Promoting Business with Corporate Gifts
- Major Issues and Empirical Evidence

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ABSTRACT

Corporate gifts are an important tool in the marketing communication mix. This paper is divided into two parts. It first reviews the literature of corporate gifts and incentives, focusing on major issues in the use of corporate gifts: marketing issues, practical considerations, and ethical and cultural concerns. In the second part, it presents a survey in the UK airline industry. Corporate gifts are found to be used mainly as a means of enhancing corporate image and creating goodwill. They are also used to help reinforce other elements in the marketing communication mix such as advertising and sales promotion.

Key Words corporate gifts, marketing communication, promotion mix, branding, business ethics, airline industry

INTRODUCTION

Corporate gifts are an important tool in the marketing communication mix. In the corporate world, gift giving can be a double-edge sword (Pachter, 1995). If used properly, they provide the company with a valuable means of strengthening relationships with its key customers and employees, creating goodwill, fostering new relationships and promoting the company's business. A properly timed and appropriate gift is one of the best ways of conveying the important message that a relationship matters (Davis, 1996). Gift giving is a complicated business and can itself be a form of art as shown by numerous rules, tips and guidelines offered in the literature (for example, Pachter, 1995; Davis, 1996; Campbell, 1997; Feder, 1998; Gines, 1998; Speer, 2000; Taylor, 2003). Although gifts and incentives are generally perceived as a sales promotion tool they should be used as an integral part of the marketing communication mix to synergise and support other promotion activities. Verbal communication is soon forgotten but gifts with your company's logo on them form a reminder of your company, which may tip a business decision in your favour (Axtell, 1990). As companies become increasingly aware of the importance of developing and maintaining long-term relationships with their customers, corporate gifts can help motivate those who sell and build relationships with important customers.

DEFINITION AND CLASSIFICATION

A corporate gift can be anything from stationary to an all-inclusive Caribbean holiday for two. The type of gifts used is limited only by the imagination. The Mintel report (1997) identifies a distinct difference between corporate gifts and incentives. A gift is given as a corporate gesture in recognition of business conducted or as part of business to business promotion while incentives are products or schemes perceived to be of relatively high value and typically used to reward staff or long standing business customers. Companies that wish to purchase corporate gifts and incentives can choose from a seemingly endless range of items, which can be placed into three broad categories, based on the value of the item and purpose of the gift. The first category are give-aways, generally low value, high volume, less personal items that are used mainly to promote a company’s name. The second are standard gifts which suit most occasions of gift giving and cover a range of prices, but always achieve a higher perceived value that “give-away” and are presented in a more personal manner. The final category contains luxury gifts that are high value, low volume items that address an individual and carry prestige often based on strong brands (Mintel, 1997).

CORPORATE GIFT INDUSTRY

In the past the main focus of business gift giving had been on consumers under the banner of sales promotion. However in the last third years there has been a rapid growth in corporate gift giving which has established a niche within the sector. The corporate gift industry can trace its origin to the United States, arriving in the UK in the 1960s. By the 1980s corporate marketing activity had become established in Britain, and rapidly expanded in the buoyant economic conditions of the early part of the decade as companies were able to financially support more marginal aspects of the promotion mix and experiment with innovative promotional ideas, hence the giving and receiving of business gifts increased. The economic recession in the early 1990s saw a dramatic reduction in corporate gifts giving activities but by the mid 1990s the sector recovered and had created a firmer niche within the marketing sphere, and since then corporate gifts and incentives have continued to gain respect as effective marketing tools (Mintel, 1997).

Although corporate gifts and incentives have developed an important role within the marketing mix, they still remain a subsidiary part of the much larger sales promotion industry. As many companies do not have a budget specifically allocated to such promotional activity, the exact size of the corporate gift industry is hard to be quantified with any accuracy. However, trade sources believe that expenditure on corporate gifts and incentives will follow a similar pattern to that of sales promotion industry which grew from 3.0 billion in 1991 to 8.6 billion in 2000: 286 percent increase in nine years or average annual growth of 12.4 percent. It is estimated that the total value of the promotional industry including corporate gifts and incentives reached 10.1 billion in 2001 (Mintel, 2000, p16)

ISSUES IN BUSINESS GIFT GIVING

There are three main issues in the use of corporate gifts. The first is marketing related: the role and purpose, the budget and the recipient; the second involves practical considerations: the choice of right gifts and the timing etc. The third relates to cross-cultural and ethical concerns: how to give gifts overseas and how to distinguish gifts from bribery.

Marketing Considerations

The first decision in the use of corporate gifts is to define the role of such gifts in the marketing communication mix. If used properly, corporate gifts and incentives could supplement and reinforce other elements in the mix.

- Advertising –corporate gifts provide a more tangible reflection of advertising spending and a lasting and useful advertisement for the recipient, a cost effective supplement to mainstream advertising (Oliver, 1991).

- Public relations – corporate gifts can help increase awareness through their target ability and creative impact. Corporate hospitality events can be used to encourage personal communications (Mintel, 2000).

- Sales promotion – corporate gifts can accelerate the purchasing decision, speed the introduction and acceptance of new services and generally get customers to act faster than they would in the absence of any incentives or gifts (McDonald, 1995).

- Personal selling – corporate gifts are often used to remind customers of a company long after the activity of personal selling has been completed. Verbal communication is soon forgotten. However, gifts and incentives form a reminder of a company that may tip a business decision in your favour (Axtell, 1990).

The next decision is to set the clear objectives that the company wants to achieve in gift giving. The common objectives include: expressing appreciation for customers, creating brand awareness or enhancing the company's image, promoting new product or service, and motivating your own staff. Corporate gifts are a kind of business investment. Business gift giving builds on the foundation of reciprocity theory, which says that giving can lead to a recipient's perceived sense of obligation to return the favour. Corporate gift giving aims to maximise their potential in stimulating customers not only feel rewarded for past business, but also tactfully induced (i.e., not manipulated) to continue doing business with the giver (Beltramini, 2000). The giver and the recipient enter into a social contract of recognition, obligation and expectations. Social debts are created that help develop the relationship. The recipient repays the giver, who then becomes the recipient with the social debts to be paid back. The more often the two parties interact in this manner, the closer their relationship. In the business world, these social debts can be translated into loyalty building and eventually increase business from clients, and better relationship with staff (Mintel, 2000).

There seems to be a gap between theory and practice regarding whether business gifts should be used as "door opener" to generate sales or to cultivate new contacts. Some guidelines warn against associating the gifts with future sales or any other activity. "You want the recipient to feel good about you but not fell an obligation to do anything" (Feder, 1998). If it implies an obligation, it is bad manner to present a gift with strings attached (Freeman, 1996). The problem here lies in confusion about the role and objective of gift giving. If the objective is to create goodwill, then no obligation should be attached. On the other hand, if the gifts are a part of sales promotion, they are bound to be associated with future sales or carrying some obligation.

Giving or not giving

Business gift giving is not always the best way to maintain the business relationship, i.e. not giving gifts is better than giving gifts. A company used to send annual holiday gifts to its clients. It later found out what the clients really wanted was a bigger discount or improved customer service rather than a Christmas gift. It is vitally important to understand and deliver what customers really want rather than wasting time and money on gifts that do not meet their needs (Campbell, 1997).

Logo or no logo

One important objective to give a business gift is to keep the company's name on people's mind. If a gift is "corporate", it implies that the company wants its name associated with gift and to use it as a permanent reminder to the recipient. A truly corporate gift should be given not to an individual but a company. In most cases a "corporate" gift is in fact a "personal" gift as the recipient is normally a person. Opinions are divided on whether or not corporate gifts should be customised to carry the company's name, and if so, on how it should be. Anonymous (1995) offers some good guidelines regarding decision on customisation, which mainly depends on the purpose, the type and value of gifts as well as who the recipient is.

Practical Considerations

The most important principle in business gift giving is the appropriateness. A gift must be perceived by its recipient as appropriate to the relationship between the giver and the receiver (De Paulo, et al, 1983) because an inappropriate or wrong gift could do one's business more harm than good. Whether a gift is appropriate depends not only on the gift itself –its type and value, but also on the context or occasion in which the gift is given or received.

Type of gifts

Whether a business gift is a right one should be decided by the recipient, not by the giver. Gifts for top customers and suppliers tend to nearly always be traditional merchandise. Gifts for staff are often given in the form of vouchers (Greaves, 2001). While traditional gift items such as stationery or china still remain popular, a survey by the Promotional Products Association International found that electronics or computer related items have become increasingly popular and more affordable (Freeman, 1996). There are apparent differences in gift preference between women and men (Tyler, 1998). The top five most preferred items for women are: money, travel, flowers/plants, audio/video equipment and food or candy. The top five items for men are: money, computer software and accessories, travel, tools and audio/video equipment. The least popular item for women is tools but it is fragrance for men.

As the old adage says, it is not the gift -it's the thought that counts. An inexpensive but meaningful gift will bear out a lavish but pointless one every time (Davis, 1996). Corporate gifts should always be chosen with care and sensitivity. A gift is a very personal thing. Some gift items that would be considered "too personal" such as perfume, lingerie or jewellery, are not suitable as corporate gifts because they imply intimacy. Corporate gifts, by definition, are impersonal. How can a corporate gift generate a personal touch? Research shows people love to see their names in print, especially on something they use frequently. It should be no surprise then that today's successful gifts tend to be personalised or have a personal touch; they are more creative and more memorable. One study estimates that more than one quarter of all business gifts today are imprinted with the recipient's name or monogram (Feder, 1998). Davis (1996) also provides some good examples of making impersonal gifts personal.

Occasion and Timing

When to use corporate gifts is undoubtedly crucial as the timing of gift giving will influence the decision making process of the recipient (Axtell, 1990). The timing is decided by both external factors such as customs, and internal factors such as the intended objectives. It can also be influenced by the timing of other marketing campaign, for example, the launch of a new product. The common occasions for business gift giving are: Christmas, convention/trade show, promotional events and company anniversaries, etc. The occasions may vary in one country from another. In

China and Hong Kong, the most important gift-giving season is the Lunar Chinese New Year. In Japan there are two major occasions when business gifts are obligatory: Chugen on July 15 and Oseibo in early December.

Ethical and Cross-cultural Issues

Business gift giving is a grey area. Where does the line fall between legitimate business gifts and illegitimate corruption and bribery (Chetwynd, 1995)? The Institute of Business Ethics in the UK states in its code that gifts and hospitality should only be given if they are consistent with the customary business practices, are not excessive in value and cannot be construed as being intended as a bribe (Wyburd, 1998). Many companies have specific guidelines about both giving and receiving business gifts which allow their employees to accept gifts only of nominal value; however the term nominal can be open to interpretation (Elsberry, 1993). If a corporate gift is perceived as inappropriate to the relationship, the situation or the recipient, it can do more harm than good. Once the recipient is disengaged from the relationship it is very difficult to re-establish the bond. A practical way in which companies can prevent corporate gifts and incentives being perceived as bribery, is to ensure that their cost remain within a limited budget. A typical business gift in the US values about 25$. In the UK many firms adhere to the Inland Revenue's threshold for the value of gifts, which is £100 including VAT, over which the recipient must pay income tax (Bond, 1997). If the value of gifts is within the guideline, the ethical risk of gift giving can be greatly reduced. This is confirmed by an US survey, in which the majority of respondents (90%) believe that business gifts would not improperly influence the recipients' buying decision (Anonymous, 2001).

The issue of “when is a gift a bribe?” is especially important when the giving crosses cultural boundaries. There needs to be a mutual understanding between the giver and the recipient as to the meaning and obligations attached to the gift. What a gift represents can only be determined by the members of the exchange, at least two persons contribute to the definition of any gift, and the intended message is not always the one received (Axtell, 1990). Gift giving and hospitality, as an important part in any culture, can be fraught with mishaps and pitfalls. While in Europe corporate gifts are usually given on special occasions, in Asia it is often necessary to bring a gift for the first business meeting. Each nation has a distinctive culture and value system that dictate the business gift giving behaviour. What is totally acceptable and legal in one culture would be either unacceptable or illegal in another. International companies must understand the culture of the recipient in order to avoid making costly blunders. There are countless examples. A California construction company presented green baseball caps to top business executives from Taiwan unaware that in Chinese idiom a man wearing green cap means that his wife is conducting adultery behind his back (Steer, 2000). If this case caused only embarrassment for both the host and visitors, the next one shows that a blunder could have far more grave consequences. A delegation from the American television industry visited China in 1975 hoping to sell colour television production lines to the country. They presented their host a nice gift -a crystal turtle, which was later interpreted by the Chinese as an insult implying that China’s industry was lagging behind the West. A huge political row erupted within the Communist Party soon after the Americans left as the hardliners used the turtle incident to attack their more liberal opponents in a campaign that lasted several months. Not surprisingly, the American lost the deal that eventually went to the Japanese a few years later. Each society has its own codes of behaviour and superimposed on these codes are rules for business encounters (Mintel, 1997). It is essential for international marketers to develop a good understanding of those codes and rules that govern gift giving and receiving in foreign cultures. For example, in many cultures, the ceremony of gift giving is laden with meaning and more important than the gift itself.

THE RESEARCH

The main objective of the study was to investigate the use of corporate gifts and incentives in the UK airline industry and to examine the role of corporate gifts in the marketing communications. The empirical research in the form of postal questionnaire survey was carried out to find out the following information:

- The role of gifts and their actual usage,
- The decision making and budget,
- The occasion and timing of gift giving,
- The types of gifts chosen and whether they are customised,
- The ethical considerations in gifts giving
- The current expenditure and future trend.

The sampling frame was the UK airline industry that comprised of the largest airline companies operating in the United Kingdom, both national and international carriers. The names and contact details of marketing directors or marketing managers were obtained from the Internet. A total of 21 companies were sent postal questionnaires with a covering letter and their details are given in the Appendix 1. These individuals were contacted by telephone a few days later to ensure that they had received the questionnaire and would respond to it within the time deadline. Each respondent was offered a copy of the survey findings as an incentive to participate the survey. 14 questionnaires were returned and useable. The questionnaire contained 18 questions with a mixture of multiple choices and open-end questions. The data collection method proved to be appropriate for the study as the response rate was good at 67 percent and the questionnaires generated the information that was required.

THE FINDINGS

Q1 Who in your company normally makes decisions regarding to corporate gifts and incentives?	
Marketing manager	57 %
Sales manager	25
Account /client handler	6
Sales promotion manager	6
Marketing director	6

The decision as to whether there is a need to use corporate gifts and incentives, in the majority cases, is made by marketing managers rather than sales promotion managers. This suggests that corporate gifts and incentives are viewed as tools that can assist various marketing activities, as opposed to just being for sales promotion.

Q2 Who are the recipients of the gifts and incentives?	
Existing customers	34 %
Potential customers	19
Staff	19
Lapsed customers	12
Suppliers	8
Visitors to the company	8

This finding confirms what the literature says that gifts and incentives such as hospitality are often given to existing and potential customers with the aims of promoting the company’s image and building strong relationships (Lovelock, et al 1996).

Q3 What types of gifts are in current use, have been used in the last 12 months, or will be considered for use in the future?	Past	Current	Future
Desk items –pens, diaries etc.	6	9	5
Computer accessories	3	0	1
Jewellery, watches/clocks	3	3	1
Clothing items	6	7	4
China/ pottery/crystal	6	3	3
Fine china/ crystal	11	1	1
Hampers/ food items/alcohol	4	4	2
Corporate hospitality events/ days out	6	7	8
Air miles	2	1	1
Travel –flights only	2	3	1
Travel –holidays	1	1	0
Restaurant vouchers	1	2	3
Retail vouchers	3	3	4
Accommodations	2	2	0

The answers show that companies used a wide range of gifts and incentives. In the past the most popular item was fine china/crystal, followed by complimentary desk accessories. But they have now reached a saturation point and no longer create an impact. Corporate hospitality seems to be the most favoured form in the future.

Q4 Do you prefer "customised" or "off-the-shelf" gifts?	
Customised	82 %
Off-the-shelf	18

Q5 Why do you prefer "customised" or "off-the-shelf" gifts?
▪ Customised to ensure branding ▪ Customised for one-off ad hoc occasions ▪ Customised – relevance, due to enhancement of brand ▪ Customised as they are personalised

A big majority companies prefer customised gifts to off-the-shelf ones as the customised goods generally create a more lasting and memorable impression (Davis, 1996; Feder, 1998).

Q6 How important is it that gifts feature your company's logo /name?	
Essential	80 %
Quite important	10
Not important	10

The Mintel report (1997) suggests that a company's logo forms the key part of its corporate identity and that corporate gifts can help synchronisation between a company's image and identity. A gift with the company's logo ensures that the brand name or corporate image is kept at the forefront of the recipient's mind.

Q7 What, if any, are the key periods in the year when you decide the need for gifts?
▪ Christmas and New Year ▪ Usually at the beginning of the year ▪ Sales events, exhibitions such as business travel shows

Axtell (1990) and O'Neil (1991) emphasised the importance of the timing of giving gifts with regard to how they can influence the decision making process of the recipient. The respondents report that the role of gifts and incentives becomes particularly important over the Christmas and New Year period. As many airlines give corporate gifts at this time of year, one respondent states that we feel compelled to enter the gift arena periodically, especially at Christmas time, when competitors are likely to be giving the seasonal goodwill gesture, as we cannot risk not having a presence.

Q8 On which occasions do you use gifts and incentives?	
At a launch of a new service	57 %
At trade fairs	43
At press events	36
At sales presentations	29
At visits to the company	21
Other- e.g. birthdays of frequent flyers	7

This finding is broadly in line with the result of a similar survey in the US in which promotional event is cited as the top business gift-giving occasion (Anonymous, 2001). After advertising has taken place with the objective of ensuring customers to develop a desired opinion of a new product or service, business gifts can be used as an effective way to further communicate with potential customers and entice them to purchase the new service.

Q9 Where does the expenditure of gifts come from?	
Marketing budget	50 %
Special promotion budget	31
Special hospitality or event budget	19

The replies are divided on this question. While half of the companies have a special promotion or hospitality budget to cover corporate gifts and incentives the other half still pay for gifts out of the marketing budget, which means that they have to compete with other marketing expenses.

Q10 What type of goods do you tend to look for when buying gifts?	
A mixture of gifts to suit different needs	71 %
Low value	14
High value	14

When purchasing corporate gifts, considerations must be first given to the targeted recipients rather than the value or cost of the purchase. This is to ensure that the recipient will perceive the gifts as being appropriate to their interests and lifestyles (Riddell, 2000). The replies show that the companies recognised the importance of matching gifts to the recipient’s needs.

Q11 What do you use gifts and incentives for?	
Advertise /promote the company	26 %
Engender goodwill	16
Create loyalty	13
To say “Thankyou”	11
Retain existing customers	9
To directly increase sales	9
To win new business	7
Employee incentives	7
Apologise to customers who made complaints	2

Q12 What is the role of gifts and incentives in your company?
▪ Very important in enhancing the company image. ▪ Used to cement existing business client relationships and to forge new ones. ▪ Important part of marketing to our loyal customers. ▪ Support marketing activities. ▪ Used for brand promotion. ▪ Increase brand awareness. ▪ Quite important in general, and more important in thanking loyal customers.

The finding highlights that companies believe that gifts and incentives can be used for various objectives. The majority of respondents (42%) state that they use business gifts as a means of enhancing the company’s image and creating goodwill. The use of gifts also help to reinforce other elements in the marketing communication mix such as advertising and sales promotion.

Q13 Do you feel that corporate gifts and incentives achieve their purpose/objective?	
Always	57 %
Sometimes	36
Not very often	7

This finding is very similar to the result of a survey in the US (Davis, 1996). When asked “how effective are corporate gifts?” the replies are: effective (54%), somewhat effective (28%) and very effective (14%).

Q14 How do you prevent the gifts being perceived as unethical, i.e. being viewed as bribery?
▪ They are not expensive, so could never be perceived as a bribe. ▪ Not too costly, value less than £30. ▪ Gifts tend to be of token value. ▪ They should not be overly opulent. ▪ Not if logo appears. ▪ Essential part of business promotion, not bribery!

Clearly the value of the gift is regarded as the single important factor that distinguishes a gift from briber.

Q15 Do you expect expenditure on gifts next year to increase, remain the same, or decrease?	
Remain the same	80
Increase	10
Decrease	10

Q16 In your opinion, how has the use of gifts and incentives changed over the past few years?
▪ No real change. ▪ Not much change in the last few years. ▪ Now so many options available to marketers that there is a gift or incentive programme to fulfil almost every marketing objective, whatever that may be. ▪ We have increased our usage of gifts to customers with complaints, as the UK has adopted the USA "complaint and compensation" culture. ▪ As our business customer frequent flyer base has risen, so our need to increase the gift budget has gone up.

A majority of respondents (80%) said that there was no major change in their use of corporate gifts in the last few years, and expected their expenditure on gifts to remain the same in the coming year. A few replies indicated an increase in the use of corporate gifts as more gifts options became available.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Corporate gifts are widely regarded as an effective means of strengthening corporate relationships and creating goodwill. Marketing managers are the principal decision makers in deciding whether there is a need to use corporate gifts and incentives. The main recipients of those gifts and incentives are existing and potential customers. The majority of airlines surveyed prefer to use customised gifts that feature the company logo. In the past the most popular gifts used have been china and crystal, whilst desk items are currently the most used. However, corporate hospitality is strongly favoured to be popular in the future. The main objective in the use of corporate gifts and incentives is to promote the corporate image and engender goodwill. The companies believe that the most important time to use gifts is at the launch of a new service and over the Christmas and New Year period. With regard to the cost of gifts, half of the companies surveyed paid such offerings from their marketing budget while the other half paid from special promotion budgets. Most companies purchase a mixture of gifts of different value to suit different needs. They believe that gifts and incentives have always achieved their desired objectives and consequently expect that the expenditure on business gifts will remain the same in the future.

The research has illustrated the important role that corporate gifts and incentives play in the marketing communication mix. The airline companies surveyed believe that corporate gifts can considerably aid their marketing communication strategy. However, the key to the successful use of gifts lies in making sure that they add value to their service offering, enhancing their corporate image and creating goodwill. Companies, who use corporate gifts should use them in co-ordination with other tools in the marketing communication mix, and should have a well-defined objective for their use and ensure that they are correctly targeted, creative and ethically accountable.

Future research is needed to examine the role and effectiveness of corporate gifts and incentives from the recipient perspective as there is very little published academic research (Beltramini, 2000). In particular, it needs to establish whether corporate gifts are only a tactical tool in the marketing communication mix or whether they could play a more important part in developing and maintaining long-term business relationships with both customers, employees and other stakeholders. This survey was carried out in a single industry with a small sample so caution should be exerted when the findings are generalised. It would be interesting to conduct similar survey in other industry sectors to find out whether there is any significant difference between sectors or different sized companies in terms of business gift giving behaviour.

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Appendix 1

Names of the companies that were surveyed		
1	Aer Lingus	Marketing manager
2	Air Canada	Marketing Comm. manager
3	Air Malta	Marketing director
4	Air New Zealand	Marketing manager, UK
5	Alitalia	Marketing manager
6	American Airlines	Marketing director
7	British Airways	Marketing director
8	British Midland	Marketing manager
9	Cathay Pacific	Marketing manager
10	Continental Airlines	Marketing manager
11	Delta Airlines	Secretary to marketing manager
12	Easy Jets	Marketing manager
13	Emirates	Marketing manager, UK
14	Japan Airlines	Marketing manager, Europe
15	KLM UK Ltd	Corporate Comm. manager
16	Malaysia Airlines	Marketing manager
17	Quantas Airlines	Marketing director
18	Scandinavian Airlines	Marketing director
19	Singapore Airlines	Marketing manager
20	TWA	Marketing manager
21	Virgin Atlantic	Marketing director