

How motives of Gift Giving shape the purchase process

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Different approaches to gift-giving

Gift-giving is a universal form of interpersonal communication that can be found in all human societies. Gift exchange has been used to celebrate key life events and convey thanks and love since ancient times (Ruth et al., 1999). Christmas, Valentine's Day, Birthdays, and Mother's Day are just a few of the yearly gift-giving occasions. It is widely acknowledged that buyers select various gifts for others based on the occasion and setting (Ruth et al., 1999). For example, gifts chosen for occasions that represent rites of passage like marriages might be different from gifts that represent rites of growth, such as birthdays. But setting and occasions

are not the only things that differentiate the gift-giving processes. Research underlined how the motives behind a gift could lead to different approaches to the gift-giving process itself.

How? Let's think about two scenarios.

In the first one, it is the end of the week, and you have planned a great weekend with your family. You are getting everything done, and you are ready to go home with the image of a perfect weekend. Suddenly, a coworker shows up and reminds you about the party for your boss' birthday planned for this Saturday. Like the party was not enough, you are asked to take care of the present, the choice is all yours.

In the other scenario, your special one is coming back home after six months abroad so that you can spend a weekend together. You have been waiting for this moment for a long time, and now you want to give them a gift to show how much they mean to you. With this idea in mind, you go out looking for the perfect gift.

Now that you have these two scenarios, do you think you would engage in the same purchase process for both scenarios? Before answering, let's see what research says about it!

Motives for Gift Giving

Motives are frequently classified as utilitarian or hedonic. Utilitarian motives are based on wants to gain functional advantages, whereas hedonic motives are based on emotional, experiential, subjective rewards (Solomon 1992). Many researchers have followed this general classification to identify sets of motives in gift-giving. [Sherry](#) distinguished between altruistic and agonistic incentives in givers. Givers with altruistic goals want to increase the happiness of their recipients. Altruistic givers aim to offer presents that the receivers want. Differently, agonistic donors aim to offer presents to display their power or social standing, and they tend to give items that the givers themselves wish to give. [Ward and Broniarczyk](#)

divided donors' motives into altruistic and relational signaling motives in a similar but different vein. They have the same altruistic motives as Sherry. Their relational signaling purpose, however, differs from Sherry's agonistic incentives. Givers with relational signaling goals aim to demonstrate how well they know the recipients or their own identity through the gift. This motivates givers to choose gifts that appear to be appropriate for expressing their feelings toward the receivers. Differently, Mauss (1957) proposed another view, claiming that gift-giving behavior is primarily motivated by "obligation and economic self-interest." There are two distinct types of obligation: Reciprocity and Ritual. In this context, reciprocity refers to providing a gift in exchange for another gift, for example, when family members exchange gifts at Christmas. Contributing because one feels obligated is behavior-driven by the social expectation of giving. Obligated givers feel obligated to reciprocate when they receive a present mainly for three reasons:

1. [They believe they must reciprocate when they receive a gift](#)
2. [They give because of others' expectations.](#)
3. [They will feel guilty if they don't give.](#)

The ritual instead refers to the occasion on which the gift is given. Some examples are Birthdays, Weddings, and Christmas, as mentioned earlier. In addition, Antón et al. (2014) studied the importance of the occasion itself, dividing the gift-giving occasion into personal and commercial situations. Christmas and Valentine's Day are examples of commercial scenarios in which everyone gives and gets gifts. Everyone expects to get gifts on these occasions. As a result, givers feel compelled to give gifts. Personal situations, on the other hand, mean that givers offer gifts for personal reasons. Givers have more "freedom" on personal occasions, with less social pressure.

As you can notice, there are multiple theories regarding the motives of gift-giving. Which theory is the most suitable? It's difficult to say because the classification of motives may not include all of the givers' motivations. For example, Sherry's categorization ignored givers' reasons for relational signaling, whereas Ward and Broniarczyk ignored givers' motivation to choose what they intended to provide.

The Purchase Process

First of all, when talking about the purchase process of a gift, it is essential to distinguish between two types of involvement of the giver. One is for a specific purchase situation, while the other is for a specific product. The first one is [Task Involvement](#). According to the construct included in these terms, this form of involvement stems from the consumer's goals in a specific buying environment, including the product's intended use. The other type of involvement is [Product Involvement](#). Rather than achieving a goal, the buyer with a high level of purchase product-specific involvement cares more about that item and is more engaged in the purchase outcome. In gift-giving, it is common to expect product-specific and task-specific involvement to differ.

Now let's analyze the two scenarios given above to see which motivations are implied in each story. In the first scenario, the one about the boss's party, we are obliged to buy a gift. This obligation comes from various reasons. The first is the ritual of the boss's birthday, and the second is the social pressure the other coworkers exert on you to buy the gift. In this scenario, the purchase process is driven by Task Involvement. [According to research](#), when people feel obligated to offer gifts, they choose less personal and essential gifts. Choosing the "gift that fits the most" is more crucial than selecting something symbolic of the relationship (Babin et al., 2007). Buyers do believe that purchasing is complicated in situations like the one

illustrated in the first scenario. In these cases their shopping habits become more practical (Babin et al., 2007). In other words, customers regard gift-giving as a task or goal that must be completed. They will spend less time shopping for gifts. As a result, the gift-giving process becomes more streamlined, resulting in fewer personal items being chosen. If we apply this to our example, you would probably go out of your office aimed at the first store open. You would look for something simple that your boss could use, like a nice stylographic pen or a swiss knife. Those presents may look nice, but they won't say anything to your boss about what you and your coworkers think of them.

The second scenario is entirely different. The gift-giving behavior is driven by a voluntary choice to make the other person happy. Furthermore, the expectations of the receiver should be lower in this situation. In this scenario, the purchase process is driven by Product Involvement. When gift-giving is voluntary, people invest more time and effort in the research of gifts. They would probably choose something [that contains some references to the giver and that it fits the receiver's tastes](#). By doing so, they would be able to both communicate how much they care for the other person while providing them with something they like. In this case, the product becomes central as we want it to deliver a specific message to the receiver. In the second scenario, you would probably start looking on websites, forums and you will go in and out of every store until you find the gift that best represents your feelings and the other's interests. [Research](#) says that one of the best ways to show love is through personalized gifts. Receivers value personalized gifts not just for their uniqueness and a better fit with their desires but also because they contain allusions to the giver and reflect their perception of the recipient. Gift receivers regard gift personalization as a daring pastime, a creative process, and a mark of the giver's affection.

As you can see, the two purchase processes are completely divergent and driven by different motives. What about you? Have you ever had a situation like the ones described above? Hopefully, this article will help you adopt the best purchase processing according to your situation.

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