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## Take holiday shopping to the next level

**BY DAN THANH DANG**  
**THE BALTIMORE SUN**  
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**FYI**

- [excitations.com](http://excitations.com)

Someone once said that life is not measured by how many breaths we take, but by the moments that take our breath away.

- [wallbounce.com](http://wallbounce.com)

Some people live their lives by that attitude -- how else to explain all those rock climbers, bungee jumpers and extreme sports enthusiasts out there? And then there are those who buy gifts that embody that attitude.

To understand, imagine the following two scenes:

Scenario A: Stock car fan opens gift box to find tickets to a NASCAR race.

Scenario B: Stock car fan opens gift box to find certificate to don a driving suit and helmet, whip 15 times around a speedway solo, then ride shotgun with a professional NASCAR driver for another heart-stopping five laps.

Now if you're shooting for this holiday season to be crowned Best Gift-Giver Ever, check out the new breed of Web-based businesses that have popped up in the U.S. recently offering Scenario B-type goodies. Two Virginia-based companies, [excitations.com](http://excitations.com) in Great Falls and [wallbounce.com](http://wallbounce.com) in Arlington, launched in the last month or so.

They're called experiential gift-giving companies and represent one of the biggest growth trends in the U.S. gift market, according to Pennsylvania-based consultant Unity Marketing Research.

"The trend is moving away from material things," says Kim AuBuchon, 45, chief operating officer of [excitations](http://excitations.com), which sells the NASCAR driving experience for \$325.

Big in Britain, other European countries and Africa, these businesses operate on the idea that it's not enough to present someone with a cashmere sweater. Why not go one better by giving the lifelong memory of getting that sweater while on a shopping excursion with a celebrity stylist who also will teach the recipient how to apply makeup, get a good haircut and choose clothes?

The experiential gift can be as simple as a trip to a spa or as elaborate as a big-city dining experience with a restaurant's superstar chef.

At [excitations](http://excitations.com), you can choose from experiences that run from as little as \$50 to thousands of dollars, such as the \$6,335 Captain for a Year gift, which allows the recipient a chance to chart his or her own course on a sailing yacht or powerboat for 12 months on the Chesapeake Bay.

While excitations focuses on experiences near Washington, D.C., rival wallbounce has its sights set on the person who already has everything he or she wants in life.

Its least expensive gift, priced at \$175, sends a stylist from the five-star Peninsula Hotel in New York City to the home or office of the recipient for hairstyling and makeup help before a big event. Its priciest gift is a \$15,000, one-week Chilean Whitewater Rafting Tour for six people.

Unlike excitations, wallbounce requires buyers to register for free memberships and offers experiences in regions beyond the East Coast. Shark Diving in Mexico for four, anyone? It's only \$12,000.

Neither company will say how many experiences they've sold since launching. Wilson says that since Nov. 1, wallbounce has signed up members in 17 states and Britain.

Joanne Levin, a 50-year-old Bethesda, Md., mother of two teens, is a fan.

Levin figures she can give boring gift cards or she can give like the true thrill-seeker that she is. She and her family have gone to Alaska to watch the bears feed on salmon, parasailed in the islands and helicoptered to glaciers.

For her son's 18th birthday, she bought him a \$200 Blue Circle Package to hang-glide off the side of a mountain.

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