

Meeting of Minds

Cultivate connection, communication and trust with every client



THE GIFTS THAT KEEP ON GIVING

Client gifting is a ritual that can cultivate and reinforce a positive long-term relationship.

BOH

By Caroline Bourque



For this remodel in the heart of the nation's capital, **Ajia Monét** sought to create a space of peace and refuge for her high-achieving clientele—a law firm CEO and a newly appointed D.C. councilwoman. As an added touch, she gave them an onboarding gift and birthday presents.



So many materials, documents and checks change hands over the course of the design process—enough to make you worry that the sheer volume of transactions could cloud the designer-client relationship. One quick way to rise above the swirl of invoices and contracts, shipping delays and big decisions: a simple yet thoughtful present, no strings attached.

Designers who have implemented a gift-giving ritual find it a valuable tool for marketing, lead generation and client retention—and most importantly, for reinforcing the human connection at the heart of every design project. Here are five opportune moments when your presents will have the most impact.

1. ONBOARDING

The commencement of a project is both an exciting time and the beginning of a long and winding journey—a fact that some designers like to recognize with a kickoff present. Jessica Bandstra of Nashville-based Dogwood Proper opts for an elegant hand-poured candle. “It’s the acknowledgment of restarting our courtship,” she says. “We’re positioning ourselves as a boutique luxury firm, and it’s our little thank-you for signing on with us and starting our process. It’s our first introduction—a sweet little Southern hello.” Bandstra typically doesn’t spend more than \$50, and varies scents by season: a magnolia candle for summer, pumpkin spice for fall. She buys from local artisans, particularly the mother-and-daughter-run Nashville Chicks Candle Co.

A kickoff gift can also communicate to clients that although the designer has won their business, they won’t pull back on their promise to deliver excellence. Marin County, California-based Sheila Kramer likes to present her clients with a token of gratitude at their first meeting: “It’s something small that’s easy to bring along when you’re doing that initial concept where you’ve got all of the boards and materials—nothing too extreme,” she says. Kramer typically travels to nearby Sausalito to source the item, stopping at the Heath Ceramics warehouse to peruse an array of one-off colors and sample-sale items that often sell for less than \$50. In a time crunch, she recommends utilizing a corporate gifting company like the Bay Area’s Poppy Gifting or the Williams-Sonoma-owned Mark & Graham, where designers can select premade gift packages at different price points, or personalize items like monogrammed cheese boards or blankets, and have them sent directly to the client.

For Kramer, the gesture is ultimately more important than the item itself. “It’s setting the tone for respect in this process: ‘I respect the fact that you’ve instilled this trust and confidence in us, and I want to show gratitude to you for coming to us. There are



Charlene Miranda equipped this East Hampton new build with her trademark gift: an elephant, this time placed on the custom built-ins in the client’s media room.





For this project in San Jose, California, **Lesley Ray** gifted the client a vase to sit atop the custom wood window sill above the sink.



so many designers here in the Bay Area, and I think it's important to try to set yourself apart in some capacity," she explains.

Another upside: A thoughtful gift early on in the project is an excellent way to keep clients' minds at ease during her firm's six-to-eight-week concept and development stage, which is the longest lull between meetings during the whole design process. "We will obviously be in communication via email, but there's not a lot of face-to-face," she says. "That's why I like the candle: It lasts about that long, and it's like you're thinking of us every time you light it—and while you're getting those invoices, you still have a little something before we're presenting you with something really tangible."

Ajia Monét, principal of Ablige Interior Design Group in Atlanta and Washington, D.C., takes a similar approach, sending over

a selection of wine, cheeses and fruits with a handwritten message once a client submits their deposit. "I go into design development and it gets quiet," says the designer. "People are excited and anxious, so it's always [signed] with a little joke: 'Here's some wine to pass the time.'"

2. AFTER THE PRESENTATION

In the thick of the design process, it may seem like there's not much to celebrate yet. That's exactly why designers like Tulsa, Oklahoma-based Mel Bean decide to treat clients during this stage. After the team's furnishings presentation, clients are typically tasked with gathering their thoughts and making some big decisions. "I'll send a gift card for a local restaurant for them to take their inventories and use that as a time for them to mark up the samples and give

feedback," says Kath Bones Baney, director of operations at Mel Bean Interiors. "It's like a special little date night for them."

San Francisco designer Lesley Ray applies a similar idea to another mid-project moment: construction. "It's an important touch point," she says. "They are moving out of their homes, so they're stressed out and unsettled." Ray noticed that clients had mentioned they were eating out a lot, especially during kitchen renovations, so she began giving them Uber Eats and DoorDash gift cards. "I love giving gifts that are functional and also meaningful or specific for that person," she says. That small gesture to make dinnertime a bit less stressful in the middle of a renovation makes a big impression.

Then, there are the gifts that don't actually go to clients. At Bean's firm, a client's neighbors each receive a small gift during



The backsplash tile in this kitchen by **Regan Baker** was custom-designed and created by ceramicist Linda Fahey, owner of Yonder Shop in San Francisco, who also created marble trays for the designer's 2023 holiday client gift.



construction or installation—usually a box with a candle made by a local company along with a handwritten card. “The card is a quick little snapshot that shows them a sneak peek of our work,” she says. “It’s both, ‘Hey, we acknowledge we’re about to be doing a big project next door to you,’ and a marketing tool for us: ‘If you also need help, we’re here.’”

The firm has also started experimenting with contractor presents: a bag containing branded materials like a Yeti cup, measuring tape and construction pencils. “It’s good for our marketing, but also a sweet little gift to show our excitement about working with them,” says Baney.

3. AT THE BIG REVEAL

When a home is finally ready, a gift can be the cherry on top of the unveiling. For Brooklyn-based designer Charlene Miranda

of Miranda & Co., that cherry comes in the form of an elephant. Born in India and raised in Kuwait, she eventually made her way to Canada and then the U.S. to get degrees in architecture and design and launch her firm—but she still wants her background to come through in her work.

“In India, an elephant is symbolic of good fortune,” says Miranda. “A client’s house is so personal to them—it’s where they’re going to create all of those memories with their family. So we want to give them a small, simple token that speaks to my heritage and will also bring them luck.”

The beauty of choosing a personalized motif, Miranda says, is that it can come in many forms. For some clients, that may be an elephant print hung on the wall of a child’s bedroom; for others, it’s a small plush upholstered elephant tucked into a bookshelf. She

typically pairs the gift with something the clients can celebrate with in their new space, like a bottle of vintage wine or champagne. “It’s a parting gift from me to them,” says the designer. “It’s like, ‘Thank you for trusting me with your time, with your investment, with your vision.’”

San Francisco-based Regan Baker also puts a personal touch on her parting gift. After sampling wines from local vineyards, her team selects a favorite and then works with a local graphic designer to design and print a custom-branded label. “It’s an opportunity to have your brand in their house—something they can look at and go, ‘Oh, my gosh, I remember going through that amazing process with them, and I’d love to do it again,’” says Baker. “It’s a moment to remind people who you are and the journey that you went on together.”



When **Nicole White** wrapped up a modern renovation on this home in the Pinecrest suburb of Miami, she sent the clients a charcuterie box from her preferred vendor, The Charcuterie Chic.



4. CELEBRATIONS

Even outside of the regular project touch points, there are plenty of opportunities to deepen your relationship with clients through a few thoughtful, well-timed presents. The holidays are a big one—Baker found a way to stand out from the run-of-the-mill presents by teaming up with either artists her firm already works with or new ones they're interested in exploring. This year, she commissioned ceramist Linda Fahey (who has completed custom tile work for the company before) to create a customized tray for her clients.

Nicole White keeps up with her clients by sending gifts for birthdays, holidays and newborn babies. "I'm big on celebrating

everything—in life and with clients," says the South Florida-based designer. "Starting the project is always the easiest part—that's why I reserve gifts for the middle or the end." Her firm typically sends candles, charcuterie boxes or a client's favorite wine (according to info gathered from their questionnaire).

After a year when timelines didn't always stick, White tried something new as 2023 came to a close, sending gift boxes filled with wine or gin, flowers, macaroons to clients with a cheeky note that read, "Shit happens." Timed to arrive the day before Thanksgiving, the presents were meant to acknowledge the delays that had hampered projects throughout the year—and in one case, cheer up clients whose space wouldn't be finished

by the holiday as they had hoped. "No one celebrates a delay. It was so well received because it was just acknowledging that things aren't going as planned but we're still here for you," she explains. "I always try to explain to clients that we understand the pain. If you're frustrated, we know it, and this is our acknowledgment."

One client even sent her a note revealing that she had nearly reached her breaking point but the gift had assuaged her fears. "My team calls me the client whisperer. They're like, 'How did you know she needed that?'" says White. "I always have a sense of when they're getting to that point—I knew it instinctively, and I placed the order right before the holiday."



For this gut remodel of a client's primary bathroom, **Sheila Kramer** opted to create a daring, moody space, with details like custom-color Venetian plaster on the walls and a custom rift-sawn-oak vanity. The designer likes to bring a small gift to her initial client meeting as a token of appreciation for selecting her firm.



5. AFTER THE WALK-THROUGH

Once the big reveal happens, clients may want to hole up in their new homes—and yet the photo shoot may delay that dream just a bit longer. That's why Nashville designer Kate Figler gifts clients with accessories that were brought into the home to style the photos, like plants, candles or small decorative items. She has also given clients a set of monogrammed Weezie towels as a parting sign of gratitude.

"It's such a disruptive day for the client. We're typically asking them to not be home for the whole day for a day or two while we're scouting with a photographer and moving tons of stuff in and out of their house," says the designer. "It's a nice gesture

that day to be like, "Thank you for your time, thank you for the project, and thank you for letting us descend upon you today."

If the project doesn't include a photo shoot, Figler will give the client a coffee table book or another small item that references a personal interest they mentioned. To make the gift thoughtful, she says, the process of gathering clues to figure out what the client might like should begin long before the time comes to present it. Referencing onboarding questionnaires or simply noting client preferences throughout the project can help shed light on the perfect present when the time comes. "Go through your notes, or what the client has shared with you throughout the project," she advises. "You're looking for

something they've wished for or haven't gotten around to—those are the types of things I try to listen for."

Monét also aims to present her clients with something they mentioned needing during the final walk-throughs, or that they wanted but didn't have in their budget. Sometimes, it's as simple as wrapping up a candle or aromatherapy diffuser. Not only is the timing a great tool for client retention, but the designer hopes it provides the perfect signifier that their relationship doesn't end with the completion of the project.

"It shows them that we really care, that it wasn't just a transaction," says Monét. "We're proud of it, and you're proud of it, and we're all happy." ☺