

The Gift as a Language of Trust

Anastas Terzobaliev

*FEBA, Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”, Sofia, Bulgaria
email: anastas_terzo@yahoo.com*

Nadya Murad*

*FEBA, Sofia University “St. Kliment Ohridski”, Sofia, Bulgaria
Corresponding author, email: nadyak866@gmail.com

Abstract

Corporate and diplomatic gifts extend beyond their material form, serving as instruments of symbolic, non-verbal communication in international context. Drawing on thirty-three years of professional experience of authors and grounded in the theoretical foundations of business protocol, corporate ethics, and intercultural communication, the paper views gift-giving as a structured practice embedded in trust formation. The analysis focuses on the relational, symbolic, and strategic functions of corporate gifts in global and cross-cultural context. Particular attention is given to ethical and legal boundaries and the practical logic that guides the selection and presentation of gifts in cross-border environments. The paper argues that when gifts are culturally sensitive, ethically bounded, and strategically aligned, they function as a distinct “language of trust,” reinforcing long-term partnerships, enhancing corporate reputation, and supporting sustainable international cooperation.

Keywords: corporate gifts, business protocol, intercultural communication, trust, diplomacy, international business, ethics

Introduction

In international business and diplomacy, a gift is not merely a material object exchanged as a gesture of courtesy. It is a form of communication through which trust, respect, and cultural competence are expressed and interpreted. The selection of a gift, the context in which it is presented, and the symbolism embedded in the object often convey messages that extend beyond, and sometimes outweigh, those articulated during formal negotiations. Such non-verbal signals play a substantive role in shaping expectations, perceptions, and the overall climate of cooperation in cross-cultural contexts and in institutional asymmetries.

In global economic interactions, exchanges are rarely confined to contractual terms or derived only from transactional efficiency. Symbolic gestures, including gift-giving, function as strategic communicative acts that acknowledge mutual recognition, signal intentions for sustained collaboration, and contribute to the gradual construction of interpersonal and interorganizational trust. The first author’s experience in doing business globally and assisting public universities from Bulgaria establish and deepen relationships with Arab universities suggests that gift-giving is always associated with strategic narrative, which strengthens the weak ties between people, histories, organizations and goals. Research in organizational behavior and intercultural communication has long emphasized the importance of non-verbal cues in cross-cultural contexts, demonstrating that meaning is frequently conveyed implicitly through culturally embedded practices rather than explicit verbal articulation (Hofstede, 2011; Meyer, 2014; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 2012). Yet, gift-giving has received comparatively limited scholarly attention as

a distinct mechanism of trust formation, particularly when examined through the lens of long-term professional practice and empirical observation.

In international business protocol, gift-giving sits at the intersection of symbolism, ethics, and strategy. It is part of the strategic conversation. It reflects an understanding of cultural norms, hierarchical sensitivities, and relational expectations, while engaging with legal and institutional constraints. When appropriately calibrated, a gift may facilitate dialogue, reduce social distance, and reinforce credibility. For instance, replicas of ancient Panagyurishte golden treasure could serve as a starting point of discussion of the ancient art, pottery and jewelry and relationships between Bulgaria and Middle East.

Conversely, when misaligned with cultural or ethical standards, the same gesture may generate misunderstanding, discomfort, or reputational risk, when giving expensive watches.

The paper addresses this gap by conceptualizing business gifts as strategic instruments of non-verbal communication that mediate trust across diverse cultural and geopolitical contexts. It provides various examples of appropriate and non-appropriate gifts in different cultural settings, from the experience of the authors. The paper argues that, when guided by cultural sensitivity, ethical awareness, and strategic intent, gift-giving functions as a distinct “language of trust”,

Corporate gifts as functional and protocol-oriented instruments

Within international business protocol, corporate gifts serve as a structured mechanism for managing relationships and fostering sustainable partnerships. Their significance derives not from their material value, but from the functions they perform within a regulated communicative environment. Protocol, understood as a system of formalized practices governing professional interaction, provides the framework within which gifts acquire legitimacy and meaning. As Caplow observes, gift-giving in organizational contexts operates beyond simple courtesy, functioning as a socially encoded act that signals position, intent, and relational orientation (Caplow, 1982).

From this perspective, corporate gifts may be analytically differentiated into three interrelated functions: relational, symbolic, and strategic-image-oriented. These functions do not operate independently; rather, they intersect and reinforce one another within the broader logic of business protocol.

The relational function of corporate gifts is foundational. Gift-giving contributes to the establishment and maintenance of trust between business partners by communicating attention, respect, and recognition. In intercultural contexts, where uncertainty and informational asymmetries are pronounced, such gestures reduce social distance and facilitate interpersonal rapport. Trust theory conceptualizes trust as a dynamic construct shaped by cognitive assessments, affective bonds, and behavioral expectations (Lewicki et al., 1998). Within this framework, gifts serve as behavioral signals of reliability and goodwill, thereby supporting the affective and cognitive dimensions of trust simultaneously. By acknowledging the counterpart not merely as a contractual party but as a relational partner, the gift reinforces the social foundations of economic cooperation.

Closely linked to the relational dimension is the symbolic function of corporate gifts. Symbolic interactionism emphasizes that the meaning of objects is not intrinsic but socially constructed and context-dependent (Blumer, 1969). In international business, the choice of a gift, its perceived value, its cultural symbolism, and the manner of its presentation collectively convey messages regarding status, corporate identity, and cultural sensitivity. A gift aligned with national heritage (i.e. Panagyurishte treasure) or corporate values, or corporate production (i.e. its own winery) may convey respect for the partner’s cultural framework, whereas an inappropriately

chosen object (i.e. expensive luxury non-related brand of whisky) may unintentionally signal ignorance or disregard. The symbolic function is therefore central to how gifts are interpreted and whether they contribute positively to the communicative process embedded in protocol.

The strategic and image-related function of corporate gifts extends this symbolic dimension into the realm of corporate communication and reputation management. Gifts can be integrated into broader public relations and stakeholder engagement strategies, shaping perceptions of the organization's professionalism, ethical orientation, and long-term commitment to cooperation. When aligned with corporate identity and values, gifts reinforce brand narratives and contribute to reputational capital. Conversely, inconsistency between the symbolic message of a gift and the organization's declared principles may undermine credibility. In this sense, gifts function as tangible expressions of otherwise abstract corporate commitments.

The effectiveness of these functions depends on strict adherence to protocol. Protocol sets out acceptable forms, timing, and contexts for gift exchange, thereby mitigating ethical ambiguity and reducing the risk of misinterpretation. While gifts can strengthen trust, they also operate within sensitive ethical boundaries. Their legitimacy depends on moderation, transparency, and cultural appropriateness, particularly in environments governed by formal compliance regimes.

We can thus conceptualize gift-giving as a structured communicative instrument embedded in international business protocol, based on the relational, symbolic, and strategic-image functions of gifts. Corporate gifts contribute meaningfully to trust-building processes and long-term international partnerships, provided the practice is applied with cultural literacy and ethical awareness.

The gift as a language of trust

Intercultural frameworks help explain why these interpretive systems vary. Hofstede's cultural dimensions suggest that differences in power distance and uncertainty avoidance affect how status-marking gestures are evaluated and how comfortable actors are with ambiguity in relational exchange (Hofstede, 2011). In high-power-distance settings, gifts may be expected as formal recognition of rank; in lower-power-distance settings, the same gesture may appear excessive or inappropriate. In high uncertainty-avoidance settings, gifts may be accepted only when heavily ritualized and norm-conforming, because deviation introduces interpretive risk. These general tendencies do not eliminate the need for contextual judgment, but they clarify why "one-size-fits-all" gifting policies routinely fail in practice.

A complementary lens is the Chinese concept of *guanxi*, which emphasizes relational networks and long-term obligations that extend beyond formal interaction (Chen & Chen, 2004). Under a *guanxi* logic, gifting is not primarily a persuasive act aimed at an immediate decision; it is an investment in relational continuity, a way to signal attentiveness and to maintain a stable channel of reciprocity. This logic differs sharply from compliance-centered settings where the same investment may be framed as an attempt to bias judgment. The tension between relational and compliance logics is a recurring theme across regions.

Empirical research on gifts also supports the view that even modest gestures can influence behavior, a point with direct relevance for risk assessment in corporate policy. Experimental evidence indicates that "small gifts" can affect negotiation dynamics, challenging the intuition that only high-value transfers matter (Maréchal & Thöni, 2018). In cross-cultural contexts, where meaning is amplified by symbolism and ritual, the behavioral effect of a gift may be even more salient, not because actors are irrational, but because gifts operate as signals and as social commitments. This aligns with the economic interpretation of gifts as signals whose credibility arises from visible cost and social meaning rather than from material value alone (Camerer, 1988).

When corporate actors treat gifts as “low-stakes,” they can underestimate both the trust upside and the compliance downside.

Table 1 summarizes regional variations of the gift protocol map.

Table 1. Cross-Cultural Gift Protocols in International Business

Culture/Region	Dominant Meaning of Gift	Typical Occasions	Commonly Appropriate Gift Types	Primary Considerations	Frequent Misinterpretation Risks
Arab World	Respect, honor, partnership	Initial meetings, hosted events	Luxury items, cultural symbols	Status alignment, discretion	Misaligned value; cultural offence
East Asia (China, Japan, Korea)	Commitment, long-term trust	Anniversaries, negotiations	Symbolic items, teas, books	Hierarchy, reciprocity	Perceived bribery or inauthenticity
Western Europe	Courtesy, equality	Holidays, networking	Moderate souvenirs, branded items	Avoid extravagance	Seen as attempt at influence
North America	Respect, ethical caution	Post-contract relations	Books, modest symbolic gifts	Compliance policies	Viewed as inappropriate perk
Eastern Europe	Personal respect, informality	Business meetings	Local specialties, fine drinks	Personal rapport	Too informal; trivializing gesture

Source: Author synthesis based on Hofstede (2011) and Meyer (2014)

The Arab world

In many Middle Eastern business environments, gift-giving is deeply embedded in social structure and is closely associated with honor, education, and the credibility of long-term intention. The gift’s function is not confined to politeness; it is an observable signal of respect and seriousness. Within this behavioral grammar, a gift is evaluated along three axes: appropriateness to the recipient’s rank, resonance with cultural values, and alignment with hospitality rituals. The practical logic can be explained through the interaction between power distance and relational expectation. In high power-distance settings, gestures that acknowledge hierarchy help stabilize interactions by reducing ambiguity about roles and obligations (Hofstede, 2011).

A corporate gift that is too modest for the recipient’s status may be interpreted not as ethical restraint but as insufficient recognition. Conversely, a gift that is ostentatious without cultural coherence may be read as performative or clumsy. This is why culturally anchored gifts—objects connected to national heritage, artisanal products, or meaningful symbols—can be effective even when not extravagantly priced, because their communicative value lies in identity recognition rather than in conspicuous spending.

In the Arab-world context, the gesture is also inseparable from comportment. The gift must be supported by diplomatic behavior, cultural sensitivity, and a credible demeanor. A gift presented in an inappropriate manner can weaken its intended message. This point is consistent with research emphasizing honour-driven communication: symbols are not merely exchanged; they are performed in ways that affirm mutual respect.

In reality, this means the ritual elements of gifting—timing, public versus private presentation, accompanying words, and the choice of intermediary—are part of the “message”. The primary misinterpretation risk in this region is not typically “bribery” in the narrow Western legal sense, but offence caused by value misalignment or cultural mismatch. A typical cross-cultural gift,

well appreciated by both parties is high-quality luxury dates but somewhat rare in the recipient's market (i.e. Bulgaria or other European countries) like *wanan*, *ajwa* and *segai*; incense burners (*mabkhara*) with quality wood chips is a common, luxurious gift that holds deep cultural significance; and ornate *dallah* (traditional coffee pot) or a set of *finjaan* (mini cups) represent the sacred act of gathering and hospitality. These gifts provide a narrative, which could be continued, a discussion of traditions and future plans.

A corporate gift can communicate disregard if it ignores norms of hospitality or fails to acknowledge the recipient's status. For multinational firms, the operational challenge is to design gift practices that respect local expectations while maintaining internal controls. The solution is often to standardize governance, not objects: setting transparent approval workflows, documenting intent, and using culturally vetted catalogues that allow status-appropriate variation without improvisation.

East Asia

In East Asian contexts, gift-giving is frequently governed by a reciprocity logic that is both more structured and more temporally extended than in many Western environments. The gift is rarely interpreted as a discrete token; it becomes part of a relational account that signals willingness to sustain interaction. The *guanxi* framework is central to understanding why this matters in Chinese business contexts: relational networks are maintained through repeated obligations, and gestures such as gifts help mark continuity, attentiveness, and reliability (Chen & Chen, 2004). In a study in Bulgaria Yalamov (2012) finds out that bribery is a substitute of being well integrated in networks of personal and professional ties, similar to *quanxi*.

This does not imply that any gift strengthens trust. The interpretive grammar is sensitive to hierarchy and to authenticity. A gift that appears to be strategically timed to influence a particular decision may be read as inappropriate. Likewise, a gift that is too generic can be interpreted as lacking sincerity. Symbolic interactionism offers a useful explanation here: the meaning of the object is socially constructed and depends on context; in East Asia, context includes the relational history and the expected rhythm of reciprocity (Blumer, 1969).

The empirical and behavioral literature is relevant because it shows that gifts can influence negotiation outcomes even when their material value is low (Maréchal & Thöni, 2018). The risk in East Asia is therefore double. Under-gifting may signal relational neglect; over-gifting may trigger suspicion, compliance risk, or discomfort. The practical strategy that emerges from the regional logic is “symbolic adequacy”: selecting items whose meaning is legible and respectful, emphasizing cultural or intellectual resonance, and aligning timing with socially acceptable occasions such as anniversaries or formal milestones.

A second operational dimension is uncertainty management. In settings where uncertainty avoidance is higher, ritualization reduces interpretive ambiguity by clarifying what the gift signifies and what it does not signify (Hofstede, 2011). Corporate policy can leverage this by defining acceptable occasions and by requiring that gifts be framed as cultural courtesy rather than as personal reward. In other words, the firm can reduce risk by controlling the narrative around the gift, not only the gift itself.

Western Europe

In Western Europe, gift-giving is typically constrained by professional norms emphasizing moderation, equality, and institutional integrity. Gifts tend to be symbolic, modest, and more closely aligned with corporate branding or cultural courtesy than with personal relationship-building. This behavioral semantics reflects a lower tolerance for gestures that might create

perceived obligation. Within this setting, the relational function of gifts exists, but it is more confirmatory than catalytic: gifts rarely “create” trust, but can affirm a relationship that is already professionalized.

The cultural logic can be framed in terms of lower power distance and stronger institutional anchoring of trust (Hofstede, 2011). Where equality norms are salient, overt status signalling may produce discomfort. The risk is not only misinterpretation by the recipient but also reputational risk within the recipient’s organisation. In practice, this leads to a preference for corporate souvenirs, books, modest artisanal items, or regionally appropriate tokens that clearly communicate courtesy rather than influence. Integrity frameworks and anti-corruption norms further shape interpretation. Concerns that extravagant gifts may be read as attempts to influence decision-making are consistent with the broader integrity logic advanced in OECD anti-corruption guidance (OECD, 2019). From an institutional viewpoint, the relevant question is often not “Was influence intended?” but “Could influence reasonably be perceived?” As a result, Western European practice tends to emphasize transparency, modesty, and organizational approval processes. Universities, public administrations and companies have different thresholds – as low as 25 euro (Vienna University) through 50 euro (Groningen University) to 150 euro (University of Galway, Ireland). EU members of parliaments should report any gift exceeding a value of 150 euro.

An implication for international business strategy is that the communicative value of a gift in Western Europe is often located in its restraint. A carefully chosen modest gift can signal professionalism and respect for governance norms, thereby building trust. The gift’s “message” is that the giver understands and respects the recipient’s institutional environment.

North America

In the United States and Canada, corporate gift-giving is strongly shaped by compliance regimes and the legal risk of being construed as bribery or an improper inducement. The interpretive grammar is therefore cautious. Gifts are more likely to be acceptable once a relationship is established and when they remain clearly symbolic and of low value. The underlying logic is that early-stage gifts can distort perceived impartiality, even if the gift is culturally benign elsewhere.

Behavioral evidence supports the cautionary stance by demonstrating that small gifts can still influence negotiation behavior (Maréchal & Thöni, 2018). The finding does not imply that any gift is unethical; it implies that firms cannot rely on “smallness” as a risk shield. This is particularly relevant in environments where procurement integrity and conflict-of-interest management are treated as core corporate responsibilities. International guidance on transparency and anti-corruption similarly emphasizes the risk that gifts may be construed as bribery if they create obligations or appear tied to decisions (UNODC, 2013).

The problem that arises is that the acceptable gift repertoire is narrow. Books, modest cultural tokens, or items with clear professional relevance are generally safer, as they minimize the perception of personal benefit. From a symbolic standpoint, these gifts convey respect and compliance awareness. In North America, “protocol competence” includes demonstrating ethical restraint.

For multinational firms, this region underscores the importance of institutional translation. A culturally appropriate gift in one region may be institutionally inappropriate in another, even when intentions are identical. An effective global gifting strategy therefore requires region-specific controls and training, not only a global policy statement.

Eastern Europe

Eastern European business environments often display hybrid characteristics in which formal contracting coexists with strong reliance on personal rapport. Gifts can serve as expressions of personal respect and recognition of partnership, and may appear more “informal” than in Western European or North American settings. The interpretive semantics often accepts a closer blending of professional and interpersonal registers, making gifts potentially more potent as trust signals but also more vulnerable to misunderstanding in cross-border partnerships. Lewis’s intercultural perspective suggests that in some Eastern European contexts, relationship-building precedes full institutionalization of business cooperation, which can make symbolic gestures more central to early-stage trust formation (Lewis, 2006).

The practice of gifting local specialties or fine drinks may therefore serve as a culturally resonant token that confirms seriousness and respect. The communicative content is often relational rather than strategic-image-oriented: the gift signals a willingness to engage as a person, not only as a corporate representative. Home-made high alcohol spirits represent an additional cultural signature, which are provided as a gift to close friends and marks a potential dialogue for original recipes and flavor, transferred from generation to generation. This is obviously not appropriate for recipients from Arab cultures.

The misinterpretation risk is that informality may be read externally as unprofessionalism or, in stricter compliance cultures, as a governance concern. This is where hybrid environments create friction in international partnerships. The same gesture that stabilizes trust locally may raise flags in a multinational compliance audit. A robust strategy is to separate the relational intent from the compliance exposure through documentation, value limits, and explicit framing.

Results and discussion

Across all regions, the gift functions as a communicative instrument, but the “language” differs. In the Arab world, honor and hospitality shape meaning; in East Asia, long-term reciprocity and timing dominate; in Western Europe, moderation and equality norms constrain interpretation; in North America, compliance and perceived impropriety are central; in Eastern Europe, personal rapport and hybrid norms increase both potency and ambiguity. These differences are not decorative. They shape how trust is produced, how misunderstandings arise, and how reputational capital is accumulated or damaged.

The analytical conclusion is that corporate gift-giving should be treated as part of a firm’s trust architecture: a controlled set of practices that must align cultural literacy with ethical and institutional constraints. Gifts can support trust by signaling reliability and intention, consistent with trust theory that emphasizes cognitive, affective, and behavioral components (Lewicki et al., 1998), and with accounts that highlight how signals of intent matter in relational exchange (Camerer, 1988). At the same time, the behavioral evidence that even small gifts can influence outcomes reinforces the need for governance discipline (Maréchal & Thöni, 2018). The practical implication is not abstinence; it is calibrated competence: selecting gifts whose meaning is culturally coherent, whose timing is protocol-correct, and whose form is institutionally defensible.

Types of corporate gifts and contextual appropriateness

Corporate gifts vary widely in form and meaning, yet their effectiveness depends less on typology alone than on contextual alignment. Luxury items such as watches, artisanal pens, or high-quality branded accessories primarily serve as status markers. They signal respect, seriousness of intent, and recognition of hierarchical position, making them particularly suitable for key partners in Arab and East Asian business environments, where symbolic acknowledgment of rank remains integral

to trust formation. In contrast, corporate souvenirs, such as calendars, notebooks, and modest branded materials, serve a different communicative purpose. Their value lies in reinforcing corporate identity and maintaining professional contact without creating personal obligation, making them more appropriate in Western European and North American contexts characterised by egalitarian norms and strong compliance expectations. Intellectual gifts, such as books, reports, or curated publications, occupy a middle ground by symbolising knowledge exchange and expertise; they are widely acceptable across international meetings because they emphasise shared professional interests rather than material benefit.

Alongside traditional forms, digital, sustainable, and personalised gifts have gained prominence as adaptive instruments in global business. Digital gifts, including electronic vouchers, subscriptions, or virtual experiences, offer practicality and cultural neutrality, reducing logistical and interpretive risks in cross-border interactions. Sustainable gifts, which are ethically produced and environmentally responsible products, signal organisational accountability and alignment with CSR and ESG agendas, enhancing reputational capital in contemporary business environments. Personalised gifts, when used judiciously, strengthen relational depth by demonstrating individual attention and respect; however, their appropriateness depends on relational maturity and institutional context, as excessive personalisation may raise ethical concerns in highly regulated settings.

Ethical and legal dimensions

The boundary between an acceptable professional gesture and an inappropriate inducement remains inherently fragile. Ethical evaluation of corporate gifts depends on cultural expectations, institutional frameworks, and the recipient's role in decision-making. International companies therefore rely on formal gift policies that set acceptable value thresholds, define permissible gift types, and specify disclosure requirements. Such policies aim to ensure that gifts remain culturally appropriate, moderate in value, and compliant with corporate governance standards and applicable legal regimes. Compliance frameworks developed by international organizations underscore that even well-intentioned gifts may be construed as attempts to influence if transparency and proportionality are not maintained. Consequently, ethical gift-giving requires not only cultural sensitivity but also institutional awareness and procedural discipline.

Trends and strategic implications

Recent developments in corporate gift-giving reflect broader transformations in international business practices. Digital gift platforms (i.e. NFT art) facilitate cross-border exchange while minimizing cultural and compliance risks, particularly in virtual or hybrid business environments. Sustainable and ethical gift options align corporate practices with global sustainability goals, transforming gifts into visible expressions of organizational values rather than mere tokens of courtesy. Experiential gifts, such as invitations to professional events or cultural or sports programmers, further shift the emphasis from material transfer to shared experience and long-term engagement. Collectively, these trends reinforce the central argument of this study: corporate and diplomatic gifts, when strategically aligned with cultural norms and ethical frameworks, function as dynamic communicative tools—a language of trust that bridges cultural differences, strengthens reputational standing, and supports enduring international partnerships.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that gift-giving is a structured and consequential form of non-verbal communication in economic relations, rather than a marginal or ceremonial practice. By examining gifts through their relational, symbolic, and strategic functions, the analysis has shown how they signal trust, intent, and cultural competence across diverse institutional and cultural environments. The comparative regional perspective further illustrates that gifts are interpreted through distinct cultural semantics, shaped by norms of hierarchy, reciprocity, moderation, and compliance, which directly affect their capacity to strengthen or undermine trust.

Effectiveness of corporate gifts depends on a calibrated alignment between cultural sensitivity and ethical governance. Gifts that are symbolically coherent, appropriately timed, and institutionally defensible can reduce uncertainty, reinforce reputational capital, and support long-term partnership building. Conversely, misaligned or poorly governed gift practices pose significant risks of misinterpretation, ethical concerns, and reputational damage.

Contemporary trends towards digital, sustainable, and experiential gifts further reflect an evolving strategic landscape in which symbolic meaning increasingly outweighs material value.

Ultimately, corporate gift-giving should be understood as an integral part of a firm's trust architecture and communication strategy. It requires strategic design, cultural literacy, and procedural discipline. When treated as such, gifts serve as a genuine "language of trust," enabling international actors to bridge cultural differences, stabilize cooperation, and sustain durable economic relationships in an increasingly complex global environment.

Public and private organizations should develop a special strategy of gift-giving – to whom, when, how often, what, why and what narratives should accompany the gifts. This gift-giving strategy should also be accompanied with gift-receiving one and trainings to onboard the key personnel how effective and ethical gift-giving should be made. It also should be aligned with the overall public communication strategy of the organization.

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