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The Color of Money: My favorite financial things **Looking for holiday gifts? Here are a few financial ones**

By Michelle Singletary
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WASHINGTON - If imitation is the greatest form of flattery, then I want to be like Oprah Winfrey.

For several years now, Winfrey has thrilled audience members to the point of hysteria with her annual "Favorite Things" show, in which she talks about items that she loves and then gives away the exact gifts to people attending that particular taping.

I can't give away prizes like Oprah, but I can give you a list of my favorite financial things that would make great holiday gifts.

Here are a few of them:

- **A piggy bank.** This is still one of the best ways to teach children how to save and spend wisely. Every child should own a piggy bank. And I've found a few that I love.

The first is the Money Savvy Pig, a patented translucent bank created by Susan Beacham, a former private banker and co-founder of Money Savvy Generation. Beacham's company develops and sells products to help parents and educators teach kids basic personal-finance principles. Beacham is all about financial literacy for the young.

For example, the Money Savvy Pig, appropriate for children 3 and older, has four separate chambers inside the bank labeled save, spend, donate and invest. It also comes with a small pamphlet with tips on helping your child understand the importance of saving, spending wisely, investing and giving to charity.

In addition, the bank comes with a sheet of stickers to remind your child of his or her specific goal, such as saving for a bike. This piggy bank costs \$14.99 (\$1 more for pigs with glitter) plus shipping and handling. To order online go to www.moneysavvygeneration.com. Or call toll free 1-866-390-5959.

The Sharper Image also has a cool piggy bank that isn't a pig at all. It's a robot. The Talking Robot Bank is the 21st-century upgrade of the traditional piggy bank. It talks. It counts. It tells time. It also has an attitude - one that I love.

The robot says such things as "I'm hungry, please fill me up" and "Don't forget to insert coins today" and "Please remember to save today." It also recognizes every coin you drop in its slot and announces its value.

And my favorite: When you want to withdraw money, the robot says: "I hope you have a good reason for withdrawing your savings."

Brilliant - a bank with some common money sense, which is in short supply these days. The bank, which costs \$19.95, is recommended for children 8 and up. To order the bank online go to www.sharperimage.com.

- **Financial-planning organizer.** This holiday give someone the gift of order - for his or her financial affairs that is. I recommend the "Homefile Financial Planning Organizer Kit" by J. Michael Martin and Mary E. Martin (Homefile Publishing, \$24.95).

You may remember I selected this kit for the Color of Money Book Club in October. This 44-page handbook walks you through setting up and maintaining your financial files. The financial planning organizer kit is available by calling 800-695-3453 or online at www.homefile.net.

- **Financial books.** I know it's easy to fall back on buying someone the current best seller. But look past the fiction best sellers. Instead consider choosing a personal-finance book.

For example, my all-time favorite and the first one picked for the Color of Money Book Club is *The Richest Man in Babylon* by George S. Clason. This book is a classic and full of time-tested advice on saving and investing. Check out other book-club selections at www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/business/legacy/bookclubpage.htm.

- **A subscription to a personal-finance magazine.** This is a low-cost way of helping someone get financially straight. I know. It's not *People* magazine. But what's the point of reading about Paris Hilton's latest folly or the sexiest people alive? Those people aren't going to help your friend or relative pay their bills.

I like Money and Kiplinger's *Personal Finance*. And *Consumer Reports*, while not specifically a personal-finance magazine, is a great gift for folks who want to spend wisely.

- **ShareBuilder investor starter kit.** This is like a boxed lunch for investing. ShareBuilder (www.sharebuilder.com) is an online-brokerage company that has set up a low-cost system for people to invest in the stock market.

Individual transactions start at just \$4. Or you can choose from two subscription-based programs that offer multiple stock purchases at even lower costs for each transaction.

The starter kit sells for \$29.95, but its contents are worth more than \$100, including a \$25 certificate that can be used for a ShareBuilder account, a copy of *The Automatic Millionaire* by New York Times best-selling author David Bach and a one-year subscription to *Smart Money* magazine.

Finding the right gift is often tough.

But any one of my financial favorites will at least increase someone's financial knowledge or help him or her become money-wise.

- *Listen to Michelle Singletary discuss personal finance every Tuesday on NPR's new program Day to Day. To hear her reports online go to www.npr.org. Readers can*

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