

Research explains why some presents are great to give but not to receive

8 December 2016



Elanor Williams. Credit: Indiana University

Several years ago, Elanor Williams' parents gave her a large Himalayan salt block for Christmas, knowing how much she loved cooking and entertaining. Although she appreciated the gesture, she promptly returned it to the store and bought an "extremely boring" tea kettle that she uses every day.

While she loves her parents dearly, the Indiana University Kelley School of Business professor uses this example to highlight a common mistake many people will make this holiday season: thinking more about the moment they expect when giving a present than the many moments after, when their recipients keep and use the gift.

That difference in perception is one common mistake discussed in a new study published in the journal *Current Directions in Psychological Science*.

"The biggest mistake that people make is that they end up thinking about gift giving as a gift giver, instead of from the point of view of a recipient," said Williams, assistant professor of marketing and

a co-author of the study. "They often end up neglecting important things for the recipient, including their preferences.

"The recipient obviously matters, but it's a lot harder (for givers) to think about them than it is to think about yourself, and I think that's where a lot of mistakes come from," Williams added. "They get stuck in this role of being a giver and have a hard time getting out of it and thinking like the recipient does.

"A good gift is going to be a match between the giver and the relationship and the recipient."

She co-authored the paper with Jeff Galak, an associate professor of marketing, and Julian Givi, a doctoral candidate, both at the Tepper School of Business at Carnegie Mellon University.

According to the paper, "Why Certain Gifts Are Great to Give, But Not to Get: A Framework for Understanding Errors in Gift Giving," most of us mainly think about the moment of exchange—will the recipient be delighted, surprised or touched when they open the gift? In reality, recipients primarily focus on how they can use the gift once it's opened.

The paper, which is based on a survey of existing research, addresses an area that until relatively recently has been overlooked in marketing and psychology literature: causal factors in gift selection and gift reaction. It rebuts several commonly held and mismatched views and offers good advice to avoid gift-giving faux pas:

— While many people like fun, light-hearted gifts, givers underestimate how much recipients appreciate useful or practical gifts. Often, if a gift giver is not certain the recipient will enjoy a particular fun gift, the giver would be better off erring on the side of caution and getting a less exciting but more sure-to-be-used gift. Like a tea kettle, for instance.

— Gifts don't need to be tangible. Often recipients get more pleasure from experiential gifts, such as tickets to a sporting event, a nice dinner out or a massage. While the gift giver may shy away from giving something that can't immediately be used or appreciated, experiential gifts actually can be preferred by recipients, the paper said.

"Receiving an experience from somebody makes you feel a stronger emotional connection to them," Williams said. "If we can make that better known, then people will get over that hiccup and realize that it's OK to give the representation (of the gift in the form of tickets or a gift certificate), because the eventual experience will make them happier and also happier with you."

— On the other hand, research advises against giving socially responsible gifts, such as donations to a charity in the recipient's name, which provide little value to the recipient later, especially if one's relationship to the recipient is not that close.

— Gift cards have become popular among both givers and recipients. The paper suggests that while givers may try to tailor the gift by giving a card to a recipient's favorite store, it may be preferable to give a more versatile Visa gift card that can be used anywhere and potentially fill a wider variety of the recipient's wants and needs.

— It's often best to stick to gift registries and other pre-constructed lists, rather than give something that hasn't been suggested to elicit a surprise.

— Thoughtfulness and price are not good predictors of how much a recipient will use or enjoy a gift after it is opened. The paper highlights the value of choosing a practical gift over something that givers expect will dazzle the recipient.

"We exchange gifts with people we care about, in part, in an effort to make them happy and strengthen our relationships with them," Galak said. "By considering how valuable gifts might be over the course of the recipient's ownership of them, rather than how much of a smile it might put on recipients' faces when they are opened, we can meet these goals and provide useful, well-received gifts."

In addition to being helpful to consumers, Williams said her research has applications in how retailers can maximize happiness among consumers, whether they give or receive, and could cut down on the number of returned gifts beginning Dec. 26.

This may include finding ways for people to feel comfortable in giving useful [gifts](#), by marketing a practical gift with a fun accessory. Stores might present their blenders next to the margarita mix, for example. The accessory can add the "wow" factor.

"You can give a useful thing but also a little bit of fun," Williams said. "This might make givers a little happier to give the useful thing because they won't feel like they're making that mistake of a boring gift."

More information: J. Galak et al. Why Certain Gifts Are Great to Give but Not to Get: A Framework for Understanding Errors in Gift Giving, *Current Directions in Psychological Science* (2016). [DOI: 10.1177/0963721416656937](https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721416656937)

Provided by Indiana University

APA citation: Research explains why some presents are great to give but not to receive (2016, December 8) retrieved 31 October 2020 from <https://phys.org/news/2016-12-great.html>

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