



**UNCLE
MARK**

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**GIFT GUIDE
& ALMANAC**



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INTRODUCTION

As a technology expert, I get a lot of questions – from friends, family, and colleagues – about what technology to buy. I can usually give a quick answer, because I know which products are genuinely good and which are covered in a thick layer of marketing hype.

The *Uncle Mark 2007 Gift Guide & Almanac* is the fourth annual compilation of my recommendations. It's a free downloadable guide that helps you make the best decisions for technology purchases, and for some gifts as well.

If you're like most people, you have questions about technology that you don't want to spend a lot of time researching. But where to get the answers? You can't trust manufacturers, since they want you to buy the most recent or most expensive option. Depending on who you read, the technology media may not be on your side, either. Sure, plenty of websites and magazines – even *Consumer Reports* – can give you 17 different options of digital cameras, but that doesn't help much. You're not asking to see all the available choices. (The problem of having too many choices is explored further in Barry Schwartz's book [The Paradox of Choice](#).)

A better question is, which ONE product should you buy, and why? The pages ahead will tell you. *Uncle Mark* is a free, non-advertised guide where I give recommendations that I personally believe in. I also tell you the reasons why.

I publish this guide each year for fun, for the common good, and to spread the word about my other projects: my newsletter at goodexperience.com, my consulting firm at creativegood.com, my conference at gelconference.com, my anti-design guide at thisisbroken.com, and others. (I do mention one for-pay project of mine – Gootodo.com – in the body of the guide. You’ll see why.) But mostly I wrote this guide to answer, in one place, the questions I often get asked by people looking for clear, direct, unbiased technology advice.

Much of the gift guide this year is brand new, due to many companies releasing new products.

Two final pointers:

1. If you want to be notified when the next Uncle Mark guide comes out, then subscribe (for free) to my Good Experience e-mail newsletter. Just enter your e-mail address at goodexperience.com, reply to the confirmation e-mail, and you’re on.
2. If you have any other questions, e-mail me here: mark@goodexperience.com. I might answer them in a future Uncle Mark guide.

Enjoy,

(Uncle) Mark Hurst
New York City
November 2006

DIGITAL CAMERA: CANON POWERSHOT SD30

SUMMARY: If you want a digital camera, buy the Canon PowerShot SD30, also known as the “Digital Elph.” That’s your answer. There’s no need to read *Consumer Reports* or do a ton of research. I’ve done the research already, and this is the best choice for non-professionals.

DESCRIPTION:

Buy the Canon Powershot SD30 because it’s small, powerful, and affordable. It’s smaller than my wallet, smaller even than many cell phones, which means you can carry the camera in your pocket at all times. And that’s the whole point of having a digital camera: taking as many pictures as you want, wherever you go. If your camera doesn’t fit in your pocket, it’s not a good choice.



*The Canon Digital Elph (PowerShot SD30),
Uncle Mark’s digital camera pick for 2007.*

Consider how the SD30, or “Elph”, fares in the main criteria for buying a digital camera:

- **Size:** It’s small enough for your pocket. Some camera models are thinner (claiming to be “credit-card sized”), but they’re bigger than the Elph in length and width. Remember: size is THE most important aspect of an amateur digital camera, because it determines whether you’ll take the camera with you everywhere and use it, as you should, whenever you want. Buy small.



- **Battery life:** Battery life is decent in the SD30, though the previous version (my pick last year, the SD20) had longer battery life, and it was *smaller*, because it had no zoom. Unfortunately, in “upgrading” the SD30, Canon added a zoom, which requires lots of power to mechanically spin the lens in and out, causing a huge drain on the battery. On amateur cameras like these, the zoom usually isn’t very good anyway. I prefer the SD20 for that reason, but it’s hard to find. Anyway, the SD30 is satisfactory on battery life.
- **Price:** Retail price for the SD30 is around \$270, which is competitive with other major brands and models. (See [Amazon](#).) The SD40 model is more expensive but no better.
- **Megapixels:** The SD30 has 5 megapixels, which is way more than any amateur will need; like zoom, a big megapixel count is just a way to sell more expensive cameras. All you really need is 2 megapixels, which allows you to make great 5-by-7-inch prints. A 5-megapixel camera can generate wall-sized prints, but who cares? 99.9% of the time, 5-by-7 is fine. (Just set the Elph to shoot at 2 megapixels.)
- **Quality:** The Elph’s picture quality is very good for a non-professional camera. (Some cell phones have built-in cameras, but their picture quality is still low. For now, get a real camera.)



My past camera pick, the Sony CyberShot U40, is no longer sold. Not enough consumers wanted a 2-megapixel camera, no matter how great; the latest model is ugly and enormous.

I’ll note that the Elph is not nearly as good as my previous pick, the Sony CyberShot U40, shown above. Unfortunately, not enough consumers bought the U40, so Sony killed it – or rather gave it a battery-draining zoom, more megapixels, and a much bigger size. Our loss.



PERSONAL COMPUTER: APPLE MACINTOSH

SUMMARY: Without question, buy a Mac - unless you *must* be compatible with a Windows network at work or school.

DESCRIPTION: What's better, Windows or Mac? This debate has raged for years, starting not long after Apple introduced the Macintosh computer in 1984. Mine won't be the last words on the subject, but I can give you the reasons behind my recommendation for Macintosh.

First, the exceptions. There are two reasons why you might want to buy a Windows PC:

- If you need to plug into an existing Windows network at a school or corporation, go ahead and buy Windows. Even though a Mac might actually work fine on the network, the in-house tech department will refuse to support Macs, so there's no need to fight them. You'll need to be on good terms with them, anyway, when your Windows PC has problems.
- Some people are bitterly opposed to anything Apple- or Mac-related. If you're one of these people, by all means buy a Windows PC.

Now, for everyone else: *buy a Mac*. I highly recommend the 13-inch MacBook, a laptop that you can use at home or on the road. Order it from the Apple Store online - store.apple.com - or buy it from the retail Apple Store in your local mall - and configure it as follows:

- Make sure you're buying the MacBook, not the MacBook Pro (a good but more expensive Mac).
- Upgrade the RAM to 2 gigabytes, if you can afford it. (Otherwise, 1 gigabyte is OK.)
- Keep the hard drive size at the default size – 80 gigabytes – which is plenty big enough. If you plan to do a lot of video editing, you might want to upgrade to 120 gigs.
- Wireless capability, with the Airport Extreme card, is included in every MacBook, so you don't need to upgrade that.
- You might consider buying AppleCare. At \$250 it's pricey, but if you buy it, you'll get very good tech support for three years.
- Separately, from Amazon.com, buy Microsoft Office. Note that the [Student-Teacher Edition](#) is several hundred dollars less than the normal retail version.



The 13-inch MacBook, shown above, is an excellent computer. Macintosh is always a better choice than a Windows PC, unless you have to connect to an existing Windows network.

If in the end you do decide to get a Windows-based machine, one note of advice: make sure to buy, install, and maintain the maximum armor-plated virus protection. Studies have shown that an unprotected PC on the Internet today is infected by a virus within 20 minutes. Macs have no such worries.



There are two main reasons to choose a Mac over Windows:

1. Macs are easier to use.

The whole point of using a computer is to get things done. Given the choice between getting your work done more or less easily, why would you choose the harder option? This has always puzzled me about people choosing Windows PCs – why would they choose to be *less* productive? The Mac was designed from its inception to be an elegant, effective, easy-to-use system; Windows was built in pieces, leaving it unstable – think of a house of cards – and with a confusing, poorly designed user interface.

2. Macs are more secure against viruses.

If you use a Windows PC, you're constantly vulnerable to Internet viruses, of which there are new strains almost every week. Using a Windows PC is a constant risk to all the work you do on the computer: e-mail, documents, photos, everything. And if you use the most vulnerable e-mail program available today, Microsoft Outlook, you're doubly at risk (and inefficient – Outlook has the worst user interface of any major e-mail program).

Macs have little or no risk of catching an Internet virus. Fewer viruses are written for Macs, and the Macintosh operating system – OSX, pronounced “OS Ten” – is inherently more stable than Windows. You're more safe and secure all around when using a Mac.

Easier to use, more productive, more secure from viruses – why *wouldn't* you choose Macintosh?

CELL PHONE: TREO 700P, OR AN OLD NOKIA

SUMMARY: One of two choices, depending on how tech-savvy the gift recipient is.

DESCRIPTION: Cell phones are getting really complex – adding cameras, Internet access, and other features to their basic ability to make a phone call. There are two ways to deal with this: (a) find the best-designed device that offers all of these features, or (b) avoid all the techno-complexity and find a phone that is good at *making phone calls* (what a concept!).

For “techie” and early adopters who want all the latest features, I recommend the cell phone with it all: the Palm Treo 700p (find it at palm.com or Amazon). It combines a phone, e-mail, instant messaging, Web browsing, Palm software, and a digital camera, all in one device. There is no contest here: Treo is by far the best-designed of all the multi-function devices out there. (I have a hard time imagining who really *needs* all those features in one device, but it’s a great gift for a techie.) Note that you want the Treo 700p, *not* the 700w, which runs on buggy Microsoft code.



The Treo 700p (not 700w) is the best PDA.

For us mere mortals, who just want to make phone calls that aren’t dropped abruptly, I would recommend finding the oldest, chunkiest, most boring Nokia model you can find in your neighborhood cell phone store or online. I recommend Nokia because for years they have

consistently made the easiest, most reliable cell phones. Some of their new models have trendy, high-tech interfaces that are hard to use; try to get the oldest model your carrier supports. Some good options are the Nokia 1100, 6030, 6103, and 6133 (6131 in Europe). Each carrier only supports certain phones, though, so check to see what's available: try MyRatePlan.com.

Unfortunately, my neighborhood cell phone store didn't have any of my carrier's Nokia phones – only Motorola, which is known for poor interface design. If you're stuck in this situation, consider your options carefully (or buy online, as I should have).



A “least bad” option: the Motorola v188.

Looking at every single Motorola in the store, I chose the least bad option, the Motorola v188. The interface design is poor, as I expected, but otherwise it works fairly well as a phone. And it's much simpler than the combination cellphone-camera-toaster-blender-icecream-maker gizmos that T-Mobile and Motorola *really* want you to buy. (And don't even think of getting a KRZR or PEBL or whatever Motorola's latest fashion statement is. If you want pure ornamentation, buy a T-shirt – it lasts longer and there's no tech support.)

Finally, whatever cell phone you buy, two more tips: first, the carrier may not offer the best prices. Amazon.com may offer lower phone prices; it's also worth checking MyRatePlan.com for both phones and service plans. Second, make sure to buy a headset. It's still possible that a cell phone held to the ear for long periods can bring harmful radiation into the brain. A headset reduces or eliminates this risk.

MP3 (MUSIC) PLAYER: APPLE IPOD

SUMMARY: A gift idea for anyone who doesn't have an iPod but would actually use one.

DESCRIPTION: I got the idea for the Uncle Mark guide years ago when I recommended an iPod to a middle-aged couple who needed a graduation gift idea for their nephew. They came away looking like heroes, because the young graduate had really wanted an iPod. But times have changed. Millions of people already have iPods, so it's not as surprising a gift option.

Still, if you are considering buying one, it's helpful to know the different models Apple now offers (all at the [Apple Store](#)):

- the (full-sized) iPod, which can play videos that you download from Apple's online iTunes store, as well as music and slideshows
- the smaller iPod Nano (shown at right), which plays music and slideshows
- the iPod Shuffle, a tiny thing with no screen that can play music only, mainly in "shuffle" (random-song-selection) mode



The iPod Nano.

All three iPods are well-designed products, but they're too expensive if you're not sure it's the right gift. If the giftee is under the age of 30, he or she may own an iPod already; if 30 or over,

they may not have the interest or time to use what is essentially a souped-up Walkman. People who commute by train or subway may like it, but probably not if they drive. People who go to the gym a lot may like it, but only if they like listening to audio while they exercise.

With all that said: if an iPod is appropriate, I recommend the iPod Shuffle. It's the least expensive option and is quite versatile. On planes, on gym treadmills, and while commuting, users can listen to a random selection of their own music. (Note that some users may need coaching on how to download music onto the device.) But again, if the giftee is unlikely to listen to it much, look for a different gift.

One last note about the iPod: if you do buy some portable music device, the iPod is by far the best-designed of its class. Be careful about buying “knockoff” competitors, and by all means *do not* buy Microsoft's new iPod competitor, called “Zune.” The Zune is hobbled by poor design and severe restrictions on sharing music, even your own songs. David Pogue, the New York Times technology columnist, called the Zune a “bigger, heavier form [of the iPod] with fewer features — just to indulge Microsoft's ‘we want some o’ that’ envy.” (“[Trying Out the Zune: iPod It's Not](#)”, New York Times, Nov. 9, 2006.) If you're shopping for a portable music player, avoid the Zune and steer toward the iPod.

SUPERB KITCHEN TOOL: VITAMIX 4500

SUMMARY: This outstanding blender can make smoothies, soup, sauces, and ice cream.

DESCRIPTION: I used to buy smoothies from a juice bar down the street. Now I make them at home, more easily, cheaply, and tastily, with a Vitamix 4500 blender. I affectionately call my Vitamix “the monster” because it enthusiastically destroys anything I throw in it: whole apples, large ice cubes, almonds, everything. I can get a smoothie made to order in seconds. The out-of-box experience is good, too, since the manufacturer includes a cookbook and a free tamper, a plastic dowel to push things down into the maw.

My favorite aspect of the Vitamix is its simple interface. There are only two switches: on/off, and high/low. Contrast that to the maddening collection of buttons, dials, switches, and digital readouts on competing blenders that are much less powerful. Superficial gewgaws can’t compete with a simple, elegant interface driving a powerful motor. The Vitamix is excellent for breakfast smoothies, but it is also good for making soups, sauces, and ice cream.



*The Vitamix 4500 blender:
powerful and well-designed.*

Google “[vitamix 4500](#)” to buy it online. (Don’t bother with [vitamix.com](#), which tries to sell an “upgraded” version, the 5000, for more money and a needless new dial on the interface. Bleah.)

A SOLUTION TO E-MAIL OVERLOAD

SUMMARY: Gootodo.com allows you to keep your e-mail inbox clear.

DESCRIPTION: Everyone complains about feeling stressed from getting too much e-mail, but no one seems to have a solution. That changes now.

If your e-mail inbox is bulging, here's a simple way to solve it: to start, delete the e-mails that you don't need any more (or file them away, if you really need to refer to them later). Newsletters, meeting announcements, spam mail, one-word replies, that kind of stuff. Just get rid of all of it.

Then you're only left with action items, or todos. First, use the "two-minute rule" and do any of them that can be accomplished in two minutes or less, and then delete them. Now you only have big todos that take several minutes, hours, days, months, who knows, maybe years to accomplish. It doesn't matter: whether you have five, fifteen, or fifty big todos sitting in your inbox, there's an easy way to clear those out. If we can move those big todos out of the inbox, it will be *empty*, and your mind will feel much clearer.

The trick is to forward those big todos to a todo list that is separate from your inbox, and that separates today's todos from those coming in the future. Here I recommend my own tool, Gootodo.com, since it is the only todo list that does this. It's an online todo list that works via the

Web browser on any computer – Mac, Windows, or Linux – and it is compatible with every e-mail program: Outlook, Eudora, Lotus Notes, Yahoo Mail, Gmail, even PDAs like Treos and Blackberries. Go to <https://www.gootodo.com> and sign up for a free trial account. (After the first month it's three bucks a month, but it's free to try out.)

Once you have your Gootodo account, just forward each todo in your e-mail inbox to your Gootodo list, depending on what day - today, next week, or any future day in the next year - you want it to show up.

Here's the last step to clearing your e-mail inbox: Forward to *today's* list what you can accomplish today; forward others as far as you can into the future. Then delete them from the inbox.

Done: you now have an empty inbox and a manageable todo list to get through today.

Forwarding is easy. For example, forward an e-mail to today@gootodo.com and it will show up on today's list. (Then, of course, delete the e-mail from your inbox.) Forward an e-mail to tomorrow@gootodo.com and it will *not* show up on today's list - but will appear tomorrow. (Any undone todos from today will also roll over onto tomorrow's list.)

Forward an e-mail to 2d@gootodo.com (or 2days@gootodo.com) and it will show up in two days. Or forward it to monday@gootodo.com and it will show up on Monday. You can even e-mail a specific date, like I4dec@gootodo.com or decI4@gootodo.com, to create a todo on December 14.

I can almost guarantee that if you try this out, using the method I've described, you will feel less stressed, work more productively, and have more time for things that really matter - family, friends, and creative pursuits. Give it a try and let me know what you think.

VIDEO GAME SYSTEM: NINTENDO

SUMMARY: In a crowded field of devices, Nintendo makes the highest quality game systems.

DESCRIPTION: This is an unusual moment in the video game industry, with all three manufacturers offering new and improved systems that debut for the 2006 holidays: the Wii, the PlayStation 3, and the Xbox 360. Here are *all* the game systems today, listed by manufacturer:

- Nintendo: Wii, GameCube, and handheld DS Lite
- Sony: PlayStation 2, Playstation 3, and handheld PSP
- Microsoft: Xbox and Xbox 360

Of these three manufacturers, Nintendo is the only company with a history and culture of making great games. Sony is known for its marketing prowess – there are more games available for the Playstation than for competing systems – and Microsoft is known for, well, being Microsoft. But Nintendo is known for *games that are fun to play* – Mario, Donkey Kong, Zelda, and the rest – and that’s why I always recommend Nintendo when people ask me about video games. (Why someone would buy a game system because it’s marketed well, or backed by a well-known software brand, instead of how fun it is to play, I don’t understand.)

At this unusual moment, however, there's no easy recommendation for which game system to buy. The Nintendo GameCube has some great games – Super Smash Brothers Melee is still the best multiplayer video game ever made, for example – but the system is several years old and is being replaced by the Wii. The Wii, on the other hand, is only beginning to be available for purchase, not to mention its unfortunate name, pronounced “wee” – no doubt the result of a committee. (The Wii does play GameCube games, though: Smash, Mario Kart, and Mario Sunshine are great.)

The Playstation 2 has two genuinely good games – “Katamari Damacy” and its sequel, “We Love Katamari” – but it's being replaced by the brand-new Playstation 3. Like the Wii, the Playstation 3 is too new to evaluate, though it does play PS2 games. In general, the only advantage of the Playstation is that there are more games available for it, but (except for Katamari) they're lower-quality games than those for the GameCube. It's a little like the long-standing rivalry between Macintosh and Windows: the Mac is a higher-quality computer, but Windows computers have more (lower-quality) software available. Nintendo is a better choice than Sony, simply because it's more fun. (For Microsoft's part, the XBox has a popular series of shooting games called “Halo” but otherwise it's unremarkable.)

The only disadvantage of Nintendo is that some gamers - especially the hard-core gamers - look down on Nintendo as only offering “kiddie games,” with cutesy characters and no blood or guts. (If your giftee absolutely needs a violent game, get “Halo 2” or “Gears of War” for the XBox 360.)

So: the new game systems are too new; the old systems are too old; what's left? Handheld games.

Here only Nintendo and Sony are competitors – Microsoft has not yet created a handheld game system – and the differences are familiar. Nintendo's handheld offers more fun games, while

Sony's has a more high-tech feel to it; but that doesn't improve the games.

Nintendo's handheld is the DS Lite, and Sony's is the PSP. Shown at right is the only solid gift recommendation I can make for video games this year: Nintendo's handheld game system, the DS Lite. (DS stands for "dual screen.")

The DS Lite has several notable games, including a handheld version of Mario Kart, Nintendo's long-running series of outstanding racing games. The DS Lite is especially good here because it allows players around the world to race each other simultaneously by using the built-in wireless feature.



The Nintendo DS Lite, Uncle Mark's video game pick for 2007.

Other DS Lite game picks include "Brain Age", a kind of mental quiz game appropriate for all ages; "Wario Ware: Touched", a collection of mini-games; and "Animal Crossing", a good game for kids. Whatever you buy, remember to choose something because it's fun, not just because it seems high-tech or is marketed in some slick way. Nintendo is your best bet.

Finally, for what it's worth, I'm not alone in my comparison of the three videogame competitors. In comparing the GameCube, PlayStation, and Xbox in the fall of 2005, the Economist wrote: "Nintendo's GameCube has a far narrower range of games than Sony's console, but what it lacks in quantity it makes up for in quality, at least for the family-oriented audience that Nintendo targets... Because Nintendo has very high production standards, the games that are available are impressive." (Economist, September 15, 2005.) Well put.

ONLINE GAMES YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT

SUMMARY: Good Experience Games, World of Warcraft, and Second Life are worth knowing.

DESCRIPTION: After the lengthy description above about video games played via consoles and handheld devices, it's worth noting that there is another kind of digital game I recommend: the online game. An Internet-enabled computer, after all, can function as a game system just as much as a Nintendo – and it's easier to get back to work when you're done playing.

A few years ago I started compiling a list of free online games that anyone could start playing, right away, just by clicking on a link. My site, Good Experience Games, now lists over 200 games, all of which are fun, easy to start, and (except where noted) appropriate for all ages. I've tried to make it the best gaming resource in the world, with hours and weeks and months of gaming, for free, available right now. (I'm just glad I didn't have this when I was growing up, or I never would have gotten anything done.) Go here to play: goodexperience.com/games

Two other very different online games are worth mentioning because they're so popular. World of Warcraft is the most popular “massively multiplayer online role-playing game”, a kind of wizards-and-dragons game that people play together all over the world; and Second Life is a virtual online world, not exactly a “game”, where users explore environments built by other users. Both WoW and SL charge monthly subscription fees; more importantly, real involvement requires a lot of time and attention. Be aware of the commitment of time and money if you sign up, or if you buy a subscription for someone else. I hesitate to recommend either because of that commitment.

BOARD GAMES YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT

SUMMARY: Snatch, Carcassonne, and other board games that almost anyone would enjoy.

DESCRIPTION: Board games have made something of a comeback in recent years, and it's worth knowing about some of the more interesting options. Any of these board games would make a great gift for yourself or someone you know who likes to play games.

Snatch (2 or more players): Possibly the ultimate word game. There's no board, just letter tiles from which to make words and "snatch" your opponent's words. It's elegant, fast-paced, and competitive; I highly recommend it. Google "[snatch word game](#)" for ordering options.

Ticket to Ride (2-5 players): Fun, easy-to-learn track-laying game, a bit like "Sorry" played on a US railway map. Recommended for all ages. A great party game, it gets better with more players.

Carcassonne (2-5 players): An elegant, simple game of tile-laying as players build the medieval French city of Carcassonne together. This is one of the best two-player games of ANY type that I've ever encountered. It's also fun for more than two.

I still recommend Settlers of Catan (for 3-4 players), and Lord of the Rings: Confrontation (for two Tolkien fans only), as I have in past years. Find all games above except Snatch at [funagain.com](#), [amazon.com](#), or your local game store.

A GIFT PICK FOR KIDS

SUMMARY: I still recommend the strangely accurate 20 Questions ball, just as I did last year.

DESCRIPTION: Go to 20q.net, then click on “20Q Store”, to purchase Robin Burgener’s amazing 20 Questions ball for the very reasonable price of \$15. This toy is hard to explain if you haven’t tried it in person – but here goes. The ball’s LED screen asks you yes/no questions to guess the thing (animal, mineral, vegetable, or other) you’re thinking of. You push the “yes” and “no” buttons on the ball until 20 questions later, when the ball guesses *exactly* what you had in mind.



The one caveat, especially if you’re showing it off to kids, is to start with something easy: a lion, or a broom, or something similarly easy. Allow the ball a good first impression – nailing the first item – and then work up to more obscure items later. (If you’re especially interested in how the ball works, play the game online for free at 20q.net. By playing thousands of rounds of 20 Questions on the website, users themselves taught the ball all the answers. It’s an amazing and clever use of collective online intelligence.)

The 20 Questions ball with four buttons: Yes, No, Sometimes, and Unknown. Brilliant design.

P.S. I also still recommend previous years’ picks for kids: the 50 states placemat (Google “US map placemat”) and Five State Rummy (Google “five-state rummy” to find its Yahoo Store).

SEVERAL MORE “ESSENTIAL” PICKS

SUMMARY: A spam-fighter, DVR, laser printer, wallet pen, and news mag not to miss.

DESCRIPTION: Here are a few more items I highly recommend:

- [SpamArrest](#): Good, reliable anti-spam-mail service. It’s a “white list”, which means that only addresses you approve can get through. You can review other mail online to delete or approve.
- [TiVo](#): It really is as good as they say. If you watch any TV at all, buy a TiVo and free yourself of the idiotic tyranny of commercials and network schedules (and the very idea of TV networks). Some cable systems offer their own “DVR” but I highly recommend TiVo’s near-perfect interface.
- [HP LaserJet 1020](#): I recommend this simple, inexpensive, all-around great laser printer for non-heavy use. It’s Mac- and Windows-compatible, black-and-white only, and about \$200.
- [Zebra mini-pen](#): This 4-inch-long pen fits in my wallet, so I’m never without a writing instrument. This comes in handy more than you’d think, especially since few people seem to know about wallet pens. Find it for \$5 at any good art-supply store.
- [The Economist](#): The best comprehensive print news source. Read the print magazine once a week and you’ll get nearly everything you’d get from Time/Newsweek, Business Week, and the Wall Street Journal, not to mention international media. The website is good, too.

ALMANAC

THE BEST WAY TO GIVE A BEST MAN'S SPEECH, BY PHIL TERRY

SUMMARY: Include important guests from both the bride and groom.

DESCRIPTION: My business partner, Uncle Phil Terry, was kind enough to write in:

I recently had the unusual honor of being the Best Man twice for the same groom (and bride). Because their families live on both coasts of the U.S., they held two ceremonies. This meant I gave two Best Man speeches, which meant I had two times to get it right. I learned that the key to a good Best Man speech is to include brief vignettes involving important guests of the bride and groom who are *not* members of the wedding party.

Before my speech, I identified key guests who had important stories to share but had no formal role in the wedding. I told them that I'd like to call on them during my speech to *briefly* share a story or sentiment. I limited each person to 30 seconds and warned them that I would cut them off if it went too long. When I gave my speech, I called on each of the six people I had earlier selected, and the speech went great. It was a wonderful way to broaden participation and to share love and memories. Try it at your next wedding!



HOW TO RUN A MEETING

SUMMARY: Start with time, agenda, and intros, and end on time.

DESCRIPTION: I'm often surprised at the inefficiency of meetings, since it's so easy to run a good meeting with the tiniest investment of discipline. Here's how:

1. Start the meeting on time.
2. Start with TAI: time, agenda, and intros. At the start, establish how long the meeting will last (time); list the items to be discussed (agenda); and, if appropriate, have everyone go around the room and state their name and role (intros).
3. During the meeting, if the group strays from the agenda, write down the topic for a later discussion and return the group to the agenda. (If necessary, appoint a facilitator to watch time and agenda.)
4. End on time. Write down any unfinished business (on or off the agenda) for later discussion.

In my experience, Step 2 is the most commonly omitted. Make sure to start with TAI!



UMBRELLA STORAGE SYSTEM

SUMMARY: A simple system that guarantees you'll never get wet in the rain.

DESCRIPTION: Here's the easiest, most efficient system for always having an umbrella on hand, 365 days a year, guaranteed. It just takes an easy setup (steps 1 and 2) and a tiny amount of discipline after that (steps 3 and 4).

HERE'S THE SYSTEM:

1. Buy two umbrellas.
2. Put one umbrella at home, and the other at work (or school).
3. Before you leave home or work, check to see if it's raining, or likely to rain. If it is, take that umbrella with you.
4. (This is the hard part.) When you return to that location (home or work), bring the umbrella *back* and put it back where it was. This is the hardest part of the system because it's often not raining on your return trip, and it's hard to remember an umbrella when the skies are clear. But if you forget to bring the umbrella back, the system breaks: you're vulnerable the next time it rains when you're at that location.
5. If you lose your umbrella at a restaurant, in a cab, etc., buy another one immediately and replace it in the appropriate location. Better to fix the system earlier than later.



THE BEST WAY TO SEND E-CARDS

SUMMARY: Use delivr.net, a free e-card service.

DESCRIPTION: Several times a year I send out e-cards – for birthdays, anniversaries, and other important dates – but for a long time I couldn’t find a good selection. Amazon.com and Hallmark.com only offer cheesy or maudlin designs, and other sites do who-knows-what with your e-mail address. I was happy to find delivr.net, a free service that uses publicly available photos from flickr.com, a photo-sharing service, for the cards. I use it all the time. Try it.



A GOOD RECOMMENDATION SITE YOU PROBABLY HAVEN’T READ:

COOL TOOLS, BY KEVIN KELLY

SUMMARY: kk.org/cooltools or Google “[cool tools](http://cooltools)”

DESCRIPTION: Kevin Kelly (author, photographer, Internet veteran and all-around

Renaissance man) has written the Cool Tools website for several years. In it, he compiles recommendations from friends, along with his own, for the best *single* tool in different categories. It's like Uncle Mark, but more tech-heavy, and with lots of camping gear. Good stuff.

(P.S. In previous Uncle Mark guides I recommended Mark Twain's little-known travelogue *Roughing It* and Stanley Kubrick's 1975 movie *Barry Lyndon*. I still recommend both.)



HOW TO REMEMBER IF THE BATTERIES AREN'T IN YOUR CAMERA

SUMMARY: If the batteries are dead, or aren't in the camera, keep the battery compartment open.

DESCRIPTION: When you're charging your camera batteries (in a wall charger, say), keep the camera's battery compartment open. That way, if you pick up your camera to put it in your pocket or purse, you'll see that the battery compartment is open and will remember that the batteries aren't in it.



HOW TO WRITE DATES IN E-MAIL

SUMMARY: Use absolute dates, not relative dates, in e-mail.

DESCRIPTION: Here's something I see a lot in e-mails I receive: "Let's meet tomorrow at 7pm." The problem is that it's not always clear *what day* the sender had in mind, especially if I check mail in the morning and am not sure if they sent the note the day before. I always have to reply with something like: "Tomorrow meaning today, Thursday Dec 7, or Friday Dec 8?"

I also can't understand the e-mail that says, "How about next Friday at 3pm?" I'm not sure which Friday they had in mind! "This" Friday and "next" Friday mean different things to different people. It may be clear in the sender's mind, but until we all perfect our powers of ESP, everyone who writes e-mail should use *absolute dating*.

Absolute dating is simple: always say the day of the week, the month, and the day. You can use a relative word like "tomorrow," but it **MUST** be clarified by the absolute date. "Let's meet tomorrow, Tuesday Dec 7, at 7pm." And if the recipient isn't local, clarify the time zone by geography (say "New York time" instead of "EST", since the time zone may actually be EDT, one hour back).



HOW TO DECIDE WHICH SEAFOOD TO EAT

SUMMARY: Google “[regional seafood watch](#)” or “[seafood wallet card](#)” and get the free PDF file.

DESCRIPTION: I almost never eat Chilean sea bass any more. It’s a delicious fish, but it’s so popular with consumers that it’s being fished almost to extinction. I don’t want to contribute to its extinction, so I try to eat other fish when I have the choice.

In fact, many types of seafood are being dangerously overfished. But some are well-managed species and are OK to eat. How does the globally-minded consumer decide which to eat?

Solution: the Seafood Watch card, provided free by the Monterey Bay Aquarium. Just Google “[regional seafood watch](#)” or “[seafood wallet card](#)” and you’ll get to the right page. Some aquariums give the card for free to visitors. However you get it, keep it in your wallet and pull it out at restaurants. Monkfish? Sorry, no can do. Arctic char? Bring it!



HOW TO MAKE SURE THEY SEE THE PAPERS YOU DROPPED OFF

SUMMARY: Put the papers on their chair.

DESCRIPTION: Here's a tip I learned years ago and have used ever since. If you want to make sure that someone sees the papers you dropped off at their desk, put the papers on their *chair*. The natural inclination is to drop the files on the keyboard, or beside the mousepad. What's the first thing the person does when they get back to their desk? They shove the papers aside, onto a nearby pile. They want to check their e-mail immediately, and those papers are in the way!

But put the papers on their chair, and watch what happens: the person refuses to sit on them! They take a second to pick them up, and while they're in-hand, the person takes a look at the files while they get comfortable in the chair. Bingo: you guarantee attention to your drop-off.



TWO FREE GUIDES TO TERRORIST-ATTACK PREPAREDNESS

SUMMARY: www.rand.org/publications/MR/MRI731.I or tinyurl.com/52sqh
and www.health.harvard.edu/downloads/preparing_for_disaster.pdf or tinyurl.com/y897xn

DESCRIPTION: At the Web addresses above, you can download two free publications:

- By Rand: "Individual Preparedness and Response to Chemical, Radiological, Nuclear, and



Biological Terrorist Attacks.” (Click on the link marked “PDF” and you’ll get the free 1.6-megabyte file.)

- By Harvard: “Preparing for Disaster: 3-Step Plan”. Worth knowing some expert tips.



RULES FOR WALKING IN NEW YORK CITY

SUMMARY: Don’t make any sudden movements.

DESCRIPTION: Walking in New York is like driving on a highway. There are rules, and there are safety risks if people don’t follow them. Even if you don’t live in New York City, you can apply walking rules to wherever you live and walk.

Here is the most important walking rule: **Don’t make sudden changes in course.** Don’t suddenly stop or change your speed. Don’t change directions suddenly for no reason, and don’t make a surprise about-face. Just like driving on the highway: don’t act unpredictably. If you have to walk (or drive) slowly, at least do it predictably, so that people around you can travel safely.

There are other rules (stay to the right when turning a corner, don’t stop at the end of the escalator, etc.), but those will wait for another time. In the meantime, *The New York Times* wrote a story on their own walking rules in July 2002. From the Times archives: <http://tinyurl.com/vlrv>



A BETTER WAY OF VISITING THE CENTRAL PARK ZOO

SUMMARY: Buy the tickets next to the Children's Zoo.

DESCRIPTION: The Central Park Zoo is one of the busiest tourist attractions in New York City, especially on weekends. On a nice weekend day you'll wait in a long line to buy tickets.

Here's a way to buy tickets quickly: walk 100 yards north to the ticket booth next to the Children's Zoo, which has much shorter lines. Most people don't realize that you can buy tickets there for the main Central Park Zoo. So buy your tickets at the Children's Zoo, then walk back to the main zoo entrance, bypassing the long ticket line. Of course, once inside, you'll still be in a crowd.

(P.S. In a previous Uncle Mark guide, I recommended a better way of visiting New York's Metropolitan Museum – by showing up during the Puerto Rican Day Parade in June. Still recommended: to get to the museum, start in Central Park and walk east to the north side of the Met. You'll only have to wade through the crowds for half a block before you walk up the steps into the museum, and you'll be one of the only visitors there.)



A SKILL YOU PROBABLY DIDN'T KNOW YOU HAD

SUMMARY: Your index finger can be a magnifying glass.

DESCRIPTION: Here's a trick that works surprisingly well for any situation where you have to read fine print or any other small thing within arm's reach: turn your hand into a magnifying glass. Just curl up your index finger and hold it shut with your thumb. Make a tiny pinhole in the middle of the curl by opening your finger a tiny bit. If you look through that pinhole, you'll see that it magnifies anything that's about an inch away. Make sure it's well-lit.



MERLIN MANN'S FOREHEAD TICKET TRICK

SUMMARY: Before leaving, everyone in the group must put their ticket on their forehead.

DESCRIPTION: Quoted in full from Merlin Mann's 43folders.com:

So, you're going to a ticketed event, like a concert or a ball game. It's out of town. You're carpooling with four other people. How do you ensure that everyone in the car has their ticket with them? The car doesn't move until each person takes out their ticket and holds it to their forehead. Been doing it for 20 years, and you'd be amazed how often it saves the day.



HOW TO LEAVE A TELEPHONE MESSAGE

SUMMARY: Give the message quickly, but slow down when you give your phone number.

DESCRIPTION: When you're leaving a telephone message – on an answering machine, on a cell phone's voice mail, etc. – think about the experience of the person listening to the message. The single most important piece of information in that message is your phone number. Even if everything else in the message is garbled, if they can understand your phone number, they can at least call you back.

Conversely, most people *don't* want to hear a long, drawn-out, repetitive, boring, endless, boring, repetitive message.

Why is it, then, that people often do exactly the wrong thing when they leave a message?

“Hey there, so um, this is, um, Greg, and we're going to send you that report, ahhhhh, as soon as we have it, and anyway, you'll be getting that report soon. And when you do, uhh, could you call me, at, twoeightsifivesixfourfourthreetoeighnine.” Click.

A long, boring, repetitive message, and then he turns into a speed demon when he leaves his phone number. **WHY?** And then to make it worse, to get the phone number, you have to listen to the whole message again, waiting for that last two seconds of nonsense. Sheesh.

Remember: leave a brief message, then sllloooowwww doooowwnnnn when leaving your number.

KEEP IN TOUCH

To keep in touch with Uncle Mark:

1. Subscribe, for free, to my Good Experience e-mail newsletter. Just go to goodexperience.com, type in your e-mail address, then reply to the confirmation e-mail.
2. Take a look at my other free resources: thisisbroken.com, addyourown.com, and my list of [customer experience resources](#), all of which are linked from goodexperience.com.
3. Come to my conference, called Gel, short for “Good Experience Live.” There are two Gels in 2007: April 19-20 in New York, and then September 6-7 in Copenhagen, Denmark. Or watch videos of past presentations at the website: gelconference.com

If you have any comments, questions, or stories about how this guide helped you, e-mail me here: mark@goodexperience.com. I use SpamArrest, so you might get asked to answer a simple question in order to approve your e-mail. I read every e-mail I get and try to reply to each one.

Keep in touch –

(Uncle) Mark Hurst
November 2006