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Brainstorm: Experiences Are Better Than Things

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My friend wanted me to explain the following comment, and quickly, because it was making him feel guilty.

“You’ve got three months with this gift,” I had just told him. We were out Christmas shopping for our spouses, and he was contemplating the purchase of a set of kitchen knives for his wife. “Just a quarter’s worth of goodness. After that, any blessing goes away.”

He looked at me a bit annoyed, understandably, and so I launched into an explanation, the details of which are written below. I was appealing to an urban legend you have probably heard before.

If you really want to bless a loved one with a gift, so the legend goes, buying an experience is better than buying an object. Gifting your wife with a three-week cooking class would be better than giving her an expensive set of knives, for example. Unlike most urban legends, however, this one has substantial backing in the behavioral sciences.

A fair body of research shows that course-type gifts always trump cutlery-type gifts. On average, the brain will only be able to wring happiness out of a physical object for three months, and we often exhaust that way before 90 days. The pleasure of an experience, on the other hand, can literally last a lifetime.

My friend wanted to know why.

We are only in the beginning stages of understanding the answer, I unsatisfactorily told him. But I also told him we were not clueless, and that a number of explanations have been put forward to explain the observation.

One of the most interesting involves the richness of the information the two choices are capable of giving to our brains. Objects by their nature possess a finite, limited physical form, with mostly unchanging, corporeal characteristics that the gift-giver hopes will give the receiver pleasure for a while. At the end
of 90 days, however, the object still possesses those same finite and corporeal characteristics. But not the magic. Your brain can only gaze at this impoverished unchanging dataset for so long before it says, “Enough with the pleasure, already!”

We actually have a term for this law of diminishing returns. It is called adaptation (or habituation). Adaptation is formally defined as a decrease in the strength of a response to a repeated stimulus. The more you keep looking at the knives, the more you get used to them.

When you give someone an experience, you necessarily create an “episode” in their life, which, unlike an object, possesses a very rich dataset. There will be new people to meet in that cooking class, a new teacher to experience, probably many new things to learn. These change over the life of the experience. You begin to acquire skills you did not previously possess, which does nothing but increase this richness. There is a memory gadget within the brain designed to handle such episodes. Not surprisingly, the gadget is called “episodic memory.”

Episodic memory is a cognitive process quite capable of handling time-based data-rich targets. It creates — then organizes — hundreds, maybe even thousands of items to remember in a given experience. This is a much richer dataset than the knives possess. Importantly, when the experience is over, all you have left is a memory of what happened. As such, you can never revisit the gift in a manner identical to the way it was initially experienced — it was time-dependent after all, unlike the knives. And besides, the memory begins effacing virtually the moment it is first laid down. The point?

It will be many a moon before you will be able to habituate to such data-richness, and such instability. That’s one explanation for why the pleasure that comes from giving an experience lasts longer than the pleasure of giving an object.

Didn’t help my friend much, however. He still bought the knives. And all I had given him was the valuable experience of feeling guilty for his choices, which I am sure he will remember as surely as if I had given him a cooking class.

Original reference

Comments

2 COMMENTS TO “WHY EXPERIENCES ARE BETTER THAN THINGS”

Richard Theokas says:  April 27, 2013 at 5:46 am

So a $500 set of knives will be trumped by a $3500 cruise to the Mediterranean. So will my wallet. Even if I buy her four sets of knives during the year for continued habitual memories, I still come out ahead.
Financially:

Frankly, I prefer the experience of the cruise. We took one in 2003 and remember it fondly as if it occurred last week.

Thanks for connecting me to this site. I enjoy John’s work and look forward to it, just as I enjoyed listening to him when I was at Embry-Riddle.

David Donaldson says: June 3, 2013 at 9:45 am

I would like suggest a different comparison. The $500 set of knives compared to the free experience. That experience could be a day hike in the woods, a drive into the wine country or just spending some time together walking the dog. Couple of years ago I organised a ghost walk for a group of friends through downtown Toronto in late October... $20 and years later they are still talking about it!

While yes, you could argue that all of those cost money, my point is that the experience does not need to be expensive, for many people a $3,500 cruise is out of reach, a $200 camping weekend can produce some amazing memories for a fraction of the price 😊