



2011

UNCLE MARK GIFT GUIDE & ALMANAC

THE GIFT GUIDE

Introduction	2
iPad	3
iPhone	4
Good iPhone and iPad Apps	5
Two More Good Devices	6
Digital Camera	7
Personal Computer	8
Wristwatch	9

Gift Pick for Kids	10
Items for New and Expecting Parents	11
Other “Essential” Items	12

THE ALMANAC

A Novel You Might Like, A Nonfiction Book You Probably Haven’t Heard Of, An Easy Way to Get Free Books, How to Manage Your Email, Umbrella Storage System, How to Prevent a Sneeze	13
Keep in Touch	13

 INTRODUCTION


2011

UNCLE MARK

GIFT GUIDE & ALMANAC

Welcome to the eighth annual edition of the Uncle Mark Gift Guide and Almanac, a compilation of the very best products available today in various categories – and a few rants and tips in the back.

As always, this guide tries to recommend just **one** product in each category – the best one, or at least a strong enough choice to avoid buyer’s remorse – so as to save you the time of combing through dozens of ratings and reviews of comparable products.

So instead of “the 32 hottest digital cameras this holiday season,” the guide lists just one camera: a nicely designed, fully featured product that is a reliably good choice. The goal of the guide is to save you the time and money of an ill-advised purchase.

Your humble author is the ultimate and final arbiter of what goes into the guide. There are no advertisers here. Put simply, the guide lists products that offer you a good experience at a reasonable price.

I will admit to some personal satisfaction at creating this guide year after year. I’ve worked as a customer advocate for about 15 years – creating a consulting company, a conference, a book, and other projects such as this guide – all dedicated to spotlighting companies, individuals, and products that create a good experience. This guide scratches an itch.

By downloading, reading, and (I hope) sharing this guide with others, you are helping to reward the efforts of innovators and

companies that genuinely try to create good products. In a perfect world, this guide would be unnecessary, because only the good products would become popular, and customers would buy only from good companies. Alas, advertising and marketing have a way of bending that reality. Uncle Mark helps to turn the tide in favor of the good experience.

I don’t make any money from this guide, except when someone buys a product from some of the links in this file (which link to an associate account at Amazon or iTunes). That purchase is optional, of course. I also recommend one for-pay project of my own – GoodTodo.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 get my free Good Experience email newsletter – subscribe 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.

Finally, if you’re really interested in “good experience,” you might consider attending my conference in April. It’s called “Gel,” short for Good Experience Live. More information at gelconference.com – or you can watch videos of past Gel talks at gelvideos.com.

Enjoy,

(Uncle) Mark Hurst
 New York City
 December 2010

Design by the awesome Phoebe Espiritu. She’s at simplifierlab.com.

Copyright © 2004-2010 Good Experience, Inc. Version 12-02-c.

THE IPAD

Summary: The iPad will eventually replace laptops. For now, it's most useful when travelling with children.

The Apple iPad arrived in April 2010, prompting a deluge of press and analysis, guessing how this new innovation would impact the technology field. There's one question I've fielded ever since: **should I buy an iPad?**

I wrote some detailed thoughts in [this column](#), but here's a summary of what you need to know:

- The iPad is best for kids and grandparents. It's easy to use and does many things well, within "light interactivity."
- For adults who need a device for work, a laptop may be a better choice, since laptops still offer more functionality.
- However, long-term, I predict laptops will be replaced by iPad-like "tablet" computers.



I bought an iPad immediately after its release and have enjoyed using it ever since. Or, more accurately, I've enjoyed using it when I can borrow it from our three-year-old son. The iPad is just a great device for kids, because of its ease-of-use and its

ability to show movies and play games. It's an especially smart purchase for families travelling with children. In years past we've all seen the child on the airplane watching a movie on a portable DVD player: those many thousands or millions of DVD players are now obsolete. The iPad can hold movies, TV shows, home videos, as well as games and educational apps – all instantly available to the child strapped into the airplane or minivan seat. No DVDs to bring along.

Best app: Adult users, when they can manage to borrow the iPad from the kids, will especially enjoy one particular app: Netflix. It's a free download but requires a paid Netflix account. Once installed, the app will stream any of the thousands of movies, TV shows, and documentaries in Netflix's Instant Play collection – all at no extra charge. (Of course, the iPad needs an Internet connection, like wifi, to stream the movies.)

Amazon's Kindle app is another good choice. It's a free download and can show any books you've bought via Amazon's Kindle store. Text on the iPad isn't quite as sharp as on a Kindle device, but given the iPad's other abilities, I'd say the iPad is a better choice for ebooks than the Kindle.

Games: There are many games available for the iPad and I've listed my favorites on my [Good iPad Games](#) list – check it out.

The physical aspects of the iPad are impressive. It weighs less than most laptops, has no moving parts (such as a hard drive), and – one of my favorite aspects – doesn't heat up when you use it. Some laptops can practically cook an egg – not the iPad.

The disadvantage of the iPad is that it doesn't do as well as laptops outside of the "light interactivity" of movies, books, and games. File management occurs only within specific apps (there is no Finder), and there are fewer opportunities to "go under the hood" (there is no Terminal and few OS-level add-ons for productivity). Still, the iPad represents the future of mobile computing. Watch for laptop sales to start giving way to iPads.

THE IPHONE

Summary: The iPhone 4 is yet another quality product in the iPhone series.

As I've said since it launched in 2007, the iPhone is the most significant new digital device since 1984, when Apple launched the Macintosh. The iPhone solved many of the problems that plagued cell phone users for years, and it opened the door for a host of new features – especially due to the App Store, which allows developers worldwide to create new uses for the iPhone. Thus, for years now, Uncle Mark has recommended the iPhone as an excellent single device to replace the multiple cell phones, cameras, and PDAs that previously (pre-iPhone) would have to be evaluated separately.



This past June, Apple launched the iPhone 4, and I bought one immediately (not having upgraded since the original version). I'm happy with the device, given its speedy processor and the addition of FaceTime, which offers free worldwide video calling between iPhone 4 users, as long as both are on wifi.

Not everyone is an iPhone fan. In the past year or two, readers

have lobbied for an Uncle Mark recommendation for the new BlackBerry models, and (increasingly) for Android phones, as there are now many mobile devices powered by Google's Android operating system.

Plenty of my friends and colleagues, after doing their own research, have chosen a BlackBerry or an Android phone as the best option for their needs. You might feel the same. (Heck, you might even be one of my friends or colleagues.) Still, I'm sticking with my recommendation with the iPhone as the best mobile device platform available today.

Here's why:

- The iPhone's design is excellent – from the physical form factor to the user interface in the software. Apple, as always, keeps the hardware and software tightly integrated, and it shows. Everything just looks and feels **right**. Android and BlackBerry devices, while offering lots of functionality, don't have the same feel.
- Some users complain about AT&T, the only US carrier currently available for iPhone users. There's word that Verizon will offer the iPhone in 2011, and if so, that will bring about many new sales. Still, I've found AT&T's service to range from satisfactory – which is all one can expect from a telecom company these days – to good. It's just not a huge issue.
- The iPhone offers a mind-numbing range of useful, fun, or just plain cool functionality: a camera (two on the iPhone 4), high-def video capture, iPod for music and video, 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. (I've listed my favorite iPhone games in my [Good iPhone Games](#) list.)
- While business users who type a lot may prefer the BlackBerry since most BB models include a physical keyboard, I type plenty fast on the iPhone. For Uncle Mark, the iPhone still wins.

GOOD IPHONE & IPAD APPS

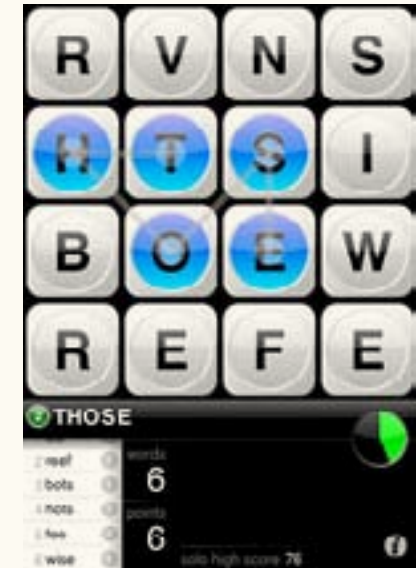
Summary: There are several good apps worth trying out.

For those readers who use an iPhone or an iPad, here are the Uncle Mark recommendations for the best apps. Among the thousands available in the App Store, there are many excellent apps for both devices, so this isn't an exhaustive list, but here are a few good choices:

- [Kindle app](#) (same app works on both iPhone & iPad, free download): Read ebooks bought from Amazon's Kindle store. If you already have a Kindle device, you can easily get ebooks you've bought onto your iPhone or iPad. See also Apple's free [iBooks app](#), which is nicely designed but doesn't have as much selection as the Kindle store... though iBooks does offer my book "Bit Literacy" as a free download.
- [Pandora](#) (both iPhone & iPad, free download): free streaming music from a bazillion different channels, based on any given musical group or artist. Occasional advertisements.
- [Instapaper](#) (both iPhone & iPad, \$5): Read Web pages on the iPhone or iPad even when you're offline. It requires some setup, but it's super-useful: while using your computer, click a link to save the current Web page to read later on the device. (There's also a [free version](#).)
- [Netflix app](#) (both iPhone & iPad, free download but requires paid Netflix account): stream any movie in Netflix's Instant Play collection. A must-have for any Netflix user with an iPad.
- For New Yorkers or anyone visiting New York, [CityTransit](#) (\$3) shows the entire NYC subway map, and [Exit Strategy](#) (\$4) shows street maps near subway stops, as well as optimal places to stand on the train so as to be near the stairs when exiting.

Games: As listed earlier in the guide, I maintain lists of the best games for each device. Highly recommended:

- [Good iPhone Games list](#) by Uncle Mark
- [Good iPad Games list](#) by Uncle Mark



Above: a screenshot from Quordy, an excellent word game included in the iPhone games list.

Finally, as this was not an exhaustive list of good apps, here are "favorite iPhone app" lists from two leading technology journalists, both at the New York Times:

- Bob Tedeschi's [10 favorite iPhone apps](#)
- David Pogue's [10 favorite iPhone apps](#)

TWO MORE GOOD DEVICES

Summary: The Roku and Grace Radio are nicely designed devices for streaming online music and movies.

Two devices I recommended in last year's guide are still good picks:

The Grace Digital Wireless Internet Radio (\$130) 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. I often tune into KCRW, a great public radio station in Los Angeles, though I'm based in New York. 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 Roku player (\$80) requires a wireless Internet connection, a TV, and a Netflix.com membership. With those in place, the Roku streams movies from the Netflix Instant Play collection and plays them on your TV. You then have instant access to thousands of movies, TV shows, and documentaries for no extra cost than the monthly Netflix fee you already pay. (This is much the same as the Netflix app for the iPhone and iPad, except that these play directly on your TV.)

There are three Roku models available – see the comparison – but I'd recommend the XD model, linked above, for most users.



DIGITAL CAMERA: CANON POWERSHOT

Summary: Sometimes the iPhone or BlackBerry won't cut it.

Some people don't need a camera recommendation. They're happy with the camera embedded in their iPhone, BlackBerry, or other mobile device. But sometimes it helps to have an actual camera, with a zoom and a powerful flash, to get the shot that a phone can't.

Once again I'm making my annual recommendation to buy a Canon PowerShot. For years this product line has turned out inexpensive, reliable, easy-to-use cameras that take decent to good photos. I've used several PowerShots over the years and have always been happy with them.



There are many PowerShot models available, including no fewer than ten choices in the mid-range level called Digital ELPH. To save you the time-consuming process of wading through dozens of camera reviews, I'll recommend the PowerShot SD1300IS, \$130 at Amazon, which takes perfectly good photos and videos.

For those who want a lower or higher price point, or an extra feature or two, one can always check the PowerShot comparison page. Two options to consider are the PowerShot A490, \$90 at Amazon (a decent entry-level camera, also shoots video), and at the higher end, the PowerShot S95, \$395 at Amazon, offering lots of near-professional features and enjoying good reviews from experienced photographers. I think the S95 is too expensive, and too much camera, for most people – hence my recommendation of the SD1300.

**PERSONAL COMPUTER:
MACBOOK AIR**

*Summary: Apple's slimmest laptop yet.
You do use a Mac, right?*

For several years, Uncle Mark weighed in on the age-old debate about Windows vs. Mac. Which is the better choice, Windows-based PCs or Apple Macintosh computers? And each year Uncle Mark recommended Macs because of their ease-of-use, design, stability, and natural protection against viruses.

Having entered the second quarter-century since the Macintosh launched, the argument now feels out-of-date. Maybe because Apple finally surpassed Microsoft in market cap, or because Dell and HP are ranking low in reliability while Apple scores high (says PCWorld), or because Macs can easily run Windows for those users who really need it. It's just hard to find people enthusiastic about their Windows PC. It feels like the argument has been resolved, and Apple won. Macs are better.

To be sure, Windows PCs still sell much, much better than Macs. The business world still runs mostly on Windows. But sales aren't the same as quality. Unhealthy fast food still sells a lot better than the nutritious, better-tasting alternatives at farmer's markets. Go figure.

Given that the Uncle Mark recommendation is to buy an Apple computer, the question remains, which Mac? My pick this year is the new MacBook Air (pictured at right), the slimmest laptop Apple has ever made, and – measuring less than a foot on the long side – one of the smallest. Prices start at \$999 at store.apple.com.

As stated earlier in the guide, I believe that the iPad – the lightweight device with a touch-screen interface – represents the future of mobile computing. For the time being, though, if you need the extra functionality offered by a laptop, the Air is a good place to look.



**WRISTWATCH:
CASIO G-SHOCK**

Summary: For old-timers who check their wrist, check the G-Shock.

My favorite wristwatch is the Casio G-Shock. I've recommended it for years because of its simple interface, durable construction, and low cost (about \$40 at [Amazon](#)). For telling time, setting an alarm, and acting as timer or stopwatch, this is a near-perfect device.



With that said, two trends are chipping away at the popularity of digital watches – or wearing any wristwatch at all:

1. Many young people today – I believe the technical term is “whippersnappers” – no longer check their wrist for the time. Their iPhone is already out on the table, and they can check the time there.
2. Wherever the timepiece sits – on the table or on the wrist – there’s growing interest in having more functions available than the traditional five (time, date, alarm, timer, stopwatch). For example, shouldn’t the timepiece also offer games, or other apps? How about a touch-screen interface?

Some tech experts have wondered publicly if Apple might

create an “iWatch” to serve this interest, but Apple to date has not shown interest in developing such a product. But at least one product team is taking matters into their own hands. Noticing that the new iPod Nano is about the size of a watch face, designer Scott Wilson and his team at Minimal have announced the TikTok and LunaTik watch kits (funded by fans on [Kickstarter](#), another project to keep an eye on). These kits provide a holder and strap for an iPod Nano – not included – to turn it into an attractive wristwatch with a touch interface.

It’s not clear whether TikTok and LunaTik will become breakout successes like the iPod Nano itself, but almost certainly some “smart watch” product will, in the not too distant future, capture the attention of the market. The Casio G-Shock is looking a little more old-fashioned every day.

GIFT PICK FOR KIDS

Summary: Pocket kite.

Once again this year, the Uncle Mark pick for a kid gift is something that will lure the little one outside, away from the iPhone, iTV, iGames, and iDistractions of all types.

This year's gift pick is the Deluxe Pocket Kite, available for five bucks at unclesgames.com. The small circular carry case shown in the photo below contains kite, string, and string winder.



The beauty of this little device is that it changes kite-flying into an activity that can take place any time, anywhere. Kites usually involve some preparation – the kite must be packed in the car, on a windy day, on a trip to the beach or the park. In contrast, the pocket kite can be stowed in a backpack or a jacket pocket for instant access.

(Thanks to [Cool Tools](#) – a perennial source of gift ideas – for turning me on to the pocket kite.)

Along the same lines as the pocket kite, by the way, I still also recommend last year's kid-gift pick: the Guatemalan foot bag, just three bucks at Amazon, shown below.



ITEMS FOR EXPECTING AND NEW PARENTS

Summary: Books and strollers.

My wife gave birth to our son in 2007, around which time I got a real education in the world of baby stuff. There are way too many products, many of them poorly designed, overpriced, or just plain unnecessary in daily life. I hope that any expecting or new parent who reads this may find some value in these product tips.

Before the little one arrives, I'd recommend two baby-naming guides. NameVoyager, aka "the baby name wizard," is the place to start. It's an excellent and free online tool that graphically plots the popularity of any given name, decade over decade, over the past 120 years.

There are many books on baby names, but by far the best I've found is "Beyond Jennifer and Jason, Madison & Montana: What to Name Your Baby Now" – now out of print but available for cheap at Amazon. (The followup book by the same authors received poor reviews – I'd stick with this original text.)

One absolutely essential book for preparing for a newborn is "The Happiest Baby on the Block," which details the all-important skill of swaddling. This is made easier by the Miracle Blanket – another essential item – which, true to its name, nearly always got our newborn to sleep.

For fathers, I'd avoid most "new dad" books. They seem to deliver not-so-deep wisdom along the lines of "turn off the football game in the delivery room, you knucklehead." The books are 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?

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. It's just a frame with wheels onto which you place the Graco Snugride infant car seat (about \$120 at Amazon),

thus making a stroller out of the combination when the car seat isn't strapped into the minivan.

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.

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 (that's the good "pack"), but they require a two-handed push with small, clattering wheels. Other strollers have a great "push" – one-handed, taking bumps easily with nice wheels or tires – but they're heavy and difficult to fold up.

If you really want a good "push" and have a wad of extra cash, the Bugaboo Cameleon is the top of the line. It's the BMW 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 large, very expensive (over 900 bucks), and doesn't fold easily.

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 \$100 – and it's light enough to carry on one shoulder.

Maclaren has lots of models – just as there are many other stroller brands and models that are good options for new parents – but the Volo is light, inexpensive, well-made, and a solid choice for most new parents.

OTHER “ESSENTIAL” ITEMS

Summary: Products to use and trust.

Here are a few more Uncle Mark picks for products and brands worth trying out:

- **Wallet pen:** Even in the age of digital devices, it’s helpful to have a pen on hand at all times. A pen that clips right into the wallet is a good choice, since you always know where to find it. In past years I’ve suggested the Zebra Mini T3, shown below, but JetPens.com, the only supplier I can find online, is currently sold out. A good alternative is the Derringer Wallet Pen from derringerpen.com (\$8 including shipping). For what it’s worth, Oprah recommended the wallet pen from thewalletpen.com, but the \$50 price tag seems a tad high.



- **Kitchen appliance:** VitaMix blender. It’s expensive, \$400 at Amazon or \$450 from VitaMix for the newest version with a variable-speed dial, but well worth it for the strong and sturdy construction. I use mine most mornings to make a smoothie for breakfast (yogurt, protein powder, toasted wheat germ, almonds, three fruits, three vegetables, and nine ice cubes, if you were wondering). Notably, all units are made at the headquarters in Cleveland, Ohio, and the company is still family-owned and operated.

- For **everyday tech appliances:** Panasonic. This company is an unsung hero of consumer technology, as it quietly but consistently makes simple, reliable, easy-to-use devices. My home phone, fax machine, DVD player, video camcorder, and 20-year-old boom box – still going strong – all bear the Panasonic brand. I can’t think of a single Panasonic product that has disappointed me in its design or reliability. Even the manuals are fairly easy to read.

- **Printer:** I still recommend the Brother HL-2170W, a wireless black-and-white laser printer, as an excellent home or small business printer. Mac and Windows PCs can easily print over wifi – no printer cables needed. \$125 at Amazon.

- **Tech brands’ reliability:** Speaking of Brother, I should add that I used to recommend HP printers, until I found their service and quality level to be in decline. Sure enough, a recent PCWorld [article](#) on tech brands’ reliability found that HP was near the bottom of the list, alongside Dell, while Brother was near the top – alongside Apple and Canon, both longtime favorites of Uncle Mark. But you knew that.

THE ALMANAC

A few final thoughts.

A few final thoughts, ideas, and pointers.

- **A novel you might like:** I strongly recommend “Super Sad True Love Story,” the 2010 novel by Gary Shteyngart. Set about 20 years in the future, the book imagines a debt-ridden America, and a New York City overrun by vapid technology and materialism, facing some uncomfortable changes. And, yes, there’s a love story at the center. Excellent writing, pitch-perfect satire, and unsettling thoughts about America’s current path.

- **A nonfiction book you probably haven’t heard of:** I recently read Parkinson’s Law, a 1950s-era book of essays by the public administration scholar C. Northcote Parkinson, whose eponymous law is commonly quoted as “work expands to fill the time allotted to it.” The book offers a straightforward, often hilarious analysis of inefficient organizations. Other than some dated language near the end of the book, it’s a pleasurable, satisfying read for anyone who dislikes pointless meetings.

- **An easy way to get free books** (temporarily): Go to the library. It’s one of the best deals running. Seriously, they should change the slogan to “like Amazon, but free.” Many libraries now allow you to reserve the book online, and then email you when it’s available. Unless you really need the book after you read it, just borrow it from the library.

- **How to manage your email:** An overloaded inbox creates stress and anxiety; here’s how to solve the problem permanently. Delete anything you don’t need again (like old lunch invites or spam), store or archive anything you might need again but which doesn’t need an action, and put the remaining action items on a todo list **outside** the inbox. One good option is my own tool, GoodTodo.com. Now the inbox is empty, and you can focus just on the items on your todo list. This works. Try it.

- **Umbrella storage system:** Here’s how to ensure you always have an umbrella on hand when it’s raining. Buy two umbrellas, and keep one at home and the other at work or school. (Perhaps store another in the car.) Then grab an umbrella whenever it’s

raining, and – this is the only hard part – remember to put the umbrella back in its place afterward.

- **How to prevent a sneeze:** Just think of watermelon – its taste and texture – and the sneeze almost always disappears. Maybe it’s just a placebo, but it works for me. (As a strange corollary, seeing a bright light apparently causes a sneeze in some people. How weird is that?)

Keep in touch:

Email me with comments, corrections, or suggestions for future guides. I’m at mark@goodexperience.com.

You might also like...

- Good Experience, my free email newsletter – [subscribe here](#).
- My Twitter feed: [@markhurst](#)
- The videos from my Gel conference – [watch them here](#) – or just come to the next show in NYC in April: [Gel 2011](#).
- If your company wants to create a better customer experience, consider hiring my team at [Creative Good](#), or join our [Councils](#).

Have a great 2011! -mark