

Turn shopping stress into purposeful gift giving by cultivating ‘consumer wisdom’ during the holidays

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The most meaningful gifts reflect the recipient's values and identity – and the giver's, too.

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Every fall I anticipate the winter holidays with almost childlike joy. I look forward to familiar traditions with friends and family, eggnog in my coffee, and the sense that everyone is feeling a little lighter and more connected.

At the same time, I feel anxious and annoyed by the manufactured sense of urgency around gift giving: the endless searching and second-guessing shaped by advertisers, retailers and cultural expectations.

Don't get me wrong, I mostly love giving – and, yes, receiving – gifts during the holidays. But as a researcher who studies consumer psychology, I see how those same forces, amplified by constant buying opportunities and frictionless online payments, make us especially vulnerable and often unwise this time of year.

Buying behavior, including gift giving, doesn't just reflect needs and wants but also our values. Frequently, the values we talk about are more akin to aspirational ideals. Our actual values are revealed in the seemingly inconsequential choices we make day after day – including shopping.

The cumulative effects of our spending behaviors carry enormous implications for society, the environment and everyone's well-being – from the purchaser and recipient to people working throughout the supply chain. This makes consumer behavior an especially important place to apply the emerging social science research on wisdom. While wisdom is defined in different ways, it can be understood as seeing decisions through a broader, values-informed perspective and acting in ways that promote well-being.

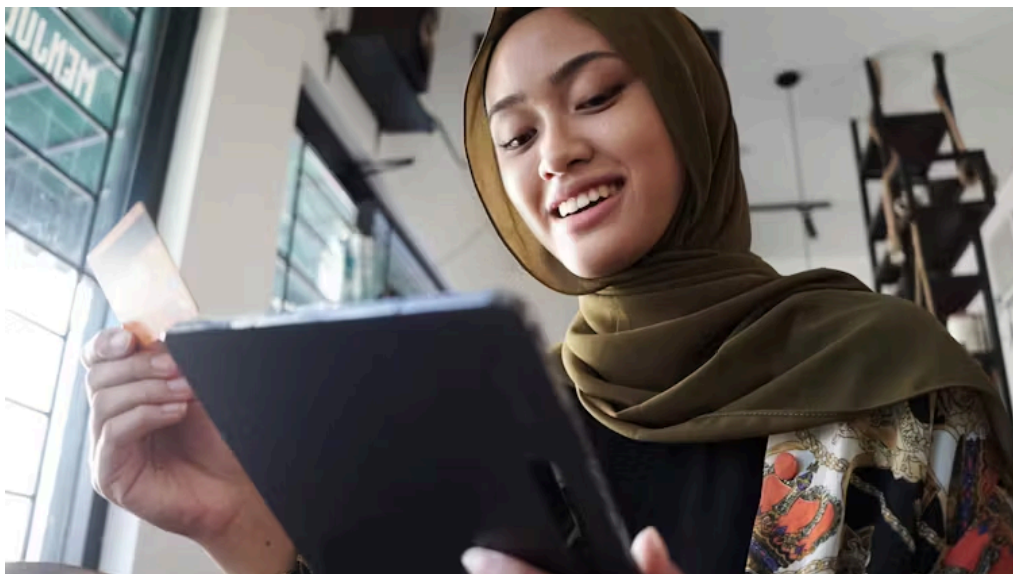
Over the past decade, consumer psychology researcher David Mick and I have studied what that means when it comes to consumption. “Consumer wisdom?” you may wonder. Isn't that an oxymoron?

But there are vast differences in how we consume – and as our research shows, this can lead to very different effects on individual well-being.

Defining consumer wisdom

Building on some of David's earlier work, I began my own research on consumer wisdom in the summer of 2015, interviewing dozens of people across the U.S. whom others in their communities had identified as models of wisdom. Previous research guided me to settings where I could easily find people who represented different aspects of wisdom: practicality on farms in upstate New York; environmental stewardship in Portland, Oregon; and community values in Tidewater, Virginia.

I didn't use the term “wisdom,” though. It can be intimidating, and people often define it narrowly. Instead, I spoke with people whose peers described them as exemplary decision-makers – people leading lives that considered both the present and the future, and who balanced their needs with others' needs.



Consumer wisdom helps support well-being – and not just the purchaser's.

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From those conversations, David and I developed a theory of consumer wisdom. With the help of a third co-author, Kelly Haws, we validated this framework through national surveys with thousands of participants, creating the consumer wisdom scale.

The scale shows how consumer wisdom is not some lofty ideal but a set of practical habits. Some are about managing money. Some are about goals and personal philosophy, and others are about broader impact.

We have found that six dimensions capture the vast majority of what we would call consumer wisdom:

1. Responsibility: managing resources to support a rewarding yet realistic lifestyle.
2. Purpose: prioritizing spending that supports personal growth, health and relationships.
3. Perspective: drawing on past experiences and anticipating future consequences.
4. Reasoning: seeking and applying reliable, relevant information; filtering out the noise of advertising and pop culture.
5. Flexibility: being open to alternatives such as borrowing, renting or buying used.
6. Sustainability: spending in ways that support the buyer's social or environmental goals and values.

These are not abstract traits. They are everyday ways of aligning your spending with your goals, resources and values.

Importantly, people with higher scores on the scale report greater life satisfaction, as well as better health, financial security and sense of meaning in life. These results hold even after accounting for known determinants of well-being, such as job satisfaction and supportive relationships. In other words, consumer wisdom makes a distinctive and underappreciated contribution to well-being.



One tenet of consumer wisdom is sustainability: Does your purchase support the world you want to live in?

Luis Alvarez/Digital Vision via Getty Images

Putting it in practice

These six dimensions offer a different lens on holiday norms – one that can reframe how to think about gifts.

Interestingly, the English word “gift” traces back to the Old Norse rune gyfu, which means generosity. It’s a reminder that true giving is not about checking boxes on referral, revenue-generating gift guides or yielding to slick promotions or fads. Generosity is about focusing on another person’s well-being and our relationship with them.

From the perspective of consumer wisdom, that means asking what will genuinely contribute to the recipient’s life. One of the most important dimensions of consumer wisdom is “purpose”: the idea that thoughtful spending can nurture personal growth, health, enjoyment and sense of connection. Out with trendy gadgets, fast fashion and clutter-creating décor or knickknacks – things that feel exciting in the moment but are quickly forgotten. In with quality headphones, a shared cooking class, a board game, and a workshop or tools to support a hobby – gifts that can spark growth, joy and deeper connection.

In my ongoing research, people have described wise gifts as those that define value from the recipient’s perspective – gifts that stay meaningful and useful over time. The wisest gifts, respondents say, also affirm the recipient’s identity, showing that the giver truly understands and values them.

Wiser consumption is learnable, measurable and consequential. By choosing gifts that reflect purpose and the original spirit of “gyfu” – true generosity – we can make the holidays less stressful. More importantly, we can make them more meaningful: strengthening relationships in ways that bring joy long after.

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