Gift-giving is a highly symbolic form of communication. Are you a good gift giver? In this podcast you will learn how to think about gift-giving more rationally, with research-based tips about what matters and what doesn’t. Here’s a hint: We should worry less about how much money we spend. It’s typically the “low substance, high sentiment” gifts that are appreciated. It really is the thought that counts!

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GIFT GIVING SUMMARY

Gift-Giving is Significant
- Gift-giving is a form of communication. It is highly symbolic.
- Gift giving is prevalent, accounting for approximately 10% of retail sales. We give birthday gifts, wedding gifts, thank you gifts, Christmas gifts, hostess gifts,…
- There is a perpetual system of gift-giving in our culture: giving, receiving, reciprocating.

Symbolism in Gift-Giving
- Gifts represent the giver’s self-identity, his or her feelings about the receiver, and his or her feelings about their relationship.
- Gift-giving is emotion-laden and impacted by rituals and traditions that are formed by individuals’ culture and personal family upbringing.

The Gift-Giving 2x2 Matrix
- Receivers typically do not appreciate the extremes (too expensive or too cheap, too much thought & effort, or no thought & effort). People generally prefer gifts somewhere in the middle.
- The most appreciated gifts are often the low substance, high sentiment gifts (bottom right). “It’s the thought that counts!”

Gift-Giving Anxiety? NO WORRIES!
- We should worry less about how much money we spend. Low substance, high sentiment gifts are appreciated - it really is the thought that counts!
- As for those gift registries and wish lists - just buy from them! Stop trying to go above and beyond. Just give them what they want.
REFERENCES & LINKS

Gift-Giving

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Professor Russell Belk

- Professor Belk’s York University Schulich faculty page
- Talk About Talk episode #17: What Our Possessions Say

Talk About Talk & Dr. Andrea Wojnicki

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Hey there, I’m your communication coach, Dr. Andrea Wojnicki. You can call me Andrea. Thanks for listening to Talk About Talk. This is where we come to learn and talk about all things communication. My goal is to help you learn the communication skills that will catapult your career and enhance your relationships. Because when we communicate effectively, we can be a better manager, colleague, parent, partner, and friend.

We can also be a better gift giver, right? Yes, gift-giving is a form of communication. A significant one, it turns out. Gift-giving is prevalent, it is a common phenomenon. It is also highly symbolic. The gifts we give and receive communicate a lot of things – about the giver, about the receiver, and about their relationship.

My goal for this episode is to help you mostly when you’re gifting someone, but also some things to think about when you’re receiving a gift. By the end of this episode, you’ll have a list of things to consider, and yes, a few things to stop worrying about when it comes to gift giving.

If you guessed by the enthusiasm in my voice that I love this topic of gift-giving, well, you’re right. I first researched gift-giving over 15yrs ago when I was a doctoral student. Those of you who have been listening to previous Talk About Talk podcasts may recall that my main topic of academic research when I was a student was WOM. It occurred to me that WOM (or consumer recommendations about what to buy and warnings about what to avoid) was like a gift from one consumer to another. So, at the time, I decided to study gift-giving to help me with my WOM research.

Well, I can tell you that that research on gift-giving has stayed with me. I can’t be in a room when a gift is being opened (whether the gift is from me or to me or whether I’m just an observer), I always go back to thinking about this research. It’s like having a
whole different lens through which to observe the gift-giving phenomenon. Are you curious? I can’t wait to share it with you.

**CONTEXT**

You know that feeling when you give a gift to someone and they absolutely **love** it? It feels **fantastic**, doesn’t it?

The opposite is true too though. Gifting **fails**. Have you ever put a lot of time and effort into finding an amazing gift for someone, and then - when the person opens it, you realize you bombed? I can tell you personally that **has** happened to me - more than once. And it really hurts - especially when the person, the receiver, is important to me and especially when I thought I nailed it. It makes me question how well I know the person - and **all** sortsa things.

I’m not sure if you ever considered this before, but gift giving is a form of communication. Have you ever considered that? Well, **that** is why we’re doing this podcast!

 Gifts communicate things about us as givers, about also what we think about the receiver, and about what we think about our relationship with the receiver. Layer onto that, gifts are highly susceptible to encoding and decoding errors (Sherry 1979). In other words, misinterpretations (communication fails) can happen frequently in the gift-giving process.

So trust me - this gift-giving stuff is worth knowing. Some of this research isn’t too surprising. For example, the significance of **reciprocity** in gift giving. In this podcast, you’ll learn what the research says about gift giving dynamics so that you can become a better gift giver and a better gift receiver. Or at least a more informed one.

Let’s start with the significance of gift-giving.

**SIGNIFICANCE of GIFT GIVING**

There is no question that GIFT GIVING IS SIGNIFICANT. There are two main reasons for this: the **prevalence** of gifts and the **symbolism** associated with gifts. In other words: gift giving is frequent, **and** it has deep and multiple meanings.
Researchers in the areas of anthropology, economics, sociology, psychology, and consumer behavior have examined the gift-giving phenomenon in detail and concluded that gift giving is a process that integrates a society (Sherry 1983), and that the significance in gift giving is “uncontested in terms of retail sales alone”, accounting or about 10% of retail sales in NA. That is HUGE! In fact, there are even gift stores, right? (Sherry 1983)

We give birthday gifts, teacher gifts, hostess gifts, thank you gifts, I could go on and on. Clearly gifting is frequent. It’s a significant part of our culture.

Gift-giving is also highly symbolic. Symbolic of the giver, of the giver’s beliefs about the receiver, and about the relationship between the giver and the receiver. Gifts can reinforce important relationships, take them to the next level, or even destroy them. Have you ever noticed how gifts-giving is a common complaint about people after a break-up? It's true, right? And by the way, If you think that gifts don't matter, that they aren’t significant, well, there’s symbolism in that too.

All this symbolism is probably why gift-giving induces anxiety. Much of the gift-giving research is focused on the premise that the obligation to give and receive might spark tension or anxiety. There’s also a strong evaluative component that exists at every stage of the gift giving process.

Kids compare gifts they got for their birthday or Christmas, don't they? Even adults - have you ever been involved in a conversation where people are comparing what gifts they received from their partners for Valentine’s Day? Yikes, right?!
Not surprisingly, gift-giving research concludes that inappropriate gifts cause embarrassment, threaten social ties, and leave lasting impressions. That’s a lot of stress when you’re shopping for a gift, isn’t it?

Then there’s the stress of receiving a gift. Of course, we don’t want the person who’s gifted us to feel badly. But gifts can produce unwelcome feelings of obligation and guilt. Have you ever received a gift from someone, and you suddenly felt like the relationship was out of balance? That’s partly because gifts are construed as currencies that are exchanged, and they’re also symbolic.

THE GIFT ITSELF: COMMUNICATION & SYMBOLISM

As I said before, gifts are a form of communication - gift-giving is symbolic. Gifts impart meaning. When you’re giving a gift you can think of it as being symbolic of three things: your own identity, your beliefs about the receiver, and your relationship with the receiver.

Sometimes Gifts “say” what cannot be said in words. Because of this symbolism, Receivers read into the gift (and the giver knows this!!!)
Consider two people who are dating. There’s the symbolism associated with traditional gifts like flowers or chocolate, or when someone insists on paying for a meal. Or the gift of jewelry. That’s all symbolic communication, right?

Gifts can express all sorts of things, including things like: **Interest, power, gratitude, an apology, compatibility** (that’s a big one), and gifts can even **indicate resources available** (or affluence).

That’s a lot of pressure to find the right gift, right? Well, I want to share with you a gift-giving model that can help us think about gifts in a way that might make this all seem slightly more rational. In a paper from 1993, CB researchers Sherry, McGrath & Levy highlighted how you can evaluate gifts across two dimensions: **Substance and Sentiment**.

The **substance** is how much cash you spent. It could range from *no cost* (say, something you made) to something *astronomically expensive*, right?

The second factor, **sentiment**, is the thoughtfulness and/or effort associated with the gift. A low sentiment gift could be a random gift card or a generic gift (like say, a teacher’s mug). Examples of high sentiment gifts are things that are personalized or homemade or that took a lot of effort to procure.

Here’s Professor Russell Belk, the multiple award-winning York University marketing professor who also appeared in Talk About Talk podcast episode #14 where he **shared his expertise about how our POSSESSIONS communicate things about us**. Professor Belk also has a lot of published research focused on gift-giving. Here he is describing the **sentiment** associated with a gift:

”...It used to be insulting and still is to some degree, to give a monetary gift or even a gift card rather than tangible gifts that you've actually sought out and thought about and found to be appropriate to the recipient. **Emerson** said that the true gift should be a part of you. And so, you bring your skills and your interest to bear on the gift, from the receiver’s point of view. So from the recipient’s point of view, you're more appreciative because it really is a part of that giver. If you send your secretary out to buy a gift for your partner, that's inappropriate because they [you] haven't put the time and effort and love and thought into it.”

So I know this is tricky because it’s a podcast and I can’t show this to you unless you go to the shownotes, but imagine for simplicity’s sake a 2x2 matrix, where you have substance (or cost) on one axis and sentiment on the other. There are four boxes. So
Gifts are either high substance, high sentiment, or hi substance low sentiment or low substance high sentiment, or low substance and low sentiment.

**Gift-Giving 2x2 Matrix**

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**Sentiment**

(personal, thoughtful, effort)

*Can you guess which gifts are most appreciated by the receivers?* Well, you might be surprised. If you guessed high substance and high sentiment (the most expensive and most thoughtful gifts, you’re wrong!

Apparently gift receivers experience displeasure at the extremes. Basically this means that if the gift is extremely high or extremely low on either substance or sentiment, then they don’t like that. If the giver was being too cheap or if they spent way too much. Similarly, if they went to way too much effort - or if it was way too easy (like as Professor Belk said, you ask your secretary to go get a gift for your partner. That’s too easy!) Another classic example here is the gift of cash. It’s so easy, right? Easy? Yes. But appreciated? Not so much.

(Of course, there are exceptions, depending on the person and the situation!)

*Can you guess what kind of gift is most appreciated then?* Well, it’s actually the low substance, high sentiment gifts that are the most appreciated. In other words the cheap but thoughtful gift. Like the drawing child gives her parent. Or the homemade meal that a one neighbor makes for another.

Most people don’t guess this, but it sounds about right when you think about it, doesn’t it?
Personally I find this 2x2 gift-giving matrix fascinating. Yes, I think about it when I’m giving or receiving or even just observing a gift-giving interaction. It’s a really cool way to examine the whole gift-giving phenomenon.

It’s also a helpful guide when you’re selecting a gift for someone. All else equal, the sentiment is more important that the substance. It really is the thought that counts.

I’ve discovered though that some gift-giving scenarios don’t seem to quite fit into this 2x2. Two of these scenarios are surprise gifts and gifts from gift-registries.

First - the surprise gift. Last December I was at home working on my Talk About Talk podcast, when the doorbell rang. Honestly, I was annoyed by the interruption. But boy was I in for a pleasant surprise. At the door was a woman who I met just a year earlier, in a professional context. We’d definitely hit it off. She was at my door with an unexpected gift for me and my family. A bunch of jumbo shrimps and high-quality steaks. Whhhhaaaat? I was so overwhelmed with her generosity. It wasn’t the gourmet elements of the gift that impressed me (although trust me, it was very very much appreciated). Rather, it was the complete surprise of there being any gift at all. This got me thinking - sometimes the gesture of gifting itself is symbolic. Regardless of the gift. Maybe there should be a third dimension on this substance and sentiment two-by-two – or maybe it's part of sentiment - call it the element of surprise.

The second scenario that doesn’t fit perfectly into our 2x2 substance x sentiment matrix is gift registries. You know, for bar or bat mitzvahs or weddings or for people who are expecting a baby? I read recently that people who create gift registries almost always prefer something from their registry, versus something else. Meanwhile, the gift giver might be trying to add some sentiment to the gift - some thoughtfulness or effort. Have you ever done this before? I know I’ve done his before. For a friend’s’ wedding. Sure there was a registry, but I had to think of something they might like at least as much and that demonstrated how much I adore them. But apparently, according to the research, that was just a waste of time. People who create registries generally just want stuff on their registry! So don’t over think it. Just buy something from the registry. Got it? Now we know.

THE GIFT-GIVING PROCESS: RITUALS & RECIPROCITY

Researchers have also sought to describe the gift-giving process with models. Many of these gift-giving models focus on three main steps: giving-receiving-reciprocating. So as you can imagine, the model or process is circular - it never ends!
The **GIVING** includes choosing the gift, creating or procuring the gift, wrapping it, and presenting it.

The **RECEIVING** includes unwrapping the gift, identifying it, thanking the giver, and displaying the gift.

The **RECIPROCATING** includes identifying an obligation and an occasion to start all over again, this time as the GIVER.

In his research, Professor Russell Belk, whom we just heard from, describes gift-giving as a self-perpetuating system of reciprocity.

There are **very** few exceptions to the universal requirement to reciprocate. (Sherry 1983). A few examples of people who may be exempt include work subordinates, wait staff, students, monks, and transients. If you’re not one of these, then sorry to say, but you’re probably obliged to reciprocate.

Of course there are rituals associated with each of the elements:

- Consider the **gift wrapping**. How fancy do you go with the wrapping? Do you always remove the price tag? What about the return receipt? And what do you do with the gift bag once the gift has been opened? Is it ok to re-gift the gift bag?

- Consider **thanking** the giver. Is a formal thank you required? Do you have to hand write a thank you or is it ok to text? And how soon after the gift was given is the thank you expected?

- And what about **displaying** of the gift? Do you **have to** wear that shirt your great aunt gave you? Do you have to display the decorative pillow that doesn’t match your living room? And when is it ok to exchange the gift?
These subtle but important elements associated with gift giving comprise the important rituals that become our cultural and our family traditions. They also explain why gift-giving expectations can be askew and feelings can get hurt. The customs that we grow up with inform our gift-giving expectations as adults, sometimes in ways that we aren’t even aware of.

I asked Professor Russell Belk about this:

“Anytime two people get together they have to decide how they’re going to regard especially rituals and the way that we celebrate things and how we eat our dinner.
AW: Is a dinner a gift?
RB: Yes, it certainly could be. And even such things as do you serve a [it] family style? Or does someone dish it out for you? It is a different sort of power….”

Wow. Preparing a meal for someone is a gift? I definitely hadn’t thought of that. See what I mean?
But I guess it makes sense. They say that cooks are giving some of themselves when they present a meal.

So there’s a lot to think about in the gifting process. Not just for the giver. But also in terms of the receiver.

RECEIVING

Sometimes the receiver will experience unwelcome feelings of obligation and guilt (Belk & Coon 1991). And sometimes not only these negative feelings, but even the gifts themselves are unwanted.

Sometimes the giver pays more for the item than the recipient values it, which is always awkward. By the way, this partially explains why people ask for Christmas lists or gift registries.

Despite all this anxiety, obligation and guilt, there is an expectation that the receiver will be gracious. Here is Professor Belk again –

”…the worst thing you can do is refuse the gift. To say I don’t want this. So somewhere in between would be re-gifting, where you take the gift to give it to someone else, hopefully not forgetting who was the original giver, giving
it back to them. But in that case, this is developing as a more acceptable thing to do.”

It’s true. **Regifting** used to be extremely insulting, but it seems to be more acceptable, right? or at least talked about. It’s almost a cliché. Nowadays re-gifting is even joked about as being environmentally responsible! I’ve heard of schoolteachers who put all the teacher gifts they receive into a pile and telling their friends to help themselves.

Speaking of teacher gifts - teacher gifts may fall into the category of what we call **token gifts**. They are small *(ok not all – have you heard about the ridiculous teacher gifts that Manhattan private schools teachers receive from their students? We’re talking little blue boxes with diamond bracelets. Crazy! Anyway, I digress.)* Token gifts are small, they are less personal, and they are often expected or anticipated gifts that symbolize or communicate gratitude. **Hostess gifts** sometimes fall into this category. A bottle of wine, some cocktail napkins, some flowers. A relatively simple gift that communicates gratitude. You can probably imagine giving token gifts like these to someone you don’t know well, right?

The relationship between the giver and the receiver is significant here…

**THE RELATIONSHIP**

The nature of **gift giving changes as relationships change**. *(Belk & Coon 1991)* As relationships progress, gifts can become more costly and more personal. So yes, remember the 2x2 matrix? Well, as relationships progress, gifts typically move from the low substance low sentiment to the high substance high sentiment quadrant.
And of course, people misfire with their gift-giving all the time! Giving too much, too little or too late can strain a relationship (Sherry 1983).

Gifts can also signal compatibility or incompatibility (Belk & Coon 1991). Here’s another model or theory to consider in the context of gift-giving: transitivity. Do you remember transitivity or balance theory from school?

\[
(+) \times (+) = (+) \\
(+) \times (-) = (-) \\
(-) \times (-) = (+)
\]

So assuming you’re buying a gift for someone you like (that’s a positive) and you choose something that you like (also a positive), you hope and assume they will like it too (another positive). But if they DON’T, then maybe you don’t know the person? Or (gasp) maybe you don’t want to know the person? It’s about balance between the giver, the receiver, and the gift itself.

Since gifts are so symbolic, they can communicate a desire to alter a relationship trajectory (Ruth Otnes & Brunel 1999) (Wooten 2000). Imagine an unexpected, incredibly thoughtful and meaningful. Maybe an intimate gift. It kind of changes things, doesn’t it?

When we communicate with people, we have our words, we have our tone, we have our body language, and, amongst other things, we also have our gifts.

Gifts are significant.

**SUMMARY**

Let me summarize now to help you think about gift-giving from a new, more rational perspective.

**Gift-giving is significant.** Simply put, gift-giving has the power to communicate a lot. Of course, there are token gifts, but there are also not-so-token gifts, especially when the gifting occasion or the tangible gift itself is unexpected.

Just understanding the significance of gift-giving can help you with your communication and with your relationships. And understanding the nuances of gift-giving can help you determine what you should worry about and what you shouldn’t worry about.
What should we worry about? Well, we should seriously consider the **symbolism** of the gift. But also consider the gift givers’ individual situation – their **culture and personal family upbringing**. Sometimes we read into gifts unnecessarily when they were intended as tokens. And sometimes we misinterpret based on divergent cultures or family rituals.

I hope you will give some thought to the substance and sentiment gift-giving model with the **2x2 matrix**. Remember that people typically don’t appreciate the **extremes**, and that the most appreciated gifts are often the **low substance high sentiment** gifts.

What should we worry less about? Well, apparently we should worry less about how much **money** we spend (*it really is the thought that counts*)!

And as for those **gift registries and wish lists** - just buy from them. Stop trying to go above and beyond. Just give them what they want – maybe with a big hug, so they know you really love them.

Alright that’s it for this episode.

Please let me know what you think of this episode. I would love to hear your gift-giving stories. Your triumphs and yes – your gifting fails. We are talking about gift-giving all month in the **Talk About Talk FB page** if you want to join us!

Now – **I have a gift for you**! I created an awesome detailed summary of the “5 Simple Steps to Improve your Communication.” Its available as a FREE printable PDF for anyone who subscribes to the Talk About Talk weekly email newsletter. It’s really two gifts – the printable PDF and the email newsletter! You’re welcome!

**THANKS for listening – and READING!**

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