

With budgets tighter than ever, couples are requesting wedding gifts they actually need

By Meredith Blake

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If you never really wanted a gravy boat anyway, there might be a kernel of good to come from the bad economy. As incomes shrink, even the most demanding Bridezillas are opting out of traditional china and cookware registries and instead vying for gifts they really want.

One British couple recently received a check for IVF treatments as a joint wedding gift from 50 friends. "Brides are always looking for clever ways to cut costs. With a recession, they are getting even more creative, so registries have taken on a DIY aspect," explains Summer Krecke, executive editor at WeddingChannel.com. "For example, one of our brides set up a catering registry, so instead of money, people signed up for a meal to bring to the wedding itself."

While this trend is only heightened by an increasingly gloomy economy, it's also a result of changing social dynamics. According to Krecke, "the modern bride has been with her partner for a significant amount of time, maybe lived with him, too, so they've already got many of the items you'd traditionally register for."

And while brides aren't registering their groceries just yet, Krecke doesn't see an end soon to this frugal trend.

"I am not going to be shocked if something out of left field happens in the next few months, like couples registering for a car or gas bills," she predicts.

Here are six options for couples who have all the Egyptian cotton sheets they can handle.

HONEYMOON

An increasingly popular choice for frugal newlyweds is registering for a honeymoon through sites such as TravelersJoy.com, HoneyFund.com and Backroads.com. Given the wide range of possibilities, from Caribbean beaches to African safaris, Krecke recommends: "Get a sense of what you're looking for first, then talk to a travel agent to find out if the resort or destination offers a registry option. It always comes back to research."

EXPERIENCE

In the same vein as the honeymoon registry comes the aspirational registry, "for people who aren't into objects and are more about experiences," says Krecke. She recommends signing up at **Cloud9Living.com**, where couples can request anything from yoga classes to hot stone massages to riding shotgun in a NASCAR vehicle. While Dinner in the Sky - 22 guests strapped into leather seats at a dining table, suspended from a crane 18 stories up - starts at \$40,000, there are dozens of more affordable outings, including a \$60 sailing trip around New York Harbor. Another possibility is BottleNotes.com, a wine registry for aspiring sommeliers.

HOME

What's the point of having 12 dinner settings if you have nowhere to put them? With mortgages harder than ever to come by, a large down payment is critically important. Many major mortgage lenders, including SunTrust, offer bridal-registry accounts, savings accounts into which well-wishers can deposit cash to be used for a home down payment. Call your bank to see if it offers this sort of program, try an online mortgage registry like FeatherOurNest.com or call the Federal Housing Administration for more info at 1-800-CALL-FHA.

EDUCATION

Heavily indebted couples may want to consider EducationRegistry.com. The free service, launched in 2006, lets you register for cash gifts to help pay student loans and tuition costs. Says co-founder Jamie Hernandez, "When my husband and I got engaged, I was finishing my second master's degree, and we really wanted to be free of student-loan debt after we got married so that we could buy a house and start a family." They couldn't find any service that allowed them to register for what they really needed, so they set up the site on their own. If you're worried that registering for money, even money that's used for practical things, is tacky, Hernandez has some cogent advice: "We consider giving gifts you don't need both tacky and a waste of money."

COLD, HARD CASH

Even if you're not up to your eyeballs in student loans, cash always comes in handy. Still, it's a little awkward to ask Great-aunt Helen for a stack of Benjamins, so Krecke recommends a polite nudge. "You can say, 'For registry information, please visit www.gogift.com,'" where cash gifts can be made toward a prepaid MasterCard that can be used just about anywhere. Yet another cash-like option is registering for gift cards at your favorite store, rather than for specific items. "It's really overwhelming to decide what you want your house to look like in a matter of a few months. Brides want some flexibility," says Krecke.

CHARITY

"A big trend is looking for ways to give back, whether it's to a cause or to friends and family," says Krecke. Try the I Do Foundation (www.idofoundation.org). It works with major registry providers like Target and Amazon.com to donate up to 10% of guests' gift purchases to charities such as the American Red Cross and Doctors Without Borders. This is a win-win even for the most diva-esque Bridezilla, since "you still get what you want, but you're still giving back."

If you already have everything you need, registering for contributions to your favorite organization is another option, and especially helpful when so many charities are facing a struggle. "Major charities are catching up to this idea and coming up with ways to share on your wedding day," says Krecke. Oxfam and the Heifer Project both have gift registries available on their Web sites (OxfamAmericaUnwrapped.com and Heifer.org).