

A secret to giving the perfect gift: Stop being afraid

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Credit: Petr Kratochvil/ public domain

Have you ever faced the daunting task of deciding what gift to give a significant other, friend or relative? And once you finally find a gift, will it be well received?

Researchers at Carnegie Mellon University conducted a study to investigate whether recipients are getting the gifts they want, and their findings suggest that the answer is no. When given the choice of receiving a gift that has sentimental value—such as a photograph of a special memory—versus a more superficial gift—such as a jersey from a favorite sports team—givers opt for the superficial gift more often than their recipients expect.

Why are gift givers missing the mark? The [researchers](#) found that most people are unsure whether a sentimental gift will be well-liked, but they are confident that a superficial gift aligning with someone's interests and preferences will be enjoyed.

"Essentially, givers seem to view sentimentally valuable gifts as having the potential to be either home runs or strikeouts, but they view preference-matching gifts as a sure single," says Julian Givi, lead author of the study. "Rather than risking a strikeout, they go for the sure thing, when what recipients truly desire are sentimentally valuable gifts."

The researchers discovered this mismatch between givers and receivers in two separate experiments. In the first, participants were told to write down the name of a friend, and those who were "givers" were asked to select a gift for the friend. Some were told it would be a birthday gift while others were told it was for a going away party. They could choose either a framed photo of their friend's favorite musician, or a framed photo of the two friends on a day they had a lot of fun together. The participants who were "recipients" were asked to select which of the two gifts they would prefer to receive.

The study results provided evidence that people do not give sentimentally valuable gifts as often as recipients would prefer. The researchers also tested to see whether the level of closeness of two friends made the gift giving mismatch disappear, but there was still a

discrepancy.

Then they tested whether this pattern emerged when romantic partners were giving gifts to one another. In the experiment, partners could give either a gift card to their loved one's favorite store, or a sentimental gift, such as a photo of the couple with carved initials in the frame. Like the previous experiment, recipients didn't receive the sentimental gifts as often as they wished.

Finally, the researchers conducted a study to uncover why givers were not choosing sentimental gifts. In this experiment, one group of participants started by writing about a time in their lives when they took a risk that paid off, while the other group wrote about a time when they took a risk and failed. Then the groups were asked to read a vignette in which they were deciding between two bicycle gifts for a [friend](#). One of the bicycles had sentimental value, while the other was made by a brand the recipient liked.

The results were consistent with the researchers' hypothesis: The participants who had written about risks paying off were much more likely to choose the sentimental gift compared to those who had written about risks failing.

"People spend billions of dollars every year on gifts, and the data suggests that they're not spending money in the best way possible," Givi says. "We are also finding evidence in a different project that people feel closer to givers when they receive sentimental gifts, so people should keep this in mind the next time they're making [gift](#)-giving decisions."

This study will appear in the *Journal of Consumer Psychology*.

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