

The danger of great gift expectations

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In the coming months, the pressure to find gifts for loved ones, co-workers and other acquaintances will mount for many people as the holidays approach, and these purchases can add up quickly. Last year, U.S. adults projected that they would spend an average of \$885 on gifts, according to a Gallup survey.

While finding the perfect gift for someone is a worthy endeavor,

researchers recently discovered an often-overlooked factor that can influence whether a recipient will be pleased with a present: how the gift is wrapped. The study abstract is available online in the *Journal of Consumer Psychology*.

The investigators were interested in exploring the validity of the common assumption that recipients prefer gifts that are neatly wrapped. They hypothesized that the opposite may in fact be true. "When we receive a gift from a friend, we use the wrapping as a cue about the gift inside and form expectations," says Jessica Rixom, an assistant professor of marketing at the University of Nevada, Reno. "If it's wrapped neatly, we set high expectations, and it's hard for the gift to live up to those expectations."

Rixom and her colleagues tested this hypothesis by asking study participants to unwrap a gift that was either neatly or sloppily wrapped. Inside, they found either an official Miami Heat or Orlando Magic mug. For this study, the researchers selected participants who were specifically Miami Heat fans but not Orlando Magic fans, so the Heat mug would be the preferred gift. After unwrapping it, the participants rated how much they liked the gift by answering five questions. The results showed that recipients had more favorable attitudes toward the sloppily-wrapped gifts—regardless of whether the mug represented their preferred basketball team.

To test whether expectations were in fact influencing recipients' attitudes toward a gift, the researchers conducted another experiment in which participants saw images of either a neatly or sloppily wrapped gift. They indicated their expectations for the gift and then saw what was inside: a pair of JVC earbuds. Then they rated whether the gift matched their expectations. The results showed that the expectations were significantly higher for the neatly wrapped gifts than the poorly wrapped gifts, but the attitudes toward the gifts after opening them were lower for the neatly

wrapped gifts.

Although gifts wrapped with imperfect paper creases and lopsided bows may be beneficial for gifts exchanged between friends, the researchers discovered that this was not the case between acquaintances. A third experiment showed that when relationships are less established—acquaintances rather than friends—the gift recipients use the neatness of the wrapping paper as a cue to sense the gift giver's value of the relationship. Gifts that are nicely wrapped suggest that the gift giver views the relationship as important, and this positivity increases the chances that the recipient will like the gift.

These findings could be useful when gift givers are deciding how much time to invest in wrapping a present or whether to pay for wrapping services at a store or mall. "If someone is questioning whether a gift is desirable for a friend and they try to make it more appealing by wrapping it well, this strategy may backfire in the end," says Rixom. "On the other hand, it may be wise to go the extra mile with wrapping when giving a [gift](#) to an acquaintance."

More information: Jessica M. Rixom et al, Presentation Matters: The Effect of Wrapping Neatness on Gift Attitudes, *Journal of Consumer Psychology* (2019). [DOI: 10.1002/jcpy.1140](https://doi.org/10.1002/jcpy.1140)

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