

CHANGING THE HOLIDAY GIFT EQUATION: MORE TIME AND LESS MONEY MEANS REAL GIFTS

FOR MOST OF US, CHRISTMAS IS A STRUGGLE BETWEEN TWO FORCES INCONGRUENT WITH THE HOLIDAY — TIME AND MONEY. IN DECEMBER, AT BREAKNECK SPEEDS, WE CAREEN BETWEEN BIG-BOX STORES WITH CREDIT CARDS FLASHING IN AN ALL-OUT EFFORT TO SCRATCH NAMES OFF GIFT LISTS.

BY BICK TREUT



“Just two more to go,” I mumble to myself in a jam-packed mall parking lot. Sliding deep into the red after spending too much, I say, “It’s Christmas, what the hell,” before driving off to another shopping center on Route 202.

During a quieter moment at a small table inside Dani & Jonny’s in Clinton, I wonder: If Jesus were born today, would the three wise men log onto Orbitz for cheap seats on the night flight from Babylon to Bethlehem? After landing, would they ask the Avis rep for directions to the nearest Wal-Mart? Not knowing what to buy, would they grab that discounted package of frankincense, gold and myrrh from a display rack near the check-out counter? Would they stop by the manger just long enough to say hi and drop off their gift before making the rounds of holiday parties?

Probably not. And that’s why I’m feeling a tad disconnected. Strains of *Silent Night* fill the coffee shop along with some friendly Clintonians who just arrived. I ask myself: What am I doing here? What are these people doing here? Don’t they realize that Christmas is just a few days away?

But the giggling newcomers don’t look like they’d cut in front of you at a jammed check-out

counter in a deep-discount store. While taking their seats, they don’t look like the types that would grab the last videogame, the one you promised your son, just as you were reaching for it on the shelf. No, these people don’t even look frazzled. And it’s mid-December. They’re having a good time, showing each other the gifts they bought for friends and relatives.

I ask where they’ve been shopping. “Right over here,” one of them says pointing to Main Street.

Later, Walter Hetzel, who owns the art store here, explains that the people who shop in town are looking for personalized service. They are looking for advice. They want to find the right gift.

“What a concept,” I reply while thinking that it sounds kind of foreign. But my mind starts buzzing with hypotheses. Maybe the people who shop in town are *process-oriented*. Maybe they enjoy the whole “picking out gifts” thing. Maybe their Christmas isn’t about getting shopping over with. To someone who feels validated by crossing things off lists, this is a revelation.

Looking at the stuff in the Secours window across the street, I think about the gifts I’ve given that had the same effect as wild pitches in baseball. One year, I got my wife a Black & Decker Scrub Brusher — the low point on my gift-giving continuum. A couple of years later I bought a knife set, and she said, “Well, I guess this isn’t as

bad as the scrub brusher.”

One thing I like about these little stores in places like Lambertville, Flemington and Clinton is you don’t fall victim to the Gruen effect — the intentional use of atmospherics (store or mall layout, lighting, music, scents) that leave you dazed and vulnerable. I read all about this in the book *Coercion* by Douglas Rushkoff. They get us disoriented so we’ll buy stuff to regain some sense of control from the surrounding chaos. We don’t realize what’s happened until we get back into our cars (if we can find them). In our own space, we crank our engines to the guilt-trip of buyer’s remorse: “I can’t believe I just bought all this stuff!”

Talking with a shop owner in town grounds us, keeps us somewhat rational and, at the same time, high-spirited. The lack of crowds elbowing you away from all the “popular items” in the chain stores takes competition out of the equation. And, in a town like Clinton, you don’t have to worry about forgetting where your car is or finding a big dent in it thanks to a runaway shopping cart.

And I’m not buying that big-box “money-saving” angle anymore. The amount you spend on a gift is proportionate to the guilt you feel because you are buying it too quickly. Real gift-giving is a thoughtful process.

So calm down and reconnect. Merry Christmas! ■