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Times are tough, but it's rude not to tip

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You haven't gotten a haircut since August. You leave the house too early to greet the trash collectors. And the only one who sees your dog walker on a regular basis is your dog.

Does that mean you can safely sidestep holiday tipping this season — especially since we're still in a down economy?

Absolutely not, says etiquette expert Lizzie Post of the Emily Post Institute, in Burlington, Vt.

But a tip doesn't have to mean cash.

"I really like to think of it as 'holiday thanking,' because then people don't get so caught up with the money," says Post, a great-great-granddaughter of 20th-century etiquette doyenne Emily Post. "This is the time of year to appreciate services you've had all year long."

If finances are tight this season, a gift of food with a simple note will do just fine, adds Post — and don't feel compelled to spill all the details of your employment status.

"I don't think you have to say you lost your job, but you can say this year was tougher than last: 'I know this isn't what you're used to receiving from me, but I want you to know this is no way a reflection of displeasure. The service was still excellent,'" suggests Post. "That way, people understand it's tough times right now, and that's all it is."

Honesty is always best, especially if you're newly unemployed, says Stephanie Miles, a contributing writer for Recessionwire, a Web site that offers economy-related news and advice.

"If you can't afford to give the tip you normally would, it's still worth saying thank you, writing a nice note, baking cookies or anything like that, and somehow showing your appreciation," says Miles.

And don't compare your holiday-tipping practices with those of your neighbors, advises Post.

"What one person is able to do, another person isn't," she says. "Don't judge the guy next door because he wasn't able to do what you were able to do."

In Westchester County, even those who are still employed are cutting back on hair appointments, facials and manicures — which may lead to a skipped holiday tip, says Mamaroneck etiquette consultant Melissa Leonard of EstablishYourselfNY.

"Instead of going every month, they're going every three or four months, so when the time comes, they think, 'Well, I didn't really go all year. I'm not going to make an appointment in December, so I'll skip the

holidays,' " says Leonard.

That's not something she advises. "People want to get in for their hair appointments, but when it comes to the end of the year, they become very Scrooge-like," she says.

Although Leonard is not in favor of drawing attention to a lower holiday tip, she agrees that a box of chocolates or a small gift with a note is perfectly acceptable if cash is tight. And service providers should be appreciative, no matter what they receive.

"A gift is not about how much the person is giving you, or what they're giving you," she says. "It's the thought that counts."

In fact, Americans may be doing a lot more thinking this holiday season.

Tipping was down last year, according to a survey conducted by the Consumer Reports National Research Center. And a recent Consumer Reports poll of 1,000 adults found that 26 percent planned to give less money or a smaller gift to service providers this year as well.

Cynthia Inman has already seen evidence of that trend.

As the owner of Ask Cindy Cleaning Services, based in Scarsdale, Inman oversees a crew of workers who make regular visits to houses, apartments and offices throughout the Lower Hudson Valley. "For the customers who leave envelopes for the ladies, we certainly have seen a downturn," says Inman. "We find that customers will then add fruit or a fruitcake, or something like that, which is always appreciated."

Although cash is preferable, says Leonard, recognizing a service provider with some sort of gift — even if it's a \$5 sweets basket from Target or T.J. Maxx — can make a nice statement.

Jenn Ranalli, who runs a Scarsdale pet-care business called Smoochie Poochies, says she likes it when clients thank her dog walkers for entrusting them with their "little furry loved ones."

"They're in your home every day. You may not see them come in and come out, because you're at work," she says. "But they're making sure your loved ones are cared for. So even (if) it's a plate of cookies, I'm sure they would appreciate it."

The most important thing, says Post, is letting your service provider know that he or she is doing good work.

"Let's say last year you were able to give a \$20 or \$50 tip to the garbage guy, and this year you're doing holiday cookies for everybody. That's OK," says Post. "But give the note that lets him know he's still doing a good job and you still appreciate the service."

What about the postal worker who was on a diet — and wrote an angry letter to Post after she suggested baked goods as an appropriate holiday gift for mail carriers?

"Quit looking a gift horse in the mouth, and start being grateful for things people do for you," says Post.

Holiday tips, she adds, are not an entitlement but a means of saying thank you.

"I hope people, this year, will be a little more grateful than in years past for anything they get," she says.

Additional Facts

Suggestions for holiday 'thank yous'

From the Emily Post Institute. For more information, go to EmilyPost.com.

Au pair or live-in nanny: One week's pay and a gift from the children

Regular baby sitter: One evening's pay and a gift from the kids

Day-care provider: A gift, or \$25 to \$70 per staffer, plus a small gift from the children

Personal caregiver: Between one week and one month's salary, or a gift

Nursing-home employees: A gift that can be shared by the staff

Home health employees: A thoughtful gift (if gift-giving is not against agency policy)

Housekeeper or cleaning help: Up to the amount of one week's pay, plus a small gift

Barber or hairstylist: Cost of one salon visit

Trash and recycling collectors: \$10 to \$30 per person

Gardeners: \$20 to \$50 each

Pet groomer: Up to the cost of one session or a gift

Dog walker: Up to one week's pay or a gift

Newspaper delivery person \$10 to \$30 or a small gift

Doorman: \$15 to \$80 (\$15 or more each for multiple doormen, or a gift)

Mail carrier: The U.S. Postal Service forbids cash tips; small gifts are acceptable

Teachers: A small gift or note, plus a note from the child
