

WSJ 11/18

For the Humble New Abode, The Less Humble Gift Registry

By KATHERINE MEYER

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL ONLINE

There's no place like home, especially if friends are willing to help furnish the place.

Housewarmings are the latest fad for gift registries, which, in part because of the Internet, have expanded beyond weddings to include baby showers and birthdays.

Virginia McGregor-Kupper, a 34-year-old police dispatcher, set up a housewarming-gift registry, including a wine rack and a four-piece cooker/steamer set, for her move to a ranch home in Adkins, Texas, from California this month. "I don't think gift registries should be limited for babies and weddings," she says.

The Magazine, a San Francisco specialty-furniture retailer, says it added "housewarming" as an option for its gift registries about six months ago, and saw about 30 to 35 such registries on its Web site in October. Meanwhile, findGift.com, a Web site operated by closely held Registry Online Inc. in Atlanta, says it's "definitely found an increased usage" of its registry for housewarmings this year.

Bricks-and-mortar retailers also are on to the practice. Bloomingdale's, owned by Federated Department Stores Inc., says it's noticed more shoppers use their gift registries for housewarmings. Bloomingdale's added "housewarming" as a registry option when it sensed interest from customers about a year and a half ago.

"We wanted to provide the opportunity for any of our guests to register for home products across the store," Bloomingdale's spokesman Stephen Berman says.

Linens 'N Things Inc., Crate & Barrel Inc. and Williams-Sonoma Inc., which operates the Williams-Sonoma and Pottery Barn stores, also let consumers select "housewarming" as the event for their registries. Linens 'N Things said housewarmings made up 17% of its online gift registries so far this year, up from 8% in 2002.

"It's an idea that is burgeoning," says Kathy Paddorz, director of marketing with household furnishings retailer Crate & Barrel.

Retailers say singles seem to set up housewarming registries more often than married folk, suggesting unmarried people—who haven't had the chance to reap household sundries from a wedding registry—are finding they want to enjoy the same sets of linens and tableware as their married friends. (Wedding registries alone generated about \$6 billion in sales last year, according to Condé Nast Bridal Infobank.)

"I have my own career and my own life, and I don't need to get married to own my own place," says Judy Chan, a 28-year-old financial analyst who held a

housewarming party for the Brooklyn apartment she purchased in the spring.

Part of the reason could be the booming housing market, as well as an increase in singles who purchase their own home—unmarried women made up 21% of home buyers in the first quarter of 2003, while single men were 11% of the market, according to the National Association of Realtors biannual survey. There are no quarterly data for previous years, but single women made up 15% of home buyers in 2001, while men made up 7%, according to the survey.

To be sure, registries have been branching off of weddings for some time. Online retailer Amazon.com Inc. has offered "wish lists" on its Web site for four years, and Toys "R" Us Inc. lets children run through the aisles scanning items they want. But many housewarming lists closely mirror items found on wedding registries, asking for items like linens, kitchen appliances and place settings.

Some manners experts find the practice a tad gauche. "It's tacky," says Naomi Paulson, director of the Etiquette School, a manners workshop in Dana Point, Calif. "You're just assuming that people are going to give you a gift, but that shouldn't be assumed."

Barry Corcoran was dubious when he received an invitation to a co-worker's housewarming last month that listed a registry with Bed Bath & Beyond Inc. "She obviously invited me so she could get a gift," said Mr. Corcoran, a New York special-education teacher.

However, some etiquette specialists say it is all right as long as it's done tactfully. "You just shouldn't tell people about [the registry] unless they specifically ask," says Jodi R.R. Smith, president of Mannersmith Consulting Inc. in Boston.

Size also counts. While wedding gifts can cost anywhere from \$100 to \$200, housewarming gifts should be more modest, according to Ms. Smith. "Maybe a plant or a bottle of wine is fine. We're not talking big-ticket items," she says.

So if asked, do the guests deliver? Ethan Minsker, a New York bartender and pioneer for housewarming registries (he held his when he bought an apartment three years ago), said he received almost all of the gifts he asked for, including an espresso machine and toaster. But Ms. Chan said most of her friends opted to buy gifts not on the registry, deeming the items she asked for, such as a spice rack and wine glasses, as "too boring."

Still, those who defend registries say they have contributed their fair share of gifts to friends' and relatives' registries over the years, and feel they deserve something in return. "It was a lot of work and a lot of money to buy an apartment," Mr. Minsker said. "I think it's only fair that your friends kick in a bit."