

SundayStyles

Time to Render Unto Doormen

But how much to tip and whom? It's strictly don't ask, don't tell.

By WARREN ST. JOHN

BEFORE parceling out your holiday tips, you might consider the case of Dr. Michael Sachs.

Last year, Dr. Sachs, a Manhattan plastic surgeon with offices on Central Park South, was feeling particularly grateful towards both his nanny and his masseuse. Both had shown years of loyal service and he wanted to give them holiday tips with an Impact. The nanny, he said, had long intimated that she was unhappy with her nose, while his masseuse, who had recently turned 50, felt her age was getting the better of her looks. So instead of the usual Christmas gratuities of \$500 and \$200, respectively, Dr. Sachs surprised them: the nanny got a nose job, the masseuse a face lift and eye tuck, all on the house.

"I've always felt Christmas is a very special time," Dr. Sachs said. "And it never hurts to do more."

December is tipping season, that period when in countless awkward exchanges, people offer their annual gratuities to those they've come helplessly to rely on, and in so doing, silently declare their allegiance to either Santa or Scrooge. Emotions, to say nothing of souls, hang in the balance, and loyalties can be established or broken with the passing of an envelope. While nose jobs

not yet replaced cash as the preferred currency of appreciation, the example of Dr. Sachs drives home the basic conundrum of holiday tipping, one that for many turns, the simple act of holiday giving into a tense and socially perilous exercise: how do you measure up as a tipper when you suspect others are more generous?

"It's a big ball of anxiety," said Linda Wells, the editor of Allure magazine, who said she doles out holiday tips to between 30 and 35 fellow New Yorkers each year. "If you ask, 'What did you give the doorman?' they'll never tell you. It's the secret you can't ask."

Tipping, economists say, is particularly fraught because it is as much a social act as an economic one. Eric A. Greenleaf, an associate professor of marketing at the Stern School of Business at New York University, who studies consumer behavior, said tipping is different from other financial transactions. "Tipping not only sends a message to the person you're tipping," he said. "For many people it's sending a message to themselves about themselves and what they've achieved. Tipping is one of those things that affects a person's self-image."

Generally speaking, the more money one has, the more of those messages one must send during the

holidays. Terry Allen Kramer, the socialite, said she hands out Christmas tips to between 50 and 60 people each year, including domestic staff in Palm Beach, Southampton and Manhattan. She typically gives doormen between \$200 and \$500, she said, adding, "No matter when you think you've finished going through the list, you find you've forgotten someone - the butcher or something."

But the less wealthy are hardly exempt. Mail carriers, newspaper delivery men, sanitation workers, dog walkers and hair stylists often expect holiday tips, and some send or leave helpful holiday cards to make the point. The reminders can have the effect of making Christmas Day seem like a kind of appreciation deadline, with the threat that blowing it could affect relationships for the year to come.

Continued on Page 12

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Continued From Page 1

Michael Lynn, an associate professor of consumer behavior at Cornell University's School of Hotel Administration, who studies tipping, said holiday tipping is especially complicated because there are no standard rates. In restaurants, he said, the expectations are well known: a tip of 15 to 20 percent is normal; anything less suggests the service wasn't up to snuff, and anything more, that the tipper was especially pleased. But outside restaurants, there are too many variables for any simple prescription of how much to hand out.

Different city apartment buildings, for example, offer different levels of service. Some doormen or superintendents may be more helpful than others. A family with children that packs an entire playroom into their S.U.V. on Friday nights in the summer - and unpacks it on Sunday night, - demands more attention than a single tenant who slips in and out with a duffle bag."

Dampening the urge of many to give generous tips is the knowledge that once a certain level of tipping is established, it must be maintained for years to come. Tips are what economists call "sticky"; that is, once they reach a certain level, they are unlikely to go down.

"The norm is that you're going to tip at least as much as you did the previous year," said Mr. Greenleaf, the N.Y.U. economist. "A decrease is seen as a very, very negative sign."

Katherine Rothman, who owns a public relations firm in New York and distributes about \$2,000 in tips to 30 people including her dog walker, said she tries to find a compromise between escalation and hurt feelings. "It would be horrible to give less than you gave the year before," she said. On the other hand, she adds "You never want to set the bar so high."

A few Manhattan buildings, most of them exclusive co-ops, have endeavored to short-circuit the social anxiety of tipping their staffs by organizing holiday tipping pools, which are then distributed to the staff according to seniority. At 10 Gracie Square, a white-glove building on the Upper East Side, the average donation to the fund is around \$5000.

Dr. Frank Flynn, an economist who studies "favor exchange" at Columbia University Business School, is current conducting a study of holiday tipping habits in Manhattan apartment buildings. One possible explanation for tipping pools in wealthy buildings, he said, is that people who regularly must manage social anxieties - socialites, for example - would be quick to find solution for something as disruptive as holiday tipping.



BETTER THAN CASH Last year, Dr. Michael Sachs, center, gave his masseuse, Teresa Wiatrowska, left, and his nanny, Arline Capinpin, cosmetic surgery instead of tips.

Perhaps the most frustrating aspect of holiday tipping is not knowing exactly how one's tip went over, even months later, which can feel like taking a test and never getting the results back. There are, of course exceptions. Teresa Wiatrowska, Dr. Sachs's masseuse, who received the face lift last Christmas, was effusive in her praise for the doctor and said she wouldn't hesitate to favor him over other high-profile clients, most of whom give her a standard cash of a couple of hundred dollars.

"I don't want them to feel bad so I don't give them the details," she said. "But Dr. Sachs's will be the priority. Everybody is nice, but he is awesome."