

Researchers find the worst reason to give a gift

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Here's a good way to make sure a friend hates a gift from you: Say it will save him money.

In a series of studies, researchers found that people reacted negatively to [gifts](#) that they were told—or that they inferred—were given to help them save [money](#).

Receiving this kind of present makes a person feel inferior to the gift-giver, the research found. People are more receptive to gifts that are intended to save them time.

"Most of us have this belief that any gift we give is going to be appreciated—but the way a gift is presented can influence how people feel about it," said Grant Donnelly, co-author of the study and assistant professor of marketing at The Ohio State University's Fisher College of Business.

The study was published recently in the *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research*.

While money-saving gifts often miss the mark, gifts intended to save people time are seen as a compliment, Donnelly said.

"When you don't have time, you're perceived as busy and in high demand. There's something high-status about that, compared to not having enough money, which is seen as low status," he said.

In one study, the researchers asked 405 people recruited online to recall recently receiving a gift that they thought was intended by the gift-giver to save them either time or money.

They were asked to write a few sentences about how they felt about the gift and then completed various measures assessing their impression of the gift and gift-giver.

Results showed that those who received the gift intended to save them money were more likely to say the gift made them feel embarrassed, ashamed and bad, compared to those who recalled the time-saving gift.

The reason? Those who received the money-saving gift reported that

they believed the gift-giver perceived their own status as higher than the recipient's.

"They thought the gift-giver was implying they couldn't take care of themselves and were incompetent because they needed money," Donnelly said.

The results held true in a real-world situation, too. The researchers provided 200 college students with a \$5 Starbucks [gift card](#) to give to a friend. Half of the gift cards included the message "I know you've been stressed for money lately. I hope you'll enjoy this gift card in hopes that it will save you some money."

The other half had a message that was identical except the message was that it would save them time, rather than money.

All gift cards had a survey for the gift recipients to return to the researchers.

Results were identical to the first study: Those who received gift cards intended to save them money had more negative emotions than those who received the cards intended to save them time. In addition, those who received the money-saving cards said they thought the gift-givers believed they were higher-status than themselves.

If there was any bright spot for the people who sent the money-saving gift card, it was that their friends were just as likely to redeem the card as those who received it as a time-saver, Donnelly said.

Another study showed that people who imagined getting a gift card intended to save them money were more likely to choose to buy a higher-status item with that card—presumably to boost their self-esteem that was damaged with the money-saving gift.

"In part because people feel they have lower status if they need money, they are more drawn to buy status-oriented products that can help them bolster this deficiency they perceive," Donnelly said.

But sending your friends gifts to save them money doesn't just make them feel bad about themselves. In one study, participants felt less appreciation for a money-saving gift than for a gift intending to save them time, or a gift with no communicated motive.

Donnelly said it is important for people to consider the message they send with their gifts.

"We can have this perspective gap where we don't really consider how our gifts are received. It can harm your relationship with the recipient if you're not careful," he said.

"It may be best to give a money-saving gift without acknowledging the reason, or to find a way to make it about saving time."

More information: Alice Lee-Yoon et al, Overcoming Resource Scarcity: Consumers' Response to Gifts Intending to Save Time and Money, *Journal of the Association for Consumer Research* (2020). [DOI: 10.1086/709887](https://doi.org/10.1086/709887)

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