

Valentine's Day Advice: Nine Gift Ideas for the Frugalista



 By Vicky Oliver

According to Wikipedia, Valentine's Day didn't become associated with romantic love until the High Middle Ages when the tradition of courtly love flourished. Ever since, the day has been fraught with symbolism tinged with traces of anxiety.

We all want our gifts to communicate the appropriate amount of love, but we're sometimes unsure how to accomplish that.

Questions abound. Should you buy him a sexy card or tickets to a basketball game? Should you present her with costly French perfume, and if so, what brand? What, if anything, will he "read into" that scented soap-on-a-rope? Will she take those teardrop earrings to mean more than you intend—or quite a bit less? And then, on the other end of the love spectrum, what if you simply can't afford to shower your loved one with the gifts that he or she deserves?

If you're watching your money (and these days, who isn't?), the good news is that we live in an era when the grand gesture can be more meaningful than a present costing hundreds of dollars. And with a little forethought, yours will convey just the right amount of love. Here are nine gift ideas for the frugalista with a heart of gold, but a wallet running on empty:

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1. Invent a signature drink for your sweetheart. Is he of Russian descent? Perhaps the drink should contain Russian vodka in his honor. Does she hail from Florida? Maybe the drink should be made with fresh-squeezed oranges instead. Are

you dating a redhead? Consider adding ginger as one of the prominent drink flavors. For added fun and hijinks, print up the recipe on cardstock so that your loved one can order the libation with ease at restaurants and bars. Be sure to put some personality into that recipe card.

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2. Get inventive with the I.O.U.s. These ingenious notes can save you a small fortune ... or even a large one. Instead of running around trying to find the perfect present for your paramour, take half of an afternoon to design a pretty I.O.U. certificate on your computer for "one free home-cooked meal." Then fill in his name, print out the document, wrap it with a ribbon (that came straight from another gift), and you're done. Cupid will attest, the quickest way to a man's heart is (still) through his stomach.

3. Name a star. It's a symbolic gesture that has little to do with science, but much to do with love and affection. Plus, it can add a real bright spot to your relationship. Call a star after a girlfriend, boyfriend, or even "just a friend" for under \$15. Every time that special person in your life stares up at the heavens, he or she will be sure to think of you fondly.

4. Shop your closet. "Love consists of desiring to give what is our own to another and feeling his delight as our own," Emanuel Swedenborg wrote. Passing on something that was yours to someone you cherish is not merely about the value of the item itself. Hopefully, the gesture will strike an emotion, and you'll have a chance to see your own joy reflected back in the recipient's face. Please note: Never relinquish something that you can't live without should the relationship combust.

5. The gift that shows what you *would* give if money were no object. Five years into your relationship is your dream of spending "April in Paris" together *still* just a dream? Show

her that you haven't forgotten with a destination charm. A company called latitude longitudeâ charms and jewelry will print out the exact coordinates of your fantasy location on a sterling silver stamped tag. You'll get all the credit for taking her there—at a fraction of the cost.

6. Say it with music. When love is in the air, why not pretend that you're an on-air personality and burn a CD of the tunes that remind you of your sweetheart? If you have been dating for over a year, the songs might harken back to the night you met. Or the CD might include the melody that played when you first kissed. Sweet dreams are made of this.

7. Something, anything, in her or his color. Some women look dashing in pink. Some guys look fetching in emerald green. When you know your lover's favorite color and then buy a present in the precise shade, it shows an extra degree of thought. These gifts needn't be costly. Scarves, hats, and gloves in every color of the rainbow can be purchased for under \$10 at your local street vendors. Even something as frivolous as a pink pen can bring a smile to the right face—hers.

8. A message in a bottle. Do you feel like Shakespeare in love, but just need a little help writing the poetry? For about \$100 less than a bottle of perfume you can give your love interest something permanent, creative, and emotionally stirring. An online company called Timeless Message will help you select a limited edition antique bottle and even craft a message for you if need be. What if you actually *are* the next Shakespeare or the second coming of Hallmark? Have no fear! It's easy to write your own sentiment (and not be dependent on the sentimentality of others).

9. Something a tiny bit Bohemian. I once ate chocolate spaghetti. It wasn't the finest meal I had ever sampled, but it was so over-the-top that I savored it anyway. (If you're giving chocolate pasta as a gift, be sure to find a recipe

that you actually *want* to try. There are several online.)

If you have just started dating, Valentine's Day is a built-in opportunity to move your relationship forward by mutually exploring a new level of intimacy. On the other hand, if you have been dating or married for a while, Valentine's Day presents the perfect chance to rekindle the romance and remember why you fell in love in the first place. No matter what you spend on your significant other this Valentine's Day, don't forget to say, "I love you."

Vicky Oliver is the award-winning author of The Millionaire's Handbook: How to Look and Act Like a Millionaire, Even If You're Not (Skyhorse Publishing, November 2011) plus four books on career development, including the bestselling 301 Smart Answers to Tough Interview Questions (Sourcebooks, 2005) and 301 Smart Answers to Tough Business Etiquette Questions (Skyhorse Publishing, 2010). She lives in New York City, where she helps people turn around their careers and their lives.