

What are you worth? Just look at your Christmas Vouchers

They are the ultimate in thoughtless gift-giving, and not worth much.

I've just had my worst ever day of shopping and it had nothing to do with the annual post-Christmas sales. The crowds were fine, I managed to find a car park in less than 10 minutes and I even remembered my green carry bag so I wouldn't destroy the environment.

No, my shocker experience was linked to something far deeper and more troublesome than crowds or parking. The sole cause of my day of horror was that creeping mug of a Christmas present – the gift voucher. While there's no formal research on the emerging popularity of the gift voucher, my highly academic questioning of three shop assistants revealed that this Christmas was, as one put it, "a voucher boom Christmas".

In our hectic, self-absorbed world, the voucher makes perfect sense.

Now I don't know how many others received these pretty bits of cardboard or plastic but I'll bet you it would number in the thousands or even hundreds of thousands. You know the ones, they usually have a line that says "From" where the friend or relative nicely prints their name followed by a "To" where your name appears. Underneath that is a dollar amount that firmly fixes your value to the said relative or friend. I'd guess some vouchers have three figures or even four. Mine only had two, and I received three of them. They were all for the same amount and all from relatives. For a while I was pleased that I'd managed to be consistent in my dealings with family. That feeling didn't last long.

For what a voucher effectively does is put the effort of gift decision-making and purchase firmly back on the head of the receiver. Rather than taking time and effort to search for the right gift for the right person, the voucher buyer simply says "stuff it, I'm not going to battle these Christmas crowds and search for a gift that shows I'm really thinking of them, I'll just buy them some credit and they can do the work". The buyers are actually thinking of themselves!

Now I know I'm male and not that much into shopping. I know going to a mall doesn't thrill me much, and, yes, I'll admit it, I've also been guilty of buying gift vouchers. This Christmas I gave two. Yet my guess is that even the most ardent shoppers go through some anxiety when doing their inevitable voucher "dumping".

My 10-year old daughter is into shopping big time. She mainly hunts for earrings and clothes, yet is also into shoes, cosmetics and anything else she's not allowed to buy with her pocket money. As she also had a voucher from a popular CD outlet to "dump" and as she usually has no trouble making decisions, I thought I'd take her along.

We went to the popular CD store first. I thought a bit of solid 10-year old decision making with a swift purchase would set us off on the right foot. I was wrong. After 30 minutes

browsing the racks, I realised she really only knew tow acts and both Shania and Missy were delivered by Santa. Faced with 40,000 CDs and DVDs she went into buyer shock and was frozen by too much choice. I knew how she felt as I go through the same thing every time I go to the video hire store. I'd rather they gave me a list of five and made me chose form them.

I then made the most crazy business deal I've made in 2004. "Would you like me to give you the \$30 cash and I'll use the voucher when I want to buy a CD?" Her decision was instant and now I'll have to go back to the mall to dump the voucher at some other time. Stupid, stupid, stupid!

We then went to the bookstore to dump two of my vouchers and where I experienced the same decision anxiety as my daughter. Faced with millions of titles, I was bamboozled by choice. There was nothing I particularly wanted and ended up getting some books "on sale" I had only remotely heard about and that added up to my personal two digit value.

Our final voucher dump was at a large department store where I was determined to buy a new tie. Now I haven't shopped for ties in years as "significant others" have always given them as gifts. I have no idea what's "in" and what's "out" so, using the video store idea, I collected five reasonable ties to narrow down the field. I thought each tie would easily fit my voucher value and was stunned to discover that even at the sales, each tie was worth more than double the value one family member had put on me.

My daughter then came over with a tie she said was really cool. She had recently finished a geometry unit at school and the tie was covered in angular shapes. She pointed out parallelogram. The best thing though, was that the tie fitted my voucher value. I now own the tie.

Giving a gift means caring about someone. It involves knowing what they like and taking time to find the gift that in some way will add to their life, or at least not diminish it. My New Year's resolution then, is to avoid the gift voucher completely in 2005. As hard as it may be in our fast-paced news-hardened world, I'm going to try to find the time and energy to choose meaningful gifts that are symbols of my own self-focused busy-ness. By doing so, the ritual of gift giving for me at least, will hold so much more.

The Age, 31st December 2004. By Phil Dye, a lecturer in business dynamics at Sydney's APM Training Institute.