

Survive the Quest for

Even if you've been stranded on a desert island,



Richard Hatch and Sue Hawk of *Survivor* fame sit among some of this year's hottest gifts. Find out more about them. Turn to page 8.

the Perfect Gift

By Dennis McCafferty

You know the holidays are just around the corner.

USA WEEKEND assembles a panel of the nation's best shoppers to help.

HOLIDAYS ARE about tradition — a tradition of running around and agonizing, which leaves shoppers perplexed about how to purchase a perfectly conceived present: Little Jimmy's sweater sports a solid fit, but he's into the baggy look; the boss had a lukewarm reaction to that cute coffee cup (she prefers bottled water); and the significant other has little use for fancy business attire — the office just went casual.

To ease the process, USA WEEKEND has gathered expert shoppers for a first-ever holiday forum. In the discussion, it's clear that mistakes are made because our thinking — not the products — falls short. But the good news is that with a touch of creativity and homework, a dud can turn into a delight.

Our distinguished panelists: celebrity shopper Allana Baroni; Neiman Marcus holiday catalog queen Ginger Reeder; "Gift Guru" author Robyn Freedman Spizman; and online shopping entrepreneur Hilary Billings, of RedEnvelope.com.

Without further ado, here's the holiday dish from these gift-giving divas:

How do you shop for the person who has everything?

Spizman: "One can never get enough fine food. They may have everything,

but they still have to eat. I like sending honeybell oranges in January. They'll enjoy them long after the holiday fruitcake is already eaten."

Baroni: "Think of pairing good gifts: For that high-energy, multi-tasking CEO, consider a handcarved rocking chair with a great, first-edition novel, along with a note saying, 'Take time to enjoy a good book.' These are people who are impressed by style."

How do you avoid the time pressures of holiday shopping?

Billings: "If you think about gift-giving all year long and 'hold' presents until the holidays, it's a much nicer way to go about it. After Thanksgiving is a tough time to shop. The crowds are terrible. And, with online shopping, it's much smoother to do it earlier than the post-Thanksgiving rush. Just before the holidays, you want to think about entertaining people and enjoying your family. Not shopping."

Reeder: "Absolutely. I listen to what people say throughout the year. I had an associate of mine say offhand in fall that he loves peanut brittle. Well, that will be his gift this year. A gift should reflect that you listen to them and you care about what they say."

How do you stay trendy and new without succumbing to clichéd gifts?

Reeder: "It's tough. At Neiman Mar-

cus, we have a committee of six people who review the gifts I come up with. If anyone says, 'I've seen it before,' it's the kiss of death. So you ask for a lot of help from all kinds of places. Every time I go to a party, I ask people what presents they fantasize about."

Billings: "Pick things that will always be in style. Certain items — a lovely cashmere sweater — will last forever. People are realizing it's better to have fewer, wonderful things than to constantly get things that are suddenly in style."

How do you surprise someone with whom you've lived for years and know everything about?

Spizman: "The manner in which you give a gift can make it so much greater. In the morning, while your significant other is sleeping, take yarn and tie it to the gift, hide it, then unravel the ball of yarn throughout the house. Then take the other end and tie it to the bed. When they wake up, slip them a note saying, 'Follow me anywhere.' Make them follow the string until they get to the present."

Baroni: "The presentation and gift can be funny, romantic, thought-provoking or practical. The main thing is that it has meaning behind it. A parka packed with fake snow, along with an invitation to a snowball fight, is a gift that brings a smile as well as something material. Give new shoes, along with dance les-

sons. Something you can do together and make like Fred and Ginger."

How do you shop for a person with no discernible interests?

Baroni: "If they have kids, give to them instead. Something that inspires creativity — say, a lunchbox filled with arts and crafts items."

Spizman: "Give gifts with lots of choices. Go to Flooz.com and buy a gift certificate they can use at dozens of stores. Or give a prepaid calling card. Everybody makes long-distance calls. If you travel, it's great to use a card."

How do you shop for friends, co-workers and relatives for whom exchanging gifts has long ago become a tedious habit?

Spizman: "Start a new tradition. Maybe it's time to draw names and limit the budget. It's more economical, and you can give one great gift instead of worrying about what to buy for everybody. When is it time to end the old tradition? That depends upon the feelings of those involved. When it's no longer joyful, it may be time for a change."

Billings: "Come up with a gift that you'll buy every year and become known for. We get a huge box of delicious pears every year from an aunt. She gives it to everyone in the family. She has established this as her tradition, and we look forward to it every year."

Our Distinguished Panelists

RedEnvelope.com founder Hilary Billings is the visionary for the upscale shopping site that custom designs your gift giving — whether you're shopping for the gadget geek, the adventurer or the jet-setter on your list.

Neiman Marcus' Ginger Reeder hunts down all of the items showcased in the immensely popular Neiman Marcus Christmas Book. From \$225 cashmere mittens to a \$175, 2-square-inch "desk TV" to a \$20 million, 380-ton submarine that sleeps 11.

Hollywood shopper Allana Baroni buys gifts for Kevin Spacey, Warren Beatty and Annette Bening, Harrison Ford and a host of other A-listers. One memorable present: A \$10,000, big-screen virtual golf game for Clint Eastwood.

Author Robyn Freedman Spizman (right), of *The Perfect Present: The Ultimate Gift Guide For Every Occasion*: Spizman is the "Gift Guru" who has appeared on CNN, CNNfn, Oprah Winfrey's Oxygen Network and many other programs.

