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*gift rap*

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A BRANDTRUST INQUIRY

“His present was in a bag.  
Brown paper. No wrapping.  
No bow. No ribbon. Nothing.  
I was robbed of the thrill...  
it just didn't feel like a gift.”

- gift wrapping zealot

## Why do we wrap?

As a social phenomenon that is widespread in both advanced and primitive societies, the exchange of gifts involves legal, economic, moral, religious and aesthetic dimensions. Anthropologists have studied this custom for years and have called into question many of the social conventions and economic systems that we would have otherwise taken for granted. But what about gift wrapping?

As an industry, the humble gift wrap accounts for approximately \$3 billion in retail sales each year. And the market is growing. More than 60% of the adult population has bought gift wrap in the last year and a \$9 roll of wrapping paper is becoming the norm rather than the exception. As retail shelves expand their offerings of exotic papers, bags, baubles and bows, it is not uncommon for people to spend more on the wrapping than the gift itself. But why?

With this in mind, the Brandtrust team conducted one-on-one interviews with self-proclaimed “gift wrapping zealots.” In search of the common emotional drivers behind their behavior, we probed beneath the surface and found there is much more to gift wrapping than meets the eye.

## Wrapping: the ritual

Gift wrapping has strong emotional ties to the holiday season. But it goes beyond having pretty packages under the tree. The act of wrapping gifts is actually considered a necessary part of the holiday experience. Like decorating a tree. Or singing Christmas carols. To many people, the season would be a bit empty without the wrapping ritual.

In some ways, the act of wrapping gifts is akin to preparing for a feast. There are specific steps involved—beginning with the preparation of the wrapping materials to the proper cutting, folding and taping techniques.

Since people frequently wait to wrap their gifts at one time, the wrapping event can be a bonding experience with family members where stories are told and shared memories are created. It is not uncommon for people to play holiday music, light candles and sing songs, frequently while sitting on the floor. And those who wrap alone are likely to recreate this type of environment and relive fond memories.

**Gift wrapping, particularly prior to holiday occasions, can take on an almost ceremonial aura. It's as if wrapping were part of a tribal ritual of sorts.**





## Wrapping: the deception

Probably the most basic function of gift wrapping is keeping the present a mystery—a simple act of deception designed to heighten the thrill of anticipation.

Some people will go to great lengths to maintain the mystery. From changing the package shape to padding the contents (you can't have someone shake the gift and guess what is inside), the art of deception is alive and well during the holiday season.

It is probably no surprise that these emotions are frequently tied to wonderful childhood memories (either reliving past childhood thrills or creating new memories for the next generation). The holidays are cloaked in mystery and gift wrapping is a big part of it.

Of course, for kids, it's all about the gift. Few gift wrapping zealots recall caring much about the wrapping as a child.

**The most basic role of gift wrap is to help build anticipation for the recipient—a form of delightful deception meant to heighten the emotions.**

## Wrapping: the gift of time

Gift wrapping often represents time and thought invested in someone special. And, wrapping zealots rarely speak about gift wrapping without also mentioning time. They'll glowingly reflect on when "I took the time to do it right", or share frustration about when "I didn't have the time", or suggest a sense of loss with "I just don't have the time anymore."

The concepts of "gift" and "time" are closely interwoven. This is particularly noticeable when it comes to the significance of the person who will receive the gift—where the most important people in our lives are seen as "worth the time" of doing the job right. For these people, gift wrapping may include handmade papers, custom bows, special ornaments or other embellishments that involve considerable time and effort.

In this regard, the act of wrapping can actually be seen as a gift in its own right. The gift of time.

Of course, this all implies the recipient will appreciate the effort, leading to the nagging question—is it worth the time?

**The best wrapping requires time and thought—it is an aspect of wrapping that may often be the greatest gift of all.**



## Wrapping: a language of love

At its best, gift wrapping is a form of language—one that is designed to express love and appreciation. Due to this subtle communication role, in some situations, the way a gift is wrapped can actually be more important than the gift itself.

For people who are in tune with this language, the way a gift is wrapped speaks volumes. A gift whose wrapping reflects an incredible attention to detail sends a very positive message. A poorly wrapped gift says the opposite. And, since gifts are often exchanged in front of friends and family, the gift wrapping can send a very public message.

Unwrapping is another part of this unspoken dialogue. Someone who truly appreciates the art of wrapping is likely to gently unwrap the gift (no tearing allowed) in such a way that “it is good enough to be used again.” This care is essentially an act of acknowledgement and appreciation.

Unfortunately, not everyone understands this language, so it is possible for the uninitiated to unintentionally send the wrong message (typically a negative one).

And, as with any miscommunication, even the best intentions can go awry, leading to disappointment or frustration.

Just imagine a young woman who views the world through the gift wrapping lens. She receives a gift. From her boyfriend. On their first Christmas together. In front of his entire family. But it is in a brown paper bag. No wrapping. No ribbons. No bows. The present may be beautiful, but how does she feel?

Or imagine a young man spending hours matching papers and bows for his mom's holiday gift. But when the gift is presented, his mother doesn't make a single comment about the wrapping. She hastily rips the paper apart and casts it aside. Then, she gives a gift to him. It is wrapped in a plastic garbage bag. The present may be wonderful, but how does he feel?

If a gift zealot receives a lovely gift that was carelessly wrapped (or not wrapped at all), what message does she receive?

And, if the person who is given a beautifully wrapped gift fails to acknowledge this expression of love, what does it mean?

**Wrapping can be seen as a language of love. When both parties speak the same language, it can be a magical experience. But when they don't, it can be a recipe for disappointment.**



## Wrapping: a gift defined

Given all the dynamics at play, it is worth asking: is a gift a gift without the wrapping? For many people, the answer is a definitive no. In fact, even some wrapped presents might barely qualify as true gifts to wrapping zealots.

Since gift wrapping is a symbol of time that forms a language of love, anything that is presented without thought and care can lose its significance as a gift.

So, while a plastic bag or brown paper sack clearly sends the wrong signal, it is also possible for gift wrap to be too perfect. Store-wrapped gifts fall into this category, as do presents that are “pre-wrapped” by the manufacturer. They may be perfectly wrapped, but there was clearly no fuss or bother involved in the presentation. Even gift bags can be suspect at times.

On the other end of the spectrum is the extremely poorly wrapped gift. An exception to the rule, a gift wrapped by someone who lacks the skill to do a nice job but plows ahead anyway, can actually be one of the greatest gifts of all.

**When giving a gift, it is truly the thought that matters. Gifts without thoughtful wrapping can be seen as no gift at all—a mere transaction.**



## Wrapping: as self-expression

Wrapping brings out the artist in many people. People who care about gift wrap get excited when describing their favorite wrapping papers and materials. They relish the crisp, clean lines that a heavy paper creates. They savor the fine details of exceptional ribbon. They light up when describing the colors and textures. The details and delights.

And, when the right combination of paper, bows, boxes and ribbons is in the hands of a person who has mastered wrapping, a gift takes on a life of its own.

There are powerful emotions tied to this very tactile experience and during our interviews, gift wrap zealots often used their hands to express the subtle nuances of exceptional wrapping materials.

So, it might not come as a surprise to learn that the most vivid memories of the wrapping experience have little to do with the gift or the anticipation of giving. Rather, many strong memories involve facing odd-shaped gifts or limitation of materials, “wrapping challenges,” times when wrapping skills were tested.

**The act of wrapping is an act of self-expression. As such, the focus may not be on the recipient, but on bringing the experience to life for the giver.**



## Wrapping: as self-identity

For people who have mastered this art, they may even view a wrapped gift as a form of self-identity.

At this level, the gift wrapper has developed a signature style—where perfection is expected and distinction is found in the personal touches. These gift wrappers are likely to include little details, such as custom handmade bows, handmade papers, symbolic holiday ornaments, snips of holly for Christmas or even fresh flowers that match a bride's bouquet. There is an immense amount of pride involved. With good reason.

These people have their reputations on the line. And their wrapping says a lot about who they are (or, at least how they wish to be perceived). In many ways, they are wrapping the gift for themselves. It is a reflection of them.

This might help explain an interesting phenomenon where gift wrapping zealots will continue to put considerable time and effort into wrapping gifts, even when it is not important to the recipient.

**For some people, gift wrapping can become a form of self-identity where the wrapped gift becomes a reflection of how they want others to perceive them.**



## Wrapping: as rite of passage

The act of making a gift presentable is often associated with the act of growing up. It can be a rite of passage.

It is common to hear stories of gift wrapping zealots learning their skills from an older mentor—typically a daughter learning from her mother. They were taught how to use the tools of the trade (tape, ruler and flat surface) and the various tricks and techniques that separate great wrapping from the mediocre.

As these children grow up, they strive to flaunt their lessons learned. It is common to hear memories of satisfying moments where a special gift met or exceeded their mentor's expectations—memories that recall pride and accomplishment.

The experience can help bond a mother to daughter while symbolizing personal growth and independence. In this way, gift wrapping is also a vehicle for shared memories.

And, among those gift wrapping zealots who didn't have this type of experience, there seems to be a desire to create a new tradition of their own.

**The emotions around gift wrapping are often tied to childhood memories where wrapping was seen as a rite of passage.**



## Wrapping up

Clearly, there is much more to the spirit of gift wrapping than the simple need to cover a present.

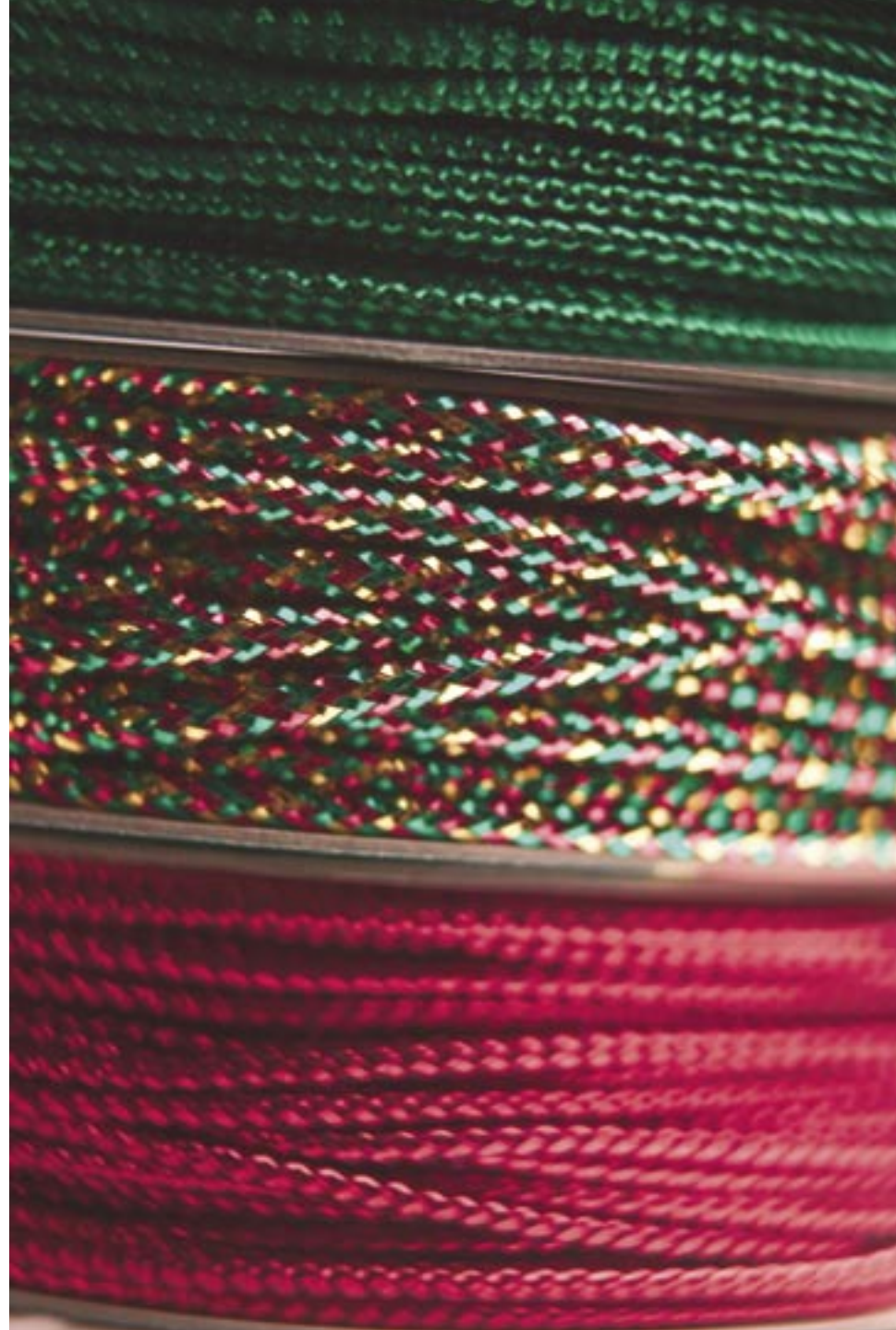
In speaking with gift wrapping zealots, we found a complex mix of emotions at play. Some are pleasant. Some are painful. But all suggest there is more to gift wrapping than meets the eye.

For many people, wrapping a gift is part of a comforting ritual that is part of the holiday season. Gifts and wrapping paper are often associated with vivid childhood memories, such as anticipating a special gift or learning how to wrap gifts for others.

As we get older, wrapping often evolves into a creative outlet and form of self-expression that can eventually be a reflection of the gift wrapper's own self-identity.

Gift wrapping often represents time and thought invested in someone special. The act of wrapping is a gift on its own.

And, ultimately, gift wrapping is a language of sorts—one that is designed to express love.



“ I’d rather give a person an unwrapped gift than a gift wrapped perfectly from a department store.”

- gift wrapping zealot

## ABOUT BRANDTRUST

Brandtrust specializes in helping our clients understand the emotional factors that drive consumer decisions, create trust in the marketplace and engage employees in the workplace. Understanding the real nature of consumer emotions is fundamental to success.

## THE EMOTIONAL INQUIRY® STUDY

Brandtrust Emotional Inquiry® Study methods involve one-on-one interviews in which the respondents are guided through relaxation and visualization exercises and respond to a series of probes about experiences in their past and how they feel as they recall the times, places and people involved.

These techniques are not new to psychological analysis, but Brandtrust is among the first to use them extensively in a commercial way.

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Why do we wrap our gifts?  
Why will we labor over each  
little crease and fold knowing  
our wrapping will be torn  
apart, ripped, crumpled and  
cast aside?

When you really think about  
it, there must be more to  
wrapping than meets the eye.

Well, we did. And there is.