Not all teens love gift cards, so choose carefully

By BETH J. HARPAZ - Associated Press

NEW YORK Conventional wisdom holds that gift cards are the perfect present for picky teens. But not all teens agree.

Reasons include logistical hassles in using the cards, lack of interest in the store or brand, a preference for cash, or even a wish for something personal. Often the cards pile up unused, but some teens sell them for a portion of their face value or even create a black market and trade them for lunch money.

Allie Sakowicz, 16, of Park Ridge, Ill., says she has "a whole envelope of gift cards sitting on my desk." Her reasons for not using them are many: "You're not going to make a special trip to use a $20 gift card to get something you didn't need in the first place. And a lot of the gift cards are for dollar amounts that don't really buy you anything at the store - $20 is not going to buy you anything at Macy's."

Using them online is not always easy, either. "When you're online shopping, they don't always work or shipping is too high," she said. "And if you do use them, but not the full amount, then they're lying around because you have $2 on them."

Karen Hoxmeier, founder of a shopping bargain website called MyBargainBuddy.com, points out that "most older kids want big-ticket items, such as iPods and laptops, things a $20 gift card won't cover." She buys her teenager's unwanted cards at face value.

Pat McKenna, a mom in Kankakee, Ill., says her four daughters love gift cards, but a friend of the family, Annie Rockert, 18, does not. She has a half-dozen unused gift cards worth $300.

"I get afraid of it not working or not having as much money on it as I thought there was," Rockert said. "People get them because they don't know
what their kids want, but if it was me, I'd rather get something that I need, not a generic, 'Here, I don't know you well enough to get a gift, so here's a gift card.'"

McKenna said adults shopping for teens should simply ask: "Would you like a gift card, or would you like a surprise, or is there something that you need?"

Joann Perahia, a mom in suburban Long Island, N.Y., says kids at a local high school where they can't go out for lunch until senior year have come up with a clever way to use unwanted cards. They're allowed to have food delivered, "so when someone is ordering and let's say the entree is about $12, kids will give their $25 Starbucks gift cards to pay the person who is ordering and laying out the money," she said.

Russell Hyken, a St. Louis psychotherapist who works with teens and has a website called TeenParentingExpert.com, says adults may be reluctant to give kids money because "they think the kid will spend it on something inappropriate. Giving $50 to a kid who may be engaging in risk-taking behavior allows them to engage in that behavior."

On the other hand, he said, "I've had clients who get gas cards, who stand at the gas station and say, 'I've got a $25 gas card, can you give me $20 for it?'" He agreed with McKenna that "parents should have a conversation with kids to find out what they really want." He acknowledged that it's not always easy talking to teens - "the parents say to me, 'My kid doesn't want to talk to me'" - but a casual chat in the car or on the way to school might be a good opportunity. Adults can also add a personal dimension to a gift card by offering to take a kid to the store and make a day of it.

"Or instead of giving kids gift cards, say, 'I want to go to the mall with you,' and give the gift of time. Nothing bonds a family better than a little retail therapy," he added.

Some kids buy gift cards from others for a portion of the face value. A number of websites have formalized those transactions, buying gift cards for up to 90 or 92 percent of face value, then reselling them to the public for up to 30 or 40 percent off, depending on the site.
Rezart Bajraktari, 21, who founded Giftah.com with two other students at the University of Waterloo in Ontario, Canada, says "there's a generation gap when it comes to gift cards. A lot of students end up with gift cards for Christmas from aunts, uncles, grandparents for things they can't use, like gift cards for a bookstore, but not the store where they buy textbooks. Or they'll get a gas card "when a lot of students tend not to have a car. They need money for groceries or rent."

One 14-year-old sent in a $500 gift card someone had given him for Harley-Davidson. "He really liked motorcycles, but he needed money for the movies and video games," Bajraktari said.

Anton Tsai, 27, founder of another site, Cardpool.com, said he started the site partly because he had accumulated a lot of Barnes & Noble and Borders gift cards. Indeed, the site has many booksellers' cards available, but Starbucks cards "will be sold within five minutes," he said.

Tracy Tuten, a professor marketing at East Carolina University in Greenville, N.C., has studied teens and gift cards and says the relationship between them is complicated.

Most teens say they prefer gift cards to other types of gifts, because they like the freedom to pick what they want, she said. But she found teens were also astute about categorizing gift card-givers' motives, identifying several types, including the acknowledger, "who just needed to acknowledge that I exist and didn't want to invest any of their own time, so they gave me a Visa card they picked up in Walmart"; the provider, who seeks to buy a card for something the person needs, like college textbooks; the socializer, who "thinks I ought to be doing this, and forces it on you with the gift"; and the compensator, often a step-relative or far-away grandparent who feels guilty. On the plus side, there's the pleaser, "the person who really cares about me and wants to make me happy."

Tuten says her teenage children say they want gift cards, but she recently found an unused stack of them from a long-ago birthday.

Some parents turn those abandoned cards into gold. Honor Lassalle of Brooklyn, N.Y., says she collects her teenage boys' cards after they've forgotten about them, "and then I use them to buy their holiday presents."
Juniors Derrick Thompson, left, and Erin Pinnix fill a container with soil as they prepare it for planting pansies as they and other ECU students majoring in recreation and leisure studies work to assemble a "sensory garden" at the RHA Health Center Thursday, Dec. 2, 2010. The ECU students are installing the garden as part of a class project for the children at RHA which houses kids in need of 24 health care.
(Justin Falls/The Daily Reflector)

**Sensory garden provided for children**

By Kathryn Kennedy

The Daily Reflector

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Three wooden, weatherproofed boxes painted with colorful images were dropped off at RHA Howell's Tar River location recently as the sun dropped toward the horizon. Stuffed with potting soil and plants, they are something new for the developmentally and physically disabled kids residing at the facility.

RHA Howell provides a home and schooling for “medically fragile” children needing 24-hour care from birth to age 15. This is their first garden.

“We have a range of functionality (between children),” Crystal Garman, director of social work, said. “A sensory garden is something all the kids can enjoy. They can see, touch, smell, wheel up to it.”

Garman praised the efforts of project facilitator Kimberly Chadwick and the group who created the mobile garden as part of an East Carolina University health and human development class.

Kale is for texture, pansies for color and rosemary for smell. Seeds were left behind so employees or kids can grow their own plants once the winter ends, Chadwick said.

She and the ECU students shoved bulbs into the soil of one box so blooms will emerge with the spring. The plastic planting trays lift out of another for transporting indoors.
The heights were specific, too. Toddlers can reach into one planter; a second and third are at varied wheelchair heights.

The entire garden is mobile, Chadwick noted, which is good because the facility is seeking a grant to build a wheelchair-accessible playground where the planting started Thursday.

“I didn't just want to have an activity,” she said of their assignment. “I wanted to build them something they could have for years.”

Contact Kathryn Kennedy at k kennedy@reflector.com or (252) 329-9566
Today’s Columnist

No matter the political party, North Carolina's political leadership has made clear that it isn't particularly interested in keeping the state's historic commitment to low college tuition.

Some leaders might take issue with that statement. The facts don't lie.

During the previous recession, average tuition at the 16 University of North Carolina campuses rose by more than 20 percent in both 2001 and 2002. From 1999 through 2003, tuition rose by 71 percent.

Those increases prompted outgoing UNC system president Erskine Bowles to announce a new tuition policy in 2006 limiting average increases over a four-year period to no more than 6.5 percent.

An annual 6.5 percent increase, of course, would still mean university tuition rising well above the rate of inflation.

Bowles, caught in the cross-currents of demands by university administrators and declining state revenues, may have done his best to stave off higher increases. Still, the policy was being undermined even as he announced that he would be leaving the position of president.

Earlier this year, the UNC Board of Governors approved campus tuition hikes as high as $200 for the current school year. Then came a budget provision from state legislators that allowed another $750 increase to offset budget cuts.

At the state's flagship, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, tuition and fees rose $1,046, or 18.6 percent, in a single year. So much for tuition predictability for parents and students.

The Board of Governors also announced that, because four years had passed under this new tuition policy, it was time for a new four-year plan. Under the new plan, schools could go above the 6.5 percent tuition cap during “times of need.”

No doubt, a time of need is on the way.
Several schools have already announced that they will seek 6-plus tuition hike for the next school year. General Assembly-initiated tuition hikes could make a further mockery of a tuition cap.

Against this backdrop, North Carolina college students are racking up an average of $19,983 in student debt while in school, according to the Project on Student Debt. Nationally, the amount of debt taken on by students rose 24 percent between 2004 and 2008.

Steve Eisman, the hedge fund manager whose bets against mortgage-backed securities were chronicled in the Michael Lewis’ “The Big Short,” sees similarities between the mortgage industry earlier this decade and what's occurring in the financing of higher education.

Eisman is focused on the for-profit education industry, online schools and the like. “It's just like subprime, which grew at any cost and kept weakening its underwriting standards,” he said at a conference earlier this year.

For-profit, non-profit or public, the unsustainable trends are the same — a commodity's price rising far faster than inflation and more buyers taking on higher levels of debt to purchase it.

To reverse the trends, parents and students could turn to the courts. The state constitution calls for tuition to be free “to the extent practicable.” They aren't likely to get any relief anywhere else.

Scott Mooneyham writes about North Carolina government and politics for the Capitol Press Association.
Doctorate Degrees in U.S. Increase to Record Level

By THE INTERNATIONAL HERALD TRIBUNE

Research doctorate degrees were awarded to 49,562 students by American academic institutions in the 2008-9 academic year, the highest number ever reported, according to the National Science Foundation’s Survey of Earned Doctorates.

The figure represents a 1.6 percent increase over the 2007-8 year. The growth was due largely to increases in the number of degrees awarded in the fields of science and engineering. In 2009, 67.5 percent of all doctorates went to science and engineering students (a total of 33,470), a 1.9 percent rise over 2008. This increase, in turn, resulted from an upswing in the number of women earning science and engineering degrees. Of the total science and engineering doctoral recipients, 622 were women — representing a 4.8 percent increase over 2008 levels — while the number of men earning science and engineering doctorates declined very slightly.

However, a decline was observed in the number of doctorates earned by foreign students. In 2009, doctorates awarded to students holding temporary visas declined 3.3 percent in science and engineering, and 4.6 percent across other disciplines.

The National Science Foundation, an independent government organization founded in 1950 to promote science, has conducted its Survey of Earned Doctorates since the 1950s.

— REBECCA APPEL
At George Washington University, coed quarters becoming option for all

By Jenna Johnson and Daniel de Vise
Washington Post Staff Writers
Saturday, December 4, 2010; 12:00 AM

The long-eroding boundaries that once kept men and women apart on America's college campuses soon will disappear at George Washington University, which this week announced that students can share dorm rooms with anyone they want - regardless of gender.

The decision puts GWU at the forefront of the movement toward gender-neutral housing policies at many of the nation's top schools. But where most have limited coed rooms to some upper-class housing, GWU is opening the option to all students, including incoming freshmen.

The change marks a retreat in the parental authority college officials at many schools once routinely wielded over their undergraduates dating to the days when dorm mothers stopped opposite-gender guests at the front doors of residence halls.

But the policy also signals the rising clout of gay, lesbian and transgendered students, who successfully argued that assigning students by gender was inherently unfair when many of them might be more comfortable with a roommate of the opposite sex. University officials considered opening the gender-neutral option to only some students before deciding to lift the restriction for all.

"Ivy League schools have it. A lot of progressive schools have it. It was time for us to try it," said Michael R. Komo, a senior political science major who is president of the GWU student group Allied in Pride, which lobbied for the change. "I really think it's a win-win for everyone, even for the straight folks who just want to live with their friends."

The proposal, first aired last winter, prompted concerns from some conservative students who argued it could create additional housing costs,
especially if many couples became roommates, then later requested room transfers. Some also suggested that the new housing policy might erode morality and trouble some parents.

"This is the liberal administration at the university imposing something on students," said Travis Korson, a senior international affairs major and president of the campus chapter of Young America's Foundation. "None of these systems have been around for more than five years. There's no way to prove they will be successful."

But most students appeared to accept the looming change, scheduled to take effect next fall.

"I feel like gender is irrelevant," said Michelle Marshall, 19, a sophomore international affairs major from California. "I think a lot of people jump to 'Oh my God, people are going to have a relationship,' but that's not the way it is."

Katie McCutcheon, a freshman from Florida, said she and her roommates live across the hall from a group of male students. "We're already living on the same floors. I've fallen asleep in the guys' room. I guess they are making them 'official roommates' now," said McCutcheon.

"It's a nice option to have," she added, "but I don't know how many people will use it. I personally would want to live with my girlfriends."

The push for liberalizing housing policies at GWU began after a small group of male and female students moved in together at an on-campus town house they called Escaping Gender. When that proved successful, the students began lobbying to expand the concept across campus.

Last school year, the student government and some student organizations endorsed the idea. That prompted the university to appoint a committee, which recommended the change. The program will start as a pilot program, and school officials plan to reevaluate over the first three years.

All students will be able to sign up for the program as long as they already know their potential roommates. They then can be placed in nearly any of the school's more than 30 halls, mostly in Washington's Foggy Bottom
neighborhood. Students who ask for a randomly assigned roommate will continue to be matched with someone of the same sex.

"We have students saying, 'Can we be matched with someone who will be best for our academic pursuits?' " said Peter Konwerski, the GWU dean of students.

Konwerski said he expects questions from students and their parents about the program, but informal surveys have found that a majority of both groups were comfortable with the idea.

"If what they're doing is giving the students a choice, then I think it's fine. It's just another option," said Dawn Bathras of Severna Park, mother of a GWU freshman. "They're 18. We can't do much about it anyway, if they're away at school."

Mary Beth Cunningham, mother of a GWU junior from Springfield, N.J., said, "The students need to learn to make those decisions based on their own comfort levels."

Cunningham added that she wouldn't be surprised if daughter Erin chooses a male roommate next year: "She says girls are too much work."

Policies about men and women sleeping in the same room vary sharply across the Washington area. Howard University began to ease its policy on overnight guests only this semester, but many other schools dropped such restrictions long ago.

The University of Maryland at College Park has allowed male and female students to share rooms in two campus apartment buildings for the past two years. The University of Maryland Baltimore County does the same and has nine such apartments.

American University has offered coed rooms in apartment buildings since last school year and plans to expand the program. Goucher College in suburban Baltimore offers gender-neutral housing in two dorms, one of them coed by room.

Similar moves are under consideration at Towson University, Washington College and St. Mary's College of Maryland.
This semester, Georgetown University's student senate passed a resolution asking for a discussion about gender-neutral housing, although school officials have said they have no plans to change their policy.

The momentum behind coed roommates might recede as students discover that the reality of rooming with the opposite sex does not always match the vision, said Carl Crowe, director of residence life at Washington College in Chestertown, Md. "I think students like the idea of it," he said, "but after living it day in and day out, they begin to have concerns."

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