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## Watch what you buy: Love can sizzle —or fizzle



**Robanne Schulman**, a professional gift buyer, advises customers not to spend too much when a new relationship is involved.

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If you have a new significant other in your life, you probably need help picking a holiday gift that's just right.

For him, is a sweater too impersonal?

For her, is a diamond bracelet too much too soon?

How about lingerie?

"Lingerie could really backfire. You don't want her to think, 'He's only giving me this because he wants to sleep with me,'" said Leah Ingram, 35, a gift-giving expert in New Hope, Pa., who wrote the book "You Shouldn't Have! How to Give Gifts They'll Never Forget."

There is no formula for giving appropriate holidays gifts based on how long you've dated, she says. Her advice: Pick a hobby-related gift.

Most important, Ingram and other experts urge: be cautious. Gift giving has the potential to break people apart.

Just ask Chris Williams, 21, of Atlanta. Last Christmas, his girlfriend told him to surprise her, even though she knew he didn't have a job or much money.

On the big day, Williams didn't have a present. Not even a card. "You can just have my love," he told her.

She dumped him the next day.

"And I really liked her, too," he said.

Here are some tips to avoid Williams' fate:

- Do some investigating. Call her best friend and ask about her likes and dislikes.

- Be creative. Pretend you're him: "Would I want the 300 thread-count bed sheets or scalped tickets for the 2002 Final Four in Atlanta?"

- Keep count. B98.5 morning DJ Kelly Stevens, 41, and a woman he has been dating for four months put their gifts under his tree. There were 11 for him and three for her.

"Now I feel like I have to go out and match that somehow," Stevens said. He's appealed to his listeners and the best idea came from a woman who suggested gifts matching each sense: touch, taste, smell, hearing and sight.

- Think. Think about her dreams, her fears. If she hates bugs and mud, a backpack won't do.

- Listen to the hints. "Honey, I really like this dress" means "Honey, I better get this dress."

Ingram calls good listening skills gift-giving radar.

"This is about being in a relationship anyway; it's about listening to the person. It's about knowing their likes and dislikes," she says.

- Ask. Don't take, "Oh, anything will be OK" for an answer.

Talking about gifts "gives you a wonderful opportunity to get to know your partner even better," said Bob Patterson, a relationship counselor in Atlanta. "This communicates, 'I am relationship material.'"

- Hire someone to do it for you. Robanne Schulman, 29, of Plaid Monkey in Buckhead, is a professional gift buyer. She warns customers against trying too hard or spending too much in a new relationship.

"I think it's better to be conservative at first than to go overboard," Schulman said. "You can always do more later."

After all, Valentine's Day is just 56 days from now.