

Consumers overpredict the use of holiday gifts

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Before you add that fancy "it" gadget to your holiday wish list, you should know you're not going to use it as much as you think you will. For a better estimate of the use you'll get out of your new toy, ask a stranger.

That's the suggestion of Jeffrey Vietri, instructor of psychology at Albright College in Reading, Pa. and author of a new study, "Actor-Observer Differences in Frequency-of-Use [Estimates](#): Sometimes Strangers Know Us Better Than Ourselves," published in the journal [Social Influence](#) this fall.

"People make optimistic predictions about themselves," he says. "They expect relationships to last longer, tasks to take less time and things to turn out generally better than they will." And when they ask for a waffle-maker for Christmas, they think, "I'll use this all the time!"

"But sometimes the reality of owning an object doesn't quite measure up to our expectations," says Vietri. "The cappuccino machine is a hassle to clean, the fancy navigation system is not necessary for most driving, and no one has time to play the new piano."

In the study, 164 participants made predictions between [Thanksgiving](#) and mid-December on how often they would use an item they hoped to receive as a gift during the upcoming [holiday season](#). They answered a few questions about the item: first, if it was a replacement for something they already owned and, if so, how often they use the current item; and second, how often they expected to use the new item between the

holidays and March. Both responses were made on a scale measuring from 1 (less than once a year) to 24 (three or more times per day). They also provided short explanation on why they thought they would use the gift as much, or as little, as expected.

Study participants were given follow-up questionnaires in the spring and reported on how frequently they had used the gift since receiving it on the same 24-point scale.

The gifts - no matter how longed for - were not used as often as predicted. "Fifty-nine percent of gifts were used less frequently than the recipients had expected to use them," he says. "Recipients predicted that the gifts would be used close to twice as frequently as they actually were."

Vietri and study co-authors Gretchen B. Chapman and Janet Schwartz also gathered predictions from "informed" and "blind" observers who estimated how often the recipient would use the gift on the same scale over the same period of time. Both groups were told what the gift was, but the informed observer saw the recipient's own prediction while the blind observer did not.

"The blind observer's predictions weren't that great," he says. "They didn't overpredict as much as the recipients, but they weren't that accurate."

But informed observers were able to make predictions far more accurately than the blind observers or even the recipients themselves. That group overpredicted only 10 percent of the time.

"The informed observers took the recipient's predictions and poured salt on them," he says. "If the recipient said they'd use something three times a day, the informed observers predicted they would use it closer to once

a day. When they saw low predictions, they guessed the recipient would use it even less."

Consumers might want to think about this before making another addition to their already crowded drawers and countertops.

"Overspending and clutter are a predictable result of acquiring something with the mistaken belief you will use the item more often than you actually will," he says. "Maybe a small step toward solving the problems of savings, clutter and the environment is to consult with others about our purchases and take their prediction seriously."

Source: Dick Jones Communications

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