



The psychology of gift giving - just give them what they want

By spending days hunting for that special gift for your friend or partner, you'll show them just how much you care, and also what incredible insight you have into their needs and interests. Right? Not exactly. A new study by a pair of researchers at Harvard and Stanford suggests that most people, at least in North American culture, would prefer that you simply buy them something that they've told you they want. They said romance was dead, it is now.

Francesca Gino and Francis Flynn demonstrated this phenomenon across three studies. First off, nearly two hundred participants were asked to recall a time they'd either received or given a wedding gift. Those who were specifically asked to recall receiving a gift from their set list reported being more appreciative than those who recalled receiving a surprise gift that they hadn't asked for. By contrast, participants who recalled giving a gift, thought it was probably appreciated just as much whether it was selected from a list or chosen independently.

A second study required 160 participants to imagine a hypothetical scenario in which they'd either bought a birthday gift for a significant other, or received one. Gift-givers didn't think it would make any difference, in terms of appreciation levels, whether they bought a surprise gift or something explicitly asked for. By contrast, those participants who imagined receiving a gift said they'd appreciate more a gift they'd asked for, than a surprise gift. What's more, this extra appreciation for an asked-for gift was mediated by their feeling that the gift-giver had been extra thoughtful.

So far, the results are based on thought experiments or memories. The third study involved 90 participants creating Amazon wish-lists and half of them playing gift-givers and half gift-receivers. Among the gift-givers, half were asked to choose a listed item to give to a recipient; the other half saw the list, but were instructed to choose a surprise item. Consistent with the first two studies, participants in a giving role didn't anticipate that it would make any difference to appreciation levels whether a gift was a surprise or selected from the wish-list. By contrast, participants in a receiving role were more appreciative of gifts selected from their wish-list and they perceived these gifts to be more thoughtful and more personal.

It seems gift-givers and receivers are at odds with each other. Gift-recipients prefer to receive items they've asked for, and they think givers who fulfil this ideal are more thoughtful. Yet when we're the one who is doing the giving, we suffer a temporary blind-spot and fail to realise that people tend to prefer receiving what they told us they want.

Are there any exceptions to this odd state of affairs? Yet another study found that if a recipient only mentions one desired gift, as opposed to a list of desirables, then gift-givers are able to see the value in offering what's asked for. Money also changes the results. A final study with 107 student participants found that gift-givers thought money wouldn't be appreciated as much as an asked-for gift, but recipients expressed the opposite opinion and said they'd actually appreciate money more than items they'd asked for.

Gino and Flynn said their results fit into a larger literature showing people's relative inability to take other people's perspectives into account. For example, in buying and selling it's been shown that we tend to overestimate how much other people will share our own views. The researchers also noted the practical lessons to take from their findings: "Gift givers would be wise to pay attention to gift registries, wish lists, and explicit requests from friends and significant others," they said. "Conversely gift recipients can facilitate the gift-giving process by not only being more direct about making suggestions for gifts, but being more specific as well. Rather than putting together one big 'wish list', they should instead list one big wish."