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The Role of the Gift Wrap Stall at Christmas.

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Abstract

The pressure to wrap a gift can cause anxiety for the giver. At Christmas, many shopping centres have gift wrap stalls to assist their customers with the wrapping. In this paper we explore the purpose of a gift wrap stall and the role it plays in Christmas gift shopping. Data were collected through observation as it allowed insights into the phenomena that could not otherwise be obtained. Findings include the nature of a gift wrap stall, the mood surrounding the gift wrap stall, the types of gifts wrapped, the level of decision making involved, the role of the staff and issues relating to trust, the waiting times for gift wrapping, the giver’s gift wrap skills, and enquiries into the gift wrap service. This research makes an insightful contribution to a novel topic in the field of consumer behaviour as it allows us to better understand gift wrapping and its role in gift exchange.

Introduction

Gift wrap often acts as the first point of physical contact between the giver and the receiver when a gift is exchanged. The pressure to wrap a gift in an appropriate manner can increase anxiety of the gift giver (Sheerry, McGrath and Levy 1993). Caplow (1984) pointed out that gift wrapping is critical to gift exchange, particularly at Christmas when gifts are often placed on display prior to opening. A gift wrap stall is where consumers can come to have their gifts prepared and wrapped. Gift wrap stalls are often situated in public retail settings. The gift wrap industry is worth over US$ 2 billion per year in retail sales (Hallmark 2008).

Gift wrapping is still a relatively under-explored part of the gift exchange process. The purpose of this study is to observe customer interaction with the gift wrap stall, describing the gift wrap stall and its role in gift creation during the gestation stage of the gift exchange process. The gestation stage of gift exchange refers to all activity prior to the gift being given including the selection, purchase and wrapping of the gift (Sherry 1983). This study will also seek to understand and gain insight into the role of gift wrapping within the context of a gift wrap stall, its staff and its customers and document and evaluate the role of a gift wrap stall at Christmas.

The findings of this study have been divided into two sections. The first section focuses on the role and nature of the gift wrapping stall, while the second part of the findings focuses on conceptual themes that arose from the research. Research into the relationship between the gift wrapping and the giver within a retail setting has only been explored to a limited degree as part of a understanding the relationship between gift exchange and retail settings (Sherry and McGrath 1989; McGrath 1989). These studies offered an extended investigation of gift shopping in the realm of gift stores. This paper builds on these earlier investigations by offering a unique perspective that incorporates gift wrapping and its importance in creating and exchanging gifts. This study could be significant to retailers, shopping centre management and academics interested in the gift giving and the gift wrapping phenomena.
The Method

To explore the gestation phase of the gift exchange process within the retail context, a study based on observation was undertaken. Observation allows insight into living processes that could not otherwise be disassembled (Grove and Fisk 1992). By unobtrusively observing the phenomena as it occurs, we can gain insights into both the process and the outcome of the service offered as it unfolds. Observation was conducted over three days in the lead up to Christmas 2007 and data were recorded in a field journal. In order to observe the gift wrap stall, permission was obtained from centre management with caveats. These included that research was not to be undertaken at peak busy periods such as Christmas Eve, that the researcher was to work the same times as the gift wrap coordinator, and that the researcher must wrap gifts as they conducted the observation. The last point was strongly stressed as a condition of research, as it would not be appropriate to have a person stand behind the counter and not wrap gifts while it was busy as it could antagonise customers.

Site of Observation

Before discussing the findings of the study, it is important to briefly understand the operational aspects gift wrap stall as it provides a context for the findings. This includes the shopping centre size and location, the stall’s layout, approach to gift wrapping and wrap selection and the people who interacted with the stall (staff and customers). Data collection was gathered at Chadstone Shopping Centre located in the south eastern suburbs of Melbourne. Chadstone is approximately 13km from Melbourne’s CBD and has over 400 shops. It is one of the largest shopping centres in the southern hemisphere by size, and the largest based on sales (Chadstone Shopping Centre 2008; Colonial First State 2008). It has sales of AUD$970 million per year, with over of 16.5 million visitors each year. December is one of the busiest periods of the year for the centre, and the centre runs extended hours in the lead up to Christmas. Chadstone is well known for its continuous 32 hour trade from 8am, December 23, to 5pm, December 24.

Point of Observation

The primary point of data collection was the centre management run gift wrap stall located in the premium fashion section. This was the largest gift wrap stall in the centre and was open to all purchases made in the centre. Customers were charged for gift wrapping, with prices beginning from AUD$3.00 for a small gift to AUD$12.00 for a large gift. The staff estimated that between 200 and 700 gifts were wrapped each day. The stall has a simple, but effective layout. It is U-shaped with benches for up to four wrappers to work at one time, as illustrated below:

![Figure 1.1 Layout of the Gift Wrap Stall](image-url)
The Gift Wrapping Process

Usually dialogue initiated by the customer and begins with ‘How much?’ but if not mentioned, the staff will point out that this is a paid service and give a quote for the gift to be wrapped. The price of wrapping is determined by one of the staff members, who for the shift, is in charge of the money and writing up the order form. There can be inconsistencies between quotes as there are limited pricing guidelines. It is during this time that customers can select the wrapping they like or give any other instructions about the wrapping. Customers are then asked to leave the gift and come back at a pre-determined time. If the customer is dissatisfied with the wrapping, the present will be wrapped again for free, although this did not occur while observation took place.

Gift Wrap Selection

This gift wrap stall had a comprehensive selection of gift wrap papers and ribbons. There were approximately twenty-four different papers, over twenty four ribbons and a selection of paper sashes used as decoration. There was a wide selection of colours and patterns, approximately a third with a Christmas theme. There were no black or dark colours. There were two rolls of paper specifically for children. The display stand has several different combinations, although there are many more that could be created. Below are examples of gifts wrapped by the stall:

![Fig 1.2 Examples of Wrapped Gifts](image_url)

Instructions for Wrapping Gifts

There were very few instructions for gift wrapping, and they were expressed verbally by the gift wrap coordinator. All edges were to be folded to make a neater finish. Sticky tape was to be used sparingly and if possible, so that couldn’t be seen. Another point was to remove all prices from the gift (except if specifically requested not to be removed by the customer). Overall, the gifts had a professional finish. One customer watching his gift being wrapped commented that he was worried that “the gift within would not live up to the wrapping that surrounded it.”

People Involved with the Gift Wrap Stall

Due to the seasonality of the service, the staff were employed casually, and many returned each year. All the staff were females and of varying ages. When asked about the lack of male staff, the feedback was that they didn’t have the touch, “they were all thumbs.” There was no dominant group of customers seeking the services of the gift wrap stall. Generally the customers were below the age of 50, with very few elderly seeking gift wrap. Out of the 49 transactions observed, there were 29 male and 32 female customers (including couples and groups). While not a large difference, it did highlight that although women are generally seen as being more involved in the gift exchange process (Areni, Kiecker and Palan 1998; Belk and Coon 1993; Otnes, Lowrey and Kim 1993), men were still concerned with exchange of gifts and gift wrapping.
Results: Thematic Findings
Several themes emerged from the observation. They were based on the interaction between the consumers, the gift wrap staff, and the gift wrap stall in order to complete the creation of a gift. The themes discussed here appeared several times over the period of observation:

Mood Surrounding the Gift Wrap Stall
Shopping for gifts can be an enjoyable experience, but it can also cause anxiety (Sherry, McGrath and Levy 1993; McGrath 1989). The customers coming to the gift wrap stall exhibited a range of emotions, but they were generally more positive than negative. Some customers enjoyed their shopping experience while others were relieved it was over. While no one was angry, there was some frustration expressed but this was usually directed at themselves. The gift wrappers always projected a positive and happy mood, and as they enjoyed their work this was not difficult for them to do.

The Gifts Wrapped
A wide variety of gifts came to the gift wrap counter to be wrapped. Some were of unusual shapes and sizes, but the majority were perfume boxes, books or simple shapes, that are relatively easy to wrap. Gift Vouchers were also wrapped, indicating a need to de-commoditise the vouchers, and transform it into a gift (Cheel 1988). Gifts being prepared for wrapping could be divided into several groupings, based on gender or age. Gifts for women dominated the gift wrapping stall, and as one man commented, the only gift he has to buy is for his wife, while she bought for everyone else. Women are generally perceived as being more involved in gift exchange (Areni, Kiecker and Palan 1998; Belk and Coon 1993; Otnes, Lowrey and Kim 1993), yet there were still a substantial number of male customers using the gift wrapping stall. This could indicate that men still felt the need to be involved in gift. Gifts being wrapped for men, were the next largest group, followed by neutral gifts (a gift where it was not possible to tell the receiver’s gender) and then gifts for children. A possible reason why gifts for children was the smallest group, could be that people are less concerned about how the gift wrapping looks for children, and are happy to do it themselves although this is impossible to confirm based on observation alone.

Making Decisions about Gift Wrapping
Most customers preferred to not make decisions when it comes to the selection of gift wrapping. Only a few selected paper and ribbon, usually it is left to the gift wrapper who checks the colours of the product chosen and selects the wrapping to match. The customers seem to be relieved that they are coming to the end of thinking about the gift and are usually very happy with the outcome of the wrapped gift. However, during the observation, one customer did not think the gift was appropriately wrapped for a female (it was wrapped in a pale blue and silver combination with bows), yet she did not want it re-wrapped, even though it would be of no extra charge to her.

Customers who did select their own wrapping or give guidance about what wrapping they would like, usually made the decision based on to whom the gift was being given. For example, one customer stated that she would like the gift to be wrapped in pink as that was her daughter’s favourite colour, while another customer wanted lots of bows as that was what her mother-in-law liked. These decisions indicated a close relationship with the receiver, where the giver was concerned with the reception of the gift. A few customers wanted their gifts to be wrapped the same, one indicated that he didn’t want to show favouritism to anyone, while another customer wanted it to look good while on display under their Christmas tree.

Trust the Staff
The customers placed a high level of trust in the gift wrap stall staff. Customers were confident that the staff would make their gift aesthetically pleasing. As discussed previously, customers were quite happy for the gift wrapper to select appropriate wrapping for the gift. As some customers waited, they asked how the person wrapping the gift became a gift wrapper, with a following conversation about how they can’t gift wrap and how it is a talent that they admire. This indicates the equating of the gift wrappers to service worker artisans, who are able to maintain a degree of creative control over their work (Godwyn 2006). The gift wrappers all had their own favourite wrapping paper and, in conversations with each other, would indicate which papers and ribbon combinations they prefer. Usually when they chose the wrapping on behalf of the giver, they would choose from their favourites, as long as it suited the gift and followed any guidance left by the giver.

Waiting Times
Once the price for wrapping a gift had been agreed upon, usually the next point to discuss between the gift wrapper and the customer was how long it would take to wrap the gift. The pick up time stated would often put a customer off, usually because they were just about to leave Chadstone and did not want to be shopping any longer. Even when the gift could be wrapped straight away, a customer would be told that it will take at least 10 minutes. This is how long it takes to wrap the gift although this point is usually not articulated to the customer. The customer would then walk away, while the staff would discuss about the lack of understanding about how long it takes to wrap a gift. At the other end of the spectrum, gift wrap waiting times could be a few hours. This was stated prior to the goods being handed over.

On a gender basis, men were more likely than women to be happy to wait long periods for their items to be wrapped, while women tended to say they would do it themselves and walk away. The willingness by men to wait longer could indicate a perceived lack of gift wrap skill by men or that it was not something they felt comfortable doing themselves. Usually the waiting time would increase when a person came with multiple presents to be wrapped. The waiting time was dependant on the number of people wrapping gifts, and the number of customers already waiting to have their gifts wrapped. Waiting times could change very quickly. This was dependant on how many gifts were already waiting to be wrapped, the number of staff present, and the number of people waiting to use the gift wrap service.

Embarrassment of Wrapping Skills
When customers were waiting to have their gift wrapped, they would sometimes have a chat to the gift wrapper wrapping their gift. During the conversation, the customer would often express that they were hopeless at wrapping gifts and their gift never looks like the one in front of them. Usually these were off-the-cuff comments said in the moment. When the gift was handed back to the customers, they would thank the wrapper for doing a great job. This conversation between the gift wrapper and the customer implied the recognition and admiration of the gift wrapper’s skill and experience.

Enquiries into Gift Wrap
The number of people enquiring about gift wrap is about two to three people for every customer that goes ahead. Some people presume the wrapping is free, and are shocked when it is made clear that there is a fee involved for wrapping. Usually price oriented people decided not to go ahead with wrapping. Other enquiries about wrapping included whether any money made from wrapping went to charity. The gift wrapper looks uncomfortable when answering this question, usually stating that this stall has been set up by centre management to address a need in the centre. There was an expectation by the customer that goodwill and
charitable giving would occur, particularly at Christmas. The enquiry made did not, in any of the instances observed, stop the wrapping from going ahead.

Research Agenda and Conclusion

This paper explored and described a gift wrapping stall operating in a busy shopping centre in the lead up to Christmas. Observation recorded activities undertaken at the gift wrap stall, the interaction between the customers and the gift wrapping staff and the outcomes and responses to the wrapped gifts. Direct observation of the encounter allows the significance to be appreciated more (Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry 1989), and allowed insight into living processes that could not otherwise be disassembled (Grove and Fisk 1992). The findings that emerged highlighted areas previously unexplored in the gift exchange process. These included the role and nature of a gift wrap stall, and thematic findings exploring the mood surrounding the gift wrap stall, the types of gifts wrapped, the level of decision making involved, the role of the staff and issues relating to trust, the waiting times for gift wrapping, the giver’s gift wrap skills, and enquires into the gift wrap service. This research makes an important contribution to the field of consumer culture theory and allows us to better understand gift wrapping and its role in the gift exchange.

This paper could be significant to practitioners as it offers insight into commercial practices of a gift wrapping stall in a major Australian shopping centre. Findings can be learned from and applied to their own organisational setting. A limitation of this paper is that it does not explore consumers who leave the stall without having their gift wrapped, nor does it explore consumers who do not want their gifts wrapped at all. This could offer an opportunity for future research.

This research will be used to inform further research into gift wrapping. The next stage of research includes semi-structured interviews and videographed workshops. Semi-structured interviews will assisted in understanding the gift wrapping phenomenon in greater depth (Goulding 2002) and understand gift wrapping themes deemed important by the participant. Videographed workshops will highlight the visual and creative nature of gift wrapping by asking participants to wrap a gift for specific receivers and then discuss their rationale for their choice. As gift wrapping is a relatively under-explored field, it is suitable for further study from different perspectives. Gift wrapping is an important part of gift exchange and requires further recognition to understand its value and importance.

References


