



**UNCLE
MARK**

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**GIFT GUIDE
& ALMANAC**



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* *Italicized* sections are new or updated for this year's guide. -u.m.

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INTRODUCTION

This is the seventh annual edition of the *Uncle Mark Gift Guide and Almanac*, a compilation of my favorite single product in each of several categories – with some tips and rants thrown in for good measure. For those loyal readers who pick up *Uncle Mark* every year, nice to see you again; and for newcomers, welcome.

I'm a little late finishing this installment – it's now early December 2009 – as this year has been unusually busy and I've been playing catchup on a number of projects. I do appreciate the letters of encouragement, though, from the many readers who were expecting a November arrival.

The economy has improved slightly since last year's guide – or perhaps, more accurately, it's a little less horrific. But many consumers are, understandably, still watching every penny. Hence the value, I hope, of *Uncle Mark* – helping you become a more informed buyer. If I can save someone from purchasing an over-hyped dog of a product, I'll be happy. Conversely, if I can point people to the company that spends its energy making something great rather than boasting about nothing, I'll have succeeded.

This guide gives *one* pick for the best product in a category, rather than “the 32 hottest digital cameras” or “18 camcorders to choose from.” My goal is to save you time, not create yet another research step for you.

The recommendations are mine alone. You'll notice there are no advertisers in this guide; nor do I charge for downloads. (Please do share this file with friends and family!) Then why do I do it? To scratch an itch: I've worked as a customer advocate for over a decade, and I love pointing people toward products and services that create the best experience – regardless of the company's marketing budget.

I don't make any money from this guide, except when someone buys a product from Amazon by clicking one of the underlined links in this file (which link to my Amazon Associates account). That's optional, of course. I do recommend one for-pay project of my own – Gootodo.com – because I believe it will help anyone who uses it. You'll see why.

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, at goodexperience.com/newsletter.php. You can also email me directly at mark@goodexperience.com. I keep an empty inbox and am usually fairly quick to respond.

Enjoy,

(Uncle) Mark Hurst
New York City
December 2009

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TWO NEW DEVICES YOU MIGHT NOT KNOW

SUMMARY: The Roku and Grace Radio are relatively unknown but nicely designed devices.

The [Grace Digital Wireless Internet Radio](#) (\$150) uses your wireless Internet connection to tune into online radio stations from around the world. It also plays any channels you've set up on [Pandora.com](#) (an excellent, free music service). I live in New York but often tune into KCRW, a great public radio station in Los Angeles, for free (though I do voluntarily donate to the station, as one should for public radio). The controls on the radio could be better designed – wish they'd call me for help! – but otherwise it's a great little radio for our kitchen at home. We use it every day.



The Grace wifi radio plays Internet radio through a familiar chassis.

The [Roku](#) player (\$80) – also in an [HD version](#) (\$100) – requires a wireless Internet connection, a TV, and a Netflix.com membership (\$10 to \$15 a month, depending on the plan)... with those essentials, this little box does something extraordinary: it plays streams movies from the Netflix website and plays them on your TV – for no extra cost than the monthly Netflix fee you already pay. No need to wait for the DVD to arrive in the mail – watch it instantly via the Roku! While only some of Netflix's movies are available to “Watch Instantly,” there are great things available: documentaries, classics, TV shows, etc.



The Roku player streams Netflix movies into your TV or HDTV.

PHONE: APPLE IPHONE

SUMMARY: The best handheld digital device today remains the [Apple iPhone](#).

DESCRIPTION: In years past I used to review cell phones, cameras, and PDAs separately, in each case giving my pick for the best-in-class device. But the technology landscape changed dramatically in 2007 with the launch of the Apple iPhone. I was initially skeptical until I tried one, and now I've been a happy iPhone user for over two years. And it keeps getting better. The iPhone is most significant launch of *any* digital device since 1984, when Apple launched the Macintosh.

Consider the iPhone's benefits:

- It's the best cell phone available today. Even if you **ONLY** use it as a cell phone, the iPhone is worth buying, because its design is excellent – in contrast to the user-hostile interfaces of many other phones.
- While AT&T is the only US carrier available for iPhone users, I've found its service to range from satisfactory – which is all one can ask for a telecom carrier these days – to good. Even if Verizon or some other carrier has slightly better reception, they don't offer the iPhone.



The Apple iPhone, Uncle Mark's phone and camera pick for 2009.

- The iPhone comes with a 2-megapixel camera whose photo quality is nearly as good as the cameras I have recommended in past years. (Unless you're a professional photographer, two megapixels is all you need to share images online and print at 5x7.) Remember that the point of a digital camera is to have it with you at all times to take a picture anywhere – never having to ask, “did you bring the camera?” If your camera doesn't fit in your pocket, it's not a good choice. The iPhone fits. *And* the iPhone now includes a video camera, which takes surprisingly good video – saving you from having to carry around yet another device.
- It's not just a phone: the iPhone also serves as an iPod and contains an address book, Web browser, email, calendar, texting, Google Maps, and any of thousands of apps from the online App Store, most of which are free or cost a dollar or two.
- Windows users in an office environment may wonder whether the iPhone plays well with Outlook (and whether it syncs e-mail, contacts, and calendar via an Exchange server). The answer is *yes*; it only requires that the IT folks set up the server the right way.
- I used to recommend the BlackBerry for business users who type a lot (since the BB has a keyboard and the iPhone only has a touch screen), but I take it back. The iPhone's advantages over the BlackBerry far outweigh any advantage of a physical keyboard. I type plenty fast on the iPhone.
- Predictably, several companies are chasing the iPhone with their own “smartphones”. The two strongest entries are the Palm Pre (available in the US via Sprint only) and a series of phones offered by T-Mobile that run Android software by Google. They each have some strengths, but none beats the iPhone overall. I'd still recommend the iPhone.

A FEW GOOD IPHONE APPS

Anyone with an iPhone (or iPod Touch) is likely to wonder which of the thousands of available apps are worth their time. Here are a few I've used and would recommend. (See also my iPhone game recommendations at <http://goodexperience.com/games/iphone/> .)

FREE

- [Instapaper](#): Read Web pages on the iPhone even when you're offline. It requires some setup, but it's super-useful: while using your computer, you can click a link to save the current Web page to read later on the iPhone.
- [Kindle](#): Amazon's ebook reader is free for the iPhone. You don't need to buy a Kindle device. Just buy the Kindle version of the book you want and then download it to your iPhone, using the (free) Kindle app. I'm reading a 900-page Civil War history on the iPhone, and it's great.
- [Pandora](#) plays free personalized music, and [Public Radio Player](#) streams public radio stations.

FOR A FEW BUCKS

- [Quordy](#): The best word game I've found, essentially a version of Boggle, nicely implemented.
- [Galcon](#): Good multiplayer game, sort of like an extremely fast game of Risk.
- [CityTransit](#): Contains the entire New York City subway map. Helpful for locals and tourists.



Quordy is an excellent word game for solo and competitive play.

CAMERA: IPHONE OR CANON POWERSHOT

As stated above, I recommend the iPhone as the camera to carry around. However, some people want a better camera – one with flash and zoom – to get the shots the iPhone can't.

In this case, I'd recommend a Canon PowerShot, which is a product line of inexpensive, reliable, easy-to-use cameras that take decent shots. I've used them over the years and have always been happy.



The Canon PowerShot SD1200.

There are many PowerShot models available, but rather than doing a ton of research (comparing camera models is notoriously difficult), I'd recommend simply choosing the *one* model from this list that is closest to your desired price point:

- [Canon PowerShot A480](#) - \$100 (decent entry-level camera, also shoots video)
- [Canon PowerShot SD1200IS](#) - \$150 (better image quality than the A480, and shoots video)
- [Canon PowerShot SD780IS](#) - \$200 (like the SD1200 except shoots video in high-def)
- [Canon PowerShot S90IS](#) - \$400 (lots of near-professional features; good reviews from experienced photographers; I think it's too expensive, and too much camera, for most people)

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 school or work, go ahead and buy Windows. Even though a Mac might actually work fine on the network, the in-house tech department may irrationally refuse to support Macs. Don't bother fighting them. You'll need to be on good terms with them when your Windows PC has problems.
- Some people are instinctively 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*. There are two main reasons to make this choice. First **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.



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.

The other reason to choose Mac is that **Macs are more secure against viruses**. If you use a Windows PC, you're constantly vulnerable to Internet viruses, which makes it necessary to buy, install, and constantly upgrade the latest PC virus-protection software. In contrast, 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.

As for which Mac to buy: the 13-inch MacBook, starting at \$1000, is a fine laptop choice, and an inexpensive, good desktop is the Mac Mini, starting at \$600 (though it needs a mouse, keyboard, and monitor, all sold separately). I have used both of these machines for my own work and would recommend either. I'd recommend paying a little extra to max out the RAM (4 gigabytes for both the MacBook and Mini). If you need to run Windows, you can do that, too, by buying a copy of Windows and running it via OSX's built-in [Boot Camp](#) feature, which requires restarting the computer and choosing Windows. If you want to run Windows in its own window while running in the Mac environment, buy Parallels Desktop software (\$60) in addition to Windows.

The Macs listed above are available at store.apple.com or any retail [Apple Store](#).



KITCHEN TOOL: DUAL-ENDED SPATULA

SUMMARY: This single-piece spatula does everything a spatula should.

DESCRIPTION: This spatula, whose official name is the “Chef’n Switchit Dual-Ended Long Spatula,” is available from [Amazon](#) for ten bucks. After reading about it in Kevin Kelly’s [Cool Tools](#) newsletter, I bought it and have been happily spatuling (?) since.

What’s great about it? The silicone exterior doesn’t easily heat up; the metal bar inside keeps it firm when stirring or flipping items; both ends of the spatula can be used; and its single-piece construction makes it easy to clean.

Some Amazon reviewers report that the spatula can break if used too vigorously, but that the manufacturer is nice about sending replacements.

This is an easy gift idea for any friend or family member who likes to cook but hasn’t yet found the world’s best spatula.

P.S. My 2007 kitchen-device recommendation, the Vitamix blender, is still a good pick. You can find the 2007 Uncle Mark guide at unclemark.org/unclemark2007.pdf.



The Chef’n Switchit dual-ended long spatula is a keeper.



WRISTWATCH: CASIO G-SHOCK CLASSIC

SUMMARY: A reliable watch with an easy, time-tested design.

DESCRIPTION: Many companies make digital watches, but Casio makes my favorite. I've been wearing a G-Shock, or some version of it, for almost twenty years. The watch is inexpensive (about forty bucks at [Amazon](#)), reliable (it lasts five or more years before the strap wears down), and best of all, the interface design is excellent. Casio has permanently and completely solved the design problem of digital watch design: “mode” in lower-left, “set” in upper-left, and light and “start/stop” on the right.

The feature set is just right – not too big, not too small – with time and date on the face, and alarm, stopwatch, and timer also available. I don't know how people go about their lives without *all* of these features – which are hard to use or absent from other watches. Whenever I take a plane, for example, I always set the timer for the flying time, so that I always know how much time is left in the flight.

There are other G-Shock models, but they tend to be awkward attempts at fashion. Casio's strong suit is practicality, not style, and the G-Shock Classic is Casio's most practical watch. So what if it's not fashionable? I'd rather be able to set a timer easily than to look cool while flailing about on some silly fashionista watch.



The Casio G-Shock Classic



A SOLUTION TO E-MAIL OVERLOAD

SUMMARY: As I describe in my book [Bit Literacy](#), the online todo list [Gootodo.com](#) allows you to keep your e-mail inbox empty while enjoying a focused, prioritized todo list.

DESCRIPTION: Everyone complains about feeling stressed from getting too much e-mail, but no one seems to have a solution. That changes now. (Or did years ago, when I first wrote this.)

[Bit Literacy](#) has more details, but here's the deal. There's a simple way to solve e-mail overload: to start, delete the e-mails that you don't need any more – newsletters, meeting announcements, spam mail, one-word replies, that kind of stuff. Just get rid of all of it. Then file or archive anything you may need later – important messages, documentation, FYIs you need to save.

Then you're only left with action items, or todos. First, use the "two-minute rule" and complete any todos that can be accomplished in two minutes or less, and then delete them. Now you only have action items 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: just put them on a todo list, where they belong. Your inbox will then be *empty*, and your mind will feel much clearer. (Try it, I dare you!)

How do you get action items from the inbox to the todo list? The key is to use your email program to *forward* those action-item emails to a todo list that separates today's todos from those

coming in the future. Here I recommend my own tool, [Gootodo.com](https://www.gootodo.com), to accomplish this. It's an online todo list that works via the Web browser on any computer – Mac, Windows, or Linux – and is compatible with every email program: Outlook, Lotus Notes, Yahoo Mail, Gmail, even Blackberries (and *of course* iPhones – come on). 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 big 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. 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. Once you do that, you'll have an empty inbox and a manageable todo list to get through today. It's remarkably simple.

Here's how to email todos to Gootodo. Send an email to today@gootodo.com and it will show up on today's list: the Subject line will be the title of the todo, and the body of the message will be stored as well. Send an email 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.)

Forward an email 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 email 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. And [read the book!](#)

GAMES YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT

SUMMARY: Pandemic and Good Experience Games.

DESCRIPTION: In past guides (like [last year's](#)) I went into some detail about consoles like Nintendo Wii and PC games like Warcraft. This year, though, I'll just emphasize one offline and online pick.

The **best new board game** I played this year was [Blokus](#), a game for two to four players that involves laying blocky tiles (they look like Tetris pieces) on the game board. The game is easy enough for kids to learn but engaging enough for adults to enjoy. Apparently there are some brain benefits due to the spatial thinking and whatnot, but I was just happy that it was so fun to play.

(From past years' guides, I still recommend [Pandemic](#), Carcassonne, Settlers of Catan, Snatch, and Ticket to Ride as board games that are well worth trying, if you haven't already.)

The **best new online games** I played this year are all on my [Good Experience Games](#) page, at goodexperience.com/games. There are hundreds of great games on this list. I remain impressed by the creativity and dedication of independent developers who generally give away their games for free. (I've just started an [iPhone games list](#), too.)

A GIFT PICK FOR KIDS

SUMMARY: Enough devices. Let's go outside and play hackysack.

DESCRIPTION: I get so tired of technology sometimes. Isn't there some way to get us outside? Oops – our suburban or urban environment has so little room to run around – or we need equipment – or the pump broke – what now? To the rescue comes this *three dollar* gift pick.

The [Guatemalan footbag](#), or hackysack, shown at right was the star of my family's Thanksgiving this year. Any daylight hour that wasn't raining or mealtime, several of us – ages 9 to 70 – were outside in the driveway kicking around a colorful little bag of beans.



The Guatemalan footbag.

We played an easy game called Peg: one person kicks or knees the ball to someone else; then this person passes it along to anyone else in the circle. As long as the bag doesn't hit the ground, and no one uses their hands, once the third person hits the bag into the air, it's a "live ball" – anyone can catch it and then try to peg someone (by throwing it), scoring a point if they hit. But just as in dodgeball, if the target catches the bag in the air, the point is awarded to the target.

P.S. If you really want a digital device, I still recommend the [20Q ball](#) (\$35 at Amazon), which cleverly guesses almost anything you think of within twenty yes/no questions. Great gift pick for kids that don't have one. (You can also play on the Web, for free, at [20q.net](#).)



ITEMS FOR EXPECTING AND NEW PARENTS

SUMMARY: Here are a few good books, strollers, and other items.

DESCRIPTION: My wife gave birth to our first child in 2007 (yes, I'm "Daddy Mark" now, too) – and so I've gotten an education in the world of baby stuff. Here are some tips, whether you're an expecting or new parent, or are just buying stuff for one.

For expecting parents I'd recommend two baby-naming guides. [NameVoyager](#) is an excellent and free online resource that maps the popularity of any given name over the past century or so. There are many books on baby names, but by far the best I came across was [Beyond Jennifer and Jason, Madison & Montana: What to Name Your Baby Now](#).

I'd avoid most books written for new fathers, since they mainly deliver head-slappers like "turn off the football game in the delivery room" and "get ready to give up your beer money for the little tyke." (Are all new fathers Homer Simpson?) They're also heavy on the emotional stuff ("It's the most wonderful thing – you won't understand until it happens"), which by definition the reader can't relate to, so why beat him over the head with it? However, one must-read book for preparing for a newborn is [The Happiest Baby on the Block](#), which details the all-important skill of swaddling, made easier by the absolutely essential [Miracle Blanket](#), which gets the newborn to sleep.

Expecting parents also need to buy a crib. The crib I'd recommend is the Stokke Sleepi. It's more expensive than other cribs, but it's also more attractive, durable, and versatile. As the child grows,

you can add sections to the crib, like adding leaves to a table. Eventually it turns into a toddler bed – and later the ends can pop off to become chairs! The crib also comes with wheels, so in the early months it’s easy to push the infant around to wherever the parents are – bedroom, living room, etc. – without having to keep a separate crib or playpen in another room.

As for strollers: for the first three months or so, get the [Graco Snugrider Infant Car Seat Stroller Frame](#), about fifty bucks at Amazon. Yes, the name is a mouthful. (Other people just call it a “snap ‘n’ go,” a term I had never heard before my wife’s pregnancy.) At any rate, it’s just a frame with wheels onto which you can place the [Graco Snugride](#) infant car seat (about \$90 at Amazon), thus making a stroller out of the combination. It’s nice because you can detach the car seat and strap it into a car, or cab, and then fold up the frame and put it in the trunk. This is a must-have item. By the way, speaking of travel, a good travel crib – or “pack ‘n’ play” (yet more new vocabulary) – which I’d recommend is the Phil & Ted’s [Traveller travel crib](#). It’s surprisingly lightweight.

Back to the snap ‘n’ go. Unfortunately, that Graco combo only lasts for the first few months, until the baby weighs twenty pounds or so. Soon enough it becomes time to shop for a “real” stroller.



The Stokke Sleepi, already expanded once



The Graco Snugrider “snap ‘n’ go.”



Here's the deal with strollers: You have to choose between a good **push** and a good **pack**. That is, some strollers are compact and easy to fold up, but they require a two-handed push with small, clattering wheels. Other strollers have a great “push” – one-handed, easy, taking bumps easily with nice wheels or tires – but they're heavy and difficult to fold up.

If you want a good “push” and have some extra cash, the [Bugaboo Cameleon](#) is the top of the line. It's the Cadillac of strollers: dual independent shock absorbers on the front wheels, rubber tires in the back, endlessly configurable, the “Bug” is a great vehicle – but it's expensive (over 900 bucks) and doesn't fold easily. Bugaboo also makes Frog and Bee models that are smaller and slightly less expensive than the Cameleon.

For a good “pack,” I'd recommend the [Maclaren Volo](#), the stroller we own. It's got a much better pack than the Bugaboo (travelling well in cars and planes), a decent push, a much better price – about a hundred bucks – and it's light enough to carry on one shoulder. Maclaren has lots of models, but the Volo is light and inexpensive. (Just note the [Maclaren safety recall](#) of November 2009, which includes the Volo and some other models.)

This isn't an exhaustive list of strollers, of course: there are many brands to choose from, some made for specific uses (for twins, jogger parents, etc.), and it's a dynamic industry with frequent new products. It's easy to get overwhelmed. For most parents, I'd recommend find a good “pack” at a reasonable price.



The Bugaboo Cameleon



The Maclaren Volo



Once the little one is several months old, an excellent toy is the [LeapFrog Fridge Farm](#), which is a set of animal-shaped magnets that click onto a base that plays sound and music. The design is outstanding (a quality I've found in most LeapFrog products I've tried), but the real brilliance of the product is contextual. The Fridge Farm fits nicely onto the front of the refrigerator, thereby giving the kid a fun distraction when they're in the kitchen. Parents will grasp the importance of this benefit: the child can be occupied by a safe toy (rather than cabinets or sharp implements) that sits on a vertical surface, rather than in the middle of the floor. Our own FridgeFarm has been on the fridge for over a year and is still occasionally visited by our young playtester. Highly recommended.



The LeapFrog Fridge Farm

For slightly older visitors to the fridge, say 2 years old, I'd recommend graduating to LeapFrog's [Fridge DJ](#), which plays catchy music (and clever pixel animations) on a nicely designed device.

Some book recommendations from age 1 to 2: [Good Night Gorilla](#) by Peggy Rathmann is a clever, beautifully illustrated story; the Bing books by Ted Dewan (such as [Bing Picnic](#)) are fun; and anything by Eric Carle (like [The Very Hungry Caterpillar](#)) or Sandra Boynton (like [A to Z](#)) is good.

Our (quickly!) growing boy now asks for other books – for example, [I Stink](#), a delightfully gross book about a garbage truck and its contents – when not diving into a pile of books, too numerous to list here, pertaining to trains, train travel, train adventures, and related matters. We love the New York Public Library – he has his own library card – and so we rarely buy kids' books now.

EVERYDAY TECH TOOLS: PANASONIC

SUMMARY: Good phones, fax machines, and other consumer tech comes from Panasonic.

DESCRIPTION: When the conversation turns to consumer technology, it's usually Apple that gets most or all of the attention. Apple has made some star products – the iPhone, the iPod, and the Macintosh – but it's not the only company doing good work in this area.

One unsung hero of the consumer technology business is Panasonic, which consistently makes simple, reliable, easy-to-use devices. These days when I want to buy a home phone, fax machine, or DVD player, I don't even look at the other brands. Even Panasonic's manuals are easy to read, which is no small feat. Here are some Panasonic products I recommend, having owned them or similar models:

- Fax machine: [Panasonic KX-FHD351](#). I've used this product line for about ten years. It's an easy-to-use, inexpensive fax that is ideal for home or small business use.
- Landline phone: [KX-TG3032](#) or [KX-TG6052](#) – 2 wireless handsets and an answering machine.
- DVD player: [DVD-S54](#) (plays, doesn't record) and has a decently designed remote control.
- Video camcorder: I still have my old [PV-GS300](#), but these days it looks like the Flip videocams, such as the [MinoHD](#) (\$230), are the best product line for amateur video, after the iPhone.

OTHER “ESSENTIAL” PICKS

SUMMARY: A DVR, wallet pen, news mag, and printer not to miss.

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

- [TiVo](#): If you watch any TV at all, buy a TiVo and watch what you want, when you want, free from commercials and network schedules (and the very idea of TV networks). Some cable systems offer their own “DVR” but – much like my feelings about Mac vs. Windows – I highly recommend TiVo’s near-perfect interface over the inferior designs of competing devices.
- [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 carry a pen with them. You can buy the Zebra mini-pen for about \$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, BusinessWeek, and the Wall Street Journal, not to mention international media. The website is good, too.
- Printer: The [Brother HL-2170W](#) (\$140) is my strong recommendation. Black & white laser printer, great for home office use because of its wireless capability. Multiple computers can connect to it via any wireless network you have at home, and print without cables getting in the way. Reasonably easy setup, works great.

ALMANAC

TWO MOVIES YOU MIGHT NOT HAVE SEEN

SUMMARY: Fire up Netflix and get these two documentaries.

Here are two documentaries that are well worth seeing, if you haven't yet. *My Kid Could Paint That* is a fascinating story of a young girl who paints canvases that sell for hundreds, then thousands, of dollars. This becomes a national story when doubts are cast on who's actually doing the painting. A highly interesting look at the art world and the family in question. Just **be sure** to watch the DVD's special features to get, I think, the key to unlocking the central mystery of the film.

Second, *Deep Water* tells the story of a round-the-world sailing race in 1968. Here I'd recommend that you read nothing about the race or the film before seeing it. It's a strange, gripping, and completely true sea story that is best left to the movie to describe. See it.

(I still recommend *God Grew Tired of Us* and *Little Dieter Needs to Fly* from last year's guide, too.)



BOOKS ON MAJOR WORLD RELIGIONS

SUMMARY: It's worth learning about major religions, no matter what one believes.

DESCRIPTION: A couple of years ago I came across Kevin Kelly's [recommendation](#) for [The Message](#), a new translation of the Bible. Kevin put it well: "At least once in your life you should read the Bible all the way through because it does not say what you expect it to say, no matter what you expect it to say." *The Message* in particular is a great translation because it's meant to be read cover to cover. The language is vernacular – modern American English – but not dumbed down, there are no verse numbers cluttering the flow of the text, and the translator introduces each book with helpful context. It took me over a year to get through the book, but it's one of the best reading experiences I've ever had. It's worth reading, front to back, no matter what you believe.

Shortly after I finished *The Message* I read [This Is My God](#), a book on Orthodox Judaism written by Herman Wouk in the 1950s. Wouk is famous for writing *The Caine Mutiny* and *The Winds of War*, both of which I liked a lot, but I think this may have been his best book. Informative but not preachy, it explains Judaism, at least as Wouk understood it, in his crystal-clear prose. If there is a more readable overview of Judaism anywhere, I'm not aware of it.

I haven't yet read enough about Islam to make a solid book recommendation. However, I have on my reading list [No God But God](#), by Reza Aslan, which I'm hoping will be a good overview. Meantime, I can recommend one movie on Islam, made in the 1970s and available from Netflix: coincidentally it's also called *The Message*. It's a pity the movie isn't better known, because it gives a succinct but colorful overview of the beginnings of Islam – something a lot of Americans would

probably find helpful. I was also pleased to see that the movie was approved by a clerical council in Cairo, so I assume the content is legitimate.

Finally, I read Yann Martel's novel [Life of Pi](#) awhile back and found it a compelling defense of religious belief in general – drawing on Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. Some people I've talked to consider this book “just a sea story” and not much more. In contrast, I was struck by how the central message of the book is finally tied together in the last page or two of the epilogue, bringing everything else in the book into focus. Outstanding.

I also still like [The 100-Minute Bible](#), which takes the idea of The Message – presenting the Bible for readability – and goes one step further, compressing the text so that it can be read in one sitting. For anyone curious to get an overview of the entire Bible in one glance, this is it. Well done. As information overload grows, good summaries like this – on any important topic – will become increasingly valuable.



HOW TO PREVENT A SNEEZE

SUMMARY: Think of watermelon.

DESCRIPTION: I forget where I read this a couple of years ago, but ever since then it has



worked like a charm. Any time I'm about to sneeze, I think of watermelon – the taste, the texture – and the sneeze goes away. I know it's probably a psychological placebo, but hey, it works for me. (Other people claim that just *saying* the word “watermelon” a few times will prevent the sneeze. Now that's just silly.)



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 upfront investment. 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. (If you drive a lot, you might want to store a third umbrella in the car.)
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.



A GOOD RECOMMENDATION SITE YOU MIGHT NOT HAVE READ:

COOL TOOLS, BY KEVIN KELLY

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

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. Speaking of hidden gems, in past 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 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.



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/vlrw>



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.



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, twoeightsifivesixfourfourthreetoenine.” 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.

FINAL THOUGHTS

I'm always happy to get e-mails after I publish Uncle Mark. Some readers will find a typo or inaccuracy, which I try to fix right away. (On page iii you can see what date this version was published.) Others ask a question or make a point that I regrettably didn't have space to cover in such a short guide. But here are some answers to a couple of common questions:

"Which plasma-screen/LCD/high-definition TV should I buy?" I don't know. I've never understood the hype around HDTV – more visual resolution doesn't make the comedy any funnier – though if I was a sports fan I might take the plunge. As a somewhat jaded viewer, I bought the smallest TV I could find and keep it in a cabinet behind closed doors when it's not on.

"How could you not cover product X and brand Y, which are so much better than your picks?" My answer is very simple. Let me know when your guide is out – I'd love to read it!

KEEP IN TOUCH

I hope you enjoyed this year's guide. Here's how to keep in touch:

1. Subscribe, for free, to my Good Experience email newsletter. Just go to goodexperience.com/newsletter.php, enter your email, then reply to the confirmation email. (I also have a [Twitter feed](#), if you're into that sort of thing.)
2. Take a look at my other free resources, all of which are linked from goodexperience.com on the right-hand column: columns, games list, jobs board, invite tool, and Gel videos (see below).
3. Come to my conference, called Gel, short for "Good Experience Live." Gel 2010 will be held on Thursday-Friday, April 29-30, 2010 in New York City. You can watch videos of past presentations at gelvideos.com.

If you have any comments, questions, suggestions, or stories about how this guide helped you, email me here: mark@goodexperience.com. I read every email and try to reply to each one.

Keep in touch, and may all your purchases be good ones –

(Uncle) Mark Hurst
December 2009