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12 do's and don'ts for becoming a better gift-giver, according to science

Research shows that gifters and receivers often have a mismatch in goals. Here are evidence-based guidelines to ease your gifts-better experience.

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Image Source/Getty | For The Washington Post

By Ivana Cruz

Have you given a gift that you thought was perfect only to learn that the recipient did not think the same?

You are not alone. Gift-givers and receivers often have mismatched goals, motivations and tastes when it comes to a good gift, according to psychology and marketing research.

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Consumers will spend up to $ebay billion this holiday season, but almost 20 percent of that will be returned — a higher rate of return than the rest of the year — the National Retail Federation estimates.

Though finding the perfect gift depends on many factors — the context of the exchange, and the type and closeness of the relationship — gift-giving research can provide insights on when people go astray and how to be a better gift giver.

Here are 12 evidence-based suggestions to make it more possible that your present will be appreciated.

Do think beyond the moment of giving

Gift-givers tend to focus on the moment of giving — the unwrapping, the look of surprise — which leads many to give novelty items, research finds.

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Do think beyond the moment of giving

Do give them what they want

Do give things you yourself use

Do give experiences, gifts

Do give more experiences

Do give at unexpected times

Do give yourself enough time

Don't believe that more expensive is necessarily better

Don't be afraid to break some gift-giving norms

Don't overpackage the gift

Don't be time-stingy with your gifts

But receivers often just want useful and reliable gifts instead of a big show.

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Focus more on thinking about "whenever the person will be using the gift as opposed to the exchange," said Julian Givi, an associate professor of marketing at West Virginia University.

A coffee machine will probably be more appreciated in the long run than a Keurig.

Do give them what they want

Gift-givers tend to want to surprise and think of ideas themselves, but research shows that recipients are more appreciative of gifts that they request, such as off a wish list or registry, because they find these presents more thoughtful.

While recipients like being surprised, the gift itself matters, too.

If "they notice what they have asked for, they're still going to be happy," said Elizabeth Dunn, a professor of psychology at the University of British Columbia, and co-author of Giftology: The Science of Giving Well, from Penguin, an associate professor of marketing at the Wisconsin School of Business at the University of Wisconsin at Madison.

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Put another way, if a child asks Santa for a particular scooter, but you buy another kind of scooter, "which option do you think is better?" Givi said.

Do give things you yourself use

People tend to refrain from giving gifts that they themselves own out of fear this would devalue the uniqueness of the items and themselves, Givi said from colleague Sonal Ince's research.

But giving something you use can provide safety as an endorsement of quality, but also make an ordinary gift feel more special and the recipient feel closer to you, according to new research by Ince and her colleagues.

As long as the gift does not stray too far from the recipient's interests — giving a sports jersey to a non-sports-inclined person probably wasn't a good call — merely saying, "I thought the same thing for myself" can lead to the shared gift becoming a shared bond.

"It's kind of a friendship bracelet now," Polman said.

Do give sentimental gifts

Get sappy. Gifts such as scrapbooks and photo albums that remind your loved ones of fond memories and your relationships can bring them happiness for years to come.

Dunn and Ince's research shows that sentimental gifts, but gift-giver, when deciding between giving a more superficial gift or a sentimental one, shy away from sentimentality because of a fear of getting it wrong, according to one giver study. Givi conducted.

Give great sentimental gifts quite often, he said. "They're always the ones that get the biggest smile on people's face."

However, we don't give experiences based gifts as often as others want, one prior study found.

Experiential gifts such as tickets to a concert, cooking classes or a weekend cabin retreat can also strengthen our relationship bonds more. One study reported that people receiving an experiential gift tend to report feeling closer to the giver than when they get a material one.

Do give at unexpected times

While we tend to give gifts for special occasions — holidays, birthdays, graduations — presents given outside these kinds of celebrations are even more appreciated by recipients, Givi and a colleague reported in a prior study.

The research found that a "$5 Amazon gift card on a random Tuesday" was the happiest-inducing gift of a Alpin Amazon gift card on a birthday, Givi said.

Do give yourself enough time

Waiting until the last minute to brainstorm and get gifts makes the whole endeavor more stressful and more difficult to get right.

"I'm a huge believer in the idea that to be good at gift-giving, you have to give yourself enough time," Givi said.

Polman also tries to make notes of ideas that would be receivers have said they liked will in advance, though this type of organizational practice may not work for everyone.

Don't believe that more expensive is necessarily better

Gift-givers tend to think that the more costly a gift, the more thoughtful it is and the more appreciative recipients will be. But research shows recipients care more about the overall quality of the gift.

A prior study Polman and colleagues conducted shows that we tend to spend the gift budget on set for someone else, while trying to be under budget when buying for ourselves.

If you find the perfect gift and "it's a little, given shouldn't feel bad," Polman said. "They shouldn't feel like they need to spend more just because they have budged more."

Don't be afraid to break some gift-giving norms

Studies in Ince's lab have found people enjoy breaking typical gifts if they find it a better, cool gift or if it's a special gift, such as giving one part of a larger gift or a wedding registry.

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Don't overpackage the gift

To signal their thoughtfulness or to appease a picky recipient, gift-givers tend to think packaging the present makes it more likely that it will be well received, research finds.

But it is possible to go overboard. A prior study found that overpackaging a present makes the recipient think the giver is less thoughtful, not more.

Don't be time-stingy with your gifts

"When we think about gifts, we typically think about the exchange or the recipient," Polman said. But it also can change gift-givers' behaviors for the worse.

In a prior study, Polman and his colleague found that people tended to behave more selfishly and less thoughtfully after they gave gifts.

But giving a present does not give a pass to be less giving afterward.

Don't get too stressed out

The gift itself may not matter as much as showing that the receiver matters.

"If you're signaling to them that you care about them, at the end of the day, more often than not, things will turn out fine," Givi said.

Do you have a question about human behavior or neuroscience? Email BrainMatters@washpost.com and we may answer it in a future column.

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By Ivana Cruz

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Zero more. Don't give gifts to people who don't want to exchange gifts. First, it's unfair to put them on the spot. Second, a lot of us don't have anywhere near as much stuff we want anything and don't want gifts at all.

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Ivana Cruz · Author

Thanks for the tip!

Reply · 1 hour ago

"Consumables" make the best gifts — I no longer gift alcohol to holiday hosts, but a fancy bag (with a high-end inspection date on it), coffee, or a nice bottle of olive oil is always welcome. Gift cards, experiences, and consumables — you can't go wrong.

Berry M · 1 hour ago

Reply · 1 hour ago

I have everything I need and then some. I prefer to have people over, pitch in and cook. I have an anyone coming to my house at Christmas gets a bit of cookies. And we have a crowd each year because I like cook. So just show up and bring a bottle of wine or a dessert. Or just show up and help me cook. Or just show up and help me clean up.

Mind Mis Manners · 1 hour ago

Reply · 1 hour ago

A long time ago my children asked me to dress warmly, I was going to get my gift. We got in the car and ended up at the nicest restaurant in town. I was very pleased. My children. I will never forget the gift.

Jonquil · 1 hour ago

Reply · 1 hour ago

You probably have all the stuff you need by now. Now is time trip. Have a nice meal at a fancy restaurant. Take in a play at the museum, sports stadium or concert hall. Or go on a vacation. Make a donation in a local charity.

Jonquil · 1 hour ago

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