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Eva Cerio

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Toward a better understanding of gift-giving's meanings

Eva CERIO

PhD Student

Université Gustave Eiffel

Laboratoire Institut de Recherche en Gestion (EA2354)

Abstract:

Marketing research on giving behaviour has overlooked gift-giving, even though this topic presents social, ecological and economic issues. Therefore, we conducted 16 interviews to better understanding gift-giving meanings, distinguishing three types of objects: ordinary products, basic necessities, and precious objects. Our results identify five major meanings: philanthropic giving, symbolic redistribution, symbolic transmission, material redistribution and calculated giving. They vary according to the orientation of the gift (for a personal purpose or simple generosity) and the value attributed to the gift-giving (intangible or tangible). This research also highlights the importance of distinguishing the object that has been donated, since gift-giving is not considering in the same way for the various identified objects. Finally, this study has strong managerial implications for charities by allowing them to understand donors' discourses according to three types of objects.

Keywords: gift-giving behaviours, charities, non-profit marketing

Track: Public Sector and Non-Profit Marketing

1. Introduction: theoretical context, research questions and objectives

While it is difficult to precisely quantify gift-giving in France, studies indicate that in 2017, 209,000 tons of objects were donated or sold to / by charities, which represents an increase of 14% compared to 2014 (ADEME, 2017). This volume and this constant increase of objects invite more discussions on this practice. In addition, the gradual development of intermediary giving - achieved through intermediaries responsible for collecting donations (such as charitable organizations) - has encouraged the growth of marketing techniques to attract potential donors (Gallopel-Morvan, Birambeau, Larceneux, & Rieunier, 2013).

Yet, marketing research on gift-giving behaviours is overlooked - even though the object allows to structure links, and to express social, personal and / or family values (Ahuvia, 2005; Belk, 1988). Research has focused on (1) the explanatory factors of giving behaviour, like sociodemographic factors (sex, age) and psychographic variables such as altruistic personality, selfishness or nostalgia (Guy & Patton, 1988; Merchant, Ford, & Rose, 2011); (2) the motivational reasons to donate objects that have become useless, by highlighting donor profiles (Bergadaà, 2006; Guillard & Del Bucchia, 2012). However, few have tried to understand the meaning associated with gift-giving, and even less to intermediaries such as charities. Yet, giving objects is an act that has a meaning for the one who does it (Bergadaà, 2006). It is a source of reciprocity and meaning, through the expression of self and values (Mauss, 1923). It allows one to express one's existence and to share one's identity with others through the given object (Belk, 2010). Gift-giving is also a means of creating links of interdependence between people, a form of social exchange that goes beyond classical merchant exchange (Godbout & Caillé, 1992; Kozinets, 2002; Mauss, 1923). Gift-giving can therefore express an identity and values and create social bonds.

In this way, this research asks the following questions: what are the different meanings that a donor gives to his act of gift-giving? In addition, do the meanings differ according to the type of objects given? Through 14 interviews with donors and 2 with professionals, the goal is to understand the different meanings related with gift-giving, identifying three types of objects: ordinary objects (furniture, books, clothes ...), basic necessities (food and hygiene products) and precious objects (objects with significant financial value, whether they are symbolic or not). The objective of this research is therefore to enrich the literature on gift-giving by analysing what the act of giving means for donors and to explore the gift of precious objects and basic

necessities - two objects with little study but with significant interests (for example, Fondation de France evaluated food collection value at 39.5 million euros in 2015).

2. Methodology

In order to answer the research questions, 14 semi-structured interviews were conducted with donors chosen for their heterogeneous socio-demographic criteria and types of donations and selected with a theoretical sampling. The data were collected according to the principle of theoretical saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Nine donors were local elected officials and five donors had been recruited in an Ile-de-France university. Donors were invited to react on three themes: (1) their behaviour and feelings regarding time-giving, money-giving and ordinary objects-giving, (2) their behaviour and feelings about their precious objects and their possible gifts, (3) their reactions to two requests from French charities: one from “Restos du Cœur” for giving basic necessities and one from “les petits frères des Pauvres” for obtaining gifts of precious jewels. The interviews, fully transcribed, lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and took place at donors' homes or at their work place. Two other interviews were set up with members of the “petits frères des Pauvres” association. This association has been chosen as a priority because it has made precious object giving a focus and has organized auctions for collecting precious objects over a number of years. The data obtained were coded according to the constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) in order to make themes and categories emerged.

3. Results: 5 major meanings

In the analysis, five major meanings emerged: philanthropic giving, symbolic redistribution, symbolic transmission, material redistribution, and calculated giving. These meanings vary according to two dimensions: (1) the orientation of the gift (realized for a personal purpose or by generosity) and (2) the value attributed to the act of gift-giving: an intangible value charged with symbol and a material value (utilitarian and / or financial). The five meanings identified vary according to the type of objects studied, as we will see.

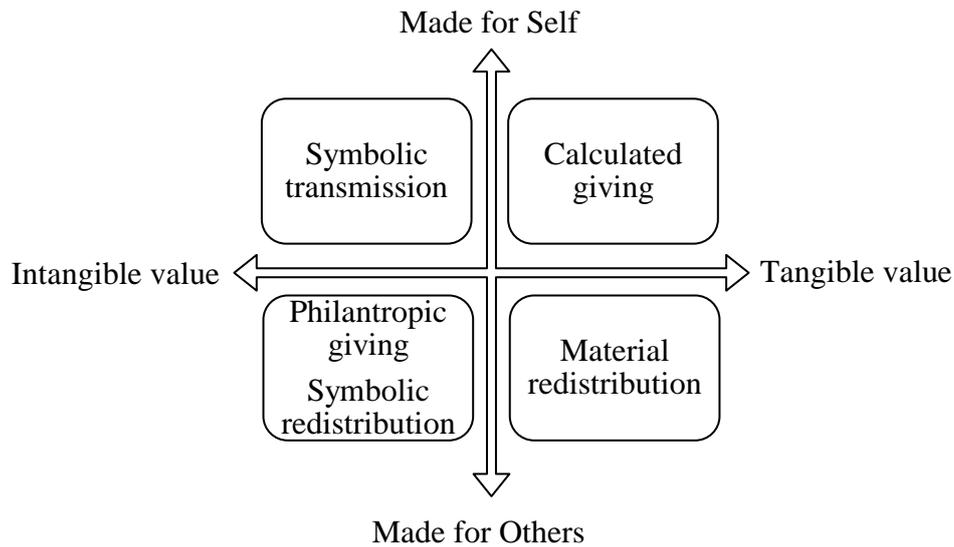


Figure 1. Classification of gift-giving meanings

3.1 Philanthropic giving

The gift represents a philanthropic act, in particular because the given object has at first symbolic values rather than utilitarian ones. Giving is part of the personality of donors and reflects their humanity and sensitivity. They associate the gift with a human act, a reflection of oneself and of their sociable personality turned towards the others: “*me, if you want, I am very social [...] I am very sensitive to everything that is charitable, humanitarian, social. I'm saying that it's natural, it's not ... I do not find any enjoyment and that's natural. I tell you it's genetic, I think that's it, you see*” (E6). Donors give out of generosity and try to level the playing field for others by doing what they call the “*little hummingbird*” (E13). It should be noted that this meaning is not mentioned in the case of basic necessities and precious objects; these two objects are given more as a symbol or out of obligation.

3.2 Symbolic redistribution

Concerning precious objects and basic necessities, the symbolic nature is strong. A precious object, by its historical and / or aesthetic values, can be given to museums, foundations or cultural associations in order to give access to a historical and / or aesthetic artefact: “*If I give this [a de Gaulle signature], it is necessary that people take advantage of it, you see, to a museum [...]. Because De Gaulle is the heritage of everybody, it does not belong to me; it belongs to history you see. It worth an inestimable value*” (E6). Concerning the gift of basic

necessities, it is motivated by the representative symbol of French redistribution and thus is a normal responsibility for French citizens: *“It is a feeling of ... rebalancing a society which is ... which lives at several speeds [...] today, in the functioning of our society, it is a form of redistribution”* (E13). It is almost a duty; although the notion of pleasure is slightly present. Here, the person gives because it is her duty; he or she does not personally implicate himself or herself in the act and maintains his or her separation from the act - remaining in a form of *“sharing out”* for (Belk, 2010).

3.3 Symbolic transmission

Here, the gift has an intangible value, but is made for oneself because it expresses a form of transmission of symbolic and family values. The gift reflects an education and the values received from family and / or entourage: *“It's a matter of education too, I think. My parents always gave for charities, so yes I think that it comes a lot from education”* (E10). It also allows them to transmit values: *“it's for educating the children; it is a way of showing them a reality that they do not live. [...] it gives them moral and sharing values, self-giving a little bit even if it's at a small scale”* (E4). This last idea is more visible when some people mention the fact that they give to charities and / or causes for which their family is or was committed. Then, the subject becomes plural - it connotes a community family.

In the case of precious objects, this transmission is more pronounced; by the memories they evoke and the way in which they represent self-identity. There is often a strong attachment for these objects. In addition, it is important for the donor that the object's value continues through the act of giving. It seems easier to give to people who share a link, and often a family link: *“I would prefer that these objects remain in the family for sentimental reasons and to conserve family history. From the moment an object is given to a charity, we don't know what it will become, in what hands it will land and so, somewhere, it distils the associated sentiments”*, E1). For people who share a symbolic link: *“I had to empty my grandparents' house [...] and there were things that belonged to the people we loved [collectible fishing rods that belonged to the grandfather] and my interest is to have found a fisherman who will use them and whose eyes shone when he looked at them ”*(E4). This symbolic transmission is not mentioned for basic necessities, since this act is more considered as a moral duty. Beyond assuming an immaterial aspect, gift-giving still has a material purpose, for oneself or for others.

3.4 Material redistribution

The idea is that the gift has a utilitarian aspect and a material purpose - a real utility for others. Donors seek to give to people in need, to combat widespread diseases and to vulnerable people. They seek to ensure the usefulness of the gift: *“I give more to a national cause where we see, that it really goes to people who need it and is not lost. I want to know that it's really going to people who need it rather than just trying to look good”* (E11). In the case of basic necessities, donors are really trying to ensure that their purchases are useful to the receiver. Therefore, they are committed to responding to defined lists of purchase. In addition, for ordinary objects, donors give functional and in objects in good condition: *“It's clothes that are impeccable, stuff that still has labels on it”* (E8). They will do it to avoid throwing away (*“the feeling of saying that we gave rather than discarding”* (E5)) and to give a second life to the object: *“I find that good that there is an extension of life for these objects”* (E13). The gift of precious objects is less defined by this utilitarian function, since people have difficulties considering giving them to charities "simply" to provide a service, as we have seen. Thus, though the useful function of the gift, giving allows people to feel good by contributing to the well-being of others.

3.5 Calculated gift

If the gift has a philanthropic aspect, it is also made in order to obtain a benefit for oneself. Indeed, some people underline the fact that by giving, they consider that they would like to have this help in return if they needed it someday: *“we say to ourselves, the day it happens to us, that we would be glad that people get mobilised like that”* (E5). We observe that there is an arbitration between the object's value, the available resources and the donor's relatives. According to this arbitration, the meaning given to the object's giving differs in terms of personal interest. People who give precious with significant financial value but are only weakly symbolic seek to obtain financial compensation through tax exemptions, for example. They will give if they have financial benefit: *“The charity recovers 80% and the donor even makes a small profit [...] when we give food, clothes or something like that, there is less impact because they do not have the same value. For these ordinary objects, we could get back just a small bit, but still get back something ... giving something that has financial value and for which we get back nothing ... it would bother me to give it ... without a return”* (E5). For objects of daily use, which are mainly utilitarian, donors seek to get rid of some objects that have become

less useful for them. Relatives will be favoured for simplicity: “*we are emptying everything, we give to those around us [...] because I tell myself that it's easier and then that it serves people we know and appreciate*” (E5). Thus, donors seek to ensure material benefits from their gift, confirming Mauss's (1923) gift/counter-gift rule.

4. Discussion and managerial implications

While White and Peloza (2009) showed that giving has a dual orientation (towards oneself or others), this research reveals the importance of the type of value attributed by the donor to his action, which can be symbolic or utilitarian. Moreover, it shows that according to the value given to the object (utilitarian, social, symbolic, financial, etc.), and the use that the consumer has of it, the act of giving will not have the same meaning. Giving precious objects is more symbolic, ritualized and familial (Price, Arnould, & Curasi, 2000). Moreover, giving to strangers raises paradoxical emotions for precious objects and basic necessities. When giving precious object, it would be necessary to maintain its symbolic value, and / or to have no family and / or no longer be attached to the object, even for its financial value – elements that are rare to mix. Giving basic necessities is considered to be a moral duty of redistribution; it can be well perceived and natural or can be a source of negative feelings (rejection of charities' solicitation, sense of judgment, personal deprivation).

Thus, gift-giving has double meanings: it is a source of meaning while at the same time having a functionality. Moreover, it relies on a form of "immaterial" reciprocity, through the search for coherence between the act of giving and personal values as well as the search for material benefits (Mauss, 1923, Godbout and Caillé, 1992). Also, donor's involvement in the act differs depending on whether the object is given without personal commitment (by duty, habit or utility) - which is consistent with Belk's (2010) concept of *sharing out* - or given to express a personal identity and engage oneself in a philanthropic way - which is related here to the concept of *sharing in* (Belk, 2010). Thus, if the sample selection could be improved according to explanatory variables mentioned in the literature, this research contributes to perceptions of the act of giving in a new context and takes a different look at gift-giving. It also helps to differentiate types of objects and to include the study precious objects and basic necessities, which is new and raises specific questions that could be considered in future research. To conclude, gift-giving is not always rational (Bergadaà, 2006) but is a personal act,

which depends on an interaction between a person, a situation and a given object, at a specific moment.

In conclusion, this analysis has strong managerial implications for charities. Beyond the fact that gift-giving helps reduce the ecological impact of consumption, this research provides qualitative information to charities who may better show the value of gift-giving - in particular by using the two gift-givings' identified dimensions. For example, they can concentrate on the immaterial aspect of gift-giving, which allows them to reach more consumers concerned with the symbolic aspect of the act, for oneself or for others. It also helps to better understand consumers' thoughts on precious objects and basic necessities. In particular, it shows that pleasure and fun must be associated with the gift of basic necessities and that guarantees of value transmission must be proposed for precious objects.

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