

Oh, to miss the mark when giving gifts:[Chicago Final Edition]

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Full Text (943 words)

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Every December, Johanna Kurtz-Osborne of Chicago looks forward to the gifts she'll get from her husband, Bill--and struggles to find gifts for him. "He gives me wonderful gifts and I give him what I think are wonderful gifts, but he usually takes them back," she says.

Bill Osborne, 42, has a knack for getting Johanna clothing and jewelry she likes, and even qualified for the husbands' hall of fame by buying her a Kate Spade purse before they became trendy. On the other hand, Johanna, 40, has seen the telescope she got him several years ago remain packed in its box and books she has bought him go unread. "I always feel like I fail when I buy him gifts," she laments.

There's a lot more to Christmas presents than what's found under the tree.

Giving a person--whether it's a spouse, significant other, or family member--the right holiday gift can be just as satisfying as receiving one. But giving the wrong gift can cause disappointment, tension and even raise questions about the state of the relationship.

"The gift-giving process is all about understanding the [other] person ... what they're about, their personality, their likes or dislikes," observes Elina Furman, a New York City author whose many books include "The Everything Dating Book" (Adams Media, 12.95). "It gauges how well you know each other."

"It makes you feel you don't know the person well when you buy something they can't enjoy," concurs Johanna. "This is my partner for life and I feel like I don't know him. The first couple of years is fine, but when you're married for seven years and you have to get a list, it's a little disappointing."

According to Furman, when a person gets a present that's out of sync with his or her desires, it suggests that the relationship has communication problems.

On the other hand, "when someone does get it right, it shows that they're attentive to your needs, it shows that they've been listening. It shows they're going to apply the effort to try to make the relationship work [because] how much they looked for the right present is correlated to how much effort they're putting in to make the relationship work."

It's fairly easy to spot when a gift is just something to put in a box by a certain day of the month--for example a brightly colored, shiny jacket for someone who always wears black. "Men also

get things they put in the back of the closet, like a sweater that they'll never wear," Furman says.

She adds that whereas women are more likely to express their disappointment with gifts, men hide their own reactions to avoid hurting their partner's feelings. While a gift that's way off base can signal a problem in a relationship, a lot of times gifts reveal an overall appreciation of the recipient, but confusion about the finer points of his or her preferences. Johanna knows that Bill loves books, but because she's not an avid reader, she tends to miss the mark when she buys them for him.

Similarly, David Schwartz, 53, of Morton Grove knew that his wife, Bonnie, also 53, wanted perfume for Christmas two years ago-- but he got her Elizabeth Taylor's fragrance when she wanted Celine Dion's.

The stereotypical, but often genuine, differences in the ways men and women approach shopping also affects gift giving. "Guys go out and buy what they need when they need it," observes Sandra Beckwith, a Fairport, N.Y.-based consultant. "It's really hard to get them what they want because they got it last weekend when they went out."

This focus on utility rather than personal pleasure, often leads men to give well-intentioned but impersonal gifts. Because they had just done work on their kitchen, Rich Tucker, 41, of LaGrange thought he had the right idea when he got his wife Nicole Bonenfant, 42, kitchen gadgets as a gift. "I hadn't realized that kitchen stuff wasn't that exciting," he says. "Practical gifts, out, impractical gifts, in."

Once he learned this lesson, Tucker was able to find a pair of boots for Bonenfant by noticing the kind of shoes she liked in catalogs and drawing connections. "The boots were awesome," she says. "They were very stylish, they were the right size." If bad gifts suggest trouble and good gifts indicate good communication, great gifts sometimes can even change a person's perception of a relationship.

Chicagoan Meredith Kaminski had been dating her husband Ron for seven months when two Christmases ago she gave him a photo album filled with pictures of trips they had taken together, a personal, low-key gift that reflected her sense that the relationship was still in an early stage.

Ron, on the other hand, gave her an original painting by Dr. Seuss (Theodore Geisel), whom she loves. Though she was embarrassed by the difference in the costs of their presents, she also was very moved by the gift and the message it conveyed. "It was a gesture to let me know that this wasn't just any relationship, that he saw a future," says the 28-year-old Kaminski, who married Ron four months ago.

Still, a gift's cost is secondary to the thought that's put into it. "He really paid attention to the fact that she's a big Dr. Seuss fan," Furman says. "Even if he'd gotten something on a smaller level, just showing that he paid attention to her likes and hobbies shows a commitment."

And making a commitment to really paying attention to someone is always a great gift.