

SECRET SANTA... OR SECRET LOVER

Bryony Taylor looks at the perils and pitfalls of inter-office gifts.

It's Christmas, the time of cheesy pop songs from the Seventies and alluring bright lights in every shop window, selling you everything from chocolate snowmen to that essential party dress. It doesn't matter how hard you shut your eyes, there's no getting away from the festive season and its expense.

With so many people desperate to keep the Christmas expenditure down, the Secret Santa concept has proliferated, especially in the work place. It's hard enough coming up with gift ideas for your loved ones, so don't think you're expected to buy presents for all your colleagues as well. Rest assured they won't be buying them for you. Most companies, if celebratory gift buying is required, use a Secret Santa to limit the amount of presents each person has to buy and how much cash they have to spend. It sounds like a great idea, but just like any situation where work politics and your boss are involved, it can also be a little tricky.

When you're making your list, make sure that any gifts you intend on purchasing are generic ones. Trying to be individual or original is great if your colleague is your best friend, but it is likely that although you've spent a lot of time ensconced in a room with your Secret Santa, you won't know their specific personal tastes.

Buying gifts like perfume and clothing for your intended can be an extremely difficult road to navigate, and you need to consider the overall effect of any present you give.

Handing out deodorant to someone may be amusing, but viewed in the wrong light i.e. public humiliation, your joke present could be interpreted as bullying and the repercussions could be serious. The National Safety Council of Australia now conducts regular seminars on avoiding the pitfalls of the office Secret Santa. That nicely wrapped gift of deodorant to the post guy with a hygiene problem could break discrimination laws.

Most Secret Santa schemes set a limit to the cost of presents; often this is between £5-£10. Spend this wisely; too little thought or money spent on the present and people wonder why you know so little about the person you've sat next to for the last year; while too much could encourage gossip on your obviously suppressed infatuation for your colleague.

From this perspective, a Secret Santa could appear a case from the 'damned if you do, damned if you don't' house of philosophy. But it's really not that hard. Think of it as practice for the fake smile awaiting Granny's knitted jumper this year. To help we've put together a quick tips guide to help you through the present minefield. ■

DO's

* Gift Certificates

Recipient can buy themselves exactly what they want, however there is no way to hide your actual spend.

* CD or DVD

It's got to be something they'll actually like. To be successful you'll probably have needed to have had at least a couple of conversations over the year to help you gain that inside knowledge to their tastes. Blockbuster films and popular music are safer bets in general.

* Alcohol

Dodgy ground. Make sure your colleague is not a recovering alcoholic, or doesn't have a religious aversion to the amber nectar. A good bottle of wine often goes down very well and won't necessarily break the bank.

DON'Ts

* **Flowers**

Easily taken to suggest a burgeoning affection you might not have. Best to steer clear.

* **Clothes**

Only if you work in fashion. Otherwise, you're spending £5-£10 on clothes for someone. And while you're there, why not just get them a cardboard box, malnourished whippet and some fingerless gloves to complete the look?