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Democracy Dies in Darkness

The science of giving gifts your loved ones won't want to return

Why people ignore wish lists, and other mysteries of holiday gift-giving.

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Trying to find an ideal gift for a friend or family member, or at least something that won't end up in the trash, is a perennial source of pre-holiday anxiety.

As it happens, behavioral science can help. After all, gift-giving combines economics and psychology (the exchange of goods plus the complicating desire to affirm or celebrate a personal relationship), and those two academic fields have grown ever more entwined in recent years. So before struggling to sort through the likes, dislikes, quirks and wishes of the people on your holiday lists, you may want to consider some recent findings about which gift-giving strategies work — and which don't.

First, should we give gifts at all? Some economists think gifts — unless they're cash — are a waste of money, pointing with horror at the "deadweight loss" that occurs when people give each other goods that don't mesh precisely with what consumers

But that mind-set misses the point of gift-giving — and it's just plain unromantic. The value of a gift extends beyond the price of the item and its raw usefulness to include sentimental value, and this second kind of value can be empirically measured. One study from researchers at the University of Florida and Carnegie Mellon University demonstrated that people valued comparably useful objects more highly when they were gifts, as opposed to when they were self-purchases. What's more, while the pleasure derived from *all* new acquisitions wanes over time, broadly speaking, the part of a gift's value that comes from sentimental attachment is largely immune to decline, the study found.

Unsurprisingly, some gifts are better at conveying sentiment than others. Backpacks, generally perceived as highly utilitarian, are less effective for this purpose than watches, no matter who gives them. And of course, the fact that people are sentimentally attached to gifts doesn't mean you can buy just anything and inspire joy.

This is where the preferences of recipients come into play. Yet gift-givers often give short shrift to those preferences.

One reason is that they focus too much on the reaction the gift will elicit when received — a somewhat self-serving perspective. When most people think of a successful gift, they picture the recipient beaming and exclaiming with delight; marketing professors from the National University of Singapore and the University of Chicago call this the "smile-seeking" motive, and it's rewarding for the giver. But it can lead you to buy something that scores higher on the initial "wow" factor than on long-term satisfaction. Fresh flowers or a big basket of sweets may get a big reaction, but a book, a cactus or an elegant serving bowl delivers happiness over months or years, and is therefore ultimately more satisfying.

Another common mistake is to use a gift to demonstrate how well you know a person. If you're aware of what someone wants — everyone in my family still makes a Christmas list, complete with hyperlinks — strongly consider heeding their wishes. According to marketing scholars at Emory University and the University of

wishes. According to marketing scholars at Emory University and the University of Texas, people who are personally close to a recipient are especially inclined to ignore wish lists, and to seek out something distinctive and "just right." But going rogue in that way leads to presents that recipients like less than gifts they asked for, the study found. (Ignoring wedding registries is another way this misguided tendency manifests itself.) Unlike close friends, more distant acquaintances tend to give requested items, which make receivers more happy.

In some areas of gift-giving, the research is in flux. For the past 15 years or so, the received wisdom in behavioral economics has been that buying experiences, or giving them as gifts, produces more happiness over the long run than purchased material things do. So instead of buying your sister a kitchen mixer, for instance, consider a gift of cooking lessons from a local chef.

Experiences are thought to trump material goods for several reasons, chiefly because people tend to use material things on their own, whereas experiences are often shared with others. And material goods are easily compared against rival goods, or against things friends and acquaintances own, which fosters discontentedness. Experiences are more idiosyncratic, effectively blocking such comparisons.

Yet other researchers have recently pushed back against the "buy experiences"

conventional wisdom. Two academic psychologists at the University of British Columbia found that objects received as gifts tend to produce modest and consistent happiness, whereas experiences given as gifts sparked brief, intense bursts of happiness. So sometimes it comes down to which kind of happiness you wish to convey.

And as you ponder gift choices, you may want to consider whether this holiday season is an extra-special one for your recipient — the first holiday as a married couple, the first with a new child, the first in a new city. At moments in life worth celebrating, material goods beat out experiences as gifts, according to researchers from Ohio State University and Washington University, because those objects can evoke memories and feelings of meaningful events for years to come.

We take a confused approach to gift-giving. We try to outsmart recipients with gifts they didn't even know they wanted, when their wish lists are staring us in the face. Or we reduce a complicated ritual of exchange to how big someone's smile is at the moment of unwrapping.

Roughly 1 in 3 gift recipients return at least one holiday present, and many more hang on to gifts they don't like. Knowing a bit about the psychology of gift giving

can increase the odds that yours don't end up in the back of a closet.

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