

FACE TO FACE

For Heather Barbour gift giving is serious business

by Catherine Morrison

Heather Barbour supplies gifts for giving. Official gift giving is what corporations and public sector organizations do for a variety of purposes, including acknowledging a state visit, thanking a speaker, honouring a service or achievement, celebrating retirements and anniversaries and marking an institutional milestone. A gift can speak volumes about the organization that gives it; hence it is not something to be taken lightly.

Canadian themes are the heart and soul of Barbour's business, Ottawa-based Tributes Fine Gifts. She estimates that more than half of it is with public sector clients, including governments, colleges, universities and associations. Both public and private sector clients come for the Canadiana that is her specialty.

Barbour's gifts are ambassadors for Canadian art and craftsmanship. Tributes represents artists and artisans across Canada: wood carvers, glass blowers, painters, Innu carvers and Haida designers whose works are manufactured in pewter. David and Lee Bennett from Ste. Agathe des Montes, Quebec, carve in marble and soapstone; Ottawa's Richard Bond developed a unique technique for sand blasting an image onto stained glass. Hoselton Sculptures of Coburn, Ontario, creates polished aluminum sculptures from recycled aluminum that run, according to Barbour, from "the affordable to the unique."

It's because she can supply gifts from the affordable to the unique that organizations keep coming to Heather Barbour.

She relates the story of a client who wanted to mark the signing of a major corporate merger. Everyone on the negotiating team, from presidents, to lawyers, to accountants, was to receive a special tribute – a finely drawn pair of Canada geese, flying together and etched into a piece of antler – commissioned by Barbour from Len Masse of Willingdon, Alberta. Masse has adapted the art of scrimshaw – traditionally done with whalebone – to the medium of moose antler.

Polar bears, crafted in a variety of media, are a big part of the inventory, as are loons. A stack of identical black boxes sits in the packaging room of Tribute's quarters. Inside each rests a black and white carved loon, eyes glittering. Barbour ships dozens of them every year to the Government of Ontario, which gives them to departing members of the international consular

corps stationed in Toronto. According to Barbour, the consuls have come to expect the bird's arrival as they pack up for their return to all parts of the globe.

Inukshuks, the intentional piles of stones dotting the Canadian north as guideposts for travellers, are popular – represented as lapel pins or glass and soapstone carvings. Inukshuks seem to be a powerful symbol in corporate culture, particularly the communications industry, says Barbour. They evoke qualities of leadership, the inter-dependence of teamwork and the importance of communication.

A few simple questions about the occasion, the recipient and, of course, the budget can determine what a client wants, even if the client has no idea. But of course it's much more than knowing how much a client wants to spend. Barbour needs an understanding of the client organization, its corporate culture and the image it projects. Because so many of the gifts go abroad, to heads of state and royalty, as well as international speakers, conference delegates and business contacts, knowledge about any cultural taboos is essential. For example, she says, you would never give a clock to someone in China, "... the word for clock is too similar to the word for death."

There is also the delicate go-between role in translating a client's wishes into a work of visual art. Sometimes a client wants to express a somewhat abstract concept, such as the "innovation in governance" award Barbour commissioned on behalf of a client from one of the sculptors she works with. The challenge of expressing an idea in a piece of sculpture is the artist's. Barbour's role is to deliver the clients' wishes in concrete form, right down to the packaging.

Prior to buying Tributes in 1996, Barbour worked as a meeting planner. She is well versed in how the thematic aspect of meetings must be carried through the tiniest details, right from the hospitality gifts for delegates through to the design for an international award to be launched at the meeting. She considers herself a pro at working with committees, pooling ideas, feeding back suggestions that address a variety of agendas and tastes and achieving consensus on the final gift choice. All of her work is by referral; she has not done any marketing.

"You can do the wrong thing with a gift," says Barbour, recalling the time that she was given a salad bowl by an organization, no doubt with the best of intentions, but reflecting neither who she was, nor the identity of the organization giving it. "That salad bowl has been a joke for years around my house."

[Catherine Morrison](#) is a writer based in Chelsea, Quebec. She has been published in the *Ottawa Citizen* and the *Globe and Mail's* print and online editions, as well as in *Canadian Consumer*, *Asia Pacific Magazine*, the *Edmonton Journal* and *C.A.R.P. Magazine*. She was a full-time writer/broadcaster for CBC Network Television and CBC TV and Radio, Winnipeg, and a contributing editor and columnist for *Winnipeg Magazine*.