

OPINION



Shoppers on Black Friday walk at Water Tower Place in Chicago on Nov. 24. EILEEN T. MESLAR/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

An important holiday gift that everyone should consider giving

By Sheldon H. Jacobson

Holiday shopping has begun, as stores and online retailers used Black Friday and Cyber Monday to launch the most lucrative time of the year for their businesses. Given that Thanksgiving was early this year, this holiday shopping season is longer than in most seasons.

When thinking about gifts for friends and relatives, the cost to you is one factor that enters your decision. However, to be mindful of the gift recipient, it is prudent to think about the full cost of ownership as well.

Consider the following situation. Suppose that grandparents are so proud of their grandchild who will be off to college next fall that they want to give them an automobile as a holiday gift. Such a generous offer would be appreciated by most. Yet, the ancillary costs of owning an automobile may be prohibitive. There is the cost of insurance, the cost of state tags for the vehicle, and the cost of maintenance and repairs that will inevitably arise. Without such considerations, what first appears like a generous gift may quickly become an unwelcome burden. This would only become more onerous if

the car is involved in an accident, creating more issues than most young people are ill-equipped to manage.

Another often welcomed gift for young people are pets. That cute dog or cat at the pet store must be fed, trained and taken care of. Parents often assume these responsibilities, using the pet as a mechanism to teach their children that having a pet is more than playing with it.

Most items require some maintenance and care. This is particularly true with technologies that involve software updates and services that are rarely free. This suggests that when choosing a gift for someone, consider not just what it will cost you, but what it will cost the recipient. Without such considerations, a well-intentioned gift may never be used, eventually ending up being stashed in a closet or donated to charity.

Gifts are an expression of good feelings and gratitude. They should not be a burden. The person receiving the gift implicitly will think about such issues, even if you do not consider them when making the purchase.

So what is the ideal gift?

For most people, there are things that they want and may not be able to afford.

This is why gift cards have become so popular. It allows the recipient to decide what they want, need and value, taking the guesswork out of gift giving. It also allows recipients to weigh the entire costs and benefits of every purchase, giving them control over the cost of ownership. Of course, gift cards do not carry with them the personal touch that a carefully chosen gift item offers.

There is a gift that everyone can give. It is also the most expensive gift to give, yet everyone can afford it, if they choose. The best gift one can offer people who we care about is our time and our attention.

"Stuff" may be reserved for people who are a part of our life, and with whom we do not share a visceral or ethereal relationship. Family members may like a gift of "stuff," but time spent and attention given are more meaningful and provide a more substantive and lasting offering.

When giving our time and attention, we are providing those we love and care about an experience. It is something that they will keep and remember far beyond any item. Ask any person what their most memorable moments were when growing up. They will invariably talk about experiences that

they had, not the items that they were given, which most likely are long gone.

Yet, giving time and attention is something that most of us are unwilling to offer. In our smartphone-driven, technology-centric life, it is far easier to buy something than provide our undivided presence to those we care about and love.

This holiday season, think carefully about the message you want to send when giving a gift. If you do opt for "stuff," supplement it with an experience. Also, include a personal note (without using ChatGPT!) to convey your sentiments. The experience and the note will be what is remembered and kept by the recipient; it will be appreciated for your attention far beyond the useful life of the gift itself.

During this season of giving, time and attention may be expensive, but is the most meaningful gift we can offer.

Sheldon H. Jacobson, Ph.D., is a professor of computer science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. A data scientist, he applies his expertise in data-driven risk-based decision-making to evaluate and inform public policy.