

What Moms Really Want For Mother's Day

Raquel Laneri, 05.04.09, 6:00 PM ET , Forbes.com

Every Mother's Day, my two sisters and I travel home to Pittsburgh to spend the weekend with our mom and participate in the Race for the Cure. Every year, in the weeks leading up to our homecoming, we embark on a series of e-mail exchanges asking if all of it--the traveling, the race and the time together--is enough. This leads to another string of e-mails debating the merits of the right present: flowers vs. driving gloves vs. some practical kitchen appliance. She's our *mother*, yet we still somehow are never entirely sure what to get her--or how much we should spend.

As May 10 approaches, many sons and daughters are likely to grapple with the same questions, especially the "how much" part.

Americans will spend an average of \$123.89 a person on Mother's Day gifts this year, down more than 10% from last year's \$138.63, according to the National Retail Federation, an industry trade group. "Given the state of the economy, many consumers will trade down or simply spend less than they typically do," says NRF spokeswoman Kathy Grannis. The consensus is that mom can expect a somewhat less lavish celebration this year.

Ironically, that's one thing most mothers *don't* worry about. "Moms are typically the ones who understand the most when it comes to thoughtful, inexpensive gifts," says Grannis.

Take Michele Barata, founder and chief designer of her eponymous accessories company. "If you ask me what I want for Mother's Day, it's not a fancy car or new shoes--it's time," says the San Diego-based mother of two.

"I'd like to lay at the beach with my kids, read a magazine article, soak in the tub and paint my nails," she adds. "I'd like to really enjoy a vanilla latte. I mean, really sit and enjoy it, not suck it down as fast as I can because I have to get some place." (Good news: A vanilla latte and a bottle of nail polish will likely cost you less than \$20.)

Lesli Rotenberg, senior vice president of Children's Media at PBS in Vienna, Va., has a similar wish. "The best gift of all would be more time with my family," she says. "It may sound simple, but I'd love to spend Mother's Day planting flowers with my two daughters, followed by dinner made by my husband."

Indeed, many wish lists are surprisingly modest. Sandy Lish, co-founder of public-relations firm Castle Group in Boston, wants her husband to download and organize all the songs she wants on her iPod. Nancy Jeppson, development coordinator at the Worcester Art Museum in Massachusetts, longs for a massage. And Melissa Borst, senior vice president and general manager of PNC Merchant Services in Pittsburgh, is simply hoping for cards from her two kids and husband. "And a clean house for the day!" she adds.

Cathy Tollefson, an editor based in Pierce County, Wash., doesn't just want a clean house; the mother of two teenagers dreams of spending the day on her back porch, sipping mint juleps and directing her kids in the yard work--"a day of slave labor," as she puts it. She's not alone; whether having someone else organize old photographs into photo albums and scrapbooks (Lisa Vinton, Murietta, Calif.), fix up the screened porch (Anne Marie Carver, Washington, D.C.), or polish one of her artworks (stone sculptor Robin Antar, Brooklyn, N.Y.), mothers, generally, just want a day free of responsibility.

And they deserve it--especially in this economy. A survey conducted by Blackhawk Network, the largest provider of third-party prepaid cards, showed that women were more likely than men to cut back on their personal spending over the last year. Parents have particularly felt the pinch; 66% of parents tightened purse strings when it came to purchasing something for themselves, compared with 58% of respondents without children.

"Women are traditionally considered the major caregivers of the family. In an economic crisis, this carework is especially important as women are keeping families together," says Rosanna Hertz, professor of sociology and women's studies at Wellesley College and author of *Single by Chance, Mothers by Choice*. "Women have been silently sacrificing for their children so they can send them to college, send them to summer camp, so that their families can continue on with their lives," says Hertz, herself the mother of a teenage girl. "I think that's another reason for celebrating that anchor in the family life."