

More are hoping Santa will bring them tickets instead of stuff

Travel and entertainment rose to the No. 2 spot, up from No. 6 last year, on an annual holiday spending survey of Twin Cities consumers. It was surpassed only by the perennial list topper: gift cards.

By Kavita Kumar (<http://www.startribune.com/kavita-kumar/258266031/>) Star Tribune

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Charlotte and Matt Hill sent out a mass text to family members asking them to take a different, less-things-oriented approach to Christmas gifts for their three young children this year.

Instead of toys, how about a family membership to the Minnesota Zoo? Or perhaps the grandparents could take the kids to a play?

“They already have so much stuff, and they don’t really play with a lot of it,” said Charlotte Hill, the Burnsville mother of a 5-, 4- and 1-year-old.

A growing number of consumers like the Hills whose closets are already stuffed with last year's barely used, must-have blender and piles of neglected sweaters are asking for and giving more experience-based holiday gifts such as tickets to a concert, sporting event or a play.

The trend has been especially pronounced among millennials who often place as much if not more importance on Instagram-worthy experiences — such as traveling to far-off locales or attending music festivals — as having the latest fashions. It's one of the many reasons why mall-based specialty retailers have been struggling and why categories such as board games, which facilitate socializing with friends, are in the midst of a big upswing.

Travel and entertainment rose to the No. 2 spot, up from No. 6 last year, on the University of St. Thomas' annual holiday spending survey of Twin Cities consumers. It was surpassed only by the perennial list topper on most such holiday surveys: gift cards.

“When you think about it, it’s a can’t-miss gift,” said Jonathan Seltzer, a marketing professor who helped conduct the study, of experiential gifts. “If you get a sweater — figuring out the right size and color — good luck. ... And do you really need that 13th sweater?”

As they've witnessed the trend unfolding, Twin Cities sports teams and arts organizations have been stepping up marketing efforts suggesting museum memberships as the perfect holiday gift and offering Black Friday sales for tickets to games and concerts.

December is the Walker Art Center's busiest month for membership sales because so many people give them as gifts, said Kerstin Beyer, director of the museum's annual fund. This year, the museum is on track to sell more gift memberships than last year.

In the past few years, the Walker has worked to capitalize on the shift toward experiential gifts. It has added a dedicated page on its website for gift memberships; given incentives such as \$20 gift card to the Walker shop for purchases of two memberships, and packaged the membership gifts up so they look more appealing under the tree.

“It is a cute red box with a bow that has a Walker Art Center snow globe in it with the ‘Spoonbridge and Cherry,’” Beyer said, “so you have something to open that’s not just a letter.”



(http://stmedia.startribune.com/images/ows_14823785488016)
Top gift items in the Twin Cities: STAR TRIBUNE

Shoppers who don't find inspiration in the Walker Art Center gift shop can pick a gift membership instead.

2. Travel and events (including plays and shows) (last year 6)
3. Cash (last year 2)
4. Clothing/accessories (last year 4)
5. Books (last year 3)

Source: University of St. Thomas annual holiday spending survey

And knowing that many time-crunched people will be rushing around this week in the mad dash to finish shopping before Christmas and Hanukkah, the Walker will leave gift boxes for people to pick up at the museum’s 24-hour security desk.

“They can pick them up in the middle of the night,” Beyer said. “We don’t advertise that, but we want to make sure people are happy.”

Tickets, please

The Minnesota Wild also has seen more interest, especially by millennials, in giving or receiving tickets as gifts — which is probably not surprising in the land of hockey, said Mitch Helgerson, the team’s vice president of sales and market intelligence.

The Wild’s promotion between Black Friday and Cyber Monday in which it waives Ticketmaster fees has been growing in popularity.

“We saw a nice uptick this year vs. the last couple of years in some of the single-ticket sales,” he said. “A lot of them are usually gift tickets. You can tell by the dates. Our holiday games are always the most popular, followed by January.”

The Minnesota Orchestra has seen a 43 percent increase in sales of holiday-related gift packages and promotions this year over last year. It’s hard to know if all of them are being bought as gifts or for personal use, but most are marketed with a holiday-giving message, said spokeswoman Gwen Pappas.

“Maybe a stronger economy is fueling more gift purchases in general?” she wrote in an e-mail. “We aren’t certain, but it is a happy trend.”

The Minnesota Opera’s holiday promotion for subscribers — two tickets for friends or family for \$100 — also has been growing in popularity, said spokesman Eric Broker.

While retail experts acknowledge a growing interest in services and experiences, they still expect a more robust holiday season for traditional goods amid lower unemployment and higher incomes. The National Retail Federation has forecast a 3.6 percent increase in holiday spending, which would be better than last year and doesn’t include travel and entertainment.

“We can’t underestimate the goods sector,” Jack Kleinhenz, the trade group’s chief economist, told reporters at the start of the holiday shopping season. “We have this tradition of gift giving. These gifts can be in the form of services, but still in my view the principal spending will still remain on goods.”

Retailers want a piece

Still, Beth Perro-Jarvis and Mary Van Note, who run Twin Cities-based consulting firm Ginger, hear concerns from some clients about what the move toward experiences will mean for them. But they note that retailers can still try to get in on the action — after all, people need to get outfits for their excursions.

“That’s why REI is doing gangbusters business for people buying stuff for that one camping or backpacking trip,” Van Note said. “And retailers are trying to make their shopping into an experience.”

Nordstrom, for example, has special shopping events for their loyalty members, replete with appetizers and champagne.

For her 17-year-old daughter, Van Note is planning to give a Visa gift card and a mother-daughter day at Mall of America during which she will treat her to lunch and a massage — a gift that blends physical shopping with an experiential gift. Perro-Jarvis’ son and his girlfriend have both asked for tickets to Bonnaroo, a big music festival held every summer in Tennessee.

“They both are trying to conspire to get the tickets from their families,” she said.

“They’re like, ‘We have a lot of stuff. We’d love to go to this once-in-a-lifetime thing.’”

Like her son, the main thing on her own holiday wish list is concert-related, only in her case it’s tickets to see Bruno Mars at Xcel Energy Center in August.

The duo are also seeing more families swapping out more traditional holiday gifts for a big family vacation.

“Several of my friends will say they’re going to give each other bare bones Christmas gifts, but we’re all going to go to Hawaii in the spring,” Van Note said.

Still, it can be hard to wean people off the idea that gifts need to be things. The Hills, the family in Burnsville, learned this firsthand when some of their parents were skeptical about their request. How would their children feel watching their cousins open toys while they would just get a piece of paper for an outing at a later date?

They didn’t want their children to feel left out, so they agreed to let family members include some more traditional gifts in the mix, too.

“It’s hard for grandparents when they want to give stuff,” Hill added.