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Purchased, modified, created: consumer voices in experience gifts

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Gift giving behaviour is an established topic in consumer research, but little is known about the phenomenon of experiences as gifts. Experience companies are only part of the market; hospitality, tourism, leisure and entertainment providers also have the potential to offer such gifts. Using real life consumer accounts, this research explores the behaviour associated with purchased, modified and created experience gifts. The findings show that consumers act as adaptors and competitors as well as purchasers, make specific use of information technology, and use ‘donor resources’ to convey meaning in ways unappreciated by industry in this wider portrayal of the experience gift sector.

Gift giving behaviour

Experience gifts

Experience industry

Hospitality gifts

INTRODUCTION

It is likely that you yourself have either given or received an experience gift, or that you know someone who has. The gift might have been a spa day, rally driving, tickets to the theatre or any number of possibilities. Perhaps you have ‘walked with wolves’, ‘slept with the SAS’, or participated in a Mad Hatter’s tea party on board an Edwardian river boat – more unusual examples than the classic choices but

nonetheless experience gifts. Essentially, experience gifts are services from the commercial experience companies, hospitality, tourism, leisure, entertainment and similar industry sub-sectors that are designated as presents by buyers (donors) for users (recipients). Although within gift giving research by social scientists, the topic of 'self gifting' arises [Faure and Mick, 1993; Mick and DeMoss, 1990, 1992; Sherry et al, 1995], gift giving whether for physical good or experience implies that there are different individuals inhabiting the roles of buyer and user, and that the gift changes ownership through a socially defined process of exchange.

The experience industry as portrayed by Mintel [2001] consists of companies who package up experiences with components such as insurance to be marketed to the buying public. On this basis, the experience sector was judged to be worth around £100 million in 2001 and with predicted growth to £239 million by 2005 [Mintel, 2001]. Such experience companies tend to position themselves in the gift giving market, with about 70-95% of their products being purchased as gifts for other people [Clarke, 2006; Mintel, 2001]. The United Kingdom is a well developed though fragmented market for the experience gift, and there are many experience companies, some of which specialise in a particular product category (for example, Balloons over Britain, Avia Special or Everyman Racing) and some of which offer a more general portfolio (for example, Virgin Experience Days, Experience World or Intotheblue). The market leader, Red Letter Days, may even have acquired household name status following the success of the BBC's series, 'The Dragons' Den', and the publicity surrounding its financial failure and subsequent revival in 2005. On the basis of experience days value (as opposed to experience gifts value), Red Letter Days, with a turnover of £20 million [Gohlar, 2007], is estimated to hold around 11% market share

in the United Kingdom, with nearest competitors Buyagift and Virgin Experience Days at 7% [Intel, 2007]. Typically, commercial experience companies with a general portfolio have hundreds of experience offers; taken as an industry, the dominant experience product categories comprise driving and flying, pampering and relaxation, and a third category of adrenaline, adventure and watersports [Intel, 2007]. Some of the commercial experience companies (for example Activity Superstore) command a high street presence by distributing through the traditional retail brands such as Boots, WH Smith or Argos; others have placed strategic emphasis on online distribution, as illustrated by eXhileration's ownership by Lastminute.com [Intel, 2007].

Yet to understand the experience gift industry by accepting the confines of this industry-led definition is to mistake the true scope and nature of a very twenty-first century phenomenon. In fact, consumers are more sophisticated and active in their usage of experiences as gifts than has previously been recognised. Industry research has generated knowledge of its own gift giving segments, but there is much consumer activity below the waterline that remains invisible to the official experience gift sector. The experience gift industry is only the tip of the metaphoric iceberg.

The subject of gift giving behaviour in the experience sector is of intrinsic interest to service marketers for a number of reasons. Gift giving is a self-perpetuating behaviour [Banks, 1979]. Gift giving behaviour in general, regardless of the form of the gift itself, stimulates reciprocity through the social obligation of future repayment [Mauss, 1954]. This expectation of balance in reciprocity through a reversal of donor-recipient roles is a central tenet of gift giving, for it supports the smooth functioning

of human relationships [Roberts, 1990; Sahlins, 1972]. For marketers, such reciprocity through time establishes a virtuous cycle of consumption [Banks, 1979; Lowes et al, 1968; Rugimbana et al, 2003], as apt, I would argue, for experiences as for physical goods as experiences increasingly penetrate the gift giving repertoire of individuals. In addition to the longer term influence of reciprocity, there are more immediate benefits for the services marketing practitioner, for the sale of one experience as a gift often results in additional sales so that donors, relatives or friends might share the experience with the recipient. This multiplier effect enhances the attractiveness of the experience gift as a subject for further investigation.

From a theoretical standpoint, despite the longevity of gift giving research and the contributions from different disciplines to the body of knowledge, relatively little is known about the nuances of experience gift giving behaviour as opposed to its generic counterpart which has largely been predicated on an understanding of physical goods. Only recently has the experience gift been identified for dedicated study [Clarke, 2006, 2007], initially underpinned and justified according to context by the service characteristics of intangibility, inseparability, variability and perishability. A service product overlaid with gift status generates fascinating questions for the services marketer. Questions pertaining to the perceptions and management of risk in choosing an intangible gift for a third party; service scripts and critical incidents for the interaction of co-producers that include an uninformed recipient for whom the gift was a surprise; self-concept and image for experience gift displays of public and conspicuous consumption; or the role of attribution theory in the case of experience gift failure – for just four examples. Consumer behaviour in the experience gift market provides a fresh and lucrative vein for service marketers to explore.

This paper seeks to move beyond the boundaries of the experience gift as established by the experience sector, and to investigate consumer constructs of the experience gift. It isolates three specific types of experience gift – the purchased, the modified, and the created – for in-depth examination and deciphers the subtleties of the associated consumer behaviour. Based on an analysis of consumer accounts of actual experience gift consumption, the paper is firmly rooted in the consumer voice, and offers a wider portrayal of experience gifts than the current industry perspectives.

EXPERIENCES AS GIFTS

By chance rather than design, experience gifts have intermittently been captured in data sets of studies that crossed product categories [see, for example, Durgee and Sego, 2001; Mick and DeMoss, 1992; Rucker et al, 1996; Sherry et al, 1995]. In their study of ethnic identity and gift giving, Rucker et al [1996: 152-153] note an Asian perception of ‘being’ with others and a Caucasian perception of ‘doing’ something for others as respectively appreciated gifts – a comment on the experience gifts in their data set.

Recent research has made the experience gift the focus of dedicated study, and highlighted the similarities and differences in consumer behaviour between that associated with intangible gifts and that recognised in general gift giving behaviour [Clarke, 2006, 2007, 2008]. Experience gifts are versatile, suitable for different gift giving occasions (Christmas, birthdays, retirement, weddings etcetera), for both significant and non-significant relationships, and for different donor-recipient

configurations (one to one, group to one etcetera) [Clarke, 2006, 2007]. Experience gifts can be used very effectively to surprise the recipient through use of suspense and decoy strategies [Clarke, 2007], the element of surprise having been identified as one aspect of the perfect gift in Western societies [Belk, 1996; Durgee and Segó, 2001]. Maintenance of surprise during gift exchange may be achieved through one of five alternative wrapping strategies engineered for the intangible gift [Clarke, 2008]. All gifts demonstrate a level of donor sacrifice across the three resources of money, time and personal effort [Cheal, 1987; Rucker et al, 1996], with time and labour expended in gift search and purchase symbolising time and effort invested in maintaining the relationship [Pandya and Venkatesh, 1992] and some indication of higher income groups substituting a shortage of time with more expensive gifts [Mortelmans and Damen, 2001]. Experience gifts are adept at demonstrating Wooten's [2000: 93] 'gifting capacity' of an individual donor in terms of personal effort and time invested, both during the decision process and purchase and during experience consumption when donors can elect to share quality time with the recipient [Clarke, 2006]. A model of experience gift giving [Clarke, 2008] showcases the actors and processes involved in experiences with gift status, and demonstrates the role of third parties – such as accomplices, out-group participants, and significant others – alongside the core donor-recipient dyad.

The model of experience gift giving behaviour [Clarke, 2008] identified three types of experience gift; the purchased experience, the modified experience and the created experience. The purchased experience was described as 'purchased as single experience product or package', the modified experience as 'purchased as single experience or package and deliberately modified through additional experience(s)',

and the created experience as ‘invented and created by donor from commercial and / or non-commercial elements into a hand-crafted experience’ [Clarke, 2008: unknown]

Both purchased and modified experience gifts can be sub-divided into the experience companies, the tip of our metaphoric iceberg and as recognised by Mintel [2001], and into the hospitality, tourism, leisure, and entertainment providers. Combining the purchased experience gift with the specialist experience company equates to the iceberg tip and to Mintel’s [2001] experience industry. In addition, two facets of the experience gift that could be incorporated into all three types of experience gift were identified. Firstly, that experience gifts could be designed as a one-off or single experience, or as a series of experiences staggered through time. For example, a single snowboarding lesson versus a series of snowboarding lessons. Secondly, that experience gifts could be designed for immediate consumption following exchange, or for delayed consumption at a future date. For example, a river boat picnic on the recipient’s birthday versus a gastronomic stay at Le Manoir several months after gift exchange [Clarke, 2008]. Interestingly, delayed consumption introduces the notion of ‘recipient sacrifice’ [Clarke, 2007], or the money, time and personal effort of the recipient in making it happen; in extreme cases, recipient sacrifice can overwhelm the symbolic meaning of the gift and cause recipient dissatisfaction.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research sought to capture the consumer voice for experience gifts through depth interviews with individuals who had either given or received an experience gift during the preceding two years. These real-life accounts of the actual giving, receiving and consumption of experience gifts produced thick data for a total of 52 experience gift

cases and allowed informants to express their own constructs of experience gift giving reality. The ten informants were of different ages, gender and occupations, albeit drawn from a particular locale of the United Kingdom; none were previously known to the researcher. A proforma was completed prior to the interview which recorded categorical data and informant confidence in general gift giving skills. Each interview began with a 'grand tour' question [Ruth et al, 1999: 387] recalling a specific case of experience gift exchange, then loosely traced the different generic stages of gift giving – 'gestation' or decision making process, 'prestation' or gift exchange between donor and recipient, and 'reformulation' or consumption and post-consumption [Sherry, 1983] - to elicit the details. Interviews concluded with an invitation for any examples of experience gifts that were dissatisfying in some way, the idea being to draw contrasting data using a different form of probing. The phraseology and exact vocabulary of each informant was captured through tape recording and subsequent transcription. Each case in the data set was categorised as either purchased, modified, or created (see Table 1). Cases were analysed using a modified constant comparison method [Belk and Coon, 1993; Wooten, 2000], with labels emerging from gift giving theory (for example, donor resources), informant vocabulary (for example, 'Just because' gifts), and data interpretation (for example, antagonism). The resulting themes were cross-checked against the original discrete case story and against negative cases as appropriate.

The depth interviews were complemented by a written instrument completed by the recipients of an historic flight gift. These Tiger Moth and Hurricane flights were operated by a specialist experience company from four airfields across the United Kingdom (South Yorkshire, Manchester, Leicestershire, and Surrey). The written

instrument was structured with a focus on the gift occasion, participant relationships, and post-exchange and consumption behaviour. Recipients self-completed the written instrument in the physical surroundings of the flight and immediately after the experience. As before, the resulting 137 cases were categorised as either purchased, modified or created, and the text was treated to the same process as the depth interviews, with emerging themes and patterns compared against depth interview findings. Examples of the historic flight cases are incorporated in Table 1 under the purchased and modified categories; there were no cases that fitted the created category.

CONSUMER VOICES AND THE EXPERIENCE GIFT

The findings are explored under the relevant subheadings reflecting the consumer-derived typology of the purchased, the modified, and the created experience gift.

The Purchased Experience Gift

The purchased experience gift is the gift described by the consumer as having been bought either from a commercial experience company or from the hospitality, tourism, or entertainment sub-sectors, and without any significant modifications being made to the experience subsequently by the donor. The gift was very much the product offered by the relevant company or organisation; a service product overlaid with gift status. Experience gifts in this category ranged from the ‘very classic experience gift’ (Female, aged 46-55) of the Spa day to the more unusual such as the glider lesson, and from the inexpensive ‘cinema tickets for Lord of the Rings and the

first Harry Potter movie' (Female, aged 46-55) to the more expensive such as the New York trip.

Impulse buying was a discernible consumer behaviour pattern for this category, but it was not apparent for modified or created experience gifts which by their nature require an element of planning on the part of the donor. For the purchased experience gift, such planning is not a pre-requisite and the visibility of the company's product offer through tangible evidence such as 'great big boxes' (Female, aged 26-35) or through actual on-site simultaneous production and consumption act as trigger mechanisms for instant gifts even in the absence of occasion (described by one informant as 'Just because' gifts). One informant explained how she bought her very first experience gift as a donor

I'd obviously gone into Smiths, not for that purpose, you know, but seen that box and thought 'well actually that's a very good idea'. I mean in the display that's the only one I would have got him, because the other ones I didn't think were suitable, but it was just 'Hang on. That's a really good idea'. So that one was a little bit of a change for me. (Female, aged 26-35).

This merchandising display of experience gifts in a traditional shopping outlet had caught the attention of a Christmas shopper, who responded with an impulse purchase, her introduction to the phenomenon of experiences as gifts. In another example, a donor explained a visit to a village fete where there were helicopter rides in progress; he had impulsively bought a ride as a gift for his partner;

I mean it was an experience gift but I suppose 'cos there wasn't the planning and there wasn't an occasion; we were just there and they were doing them and I just went for it. (Male, aged 46-55).

Information technology was used in a specific way for purchased experience gifts. Although, as the impulse buying shows, some consumers bought experience gifts through traditional outlets, the majority favoured the internet to the extent that some claimed only to use this method. Typically, website comparison was used to make decisions about the merits of competing offers and to compare product features including legal legitimacy, insurance, safety and consumer briefings;

With the race car one, we went onto a couple of sites and some of them were of comparable price but the time on the track ... it was a number of laps round the track and one was shorter than the other. So I think you then have to just make sure; something might be £10 cheaper but it could then lessen the experience. (Female, aged 26-35).

In addition, such internet searching was contrasted to the traditional mode of purchasing gifts; in the words of informants, ‘trotting round shops is not what I do’ (Female, aged 36-45) or

rather than spending half an hour in a shop, I suppose you do spend a couple of hours researching it. (Female, aged 26-35).

The second specific use of information technology for purchased gifts was by recipients, who often used the internet to plan how best to use their gift. The donor of Le Manoir experience, a short break package of accommodation and meals at the renowned Cotswold manor house of chef Raymond Blanc, described her parents behaviour after receiving their gift;

they’ve gone online and looked at all the rooms and decided when they want to go and which room they want to go in and they phoned up the hotel and booked it themselves. (Female, aged 26-35).

Thus after gift exchange, there is evidence of recipient involvement in organising and arranging the details for gift consumption, and of using information technology to do this.

Donor resources and recipient sacrifice were apparent for purchased experience gifts. Price was discussed most in terms of ‘not being an issue’; an acknowledgement that the financial resources invested reaped due rewards in recipient delight. Where groups of donors were involved, price was spoken of in terms of ‘chipping in’, ‘a kitty’, or ‘we all sort of clubbed together’. There was also some recognition of the costs of sharing the experience gift with one or more significant others; these donors absorbed these monetary costs themselves;

You know you wouldn’t send one person to a health farm, would you? You’d either buy it for a couple – like my brother and sister-in-law – or for me and that person to do together, like the snowboarding. So you wouldn’t buy it and send them and say ‘Have a good time’ sort of thing ‘cos it just wouldn’t be. So I think the experience is doing it together, or getting them to do it with somebody of their choice, kind of thing. And that you do end up paying more
(Female, 26-35)

Price was the donor resource most openly discussed, but, aside from the impulse gift, donor sacrifice was also evident in the time and effort spent researching the gift online, the contrasting of product offers as detailed in the previous section.

Interestingly, there was scope with the purchased experience gift, either through deliberate action or donor oversight, to offload donor sacrifice onto the recipient *a.k.a* recipient sacrifice. A certain level of recipient effort, time (pre-actual consumption),

and perhaps cost might be acceptable to the recipient and even add to the sense of anticipation (for example, as shown by the recipients of Le Manoir experience).

However, taken too far, and recipient sacrifice tips into dissatisfaction through the ‘unforeseen expense, the extensive travelling and the general disruption’ (Female, aged 36-45). For an example demonstrating all three issues,

it was a disaster in that it turned out to be a white water rafting experience for one person and we’re a family of five – I’ve got three sons – I don’t think they realised and we wouldn’t have minded paying, but if you’re going to go white water rafting and you’ve got three sons you kind of go all of you and do it ... we have very, really busy lifestyles so the children all have commitments at weekends and our holidays are booked ages in advance ... the places you could go to do white water rafting if you think about it in this country are not Oxfordshire – Scotland, Snowdonia, the Lake District, and so the opportunity for us to go up to the Lake District to use one gift token – well, forget it.

(Female, aged 36-45).

Purchased experience gifts given by donors with insufficient attention to recipient interests, lifestyle, and the acceptable level of recipient sacrifice whether in the form of finance, time, or personal effort tended towards an outcome of recipient dissatisfaction with the gift.

Antagonism was a secondary yet interesting feature of purchased experience gifts, particularly those from the experience industry. A minority of informants expressed disquiet with the whole concept of a pre-prepared experience gift sold by a commercial company; ‘I don’t understand why people do that’ or ‘I’m a bit loath to do that’. One informant expressed her feelings through an example:

I had a friend's parents buy him a driving experience; I think it was off-roading or something. It was from W.H. Smiths and was a pack. And then he had to ring up and get all the course organised and everything, and it's like well, you've walked into WH Smiths and paid 50 quid, and haven't thought about it particularly at all. It is the thought that counts, isn't it? (Female, aged 26-35).

Essentially, underpinning the antagonism is a sense that these commercially produced experience gifts don't demonstrate sufficient investment by the donor in the relationship; that the meaning and symbolism of the gift is undermined, and the gift thereby reduced to a 'money ticket'. For some, the very convenience of the purchase devalues the experience as a gift.

The Modified Experience Gift

The modified experience gift is the gift described by the consumer as having been bought either from an experience company or from the hospitality, tourism, leisure, or entertainment sub-sectors, and then being modified with the addition of supplementary experiences subsequently by the donor. The gift was the product offered by the relevant company or organisation, with extra components. Typically, these additions to the core experience were different forms of hospitality; food, drink, or accommodation. Hence, the Tiger Moth flight plus BBQ, the Hurricane flight plus celebration drink, or the kayaking trip plus accommodation.

It may be that the experience gift is modified in order to personalise the gift and to ensure a tighter fit to the recipient's idiosyncrasies. However, it appeared that

modification was more about extending the element of shared time together – donor and recipient – than about individualising the gift. Spending quality time with a significant other was an important aspect of the modified experience gift; ‘we made a whole day of it’ (Female, aged 26-35) requires the donor to invest more of their time in the gift than for the purchased experience gift equivalent. Underpinning the prevalence of hospitality add-ons is the fact that all the experiences in the data set required travel away from home, thus making food, drink and even a bed for the night obvious comfort choices. In a more unusual case of a modified half day off-road driving experience, it was still travel away from home and the location of the experience that triggered the modification;

We went to see High Wycombe play Liverpool in the FA Cup semi-finals at Aston Villa ...she’s not much of a football fan and I’m not greatly but a neighbour supports Wycombe and during the year I’d been to a few games ... it turned out the day they were playing Liverpool was the day we were half way to where they were playing. The driving course was near Banbury and they were playing up in Birmingham and I knew my neighbours were going. (Male, aged 46-55).

The Created Experience Gift

The created experience gift is the gift described by the consumer as having been invented by the donor from a mix of possible commercial and non-commercial elements into a hand-crafted experience. The gift was very much the design and creation of the donor; ‘I’ve put them together myself’ (Female, aged 26-35).

Experience gifts in this category, such as the trips to the capital city, erred towards the

more expensive, yet not all created experience gifts – for example, the Blenheim Palace picnic – were costly in monetary terms from a donor perspective.

Planning and plotting was exhibited by donors, especially where a group of donors was involved. A ‘project manager’ for a group of five explained

I’m in charge of sorting out all the bookings, getting a hotel for the night, making reservations at the club, buying all the tickets in advance that we can get – that sort of thing. (Female, aged 26-35).

Such created experience gifts involved ‘surreptitious phone calls’ between donors and ‘of course, everything’s diaries’ for setting dates. The creation of a final gift from an array of different experiences was a complex task necessitating planning in advance, a process that also influenced the relationship between the donors either for the positive;

All I’d say is that the planning of the birthday weekend is giving the people organising it a lot of fun and enjoyment, just talking about it and planning it and anticipating what his reactions are going to be ... So it’s bringing us all together really. (Female, aged 26-35);

as for a London experience, or for the negative, ‘a nightmare organisation’, as for the camping barn trip. One informant talked about the risk of gift failure in terms of donor disappointment being greater where donors had invested such thought, time and effort in planning and plotting the created experience gift.

Information technology was used to locate the experience items and to sift through the relevant detail; in essence, it was a tool with which to create the experience gift and

was often used intensively at this stage in the decision making process by donors. For a London experience, the project manager recounted that she'd

used the net for finding an hotel, seeing who is on at the jazz club, booking London Eye tickets, finding out when the shark feeding is on at the aquarium. (Female, aged 26-35).

Information technology was used in advance of gift exchange; unlike the purchased experience gift, there appeared to be little evidence of recipients using the web post-exchange to finalise experience gift details as this work was carried out by the donors during gift creation as part of donor sacrifice.

Donor resources of finance, time and personal labour appeared to have a different emphasis for created experience gifts. Although these gifts could absorb as much financial resource as other types of experience gift, the emphasised investment by the donor was weighted in favour of the time invested in planning and designing the experience and in consuming the experience alongside the recipient, and in the personal effort of the donor. This personal effort stretched to the creativity and imagination shown by the donor in matching the gift to the recipient's personality and to the subtleties of the relationship. Thus, although the London experience with Harvey Nichols shopping involved an 'open cheque' suggesting a spotlight on the financial resources, in fact

I think Harvey Nicks was partly because we like Ab Fab [Absolutely Fabulous] and Harvey Nicks is always mentioned in it and I tend to joke about it sometimes, so he added that to it. (Female, aged 46-55),

insinuating that gift success was rooted in the recipient's appreciation of the way in which a humorous nuance of their relationship had been woven into the created

experience gift by the donor; in other words, donor empathy with the recipient at an intimate level.

Donor as competitor was also a possibility, in that the created gift of a donor could be seen as a replacement for the products of the experience company. An informant mulled over gourmet weekends and wine tasting;

For those sorts of things I'd be more inclined to see what else I could do and put one together ... We talked about doing one for wine tasting; that would be for my father-in-law. I think if you look at the breakdown and see what's actually included in the day, I think you can think 'Well, actually I could get a nicer restaurant somewhere', or you can find places that do wine tastings, or take them off to France and do it that way. (Female, aged 26-35).

In this situation, additional personal effort and time invested by the donor replaces the convenience of the purchased experience gift from experience companies; however, it is still the hospitality, tourism, leisure and entertainment industries that provide most of the components of the donor created gift. Thus, the created experience gift might be seen as a competitor to the commercial experience sector but as complementary to the hospitality, tourism, leisure and entertainment sub-sectors. Certain types of experience gift lend themselves more readily to donor creation; donors expressed reluctance to experiment with gifts that could be physically risky, citing insurance, knowledge of restricted areas and the legitimacy of the business as constraints.

Donor confidence was a factor for the created experience gift. It was the confident donor who practised the art of creating their own experience gifts. Donors drew on previous gift creation occasions both in terms of ideas and for honing gift giving

skills; for one donor, festival tickets for a friend whilst at College ‘sort of got it going’ (Female, aged 26-35), and for another, an earlier London experience gift ‘probably informed plans for the 60th birthday weekend’ (Female, aged 26-35).

CONCLUSION

Although scarcely recognised outside of the experience industry, the experience gift is an area of important consumer activity that different businesses in the hospitality, tourism, leisure and entertainment sub-sectors would be wise to investigate. Donors may act as buyers (the purchased experience gift), as adaptors (the modified experience gift) or as competitors or complementary buyers (the created gift). The experience company offers an experience package as a convenience purchase; one might expect their continued success to focus on this aspect to attract first time and novice buyers into the expanding experience gift market. Yet gifts are an anomaly in that a donor is required to demonstrate personal investment to impart strong meaning; there is a tension between convenience and donor resources of personal effort and time spent on the decision process. Building in options for bespoke modifications may be one way forward for the experience specialists, coupled with fine-tuning the portfolio to those riskier products less likely to appeal to the consumer as a competitor.

For individual hospitality, tourism, leisure and entertainment providers, there is scope for growth as experience gifts enter the populations gifting repertoire; for straight purchase, for modification, and for experience gift creation as donors compose their own gifts from the assorted services available. In addition to the general wake-up call

to understanding the experience gift market, co-operation between networks of these providers, probably based in the same locale, is one strategic option.

There was insufficient evidence to conclude that consumers commenced their experience gift buying careers with experience company packages, moving through modification and finally gift creation as their confidence and skills matured. What was apparent was that once consumers were faced with an experience gift either as a donor or as a recipient, the idea of an intangible experience was absorbed into their gift giving practice for future occasions, an indication of the gradual expansion of the market.

This growth in the experience gift market owes much to the role of information technology as a facilitator. Although the patterns of information technology usage by donors and recipients varied by experience gift type, it was an important tool for these consumers. The experience gift market is likely to benefit as general on-line buying behaviour becomes habitual and increasingly prevalent.

To see the whole picture, one must move beyond thinking of the experience gift industry as only encompassing the experience companies. In reality, experience gift consumers comprise more than just the straightforward purchasers of ready-made experience packages. Their activity is far more varied. They purchase the products of the hospitality, tourism, leisure and entertainment providers, and project onto these the status of gifts. They modify packages and products after purchase by adding their own components. And they compete or complement by creating their own experience gift packages based on their knowledge of the intended recipient – a highly

individualised intangible gift. The experience company really is just the tip of the iceberg of the experience gift phenomenon.

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