



Time for that diamond ring?

Think outside the box

By Chandra Orr

When it comes to giving jewelry, it's all in the delivery.

We've all seen that classic movie moment: A fancy restaurant, the man holds a tiny jewelry box, the woman hears wedding bells, and inside the box — well, it's most definitely not an engagement ring.

It's a funny screen scenario, but it's certainly not amusing in person. So listen up men! To avoid any ambiguity when gifting jewels and gems, go incognito.

Switch the box, change the packaging, wrap the present in misleading paper — whatever it takes.

It also helps to choose the right piece for the right girl. Diamonds, in small doses, are always welcomed said jewelry designer Cynthia A. Sliwa, co-author of *Jewelry Savvy, What Every Jewelry Wearer Should Know*, (Jewels on Jewels Inc., \$20), penned with third-generation jeweler Caroline Stanley. If you're not ready to take the plunge into wedded bliss, look for something simple and unambiguous.

Diamond stud earrings and diamond pendants are always a hit, but don't overlook the impact of a stunning string of pearls, a pair of 14-carat gold hoop earrings or a hinged bangle.



"You can never go wrong with the classics," said jewelry expert and certified gemologist Susan Eisen, author of *Crazy About Jewelry: The Expert Guide to Buying, Selling and Caring for Your Jewelry* (Full Circle International Publishing, \$17).

Steer clear of larger or more expensive diamonds unless you've been dating awhile — and skip the rings

early in the relationship. They might give the wrong impression.

"Rings connote marriage, and this can really turn off someone who is not in that mode," Eisen said.

Even those in long-term relationships should be cautious when presenting rings as a gift — especially if an engagement is not in the future.

"If you are not giving an engagement ring and do not wish to be misleading, make sure your packaging sends the appropriate message — and don't give it to her on bended knee," Eisen said. Most jewelers offer alternative packaging that does not resemble a ring box. Unless you're giving an engagement ring, ask for one when making your purchase.

MAKE IT PERSONAL

The best gifts are those that have meaning — and jewelry is no different. "Buy something that signifies something, like a birthstone piece symbolizing the month you met or two hearts together symbolizing your relationship," Eisen said. "This will really score you big points, and it will become something she will cherish forever."

To make the piece more personal, consider engraving. The right expression can transform an ordinary piece of jewelry into an everlasting love letter.

"Engraving a sentimental phrase on a piece of jewelry makes all the difference in the world to the person receiving the gift," Eisen said.

Start shopping early to beat the Valentine's Day rush. Spend some time window shopping with your beloved, but keep it nonchalant. The goal is to get a feel for what appeals to her.

"Get a sense of the styles she prefers, or consider shopping with one of her friends to choose something she'll like," Sliwa said.

GO FOR QUALITY

"Jewelry shoppers should always consider the weight, quality and durability of the jewelry they are buying," Eisen said.

Fine-quality gold should be 14 to 18 carats and not thin or flimsy. Steer clear of 24-carat gold. While the purest, it is also quite soft and malleable. A general rule of thumb for gemstones is the richer the color and the clearer the stone, the higher the value. Stay away from stones that look washed out or too dark.

Ask if the store has a guarantee, check on their return policy and make sure the person you are buying from is a certified or graduate gemologist.

"It's important to know exactly what you're buying," Sliwa said. "Request a receipt that identifies exactly what you purchased. And ask about store policies for adjustments or returns."

Before making your purchase, be sure the jewelry fits or can be resized if needed.

"And, of course, be reasonably sure that the recipient will like it because you might not be able to return it," Sliwa said.

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