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- ▶ Public safety from a management perspective

Rebecca Morris talks with Gabriele Jacobs and Saskia Bayerl

- ▶ Necessary Condition Analysis: more value from data

By Jan Dul

- ▶ Consumer insights: think of yourself when buying for others

By Gabriele Paolacci

- ▶ Industrial ecosystems: major opportunities for port authorities

By Frans A.J. Van Den Bosch, Rick M.A. Hollen and Henk W. Volberda

- ▶ Handling threats to the validity of online data

By Petra Saskia Bayerl and Babak Akhgar

- ▶ Enriching the customer experience with big data

By Evelien van der Hurk

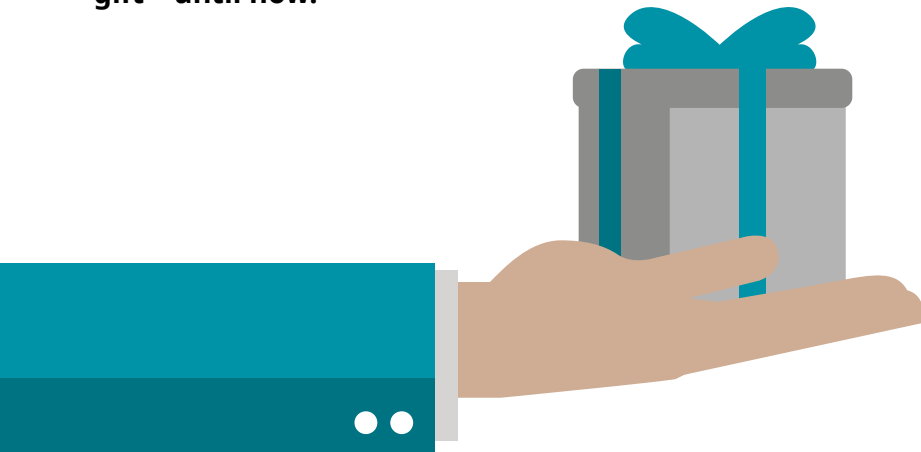


The business school that thinks and lives in the future

Consumer insights: think of yourself when buying for others

By **Gabriele Paolacci**

Although there has been research on matching gifts to recipients' tastes and the connection between the giver and the recipient, no one had really looked at how a perceived connection between the giver and the gift affected how the recipient felt about the gift – until now.



I had the idea for this project while trying to find a present for my mother. As I was looking around for the right gift, I began to wonder whether I should choose something I thought she would like, or something that I liked that I thought she would like too.

My field is consumer decision-making, not gift-giving, but I was curious about whether anyone had an answer to this question. I asked two colleagues who study gift-giving, Laura Straeter of RSM and Ilona de Hooge at Wageningen University in the Netherlands, but they didn't know either. It turned out we had given ourselves one of the best gifts an academic can receive: a fresh research question.

To find an answer to the question of whether people prefer gifts that have

some connection to the giver, we undertook four studies with a variety of participants: students from Erasmus University Rotterdam, US residents recruited on Amazon Mechanical Turk and Dutch adults. Each of these groups answered one facet of this larger question:

- Do recipients appreciate a gift more when it contains references to the giver?
- Does the attractiveness of a giver-matched gift depend on recipients' inferences about the giver's motivations?
- Does disliking the giver affect how people feel about giver-matched gifts?
- Does it matter what aspect of the giver the gift matches?

The gifts described in our surveys were not functionally related to the giver's characteristics (eg, a mug received by a professional potter) but merely contained aesthetic references to the giver (eg, a mug with a picture referencing the giver's country of origin). This ruled out the alternative explanation that recipients might be particularly appreciative of giver-matched gifts because they infer higher quality from the giver's expertise.

Giving yourself

Our respondents' answers to our hypothetical questions suggests that people preferred gifts that reflected some core quality of the giver – a reference to a place the giver knew well or something about their passions. Gifts that have some narrative information attached, such as a picture of Paris from somebody who loves Paris, or a CD from an avid music fan, meant more to the receiver than a present that had no personal connection at all. However, this reflective aspect of the present has to be a core quality. It can't be that you saw me playing baseball once (the one time I actually tried) so I gave you a baseball; it has to reflect something important about me.

Interestingly, this seems to be true regardless of whether we like the giver. Even when recipients aren't crazy about the giver, they still prefer a gift that shows some kind of consistency between the giver and the gift. There seems to be an innate enjoyment of this kind of correspondence.

Researchers have noted this effect in other contexts in the past: we tend to

make large and trivial decisions in ways that align with our self-image. Whether we are choosing a career or buying a detergent, we try to behave in ways that somehow fit our sense of ourselves. Further, not only do we appreciate consistency in our own attitudes and behaviours, we look for them in the attitudes and behaviour of other people. In fact, we like to see people acting in character even if we don't like the qualities of their character.

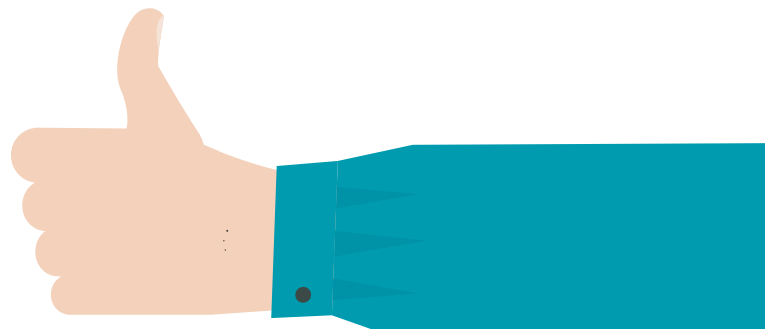
Buy for yourself

For gift-givers, the results of our study suggest that if you don't really know a person you are buying a present for, you may be better off trying to buy for your own taste (at least to a degree) than for that of your recipient. After all, you know yourself a lot better than you know them. As a marketing matter, our findings also suggest that retailers should encourage customers to buy things that they would like as gifts – perhaps among products that they've bought in the past.

The kind of thing given may matter too. For instance, it seems likely (though we didn't prove it in our studies) that the personal connection may be easier to establish in a gift that is mostly intellectual or cultural, such as a book or music.

One possible exception may have to do with the address on your package. In East Asia, for example, seeking interpersonal harmony tends to be valued more than being consistent and true to oneself, which may make the congruence between the gift and the giver's identity of less interest than it is in the West.

“...our findings also suggest that retailers should encourage customers to buy things that *they would like as gifts* – perhaps among products that they've bought in the past.”



So what gift should you give next? That we can't tell you. My mother liked Daniel Kahneman's *Thinking Fast and Slow*, but if you're not a decision-making scholar, it might not be the best gift. ■

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This article draws its inspiration for the paper *Give Me Your Self: Gifts are Liked More When They Match the Giver's Characteristics*, written by Gabriele Paolacci, Laura Straeter and Ilona de Hooge, and published in the *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, Volume 25, Issue 3, July 2015, p487-494. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jcps.2015.01.006>

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