

Want to give a good gift? Think past the 'big reveal'

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Credit: Association for Psychological Science

Gift givers often make critical errors in gift selection during the holiday season, according to a new research article in *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological

Science.

The research, led by Jeff Galak (Carnegie Mellon University Tepper School of Business) and co-authors Elanor Williams (Indiana University Kelley School of Business) and Tepper School Ph.D. student Julian Givi, suggests that gift givers tend to focus on the moment of exchange when selecting a gift, whereas gift recipients are more focused on the long-term utility or practical attributes of the gift.

"We studied many existing frameworks from research in this area, trying to find a common ground between them. What we found was that the giver wants to 'wow' the recipient and give a gift that can be enjoyed immediately, in the moment, while the recipient is more interested in a gift that provides value over time," explained Galak. "We are seeing a mismatch between the thought processes and motivations of gift givers and recipients. Put another way, there may be times when the vacuum cleaner, a gift that is unlikely to wow most recipients when they open it on Christmas day, really ought to be at the top of the shopping list as it will be well used and liked for a long time."

The researchers found that this differential focus on the moment of exchange and the desirability of the gift showed up in a number of different ways. For instance, some gift giving errors included:

- Giving unrequested gifts in an effort to surprise the recipient, when they are likely hoping for a gift from a pre-constructed list or registry;
- Focusing on tangible, material gifts, which are likely to be immediately well received, when experiential gifts, such as theater tickets or a massage, would result in more enjoyment later on;
- Giving socially responsible gifts, such as donations to a charity in the recipient's name, which seem special at the moment of gift

exchange but provide almost no value to recipients down the road.

The researchers make recommendations for those hoping to choose better gifts, advising them to better empathize with gift recipients when thinking about gifts that would be both appreciated and useful.

"We exchange gifts with the people we care about, in part, in an effort to make them happy and strengthen our relationships with them," Galak added. "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](#)."

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](#)

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