

Can intuition resolve Christmas gift dilemmas? New research suggests it can help

December 20 2012

The clock is ticking and you still haven't decided what to get that special someone in your life for the holidays. When it comes to those last-minute gift-buying decisions for family and close friends, intuition may be the best way to think your way through to that perfect gift.

When faced with tough decisions, some people like to "trust their gut" and go with their intuition. Others prefer to take an analytical approach.

Boston College Professor Michael G. Pratt, an expert in [organizational psychology](#), says new research shows intuition can help people make fast and effective decisions, particularly in areas where they have expertise in the subject at hand.

When it comes to [holiday shopping](#), it might help to draw on the expertise you've accumulated about your family, and friends.

"We often ask ourselves, 'What does that special someone want for Christmas?' Maybe the better question to ask is 'What do I know about this person?'" said Pratt, a professor in the Carroll School of Management. "The chances are you know a lot. You know a lot about your parents and your children, and your [close friends](#). What we've found is that kind of deep expertise helps to support decisions we make when we trust our gut."

In recent experiments, Pratt and his fellow researchers examined how well-served we are when we make decisions intuitively or through a

more analytical approach, said Pratt, who recently co-authored a new report about intuitive decision-making in the *Journal of Organizational Behavior and [Human Decision Processes](#)*.

The researchers said the knock on intuition stems from earlier studies that examined intuition in the context of very structured, multi-step decisions in areas such as math or logic. Analytic decisions are great for breaking things down into smaller parts, which is necessary for a [math problem](#). But intuition is about looking at patterns and wholes, which is needed when making quick decisions about whether something is real or fake, ugly or pretty, right or wrong.

"Similarly, for gift buying, there is not 'one right answer' as with a math problem," says Pratt, "It is a judgment call."

Pratt, along with researchers Erik Dane, of Rice University and Kevin W. Rockmann, of George Mason University conducted two experiments to test both methods as a means of making a basic decision, or one that doesn't break down into a subset of smaller tasks. In each experiment, one set of respondents was asked to think intuitively in a short amount of time. A second set was asked to take more time and use an analytical approach.

For example, in one experiment, men and women were asked to decide whether a designer handbag was "real" or "fake". Among subjects who had owned several brand-name satchels, intuitive respondents were able to make quick and effective judgments about the items.

"If you're looking at those shiny new winter shovels for your spouse, ask yourself, 'Is this right or wrong?' and trust your gut. You'll be well served by your [intuition](#)," said Pratt. "It's likely that your spouse doesn't want a shovel and you don't want to be the one who gives that gift."

More information: The study, "When Should I Trust My Gut? Linking Domain Expertise to Intuitive Decision-making Effectiveness," is available online at [www.sciencedirect.com/science/ ...
ii/S0749597812000994](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/.../S0749597812000994)

Provided by Boston College

Citation: Can intuition resolve Christmas gift dilemmas? New research suggests it can help (2012, December 20) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2012-12-intuition-christmas-gift-dilemmas.html>

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