What the brain wants for Christmas

By Elizabeth Landua
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Attention last-minute shoppers: We're sorry that you still have no idea what you're going to buy for friends and family this holiday season. So we asked some psychologists what, from the point of view of how the mind works, might make a great gift.

There's no far-reaching research that will tell you definitively what is the "right" gift. Many studies that have been done on giving are relatively small, so there's no foolproof prescription for showing your appreciation for any given person. But experts do have some ideas about the "behind the scenes" aspects of gift-giving that could help you this season.

Here are some ideas to consider:

**Experiences vs. possessions**

Research in psychology suggests that experiences make us happier than possessions. That's because when you get used to seeing something that you own every day, your initial elation over the object fades away. Experiences, by contrast, still give pleasure as you remember them.

Ryan Howell, assistant professor of psychology at San Francisco State University, has led studies demonstrating that when people think about purchases they have made for themselves recently, if they consider experiences, they are more apt to report higher satisfaction with them. That applies both at the time of purchase and after the experience had passed.

This is in line with a 2003 study "To do or to have: That is the question" by Leaf Van Boven and Thomas Gilovich similarly showing that, at according to participants' self-reporting, people appear to be happier with making experiential purchases than buying objects.

But it's not clear this is always the case with gift-giving. Gilovich told CNN previously that giving and receiving a gift is, in itself, an experience, and that objects you receive may acquire sentimental value that increases with time, becoming keepsakes.

You can also be successful by playing up how well you know the other person, and giving them an experience that shows that, Howell said. Howell remembers that since his mother likes to quilt, he paid for her to go on a quilting retreat.
"The key is in the connection with the other person," Howell said.

**Giving them what they want**

You may take a lot of pleasure in thinking about what would be the perfect gift for a particular person. But research shows that your intuitions about how much "it's the thought that counts" are probably misguided.

Yan Zhang and Nicholas Epley published a 2012 study in the Journal of Experimental Psychology showing just that. Participants tended to first consider whether they like the gift or not. If they did not like the gift, that's when they ponder your intentions -- as in, why you would get them such a terrible gift?

Putting thought into the gift may serve as some protection for you, said Epley, professor at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business. But it may not necessarily increase the person's appreciation for the gift.

"If you're trying to make a gift-giver happy, something they'll really feel grateful for, get them what they want," Epley said.

With regard to thoughtfulness, it's the giver who appears to reap more benefits from thinking a lot about a gift than the receiver, Epley said.

"The way those thoughts count are that they make a gift giver feel closer to the recipient of the gift," he said.

**The safe choice?**

Still, Dan Ariely, professor of psychology and behavioral economics at Duke University, wishes people would be a little riskier in their gift choices.

When you're stuck on what to get someone, it's tempting to turn to gifts that don't last very long anyway, such as flowers and chocolates. They don't take up very much space, and if they're not pleasing to the recipient, it's not a big deal, Ariely said -- you don't have to bear much responsibility for things going wrong.

But if you want to make an impression on someone, it's better to take a risk and go for something that truly stands out, Ariely said.

"Try to give something that the person would have not thought about buying for themselves," Ariely said.
This season, Ariely is giving out nice headphones and "very good pens," luxuries that are useful but also not usually what a person would buy for himself or herself. He's also giving funny hats and shoes with small wheels in them, items that adults might not feel comfortable purchasing for themselves.

Still, Epley cautions that you're probably more likely to make someone happy by giving the person exactly what he or she would want.

"We find, with gift-giving, that our intuitions about gift-giving aren't right," he said.

**Gift cards vs. cash**

In our daily lives, a lot of purchases have the element of guilt along with them, Ariely said. If you give cash or a credit-card-sponsored gift card that can be used anywhere, your friend may be tempted to use it on groceries or gas or some other necessity that doesn't make it feel very "present"-like anymore.

Ariely's intuition is that if you give a gift card that must be used at a particular store, restaurant or entertainment venue, it may eliminate the guilt a person would feel about spending money to treat herself or himself. In fact, you're essentially creating an experience for the person by coaxing them into going to a particular place that they might not otherwise go.

A spa gift certificate is a popular example, Ariely said. "If you can only spend it on things that you would otherwise not allow yourself to buy, then it's more valuable," he said.

**For men vs. women**

There has been some research to suggest that men and women view gifts differently. Jeff Huntsinger, assistant professor of psychology at Loyola University in Chicago, and colleagues did a study published in Social Cognition in 2008 on how gifts influence relationships.

Researchers did a series of experiments with men and women where people were led to believe either that they had received a good or a bad gift from their romantic partner, and then state their views about their partner and their relationship.

It turned out that regardless of whether the gift was good or bad, women believed their boyfriend was similar to them and that the couple would stay together for a long time. Men, on the other hand, had a more negative reaction in the "bad gift" setting, being more likely to view their girlfriends as dissimilar and to predict that the relationship would end sooner.

This should not be generalized to the public at large, as this is just a single study, and it's unclear what its implications are, Huntsinger said. But perhaps for relatively modest gifts, women
receiving bad presents may not view them quite as negatively as men. More research is needed to say for sure.

"What's interesting about gifts is that they can act as a marker that we understand the other person," Huntsinger said.

**Making everyone happy**

It's important to determine whose happiness you're trying to maximize when you give a gift, Ariely said. If it's the recipient's happiness, give what that person would like the most. If it's your own happiness, give whatever makes you happiest to give. And if it's the happiness of the relationship that you're most concerned about, Ariely says, consider: Under what conditions would this person remember and think about you?

If you're buying multiple gifts for a single person, such as a spouse of a child, you can try a mix of requested and "surprise" presents, Epley said. But he's more pessimistic about those wild-card gifts.

"As long as you recognize that those gifts are really for you, as much as they are for the receiver, then I think that's fine," he said. "Just don't be disappointed if they don't appreciate your thoughts."