in your life when you could ask for items for entertaining throughout your marriage that you couldn't afford at that young age."

And it made a certain amount of sense. These things were expensive, and even for middle-class couples, it might take years to collect 12 place settings of bone china or sterling flatware.

In the '70s and '80s china shops and department stores -- The Bay, together with Home Outfitters boasts Canada's largest bridal registry -- began adding everyday dinnerware, stainless steel cutlery, and other household items to the wish lists. Proponents say this was a good thing; not only does the bride get what she really wants, but this larger selection offers her shower and wedding guests more choice in items and price range. Critics say it was the beginning of the slippery slope.

Somewhere, a threshold of good taste and gratitude has been crossed.

It may have been in 1993, when U.S. discount department store Target launched the first electronic gift registry. The new technology made registering that much easier. And Target's entry into the field also indicated that gift registries were no longer just for fancy stores or for weddings. These days you'd be hard-pressed to find a retailer who doesn't have one.

Outdoors stores like Mountain Equipment Co-op, discount retailers like Wal-Mart, and even hardware stores like Home Depot and Canadian Tire all have gift registries for any "special occasion."

Toys 'R' Us Canada has a registry for baby showers; in the U.S. there's a site for children's birthdays and other occasions. While we don't have a site dedicated to older kids here, Canadians are free to keep using the baby registry well after the babe-in-arms has started walking. And many do.

Sears invites all its customers to have a personal registry. Simply add all the things you could ever want to your list, taking the guesswork out of gift-giving for family and friends.

If you're not content with limiting yourself to the wares of a single store, check out TheThingsIWant.com, possibly the most bald-faced example of self-centered consumerism out there. With a simple click, you can add an item from any online store to your personalized list.

The founders began the company in 2001 because, they write on the website, "We recognized that teens making a wish list needed different things from a bride-to-be. And that a Christmas List was very different from a Baby Registry List. We knew (the buyers) all had one thing in common: a desire to add items from the many sites they wanted and not be restricted to a set of retailers."

The ubiquity of gift registries is rivaled only by the strange things people feel are acceptable to register for.

Joy Weaver, an etiquette guru from Dallas who has a regular advice segment on Good Morning Texas and has appeared on The View and The Early Show, has seen (and heard) it all. There was the woman who bought a new house and then sent invites far and wide to her housewarming party complete with her registry information. And then there are the betrothed who ask people to donate cash to travel agencies for their honeymoons. Weaver has seen couples register at car dealerships so guests can donate to their new wedding wheels. Some newlyweds, encouraged by their realtors, have even set up bank accounts so guests can contribute to the down payment on their first home.

Which brings up another troubling aspect of our consumer society -- the kinds of gifts people are expected to buy. Forty or 50 years ago, young married were lucky if a well-to-do great aunt or august grandmother ponied up a few sets of sterling flatware. No longer. And it's not just that we're now expected to spend at least \$100 on a wedding gift -- often more. It's that many betrothed couples don't trust the taste of their friends and family.

Ask the etiquette experts what they think of gift registries and you get a variety of answers.

Joy Weaver calls it "shameless begging. What the invitation should be is one to come and celebrate the baby arrival or, in the case of the wedding, the new life together. I think it's a spoiled generation that feels a sense of entitlement."

Lew Bayer, partner in the Winnipeg-based etiquette-training firm The Civility Group, understands that gift registries can be a form of courtesy to the would-be gift-giver. She also admits it would "seem a little bit rude to solicit gifts any time. If it's 'I graduated, are you going to give me a gift?' or 'I finished my wine-making seminar, where's my present?' it's like we're creating occasions where people are supposed to buy gifts.

"It used to be that you would buy a well-thought-out gift because you got to know the person and could come up with something thoughtful on your own. I think because we're a little out of touch with each other, the idea that I could just go to a registry and find out what Dad wants because I don't know him well enough to know what he wants is a bit of a sad state of affairs."

It's also true that registering for gifts can sometimes bring out the crass consumer in even the most reasonable person.

A friend was uncertain whether to register for her upcoming nuptials. She didn't expect people to buy her gifts and registering seemed to scream, "Not only do I expect a gift but I expect this gift." By the same token, she always uses registries when someone she knows gets married, and she appreciates them for their convenience.

So register she did. But then something happened. She became so enthralled with her gift list that she checked it online daily. At her shower, as she opened an electric can opener, she happily reported that she'd noticed it had dropped off the list earlier that week and she wondered who had bought it.

Her conversion to registry hound didn't offend me, but I could see her conservative aunt's ears curling across the room as her niece gleefully unwrapped gifts she already knew she was getting.

There's no denying that gift registries are helpful for those occasions when you're invited to something for someone you hardly know -- a co-worker, a distant relative, your manicurist. But then you have to wonder why, if you don't know them very well, you feel required to produce a gift.

"There's a point where children and adults are losing sight of the whole point of gift-giving," Bayer says. "It's not obligatory, it's optional. By nature, a registry is almost like saying it's mandatory. Sometimes convenience is the reason we do things these days. Gift-giving is supposed to be about making someone feel special and going out of your way, doing something more than what's expected or required."

For many people, the most thoughtful gifts they've ever received were not things for which they could have registered.

My best gift? The refurbishing of an old piano, complete with lessons. Close second: A book of photos of loved ones, carefully put together by a friend.

Then there's the surprise factor of receiving a gift. One colleague, from a large Italian family, received a waffle iron from the cousin of her new non-Italian husband. Not only was she charmed by this off-the-registry item, but she ended up loving waffles. She's still using the iron more than 10 years later.

The truth is, there's no real social reason to have a gift registry, outside, perhaps of the traditional wedding one.

It isn't a tool that we've needed -- it's a construct of the retail industry, something created by some incredibly savvy marketers.

"Registries are a big, big business," says Weaver, whose business is called Just Ask Joy.

Rebecca Black, a California school-teacher-turned-etiquette instructor, describes the trend as "a brilliant strategy" launched by several large U.S. retailers about three years ago.

"Some large stores advertised 'Register for all occasions' and people really bought it into it," Black says. "So many do it now. People thought it was proper because the stores were suggesting it. But these are the same stores that say 'Go ahead and list your registry information in your invitations.' They don't know anything about etiquette. They just know it's good for them."

Black says it has become acceptable to list registry information on wedding and baby shower invites because one of the major points of the shower is the gift. But it's still a big no-no for wedding invites. And, she says, you shouldn't be registering for any occasion outside those two anyway.

"I think we really do need to click it down a notch. For right now, it should just (be) weddings and baby shower. That's it."

Jennifer Campbell is an Ottawa writer.