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Winning at the Game of Love

These diverse companies all have one thing in common: They've turned love into big business. Find out how you too can you cash in on the romantic holiday.

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Winning at the Game of Love

They say "love don't cost a thing," but according to these statistics, it most certainly does. Not only is Valentine's Day the number one holiday for florists, but it's also the single biggest sales day for chocolate in the United States. According to the California Cut Flower Commission, lovebirds are expected to buy 189 million stems of roses this February 14.

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To put it simply: Over the last few years, Valentine's Day has become big business. This year's projections from the *National Retail Federation's Valentine's Day Consumer Intentions and Actions Survey* show that about 63 percent of consumers are expected to celebrate the

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holiday. Last year, Valentine's Day spending brought in about \$13.7 billion, and this year, loving purchases are expected to increase to about \$16.9 billion.

How does this day of love compare to other holidays? Valentine's Day maintains its spot at number two in holiday spending, coming in behind the winter holidays, which hold the top spot at \$457.4 billion, but ahead of Mother's Day, which comes in at around \$13.8 billion, and Easter, bringing in about \$12.63 billion.


In the last five years, consumers have steadily increased their budget for love. In 2002, consumers planned on spending an average of \$95 on Valentine's Day gifts. This year, survey results show that the average consumer is expected to spend \$119.67. Who's more likely to shell out money for love this year? Consumers ages 25 to 34 plan on being the most generous this holiday, on average spending \$164.32, while consumers ages 45 to 54 will spend \$107.81.

So how are couples planning to show their love and affection this Heart Day? Of course cards, chocolates, flowers and jewelry will always top the list of Valentine's Day spending, but this year, several companies are putting a twist on those traditional treats.

For starters, lovers are no longer settling for just any chocolates. Artisanal chocolates are a new trend entrepreneurs across the country are profiting from. These delicious delights are often produced by an artisan from a unique blend of beans and flavors. Chocolate connoisseurs in New York are seeking out the intense flavor and freshness of Kee's Chocolates in SoHo. Kee Ling Tong formed the company in 2002 after leaving her job in the corporate world to pursue her dream of opening her own shop. Her signature chocolate? A crème-brûlée-filled creation with fresh custard takes top prize. On the West Coast, L'Artisan du Chocolat tempts taste buds in Los Angeles. Husband-and-wife team Christian Alexandre and Whanjun Park make traditional French chocolates with ingredients imported from France. Another husband-and-wife team prove that gourmet chocolate, love and business mix together perfectly in their business, Rose Hill Chocolate Company in Mukilteo, Washington.

But Valentine's Day isn't just about chocolates, it's also about romance. What says romance more than a gondola ride at sunset with the one you love? That's why Joseph and Camille Gibbons created Gondola Di Venezia along the Charles River in Boston. They started the business in 2001, and today, they say it's become an important part of their married and family life. To date, 128 marriage proposals have taken place on their gondolas--and every one ended in a "yes." The Gondola Getaway in Long Beach, California, has also seen its fair share of proposals. The company began as a marketing project in 1981 by University of Southern California student Mike O'Toole. In 1984, O'Toole took his project to the next level by traveling to Europe to learn the Venetian tradition by those who knew it best. He brought it back to Long Beach and has been wooing lovers--Venetian style--ever since.

Speaking of proposals, these days many brides and grooms are opting



for conflict-free diamonds when they decide to get hitched. One entrepreneurial company has jumped in to fulfill this growing trend. Brilliant Earth "Conflict-Free" Diamond Jewelry tripled its sales over October, November and December of last year. Co-founders Beth Gerstein and Eric Grossberg started the company in San Francisco after Eric proposed to Beth, but couldn't find a reliable source that could guarantee conflict-free diamonds.

Of course, Valentine's Day wouldn't be complete without flowers. Going along with the idea of conflict-free diamonds, this entrepreneurial company helps flower-givers be a bit more politically correct. Gerald Prolman, founder and CEO of OrganicBouquet.com, formed the company in 2001 with the goal of establishing the national market for organic flowers. Another floral company that breaks the mold of conventional flower arranging can be found in Southern California. The English Garden in Westlake Village says their arrangements give real meaning to the concept of floral art. They offer a creative assortment of Valentine's creations full of bold, colorful and distinctive designs. The flower shop was created by Susan Winston in 1996.

But for couples who choose to express their love with words instead of flowers, BellaMuse offers special Valentine's Day sets of stationery. BellaMuse was established in 2003 by artist and typographer Alicia Peck. Peck sells a unique set of six Valentine cards filled with unique ways to say "I love you" to every object of your affection. Peck promotes her unique creations at more than 30 stores across the United States and at a street stall in New York.

For couples wanting to make a lasting impact on their significant other, a new Valentine's Day trend allows them to creatively express themselves in print. Photographer Jim Kennedy of Jim Kennedy Photography in Huntington Beach, California, says that boudoir photo sessions are becoming more popular at his studio, especially at this time of year. Another photographer getting in on the trend is Laura Novak of Laura Novak Photography in Wilmington, Delaware. Novak offers a Valentine's Day special on boudoir sessions to bring in a little extra business and provide another service to her clients.

Some companies are thinking outside the box this Valentine's Day and dreaming up adventures that give couples the opportunity to get away and re-connect. A perfect example? Magic of Romance, Inc is the only licensed travel agent that focuses exclusively on creating romantic vacations for couples. Founded in 2005 by Amy Graybeal, Magic of Romance works with each couple to create an individualized experience that they'll never forget, from waltzing the night away at a Viennese Ball to celebrating Carnival in Venice.

But don't get fooled into thinking Valentine's Day is all about couples in love. Entrepreneurs are also tapping into the market of singles looking to find their Mr. or Ms. Right. Speed dating, a fast way of weeding out potential daters, has increased in popularity in our fast-paced society. Companies like Rapid Dating and 8minuteDating are cashing in on the trend. Rapid Dating, founded by Renee Piane in 2002, has grown from Arizona all the way to Philadelphia and several other spots in-between. 8minuteDating was founded by Tom Jaffee in 2001, and now has more

than 60,000 customers in both the United States and Canada.

No matter what your area of expertise, there is definitely money to be made in the Valentine's Day market. Do you have a passion for travel? Look into starting your own romantic travel business. Is creativity your thing? Make a few unique Valentine's Day card mock-ups and see how they sell. There's always a market for love, be it in February or any other time of the year for that matter. From marriage proposals to weddings to anniversaries, love is one trend that appears to be here to stay.

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