

For consumers, greatest gift may be anticipation

NATALIE JACEWICZ 6:33 a.m. PST December 11, 2015



(Photo: GANNETT)

The weeks preceding the holidays torture children, and may even irk work-weary grownups. But scientists say delayed gratification may not be the worst part of December for consumers. In fact, it may be the best.

Previous studies have shown that people get more pleasure from experiential purchases than from material ones. In other words, people generally gain more happiness from doing things —attending a concert or taking a vacation, for example — than from having things. But a paper in *The Journal of Consumer Psychology* has shown that people's happiness also varies depending on when they receive a gift. Though consumers prefer to get their mitts on goods as soon as possible, they prefer the opposite in experiential purchases. They relish the wait.

"People derive benefits from the goods they buy ... when they're not experiencing them," said Amit Kumar, who authored the Cornell study with Thomas Gilovich.

Kumar said experts classify happiness in three categories: anticipatory pleasure, moment-to-moment enjoyment, and retrospective satisfaction. When it comes to the pleasure people derive from anticipation and reminiscing, experiential purchases blow material ones out of the water.

To test whether people do, indeed, prefer goods sooner and experiences later, Kumar and Gilovich surveyed roughly 100 men and women in a series of tests. They presented participants with hypothetical situations and also analyzed their real-life purchasing patterns. The researchers found that people prefer to "have now and do later," and their purchases reflect this. Buyers tend to consume material goods immediately and dislike waiting. But consumers buy experiences in advance and savor the lead-up.

This enjoyment contradicts society's "consume now, pay later" mentality, according to Harvard Business School's Michael Norton, who wrote the book "Happy Money: The Science of Smarter Spending" with Elizabeth Dunn. He points out that businesses like Amazon encourage people to consume a book or movie immediately and pay later on a credit card statement. But this spending does not maximize happiness, he says.

"If you get everything right away, you never get to anticipate it. And you're also in debt."

He said studies have shown that pre-paid experiences like cruises can maximize happiness before and after the main event.

"The happiest day of a cruise is the day before the vacation," Norton said. "When you're envisioning your vacation on the beach, it's perfect. You look terrific: You're already tan; your abs look awesome."

The rosy goggles continue after the trip. People often register pre-paid elements of a trip — think turndown chocolates — as "free" when they reminisce after the fact.

Science's verdict is in, but people still love material goods. Millennials tend to say they'd prefer experiences to material goods, but Norton notes that the market shows people still buy a lot of goods.

The Northridge Mall in Salinas welcomed roughly 100,000 shoppers on Black Friday weekend, according to Susan Causey, the mall's general manager. Visits have increased year over year each holiday season, she said.

But Causey suggests that mall shopping blurs the line between material purchase and experience. She said "a combination of all the beautiful interior and exterior décor, the presence of Santa, holiday music and live entertainment" make holiday shopping special.

Not too far from Santa, Karen Gomez, 22, and Sheila Acosta, 21, sat under streams of holiday lights hanging from the ceiling. Gomez said they were shopping for games to play on their Wii.

Acosta said she doesn't tend to dwell on the game itself when she makes a purchase. "It's about the experience — having fun with family."

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