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Holiday tipping can be tricky gift giving

By [Christine Karavas](#)

In the season of giving, it can be enough of a challenge finding a gift for a friend or family member, but deciding how to show your appreciation to a service provider poses its own conundrum.

Many providers are associated with tipping year-round, including waiters, hairstylists, babysitters, valets, masseuses and cab drivers. During the holidays, it is also appropriate to show your appreciation to other service providers as well.

Dog walkers, personal trainers, cleaners, postmen, caregivers, doormen and gardeners are also candidates for holiday tips or gifts, according to Lisa Grotts, a former director of protocol for The City and founder of The AML Group Etiquette and Protocol Consultants in San Francisco.

Syndi Seid, founder of San Francisco-based Advanced Etiquette, said those who have provided continuous, ongoing services and business throughout the year are at the top of her list for holiday tipping.

“Holiday gifting and tipping is an act of kindness and a show of appreciation for whomever you want to share good cheer, kindness and gratefulness toward,” Seid said.

When determining holiday tips, there are a number of factors to consider, Grotts said. The quality and frequency of the service are important, as well as your relationship and history with the service provider. The giver’s budget as well as regional customs should also play a role; tips are generally higher in larger cities, according to Grotts.

San Francisco resident Joseph Underwood said in his former job as a waiter, he once received a \$100 tip for Christmas.

“I thought it was a mistake,” he said. “It’s a nice gesture, but it’s not expected.”

In many situations, a suggested holiday tip would be the amount paid for one week or one session of service, according to Grotts.

There are exceptions. Letter carriers can accept gifts worth up to \$20, but not cash, according to federal regulations.

If you're unsure about giving a tip, or if you have established a more personal relationship with someone, a gift is almost always appropriate, according to Seid.

"Turn it around to yourself," she said. "Yeah, we all need money. But if you were a waiter or a hairdresser, and you served the client for the whole year, and then at Christmas, they gave you another \$20 in an envelope, that's nice. But how would you feel if that client gave you a gift of something that was your favorite? That says something."

Keep in mind, however, that employees in some industries, including waiters and cab drivers, rely on tips as part of their income, Seid advised.

San Francisco resident Jose Aveves said he hesitates to give money sometimes at the holidays because it could offend a service provider that usually doesn't get tips.

"It's kind of a hard one because you don't know when it's appropriate and when it's not appropriate," Aveves said. "Money is a touchy subject. You don't want them to think you're saying 'Oh, here's some money. You need it.'"

Chris Bettencourt, a personal trainer at FitSF said his clients often give him wine or gift cards. They steer clear of sweets because they know him well enough to realize he's not a candy person.

Justin Ready of Adventures in Dog Walking said either gesture is welcome.

"It's nice when a client takes the time to pick a gift just for you, but cash tips are fine as well," Ready said.

Franklin of Wondersitters, a Bay Area childcare service, said that although tipping sitters is not obligatory, it is a gesture a client usually does in appreciation for a job well done — and that often includes an extra something during the holidays.

A hand-written note should accompany your holiday tip or gift, Grotts said. For teachers, day care providers, nannies and babysitters, she suggests a gift made by your child or including your child in on choosing what gift to give.

Sour economy makes tipping extra-sweet

A recession makes holiday tipping difficult, since in tough times almost everyone cuts back on discretionary spending.

"I have noticed in the last few years that some of the gratitude has dropped off because of the economy," said Jack Owen, hair stylist at Hair Space. "This year, I expect it to be less because some of my clients have been either let go or are working less."

But etiquette experts say you should try to avoid stingy tipping during the holidays.

“By giving a lesser amount, it will appear as though you were less satisfied with the services provided. It is never appropriate to give no tip at all,” said Syndi Seid, founder of San Francisco-based Advanced Etiquette.

A classier, more affordable way to show appreciation is in a handwritten note accompanying a lesser tip or small gift, Seid said.

City resident Water Fernandes said he doesn't like cutting back on tipping during the holidays, particularly when the economy's bad.

“People are buying presents for other people, and they have more needs during the holidays,” Fernandes said.

Business owners said the recession has had an impact on tipping.

“Last holiday season, tipping was OK,” said KandiChhi, owner of Sweet Inspiration Bakery. “This year, I don't know. I think there will be less tips because of the economy.”

Lisa Camha, owner of Lisa's Hair Design on Castro Street, said she's received holiday tips in the past, but she doesn't anticipate the same sort of tipping from her customers this year.

“People are not getting haircuts as much because of the economy,” she said. “They're my friends. Sometimes I don't need anything and I'll give them a cut because they got laid off.”

Justin Ready of Adventures in Dog Walking said he saw fewer and reduced tips last holiday season — and an increase of gifts such as bottles of wine.

“I saw a lot of regifting to me, instead of (giving) a tip,” he said.

Holiday tipping and gifting guidelines

Baby sitter: One night's pay and a small gift from your child

Barber: Cost of one haircut or a gift

Day care providers: \$25 to \$75 each, plus a small gift from your child

Dog walker: One week's pay or a gift

Personal trainer: Up to the cost of one session

Garage attendant: \$10 to \$30 each

Letter carriers: U.S. government regulations permit carrier to accept gifts worth up to \$20, but not cash

Housekeeper: Up to one week's pay or a gift

Massage therapist: Up to one session's fee or a gift

Package deliverer: A small gift if you receive deliveries regularly

Personal caregiver: Up to one week's salary or a small gift

Pet groomer: Up to one session's fee or a gift

Doorman: \$15 to \$80

Handyman: \$15 to \$40

Yard, garden worker: \$20 to \$50

Nanny: A gift from your family or one week's pay, plus a small gift from your child
Teacher: Give a gift that is a token of appreciation from your child, not cash
Beauty salon staff: The cost of one salon visit, split among staff