

STARS & STRIPES.

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Holiday Shopping Guide 2008

November 9, 2008

TOY STORIES

What your kids will want under the tree

MORE AFFORDABLE ELECTRONICS

iPod, game consoles come down in price

BARGAINS

ADVICE

RINGING IN THE NEW YEAR

'Google phone' and new Blackberry arrive

IDEAS

READY TO GO?

Fewer flights mean you should book early

An Advertising Supplement to Stars and Stripes

With the markets down, many are looking at Christmas on a shoestring budget

Those ugly nose dives by the Dow Jones industrial average on lately? Blame Eva Metoyer.

And millions of consumers like her.

Inglewood, Calif., resident Metoyer, 33, is a serious shopper.

Last year she was up at 4 a.m. the day after Thanksgiving to get in line for holiday sales at Best Buy and Macy's. This year, she said, she'll be staying home.

"I'm very concerned about my mortgage, my children's mutual funds," Metoyer told me outside a Target store in South Los Angeles. "I'm going to focus on that."

One factor for the Dow tanking was when the Commerce Department reported that retail sales fell 1.2 percent in September. It was the biggest drop in several years and the first time since 1992 that sales have declined three months in a row.

For economists, this was tantamount to the doorbell ringing and a husky voice saying, "Recession calling!"

To see how bad things have gotten, I visited another L.A.-area Target, the Westside Pavilion mall in West L.A., and Westwood Village adjacent to the University of California, Los Angeles, where, alarmingly, it seemed as if half the stores were vacant.

What I heard from shoppers and merchants is that this is going to be one of the gloomiest holiday seasons in many years.

"It's never been this slow," grumbled Sam Joma, manager of the Gallini menswear store in the Westside Pavilion, where he has worked for about 15 years. "Sales are flat. Very flat."

Like most merchants I spoke with, he said he was trying to counteract the bad economy by offering deep discounts — at least 25 percent off for much of his inventory.

Joma gave me a once-over and decided I'd look much better in a nice suit. "I'll give you a deal," he said. "I'll take any offer that's serious."

Upstairs at Village Jewelers, owner Levon Latchinian gazed upon his empty store and stated the obvious. "Things are very quiet," he said.

Latchinian said he counts on the holiday season for about half his annual revenue. The way things are looking, though, he said he expects this year's sales to be about 50 percent below last year's.

"Jewelry is the last thing people are thinking about right now," Latchinian said. "They're thinking about necessities like food. They're not thinking about jewelry."

He and other Westside Pavilion merchants said they couldn't

remember seeing the mall this dead. Shoppers were few and far between. As I traversed the three levels of shops, the most common sight was bored-looking salespeople chatting on cell phones.

"The stock market hit a lot of people," said Joan Craig, who expects to cut back this year for her three kids. "Everyone's being more careful."

The National Retail Federation says that for the first time since the trade group began surveying shoppers in 2002, people are expected to spend less on gifts for family members than the year before — an average of \$466.12 this year compared with \$469.14 in 2007.

That difference might seem like pocket change, but multiply it by more than 180 million taxpayers and you can see we're talking serious money.

Federation spokeswoman Ellen Davis said gifts for family members typically account for as much as 75 percent of people's shopping budgets, so any cutback in this category represents a widespread tightening of purse strings.

"By and large, people feel like their families will understand the situation," she said. "You may not be able to cut the \$20 gift card for the baby sitter, but you're hoping your family will sympathize with what you're facing."

Even so, the federation expects holiday sales to grow by 2.2 percent this year to \$470.4 billion. Sounds like a lot, right?

"That would be the lowest increase since 2002," said Davis, "and about half what we usually see in growth. We expect this to be the worst year in recent memory."

That means some shoppers might want to rethink their game plans. Merchants know that prices are everything this holiday season and will be discounting items accordingly. Those discounts will run deeper as Christmas approaches.

"It's a game of chicken," Davis said. "You may get better deals in December. But people need to be aware that retailers are shipping less merchandise to their stores. If you're looking for something very specific, you may want to shop early."

She also said that retailers are trying to keep people coming back for more by discounting different items at different times over the next three months.

—David Lazarus, Los Angeles Times



Green Christmas? Retailers offer options

MILWAUKEE — Americans may be watching the green in their wallet more closely right now, but when it comes to buying "green," many retailers are hoping people will keep shelling out more money.

TreeHugger.com, a Web site that promotes sustainable living, is featuring "Real Green for Real People" in its holiday guide this year. The company says it wants to show people they can go green without having to spend too much more. Products to be featured include a cardboard playhouse by Kidsonroof for \$50, or a squeaky Gingerbread Buddy from Planet Dog for about \$10.

Plow & Hearth, a subsidiary

of 1-800-FLOWERS.COM, has compost crocks, which allow you to compost at home, for between \$29.95 and \$44.95, and organic T-shirts for \$34.95.

Wal-Mart Stores Inc., is also getting into the act with its eco-friendly jewelry line from Love, Earth. There are spiral circle necklaces for \$48 on the company's Web site and diamond-cut bangle bracelets for \$78.

Duluth Trading Co., a Wisconsin-based catalog, has eco-friendly products this year too. The company is selling a Solar Movement Watch for \$99.75 that automatically recharges itself in light, both sun and artificial.

—The Associated Press

STARS AND STRIPES

2008 Holiday Shopping Guide

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Hot toys for 2008

NEW YORK — As parents grapple with shrinking retirement funds, a shaky job market and inflationary pressures, high-priced holiday toys such as Hasbro Inc.'s \$300 robotic Kota the Triceratops from Playskool and \$249 Ultimate Wall-E robotic dolls from Thinkway Toys might suddenly give them a bit of sticker shock.

With this in mind, retailers and makers are emphasizing more affordable toys this year amid a deteriorating economic environment.

Hasbro, for example, offers smaller animatronic animals, including a newborn chipmunk and a puppy that rolls over for a more affordable price of \$40.

And two toys that have been receiving much industry buzz — Spin Master's Bakugan and Techno Source's Clickables Fairy Collections — have components that start at about \$5 and \$6.

Retailers such as Wal-Mart Stores Inc. and K-B Toys Inc. have focused on promotions as well, offering toys for under \$10.

"I think there's going to be a lot more promotion of lower-price toys," said BMO

Capital Markets analyst Gerrick Johnson. He said that while there are more high-priced toys offered this year compared to last year because of the lengthy development schedules toys require, that will likely not resonate with shoppers.

"I've seen in stores a lot more people trading down to lower-priced items," he said. "High-priced items aren't going to perform as well as they have the last couple years."

He added that parents will likely study how long children's interest will last in toys, particularly higher-priced items such as Jakks Pacific Inc.'s \$80 night-vision goggles and Mattel Inc.'s \$60 Elmo Live interactive doll.

"Parents are willing to shell out more if they know the 'play value' is there," he said. "They'll buy a \$50 video game because they know kids are going to play that out for months."

—The Associated Press



Mattel Inc.'s Elmo Live will retail for around \$60 this holiday season. Business Wire

SEASONS GREETINGS FROM ANDREWS MCMEELE

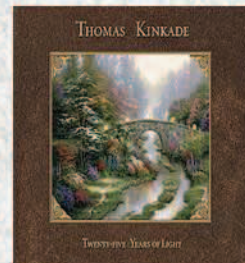
BOOKS



Dilbert
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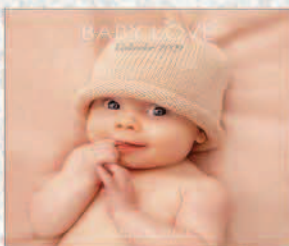


Baby Love
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Thomas Kinkade
\$45.00 HC

CALENDARS



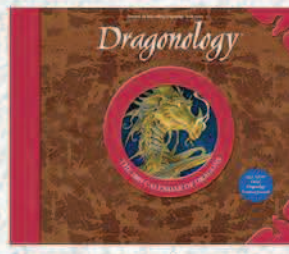
Babylove \$13.99 Wall



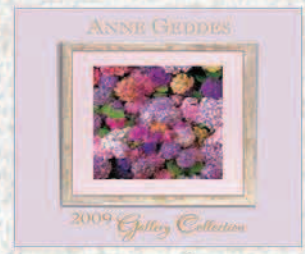
Dilbert
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Fairyopolis
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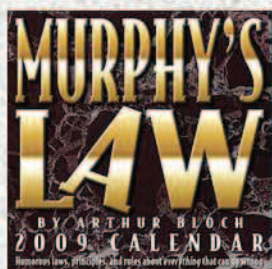
Dragonology
\$14.99 Wall



Anne Geddes
\$13.99 Wall



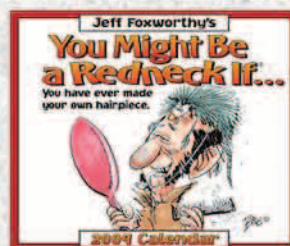
The Dangrous book
for Boys
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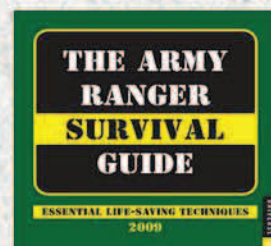
Murphy's Law
\$12.99 Day-to-Day



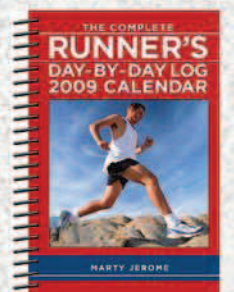
Thomas Kinkade
\$13.99 Day-to-Day



You Might be A
Redneck
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The Army Ranger
Survival Guide
\$11.99 Day-to-Day



\$12.99 Engagement

Available at Selected Military Bookstores

RECALL!

Toy safety at issue again this holiday season

Faced with a potential crisis of confidence spurred by high-profile toy recalls, major retailers have taken different approaches to walking the tight rope of alerting shoppers to problems while reassuring them it's still safe to buy toys to put under the tree.

Will consumers become scared or more confident after reading the big, blue signs saying, "Nothing is more important than the safety of your children ..." that now stand in prominent spots inside Toys R Us stores?

Will they see the recall notices casually taped on shelves at Kmart? Will they be swayed by eToys.com's reminders that shopping online automatically registers customers to receive any recall notices that may apply to those products in the future?

The toy industry and retailers may see such questions answered over the next several weeks as holiday shopping kicks into gear. If businesses haven't made the right moves, consumers increasingly pinched by economic concerns could shift their dollars to something that seems safer, such as clothes or books.

Toy safety is definitely on consumers' radar, said Jean Halloran, director of food policy initiatives for Consumers Union, an advocacy group that publishes Consumer Reports magazine. "We keep getting calls and inquiries as to, 'What do I do?'"

The next issue of the organiza-

tion's magazine, Consumer Reports, will contain a report on using home lead testing kits — a topic the staff decided this summer likely would draw interest following big Mattel recalls involving lead paint.

The U.S. Toy Industry Association also saw the "perfect storm" coming earlier this year, according to a videotaped speech the organization's President Carter Keithley made to a gathering of toy manufacturers in Hong Kong last month.

Recalls affecting pet food, toys and other products focused concern onto funding for government inspections and safety efforts, Keithley said. He added that it didn't help that all this was happening during a presidential campaign.

In that environment, he said, importers and retailers began getting nervous. They started testing toys produced not just for this holiday season, but over the past several years. That led to more recalls. Even if only a small portion of toys sold had issues, each new recall brought more attention to the issue.

The situation threatened "not just this holiday season but potentially many more to come," Keithley said. After deciding industry standards were fine, the association developed plans to reinforce toy testing and inspection programs. In late August, a group of retailers and labs began meeting to develop standardized testing procedures to be used industrywide.

Short-term, the association hopes consumers will be reassured the intensified testing could make this the safest holiday in years. Once that hurdle is surmounted, the on-

going emphasis on safety should build trust.

"We believe this is the most effective program to help our industry regain the confidence of the American public," Keithley told the suppliers.

Retailers have been actively trying to achieve the same goal. Wal-Mart issued a statement in August describing its stepped-up plans to ensure toy safety, including double-checking testing documentation from suppliers and hiring independent labs to do as many as 200 additional tests per day.

Toys R Us Chairman Gerald L. Storch testified before Congress recently about a new safety microsite on its Web page to collect all recall information and the introduction of an e-mail notification system for product recalls. The company also created large bulletin boards to post recall notices in stores.

Ignoring the issue wasn't an option. "We saw the biggest toy recalls in U.S. history," said eToy spokeswoman Sheliah Gilliland. The company took the tack of providing as much safety information as possible, and not just about recalls. "We want to make sure people feel safe," she said.

The survey indicated many parents might not worry enough about toys with small parts ending up in the hands of children who are too young for them.

In terms of posting actual recall notices, the various approaches taken by retailers appear to meet requirements of the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission.

—Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Some go online for trees

NEW YORK — These days, consumers can order just about anything on the Internet — even real Christmas trees.

More shoppers are ordering Christmas trees online and having them shipped straight to their doorsteps to avoid crowded tree lots and the hassle of hauling trees back home on the roof of their cars.

Around 25 million to 30 million Christmas trees are sold in the U.S. every year, and the National Christmas Tree Association estimates 175,000 trees are sold on the Internet or from a catalog.

Though it may seem like a small number, Becky Rasmussen, a spokeswoman for the association, says ordering Christmas trees online is growing in popularity, despite lofty shipping costs.

Lands' End, a Dodgeville, Wis.-based catalog retailer, is selling Fraser firs online for the first time this year.

Spokeswoman Michele Casper says the trees hail from North Carolina and are chopped on the day they are ordered to keep them fresh. She expects online ordering to resonate with shoppers who are looking for convenience.

"It's less stress and less mess," Casper says. "We all know the holidays are hectic, and this year there are fewer days between Thanksgiving

and Christmas. Every little bit is going to help this season."

For \$129.50, shoppers can buy a tree between 4 feet and 5 feet or pay \$299.50 for a bigger tree between 8 feet and 9 feet — the largest offered by Lands' End.

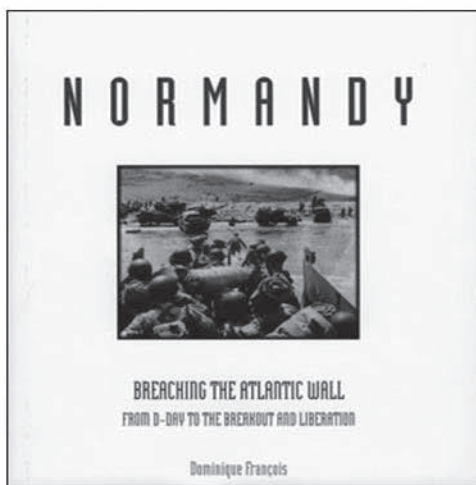
Overstock.com benefits from stores' shortfalls

Overstock.com, which offers brand-name merchandise at discount prices, is reaping the benefits of a sharp drop in consumer spending.

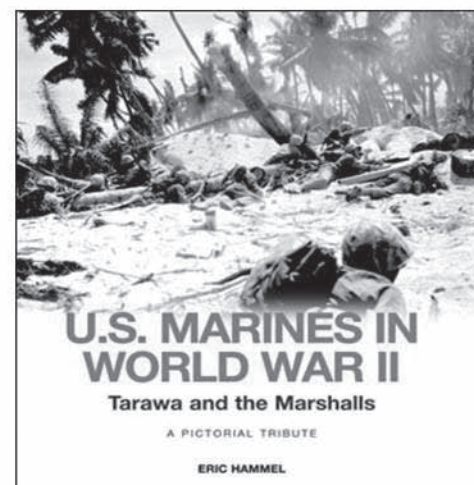
CEO Patrick Byrne says stores have canceled some of their holiday orders, leaving makers with piles of excess goods in recent weeks. In addition, Overstock.com is benefiting from a slew of store liquidations. In fact, the online retailer is awaiting 26,000 comforters from 20 Chinese makers that had already stitched the quilts but had not stuffed them before Linens 'n Things announced it was liquidating.

"We are getting a ton of apparel, handbags, shoes," said Byrne. He noted that he's now getting about three or four times as many offers from manufacturers compared to two months ago. Even "the low-ball" sales estimates from stores turned out to be too high, he said.

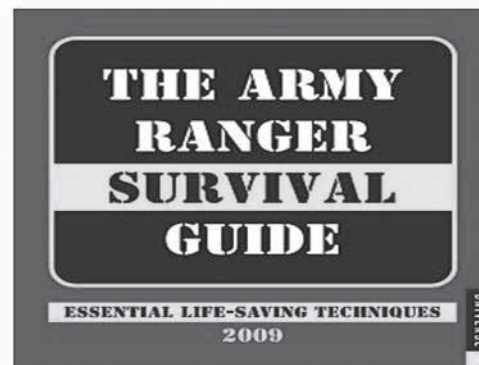
—The Associated Press



\$50.00 HC



\$35.00 HC



\$11.99 D-T-D Calendar

The National World War II Museum
504-527-6012
www.nationalworldwar2museum.org

Stay safe while shopping online

FORT WORTH, Texas — These days, you can couch-shop online, in your pajamas while sporting bed-head. But while Internet shopping may be easy and sometimes cheaper, the Federal Trade Commission and police want to make sure you do it safely.

Police say consumers are becoming savvier about online shopping but that officers do occasionally receive fraud reports.

“You always have to be careful and know who is on the other end of the transaction,” said Grapevine, Texas, police Lt. Todd Dearing.

“If you’re not sure, don’t press the ‘send’ button. Always use reputable sites that take precautions to protect your information.”

The commission has offered these tips for safe online shopping:

Know whom you are dealing with. Confirm the online seller’s physical address and phone number in case you have questions or problems. If you get an e-mail or pop-up message that asks for personal or financial information, never reply or click on the link in the message. Legitimate companies do not ask for this information via e-mail.

Know exactly what you are buying. Read the seller’s description of the product closely, especially the fine print. Words like refurbished, vintage, or close-out may indicate that the product is in less-than-mint condition, while name-brand items

with “too-good-to-be-true” prices could be counterfeits.

Know what it will cost. Check out Web sites that offer price comparisons. To receive the best consumer protections, pay with a credit card. Factor shipping and handling — along with your needs and budget — into the total cost of the order. Do not send cash.

Check out the terms of the deal, such as refund policies and delivery dates. Make sure you understand the seller’s return and refund policies. Find out when you can expect to receive your order. The FTC requires sellers to ship items as promised or within 30 days after the order date if no specific date is promised.

Keep paperwork. Print and save records of your online transactions, including the product description and price, the online receipt and copies of correspondence with the seller. Read your credit card statements as you receive them and watch for unauthorized charges.

Never e-mail your personal information. E-mail is not a secure method of transmitting financial information like your credit card number, checking account or Social Security number. If you want to pay for something through an organization’s Web site, look for indicators that the site is secure such as a lock icon on the browser’s status

bar or a URL that begins “https.” The “S” stands for secure.

Check the privacy policy. The site should let you know what personal information its operators are collecting and

why and how the information will be used. If you cannot find a privacy policy — or if you cannot understand it — consider taking your business to another site.

—Melissa Vargas, MCT



ADVERTISEMENT

From the Battlefield to the Base

New earphone technology provides consumers with military-grade noise reduction

It is widely recognized that most iPod®/MP3 earphones are not effective at blocking out ambient noise.

That’s not the case with the Comply™ NR-10 earphones.

Recently introduced to the consumer market, Comply™ NR-10 earphones incorporate the same patented noise reducing technology used by the U.S. military and general aviation industry.

“The introduction of technology developed for the military to the general population is not uncommon,” said Dr. Bob Oliveira, president and

founder of Hearing Components – the makers of Comply™ branded consumer electronics products. “In this case, the same principles that allow soldiers to communicate during the heat of battle can be applied to improving the listening experience.”

A key element of both the state-of-the-art U.S. Marine Corp QUIETPRO® headset system and the rotary-wing aviator communications earplug (CEP), Comply™ Foam Technology provides full adaptive hearing protection without compromising communication.

Beyond combat scenarios, Comply™ Foam Technology enables users to enjoy music in the most extreme environments. The earphones’ passive noise reduction is a product of the patented technology featuring ultra-soft memo-

ry foam which conforms to the user’s ear canal, providing amazing comfort and a secure in-ear fit. These specially designed foam tips filter out unwanted or extraneous noise and channels pure sound into the ear canal.

“The Comply NR-10 earphones are engineered to maximize noise reduction and provide enhanced audio performance,” said Oliveira. “The technology blocks out more noise than the leading

active noise cancellation headphones. And unlike active ‘noise canceling’ headphones, this passive noise reduction technology incorporated into the Comply NR-10 earphones does not require batteries.”

According to Oliveira, the Comply™ NR-10 has received one of the highest ratings recorded for an earphone or standard noise reduction device,



Comply™ Foam Technology provides in-ear fit and comfort while blocking out noise.

receiving an amazing Noise Reduction Rating (NRR) of 29 dB. In comparison, the leading active noise cancelling head- phone has an NRR of 23 dB.

The Comply™ NR-10 earphones are an ideal product for service men and women and are available for purchase online for \$79.95 at www.complyfoam.com.

In support of the Armed Forces, Hearing Components is offering \$15 off the online purchase of NR-10 earphones. Please enter discount code: **NR10** at checkout. Hearing Components ships to APO/FPO addresses via USPS.

Comply™ Foam Technology eliminates the significant noise threat of helicopters and is currently being used by the U.S. Armed services.



Comply™ NR-10 earphones are engineered to reduce ambient noise and enhance audio performance.



Are Macbooks really worth the price tag?

Apple's laptops get a makeover just in time for holiday season



APPLE/MCT

ASAN JOSE, Calif. Apple refreshed its notebook computer lineup, introducing faster, greener machines and cutting the price of an entry level model to about \$1,000, all in time for the holidays.

The new computers take their design cues from the lightweight Macbook Air notebook that Apple unveiled in January.

The computers have rounded cases like the Air's and are made using a similar manufacturing process that helps to reduce weight and internal parts while adding rigidity.

"This is a tour de force of engineering," company CEO Steve Jobs told attendees at the computer's unveiling event.

That it may be, but some analysts questioned whether Apple's emphasis on design over price was out of touch with the times, given the ongoing economic crisis and wide expectations of a recession. Other manufacturers have been cutting prices, and one of the fastest growing PC segments has been the so-called netbook market, where machines often sell for as little as \$300, analysts noted.

That's a market that Apple doesn't play in and the company moved in a different direction than its competition. Except for its entry-level notebook, which sports an older design, Apple maintained its prices on other notebook models and even raised the price on one model.

The updates will help "Apple maintain its image of ... attention to detail and overall focus on the

end-user experience," said Bob O'Donnell, an analyst with industry research firm IDC. But, he added, "The price points are a little high."

At the event, Apple announced updates to its entire notebook lineup. The consumer level Macbooks, which formerly came in a plastic shell, now will sport an aluminum enclosure, except for the \$1,000 low-end model. The company is replacing the Intel chipset — but not the Intel microprocessor itself — in all of its notebooks with one from Nvidia.

Apple is also replacing the integrated Intel graphics chip in its Macbook notebooks with one from Nvidia that Apple says will run 4 to 5 times faster.

Additionally, Apple has removed a wide range of hazardous chemicals such as PVCs and arsenic from its new notebook computers or their manufacturing process. The notebooks have earned a gold rating from the Electronic Product Environmental Assessment Tool, a service sponsored by the Environmental Protection Agency to help consumers judge the environmental impact of particular products.

Apple's computer sales have outgrown those of the broader PC industry in 14 of the last 15 fiscal quarters, noted Tim Cook, Apple's chief operating officer, at the event. The updates should help the company maintain that momentum — at least in the near term, analysts said.

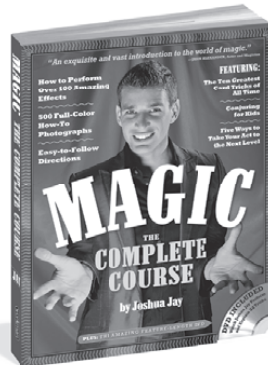
—Troy Wolverton, MCT

Macbook (entry)
\$999

Macbook
\$1,299; \$1,599
(Base prices)

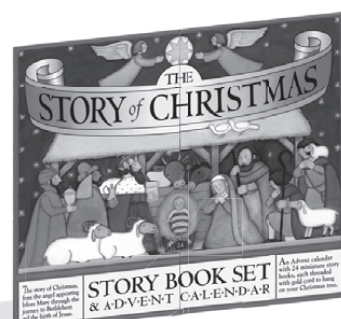
Macbook Pro
\$1,999 to \$2,499

Christmas Treats From Workman



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Toss the tuxedo. Lose that top hat and set the rabbit free. Magic is getting a makeover. A complete course to magic, with over 100 amazing but easy-to-learn tricks, plus the mechanics and presentation necessary to perform each one. Also includes a 2-hour DVD featuring 35 of the tricks.



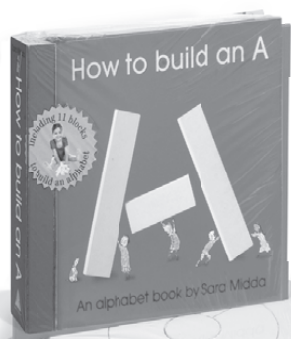
THE STORY OF CHRISTMAS

This wonderfully illustrated advent calendar includes 24 miniature board books, each retelling a part of the story of the first Christmas, and each one with a gold thread loop on top so that it can be hung on the tree after it's read. To be treasured by the whole family each Christmas.



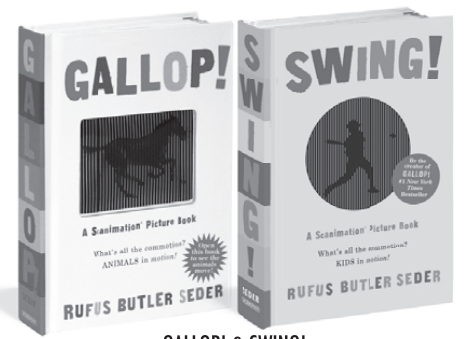
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HOW TO BUILD AN A

Don't just learn your letters—build them! The 10 die-cut foam pieces in this innovative new ABC kit can be used to build all the letters of the alphabet, uppercase and lowercase. It's a fresh, brilliant concept that engages new readers with the alphabet in a way no book has before. For preschool and up.



GALLOP! & SWING!

What's all the commotion? *Animals and kids in motion* in the #1 children's bestsellers! The images really move and the happy, rhyming text captures in words the pure energy of the figures in motion. You can't put the books down. Ages 3+ and for adults who love great design.

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Workman Publishing • New York

iPods see price drop, space boost

When Apple released the iPod in October 2001 it cost \$399 and held just 5 GB of music, or about 1,000 songs. The new line of iPods that Apple introduced recently range in price from \$49 to \$399, can hold up to 120 GB of music (30,000 songs), videos and photos, play games, surf the Internet, access e-mail or download music.

So what's changed in seven years? Why should you care that Apple refreshed its line of digital music players?

Well, if you've been holding out on getting an iPod or thinking about getting a new one, now is a good time to buy.

Although each year the price of an iPod goes down while its storage capacity goes up, the new 8GB iPod nano is the perfect size and price for someone who's never had an iPod before and doesn't want to shell out a ton of money to join the party. It

can hold up to 2,000 songs or eight hours of video and costs only \$149. There's also a 16GB model, which costs \$199. (If you're looking for an even better deal, check out the "Refurbished iPod" section of Apple's online store.)

The new nano is the first iPod that does an equally good job of being small and light enough to strap to your arm while you work out while still having a big enough video screen to let you comfortably watch a movie or TV show while you're on a plane — though the two-inch screen may be too small for some. Video viewing isn't perfect, as some of the names in the opening credits of an episode of "Mad Men" could not fit on the iPod screen.

It's amazingly thin (6.2 millimeters, or about as thick as two business cards) and it has an attractive curved aluminum design with a curved glass screen. It's so small

that it barely takes up any room in a pocket or purse.

The nano has some neat features that come from its more high-profile relatives, too. It has an accelerometer, so that when you turn the nano horizontally, photos and album covers switch to a landscape view. The accelerometer also makes playing games a lot of fun. The nano comes preloaded with three games, including one addictive one called "Maze," in which you tilt the nano to maneuver a ball.

There are also some new features that are unique to the nano. You can increase the size of the iPod's font so it's easier to read, and you can also enable the iPod to speak menu names and song information. And there's a fun new feature that lets you shake the nano to shuffle to the next song.

—Etan Horowitz
MCT



The latest version of the iPod Nano.
APPLE/MCT



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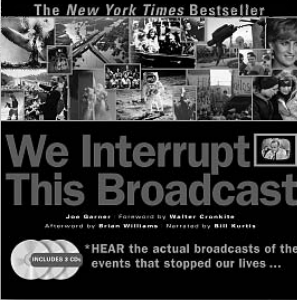
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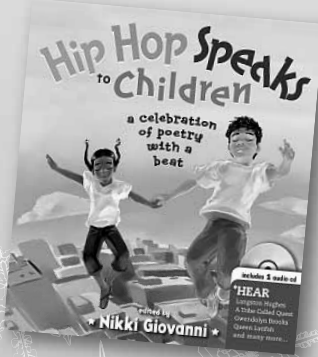
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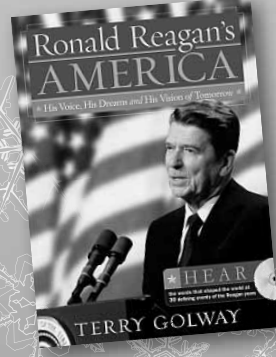
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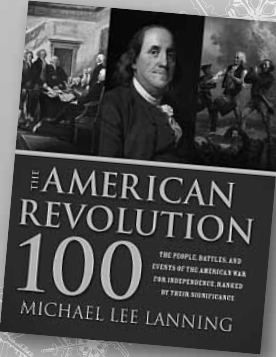












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T-Mobile G1

The 'Google phone' has arrived

This year's second-most anticipated cell phone, the T-Mobile G1, is significant not because it's elegant or stylish like the most anticipated phone, the iPhone 3G, but because of what's inside.

It's the first phone with Android, an open-source mobile operating system largely developed by Google that will ship with other phones in the future. For that reason and the inclusion of Google's core services, some people call the G1 the "Google phone."

Open source means the operating system's blueprints are published, allowing software developers to create programs, or "apps," that users can download. There are apps for the iPhone, too, but Apple hand-picks which ones are available, something that limits innovation.

The G1 (\$179.99 with a two-year contract) is a nice introduction to Android, a mobile-operating system that continues the evolution of phones as powerful computing platforms.

But it doesn't do a great job showcasing its potential. It isn't as intuitive as the iPhone, and it may take average users a while to figure out basic and advanced shortcuts and features, like the ability to quickly switch between programs or to copy and paste links between programs.

Without the instant wow factor of an iPhone, it probably won't catch on as quickly with the average consumer. Instead, it may appeal more to techies who value open-source products and don't mind a somewhat steep learning curve.

It also lacks features that would attract corporate users, such as Microsoft Exchange support, although a T-Mobile representative said he expects it to be added by the end of the year.

Once Android is released on a phone that comes closer to the

sleek design of the iPhone and developers have more time to build applications for it, I expect it to be more of a competitor.

Besides techies, this phone may appeal to people who don't need the business features of a BlackBerry or iPhone or crave some of the things the iPhone lacks, such as a keyboard, removable battery, SD card slot and a better camera. It is also good if your life revolves around Google, because it makes using Google products such as Gmail, Maps and Calendar easy to use. The addition of Wi-Fi and GPS are also nice.

The G1, made by HTC, resembles the popular T-Mobile Sidekick phones because it has a screen that slides out to reveal a keyboard.

You can play music and videos on the G1, but it probably won't replace your iPod, especially since you need an adapter to use it with regular headphones.

Although there are fewer than 100 apps available now in the "Android Market," it is easier to download and install them than on the iPhone. Among the best are several price-comparison tools that let you use the G1's camera as a bar-code scanner. Once the bar code is recognized, the app displays an organized list of online prices as well as the price and availability at nearby stores.

You can run applications at the same time, letting you stay signed in to an instant messaging program while browsing the Web.

The G1 boasts a Web browser that should display Web pages as if you were using a computer, but it isn't as good as the iPhone. Although you can zoom in and out of Web pages and choose the areas to focus in on, it's not as easy or as convenient as the way you can use two fingers to zoom in and out on the iPhone.

—Etan Horowitz, MCT



Courtesy of Rim.com

BlackBerry Storm BlackBerry goes touchscreen

I was all excited when I got to play with the new Verizon Wireless BlackBerry Storm. As a longtime "CrackBerry" addict, my swollen, sweaty thumbs were quivering with anticipation. Could a BlackBerry-quality typing experience really translate to a touch screen?

I wasn't disappointed. Press firmly on the Storm's screen and the clickable SurePress touch-screen interface reacts with a spring-like effect that feels like a tangible confirmation of hitting a key.

A virtual mouse pointer allows you to touch the screen in great detail without a stylus. And, unlike the iPhone, you can highlight text on screen to cut, copy and paste.

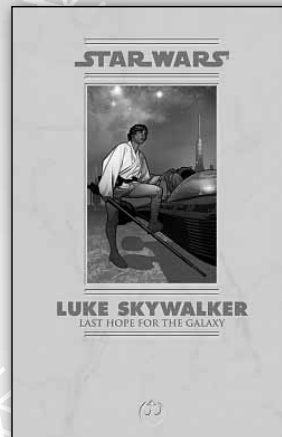
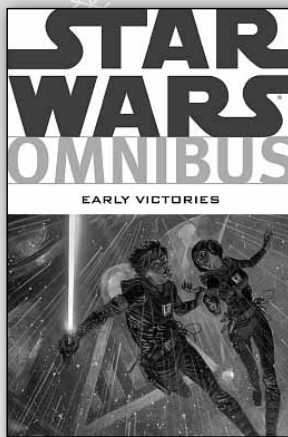
A 3.2 megapixel camera comes with a powerful flash that also provides continuous lighting when recording video. It has 1 GB of onboard memory storage and an 8 GB microSD memory card included.

A media player can play movies in full screen mode, display pictures and slide-shows quickly and manage an entire music collection.

One drawback though: the opening of the wireless BlackBerry applications store has been delayed till March.

—Michael Zitz, MCT

Celebrate the Holidays with graphic novels from Dark Horse!



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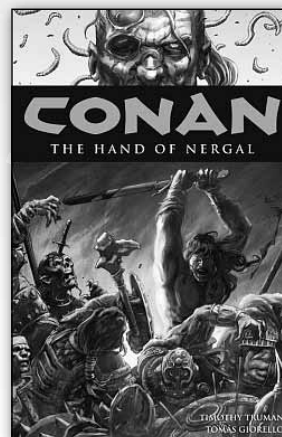
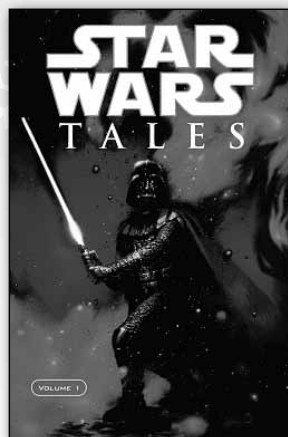
This latest *Star Wars Omnibus* reprints many of the early tales of the Rebellion. Following the destruction of the first Death Star, Luke Skywalker is the new, unexpected hero of the Rebellion. But the galaxy hasn't been saved yet—Luke and Princess Leia are finding there are many more battles to be fought against the Empire and Darth Vader!

Conan Volume 6: The Hand of Nergal
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This latest collection in Dark Horse's smart, innovative *Conan* series finds the cunning Cimmerian chased by both unfinished business from his past and a strange novice magician who seeks to deliver a dire warning to the wandering barbarian.

Star Wars Tales Volume 1
232 page, full-color trade paperback, \$19.95

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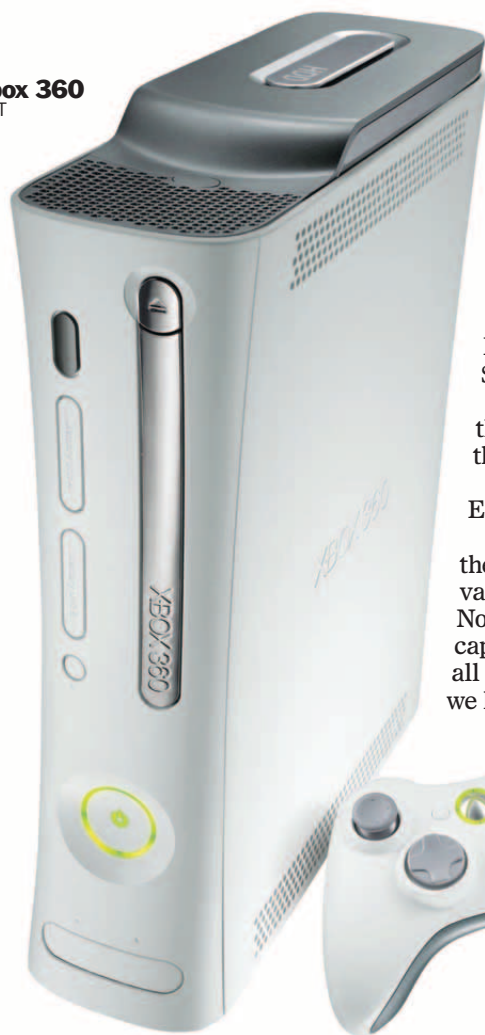


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Next-generation console costs come down

Xbox 360
MCT



A few months back, Game Stop CEO Daniel DeMatteo told stock analysts that he was factoring “a \$50 price drop” on the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 into his company’s third- and fourth-quarter 2008 earnings. He says the manufacturers are slashing list prices “to keep the velocity going” for the video game business. Yes, the biz has been outperforming previous console generations at the same point in product development, but there’s that pesky economy to contend with.

Microsoft has already repriced Xbox 360s as low as \$199 for the Xbox 360 Arcade model, which lacks a hard drive. That’s the first time a new-gen system has been priced below Nintendo’s Wii, which remains at its original selling price of \$249.

This lowest-priced Xbox model is aimed more squarely at the family and casual gamer set, which apparently hasn’t been that kindly disposed to the format to date.

The 60GB Xbox Elite retails for \$299, while the 120 GB Xbox Elite retails for \$399.

There’s no word yet when Sony will change its tickets. So far, the company has been aiming to hold prices while adding extra value to its game products. Recently, Sony said it was planning a November release of a new \$499 PS3 with double the hard drive capacity — 160GB — of its identically priced predecessor. That’s all the better for owners to download games, movies and (soon, we hear) music to PS3s from the PlayStation Network.

This new model will be offered in a “limited edition” bundle with the Sony game “Uncharted: Drake’s Fortune,” a Dualshock 3 wireless controller, plus a PlayStation Network voucher for the game “Pain.”

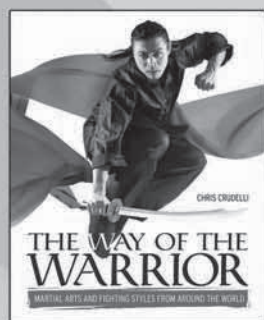
Like every PS3, this model also plays Blu-ray high-def movies, which of late has proven a major motivator for many folks to buy one. Many dealers recently received another PS3 on their shelves, an 80GB at \$399 that replaces an identically priced model with 40GB capacity.

—Information from MCT and staff reports

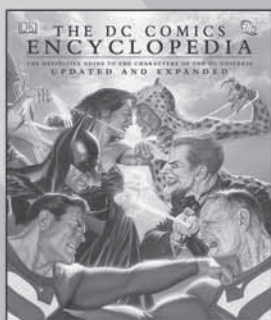


Playstation 3
MCT

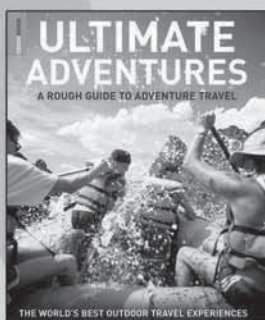
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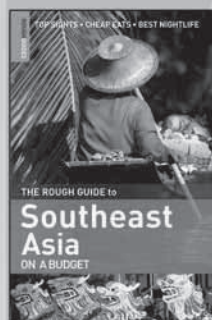
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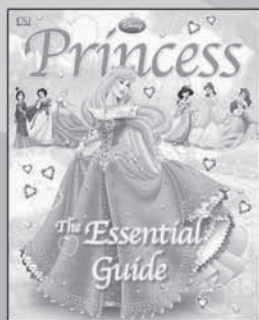
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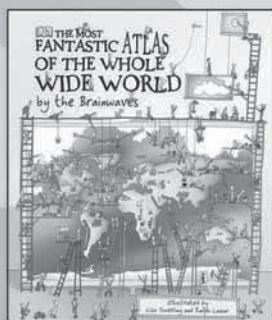
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PSP 3000: A decent value for your pocket

For 2008, the PSP 3000 gets a mini-makeover with an improved screen, a built-in microphone, and better video output support.

EDITORS’ RATING: 4 stars, excellent

THE GOOD: Light, slim enclosure; screen offers better color reproduction than that of earlier PSP models; improved AV output for video and game playback on TVs; built-in Skype with onboard microphone; retains all of the impressive media and online features of earlier PSP models; deep lineup of great game titles.

THE BAD: Some problems and annoyances remain: UMD load times still poky compared with DS games; screen isn’t glare-free, and is still a magnet for fingerprints; Web browser and data input can be cumbersome; no built-in storage.

THE BOTTOM LINE: Newcomers will find the PSP 3000 to be a solid portable gaming and multimedia device. Retail for \$199.

—CNET, MCT



St. Louis Post-Dispatch/MCT

Getting a workout in front of the TV

“Wii Fit” is a much-ballyhooed exercise program for the Nintendo Wii. Urged on by a fitness coach character, you will learn yoga poses, run through aerobic exercises, push yourself with strength training and watch a record of your progress.

Stand on the included pressure-sensitive balance board, and it will give you your weight and project your body mass index. While standing on the board, try one-legged yoga poses to calm yourself and improve your balance. Perform push-ups — the board will sense how hard

you’re working — as your TV screen tallies your progress. Games ranging from slalom skiing to a simulated run (jog in place as the Wii senses the up-and-down movements of the Wii remote in your hand or pocket) help tone muscles and work on your cardio.

Should you buy it? If you stopped using your old exercise equipment, then probably not. But for those times when you can’t get out of the house, “Wii Fit” will at least get you off the couch.

—Erin Gwinn, Chicago Tribune

More from Nintendo



MCT

Nintendo DS

Retail price: \$129

Description: The unit plays both Nintendo DS and Game Boy Advance games and features color screens, built-in Wi-Fi connectivity and touch-screen gameplay in a smaller, sleeker design, and a variety of shell colors. The DS Lite is less than two-thirds the size and 20 percent lighter than the original Nintendo DS.

The unit has a microphone, LED lights in the start and select buttons and a removable cover included to protect the Game Boy Advance cartridge slot.



MCT

Nintendo Wii

Retail price: \$249

Description: The Wii markets itself to families as a way to connect, taking video games back to a less-complex format, not that it doesn’t also provide next-generation graphics, too. The Wii also features a new-age nunchuck controller with motion-sensing technology to aid in the gameplay, often getting users off the couch.

—From staff reports

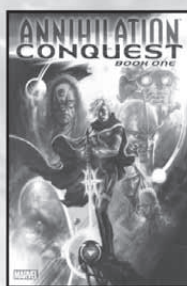
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APO/FPO holiday mail deadlines fast approaching

Shopping online with an APO or FPO address is often a challenging endeavor, but it is especially true during the holiday season. Veteran military shoppers know that to ensure items ordered online make it overseas in time for the holidays, it pays to give the APO/FPO system a little extra time during the months of November and December.

The U.S. Postal Service publishes official guidance for overseas families each Fall in the Postal Service Bulletin. This year, to

ensure delivery of Christmas cards and packages to military APO/FPO addresses, the USPS suggests that mail be sent by the recommended mailing dates listed here for mailings to APO/FPO zips 090-098, 340 and 962-966:

- Priority Mail: Nov. 13 for all;
- Space Available Mail: Nov. 28 for all except for 093, which is Nov. 21;
- Parcel Airlift Mail: Dec. 4 for all, except 093, which is Dec. 1;
- Priority Mail: Dec. 11 for all, except 093, which is Dec. 4;

First Class Mail: Dec. 11 for all, except 093, which is Dec. 4;

Express Mail Military Service: Dec. 18 for all, except 093, which is N/A.

While Priority Mail is the recommended shipping method for APO/FPO mail, Parcel Airlift Mail (PAL) and Space Available Mail (SAM) are also available alternatives. PAL is a special service that provides air transportation for parcels on a space available basis. PAL is available for Parcel Post not exceeding 30

pounds or 60 inches in length and girth combined. The applicable PAL fee must be paid in addition to the regular surface rate of postage for each addressed piece sent by PAL service. SAM packages are parcels paid at Parcel Post postage rates that are first transported domestically by surface and then to overseas destinations by air on a space-available basis. The maximum weight and size limits are 15 pounds and 60 inches in length and girth combined.

Express Military Mail (EMM) service is also an option for overseas shoppers, although it is only available at a limited number of military post offices and can be fairly expensive.

Dan Latvala, founder of the overseas military Web portal Oconus.com (and a frequent consultant to online businesses seeking advice on the APO/FPO market) had this to say about shopping online during the holiday season. "As long as shoppers place their orders by

the first week of December, they usually aren't going to be disappointed. Of course if the service member is deployed in a remote location, the earlier a package can be sent, the better. This year's deadlines are similar to the 2007 deadlines, so it appears the USPS is again taking the extra time needed for deployed personnel into account this holiday season."

"We anticipate having over 250 special coupons on the site this year," he said, "all provided specifically for overseas military families. We hear regularly from our merchants that they value military shoppers and their service to our country."

For over 600 merchants shipping to military address, information on shipping to APO/FPOs and a large selection of online coupons for APO/FPO shoppers, visit www.oconus.com for more information.

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Schedule your travel plans early

Believe it or not, it's time to start your Christmas shopping — for holiday flights. Here are a few things to keep in mind as you consider how to nab that ticket to Grandma's.

Airlines have drastically cut back on flights, so there are fewer seats available this year than last. Bottom line? Book your seat now.

The highest ticket prices are for flights between the Friday and Sunday before Christmas (Dec. 19-21). Cheaper days to fly are the Tuesday before Christmas (Dec. 23) or on Christmas itself.

While connecting flights can be annoying, they can be significantly cheaper than direct or nonstop flights. If you go this route, though, make sure you have plenty of time between flights (at least an hour, more for busier or bigger airports). As for those busy airports, try to avoid connecting in Chicago, Atlanta, New York or Newark, N.J.

Companies are popping up left and right to help travelers looking for ways to reduce their environmental impact.

Two brand-new sites are WholeTravel.com, which lists and ranks

green hotels and activity outfitters (e.g. horseback riding, white-water rafting) and VroomVroomVroom.com, a rental car booking site boasting both low prices and low guilt factor: The company donates carbon offsets for every rental.

These sites join RezHub.com, which launched last fall and helps travelers find environmentally-friendly hotels, activities, hybrid rental cars and flights (via carbon offsets).

Did you know that Google Maps can help you plan your next trip on public transportation?

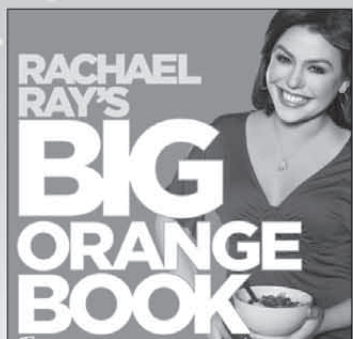
Google Transit has partnered with more than 75 transit agencies in a dozen countries to display door-to-door directions using public transportation. New York City joined Google Transit in late September.

Seattle, the San Francisco Bay area, Chicago, Pittsburgh and Portland, Ore., are a few of the other cities on the program. If you'd rather use your own two feet, Google Maps' walking directions are in Beta form, but they're handy when you want to see how long it would take you to walk, say, from your hotel to the museum.

—The Washington Post

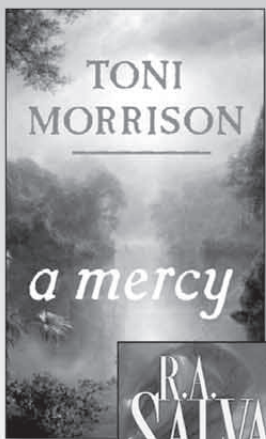


One Stop Holiday Shopping from Random House, Inc.

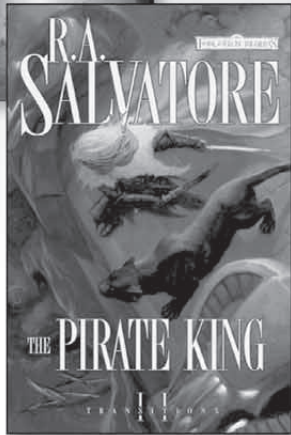


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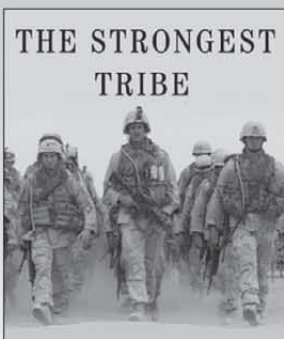
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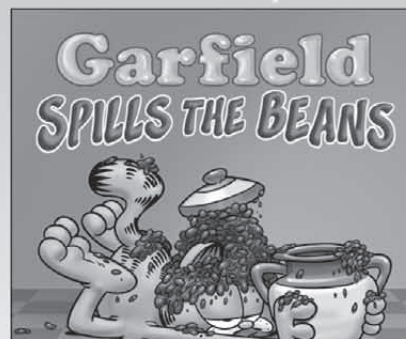
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Courtesy of Guitarhero.com

'Guitar Hero' set for sales encore?

SAN DIEGO — As it hits stores throughout the world, the fourth installment in the wildly popular "Guitar Hero" video game could become a test of the game industry's ability to weather the broader economic storm.

Activision Blizzard Inc.'s "Guitar Hero World Tour" is one of the company's most important games of 2008. At \$189.99, it will also be one of the most expensive games the Santa Monica publisher has ever released.

While some analysts still expect the franchise to drum up \$1.4 billion in sales this year, the title's steep price could turn away some consumers as they pinch pennies this holiday season.

"In this economy, people will be a little more frugal," said Ricardo Torres, editor of Gamespot, a Web site that reviews games. "This fall, it's all about value."

For Aaron Green, who plays "Guitar Hero III: Legends of Rock" with his 9-year-old son Alex, the new game is still a good value.

But the price tag makes him pause. Instead of splurging on the game when it comes out, as he would have in years past, the 43-year-old audio-visual coordinator from Rancho Mirage said he would give the game to his son for Christmas.

"The price is a little steep," Green said. "But we still need our creature comforts to help us feel better."

That's music to the game's creators, who are pitching it as a great bang for the buck. It comes with a guitar controller, drum kit, microphone and software that lets players create and edit their own music.

"It's like several games in one,"

said Brian Bright, one of the lead developers. "So you get a lot for your money."

Sarah Wright-Killinger, 30, an operations manager from West Los Angeles, isn't convinced, though she likes to play music games with her husband.

"I'm afraid if I spend money on 'Guitar Hero,' I'm just asking for it," she said. "It's just not the time to be spending money on things like that."

To persuade reluctant consumers, Activision is releasing several versions of the title, including a standalone game disc for \$49.99, which can be played using guitar controllers from previous versions of "Guitar Hero" or "Rock Band," a competing franchise from MTV Networks. There's also a \$90 version of the game that comes with a guitar controller only.

For Activision, hitting the right notes with consumers with "World Tour" is critical. The "Guitar Hero" franchise is "one of the three biggest profit generators" for the company this year, Activision Chief Executive Robert Kotick said.

The company leads the music-simulation category, but MTV is catching up fast, said Michael Pachter, analyst with Wedbush Morgan Securities.

"Guitar Hero III," released October 2007, sold 9.1 million copies in the U.S., said Anita Frazier, analyst at the NPD Group, a market research firm.

Meanwhile, "Rock Band," which came out November 2007, has sold 3.5 million copies.

"Activision needs this game to keep 'Rock Band' from gaining market share," Pachter said.

—Alex Pham, Los Angeles Times

The full version of the game includes a guitar controller, drum kit, microphone and software that lets players create and edit their own music.

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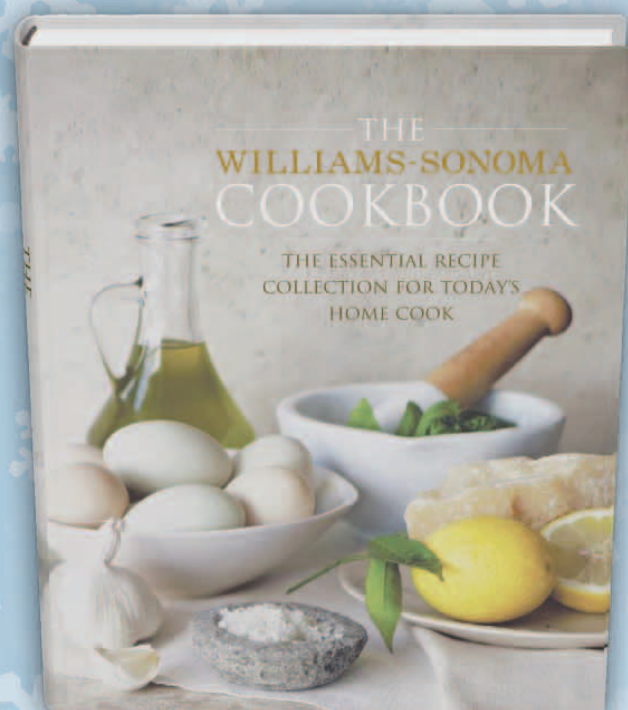


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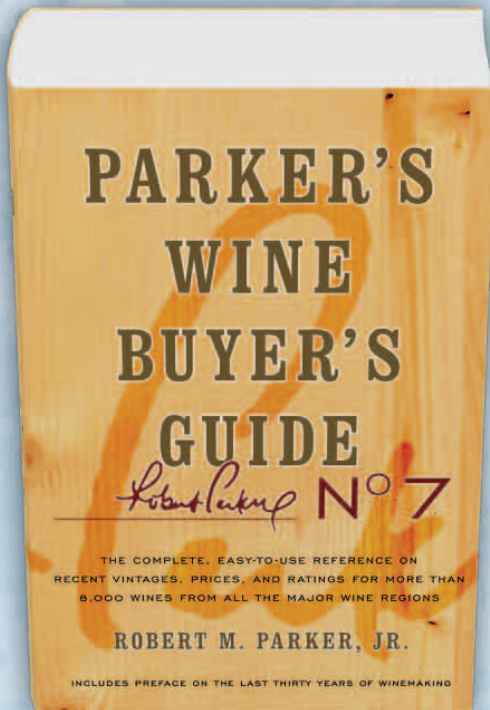
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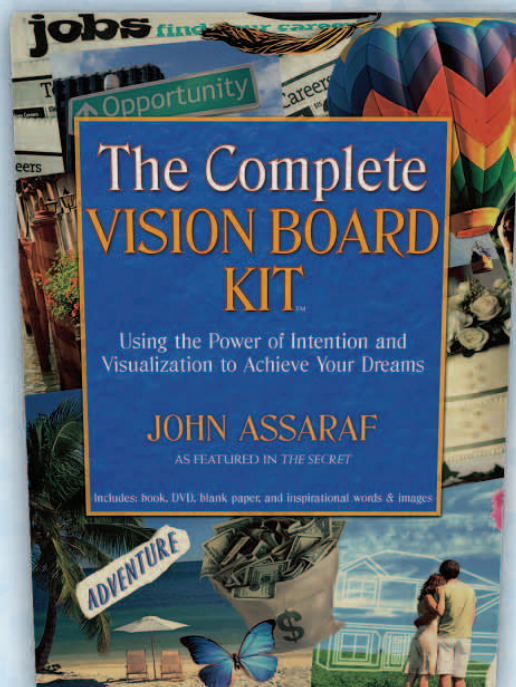
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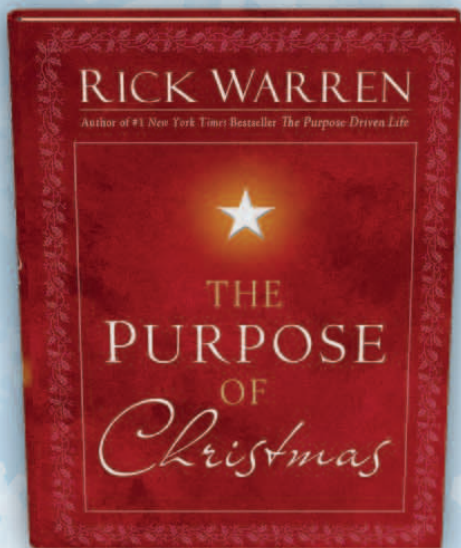
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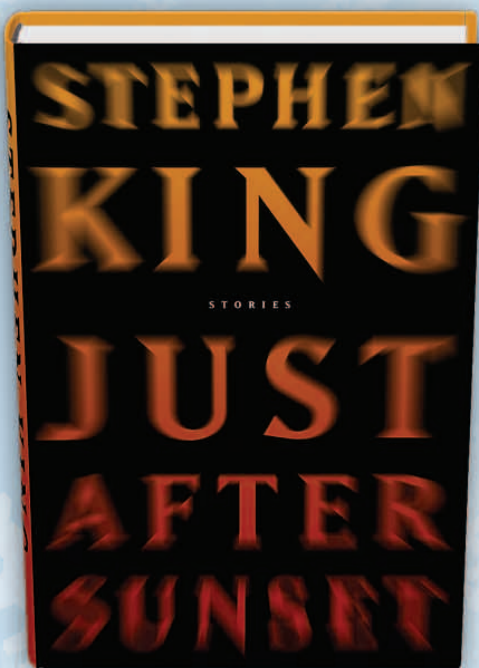
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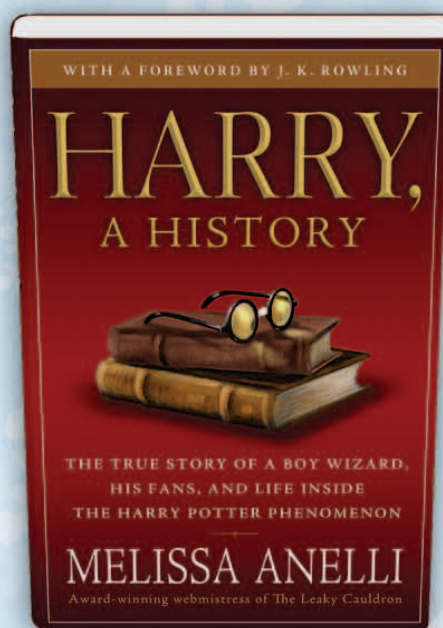
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How 'bout them Cowboys ... in your back yard?

Neiman Marcus catalog offers pricey, rare gifts

CHICAGO — The Dow has dropped, Wall Street is in turmoil and big banks disappeared.

But that hasn't stopped Neiman Marcus from mailing its much-anticipated annual Christmas Book catalog this week filled with outrageously expensive fantasy gifts.

The luxury department store has been dreaming up pricey presents for holiday shoppers through the Great Depression, the World Wars and recessions, said Ginger Reeder, spokeswoman for the Dallas-based company.

"The edict from beginning was they needed to inspire and to stop people in their tracks," said Reeder. "They used to be called stunt pages.

They are supposed to be way over the top."

This year's smorgasbord of indulgences includes such extravaganzas as a Jack Nicklaus custom backyard golf course for \$1 million and an entire Dallas Cowboys Texas Stadium end zone for \$500,000.

Yet from the looks of this year's catalog, it seems the folks at Neiman Marcus had an inkling that 2008 would be a tough year, even for billionaires. Gone are the \$45 million private jet and \$20 million submarine. This year's most expensive gift is a \$10 million thoroughbred racing stable in Kentucky that once managed the legendary Seattle Slew, a gift that smacks more of an investment than blatant excess.

Neiman's has been publishing its Christmas Book since 1926. Its merchants come up with about a dozen fantasy gifts every year, but, in truth, the retailer sells very few of them, Reeder said. The idea is to entice shoppers to buy the sweaters and furs and jewels and handbags in the rest of the 155-page catalog.

This year, that is a tall order. The historically recession-proof American luxury market is feeling the pinch. Sales are falling at most luxury firms, including at Neiman's.

"We expect customer demand will remain weak for an extended period of time," Neiman Marcus Group Inc. Chairman and CEO Burt Tansky said.

When stock portfolios plummet, it seems even the rich cut back spending.

—MCT



Stores pushing cheer amid financial woes

NEW YORK — With Americans in a deep funk amid rising layoffs and shrinking retirement funds, retailers are pushing holiday displays and store events that are even more festive and colorful than in Christmas seasons past. The goal, of course, is to get shoppers in the mood to spend in a season that some analysts say could be the weakest in 25 years.

Luxury handbag and accessories retailer Coach Inc. said it's planning displays that are "more bold, colorful and emotional" than years past. They will include jewel-tone Christmas trees made out of ribbon, brightly colored boxes wrapped as presents, snowflakes made out of an arrangement of Coach handbags and real Christmas trees in some locations.

The company said displays will be part of a more integrated holiday message across in-store marketing, its Web site, packaging and advertising.

"Every way we touch the consumer will be infused with holiday energy and messaging," said Michael Tucci, president of the North America retail division.

To add cheer, bookseller Borders Group Inc. is introducing a whimsical indoor campaign featuring line drawings of 90 different characters, such as a history buff or a jazz lover. It's also making store events a bigger part of the holiday mix, including an open house at the beginning of December with activities, coffee and cookies.

"We've done events before, but we've stepped up activity," said Rob Gruen, executive vice president of merchandising and marketing.

But Roth Capital Markets

analyst Elizabeth Pierce says she doesn't know if such activity will help during the holidays.

"Does it put consumers in a merrier mood? I don't know," she said. "What gets people in stores is great value on great items, that means a lot more than decorations."

Still, she said it will be interesting to see what retailers "have up their sleeves."

Site targets shoppers hoping for a steal

Talk about hot deals for shoppers hoping for a steal this Christmas.

PropertyRoom.com wants holiday shoppers to turn to the online marketplace where consumers can bid on stolen property.

The items, which range from dolls to DVD players, were recovered by 1,300 law enforcement agencies in 47 states. But after searching and a state-by-state mandated waiting period, authorities weren't able to reunite owners with the missing goods.

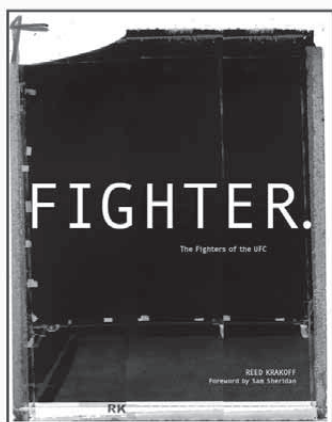
So the loot goes up for bidding — at deep discounts — and becomes available to any shopper who can stomach putting the ultimate re-gifted item under the tree.

A woman's leather Coach watch was up for grabs with a bid of \$70. And a pocket-sized Cannon digital camera was listed at \$31.

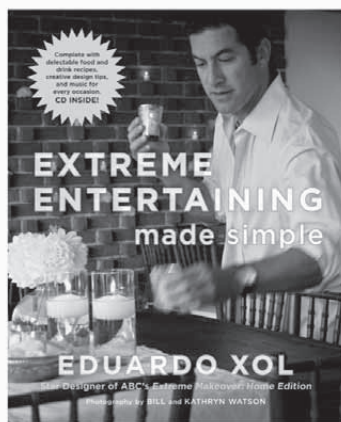
There's also art, diamonds, clothing, toys, bikes and even police cars, such as the 2005 Crown Victoria that was going for \$2,750 after 51 bids.

—The Associated Press

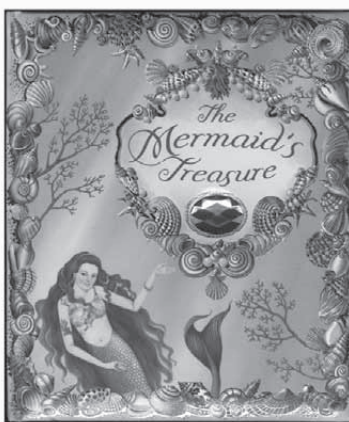
Holiday Gift Titles from Penguin Group (USA)



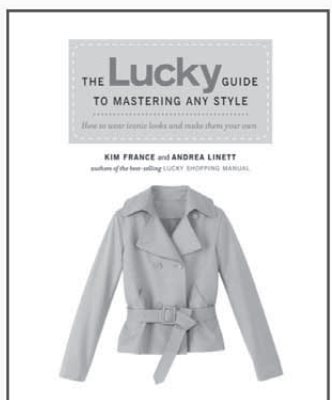
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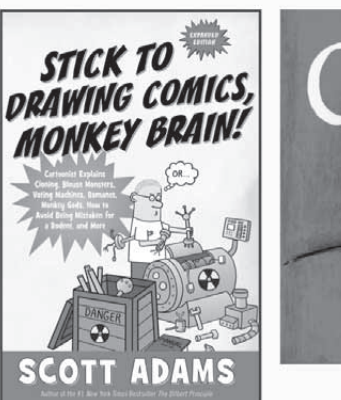
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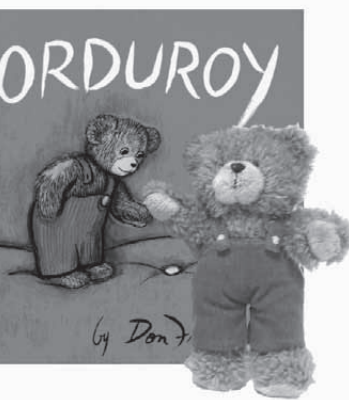
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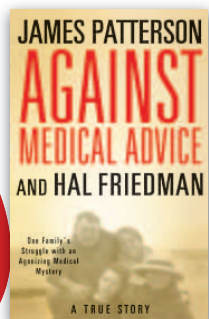
Present Arms.



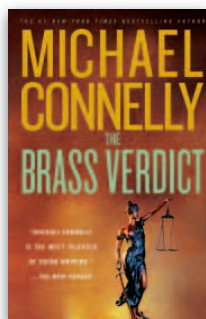
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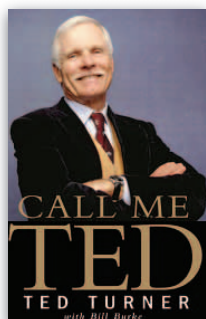




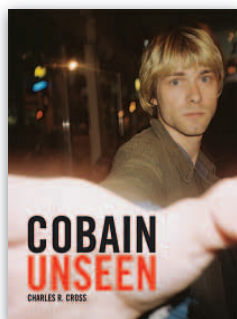
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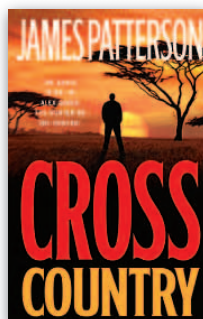
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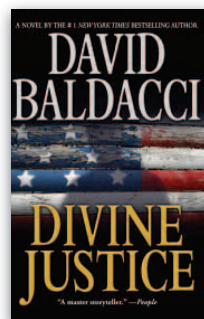
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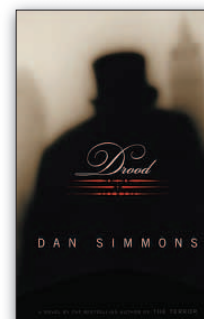
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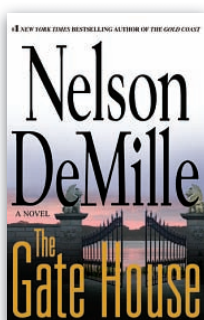
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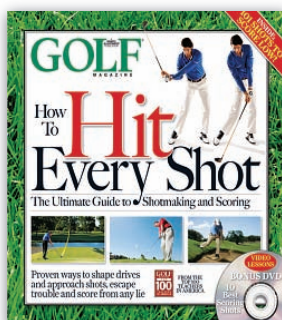
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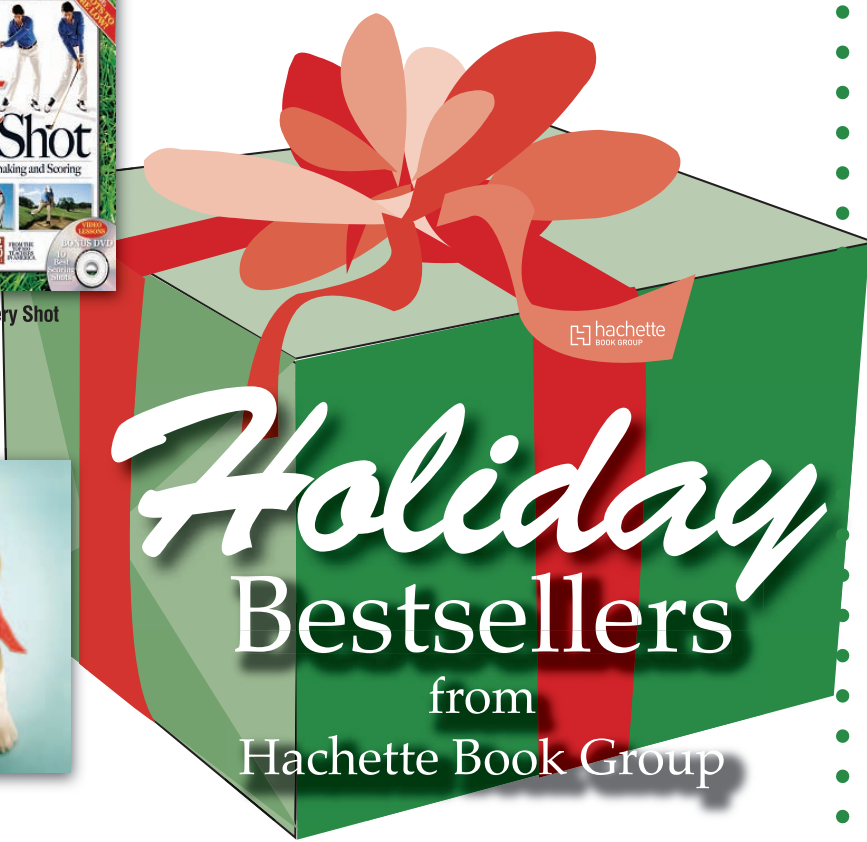
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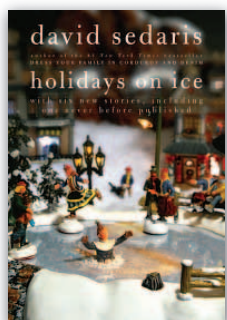
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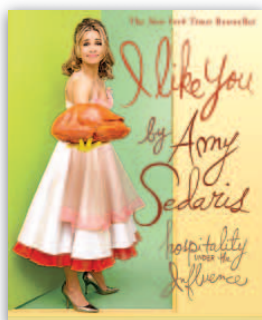
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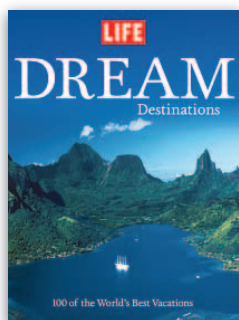
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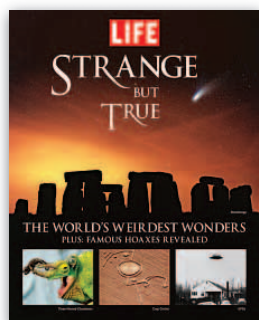
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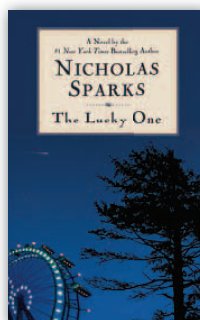
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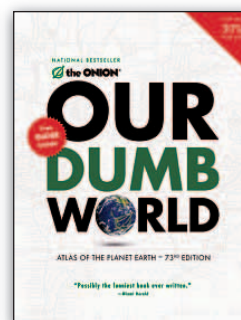
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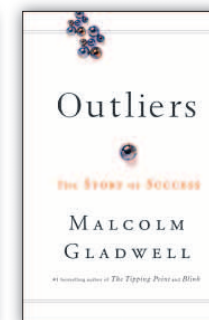
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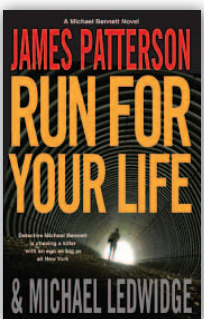
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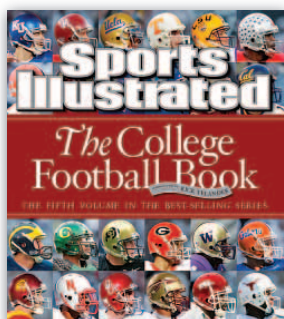
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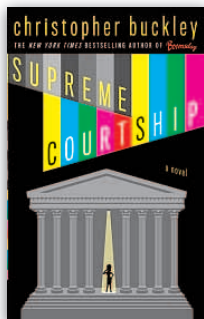
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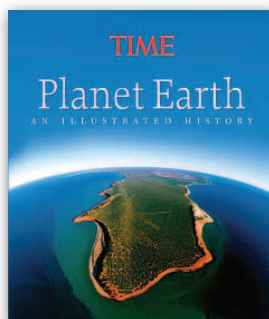
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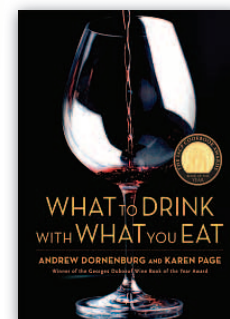
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