

The gift that keeps on giving

By all means give unwanted presents on Christmas Day, but take them back in the evening so that they can be delivered again in 364 days' time, advises **Richard Barr**



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One of the first articles I ever wrote for *Solicitors Journal* was entitled (by the editor) 'Confessions of a Christmas Killjoy' – with some justification. I referred to: 'Eating tasteless turkey, looking absurd in a paper hat, trying to find just one cracker joke that will even raise a smile, and coping with the assault on your digestive system from a surfeit of rich food.'

That was published more than a quarter of a century ago. Have I become more benign in the years between? I like to think so, but some would say not. I still behave like Scrooge, wincing as money pours out for the turkey, the oversized tree, the wrapping paper, the tinsel, and of course the gifts.

Since then, a whole new layer has been added to the celebration of Christmas, in the form of the internet and social media (terms that scarcely existed when that article was

written). Weeks before 25 December, our inboxes are filled with enticements to buy, buy, buy from internet companies offering to solve that perennial problem of what to give to the person who already has everything.

In the main, these products are just the same as the ones those who have everything already have, but simply with a different appearance: a mug in the guise of a cat, chocolates that could be mistaken for Brussels sprouts, or a witty sweatshirt that you would never want to be seen wearing in public because you are a shrinking violet.



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I vow not to succumb to the lure of these gifts, but each year I go online as panic sets in and fill my 'trolley' with things that I think will amuse or be in some way useful – a naughty banana light here, a giant car sticking plaster to cover up dents there, a name-a-star-gift box, a variety of insulting t-shirts, and inevitably fart-filtering underpants.

When the white van rolls up, and I dig the bubble-wrapped items out of the large cardboard box, I become worried that no one will be enthralled by what I have bought. In a panic I then try another company, order a doormat refusing entry to anyone not bearing a bottle of Prosecco, a stuffed blobfish, a glitter beard kit, a set of freak masks, and an inflatable Jesus, and pay a lot of money to have them delivered the day before Christmas by another white van.

Then, when the box arrives, I despair again because I know that while members of my lovely family will try to pretend that these things are just what they were dreaming of owning, when the last pickings from the turkey have been consumed, they will depart without my wonderful gifts – which will reappear in the following days, having been stuffed under sofas or beds or secreted in dark cupboards.

Yet all may not be lost, as I have a cunning plan that I have been trialling with my wife for the last few years. Yes, we do exchange a decent present or two, but to make up numbers and to pander to the pressure to give, we select from the past inappropriate gifts that have never made it out of the original wrapping. Then each Christmas we solemnly wrap them in Sainsbury's best Christmas paper and give them again. I hold the record. I have now given her the same cheap digital microscope for the past

five years, and for the past three, she has given me the same (as yet unworn) boring neck tie.

I urge cash-strapped fellow solicitors to do the same. Once you have a stock of unwanted gifts, by all means give them on Christmas Day, but take them back in the evening so that they can be delivered again in 364 days' time.

Alternatively, you could take a tip from social media. Facebook at this time of the year is full of wise sayings and pithy epithets. One that stands out says that what people really want from you is not your presents, but your presence. This is an excellent idea for next year, but one has to be careful: there are some people whose absence I would prefer at any price, presents or no presents. Perhaps I am not yet a reformed Christmas Killjoy. Besides, I never did find a recipient for the inflatable Jesus.

And now we face a new year with all the terrors that it may bring: another struggle to make ends meet, more regulations and laws from the government, less legal aid, costs capped at ridiculously low levels. And, as this article goes to press, the spectre of President Trump.

Just in case, let me get in early and wish you a very happy Christmas in around 330 days' time. Don't buy your presents too early – but if you want to give an inflatable Jesus, I am happy to part with mine at a knockdown price. **SJ**