

# Gift Guide

# SHOP NOW FOR 2009

The best holiday gifts are those purchased throughout the year — and you'll save money in the process.

BY DENNIS McCAFFERTY

**T**HE MAD DASH to the mall. The expense of rushing a website's shipping order because you just got around to online holiday shopping ... on Dec. 22. Holiday shopping doesn't have to be that way. That's why USA WEEKEND Magazine is pleased to bring its annual Gift Guide Guru panel to help you get your 2009 holiday shopping finished well ahead of time.

That's right. We said 2009 holiday shopping — because the best gifts are those that are thoughtfully bought throughout the year. You may find that this practice only makes the holidays more of a joy and



When talking with friends, listen for clues to get gift ideas.

less of a drain. At least that's how our gurus — Robyn Freedman Spizman, co-author of *Do Your Giving While You Are Living*; online gifting expert Greg Smith of Provide Commerce, which runs RedEnvelope.com, ProFlowers.com and other top online shopping sites; Hollywood celebrity shopper Allana Baroni; and Amy Dimond, the resident gifting expert for Sears and Kmart (both of which are now owned by Sears Holdings) — view it:

**How can we adjust our mind-sets to become year-round holiday shoppers?**

**Spizman:** Easy — you don't need to! Many of us

like to think that we're good listeners, and that's really all you have to be. When you're having a phone conversation with someone who matters to you, pick up ideas within the discussion about what that person cares about. These are ideas that can lead to great gift-buying. As soon as you hang up, write them down. In many ways, great gift-giving is like being Sherlock Holmes. You're picking up "clues" throughout the year. Then you assemble those clues to create the perfect gift — one that demonstrates that you really understand who this person is.

**Baroni:** Year-round shopping isn't difficult. Magazines are working on holiday issues in July, which means celebs I deal with are giving holiday interviews while they're still working on their tans!

**Are there other ways to get clues throughout the year about what a person wants, other than trading e-mails or having a chat?**

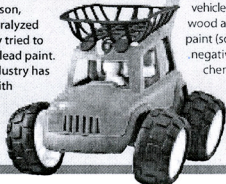
**Dimond:** Absolutely. You can be a stealthy "investigator" by going on a person's blog, or checking out what they're posting on Facebook, LinkedIn or other social-networking sites. These online outlets contain all kinds of leads when it comes to what a person likes — music, movies, recreation, sports.

**How do you convince a classic procrastinator that this kind of approach can work?**

**Smith:** Just ask me! I'm as big a procrastinator as you'll find. But if you're a shopper by nature, you can easily make the adjustment. When you're in a mall

## Eco-toys for your tyke

Last holiday season, parents were paralyzed with fear as they tried to buy toys free of lead paint. Now, the toy industry has branched out with eco-friendly, toxin-free options. Here are a few:



■ **Sprig Adventure Series (sprigtoys.com)** These toy vehicles are a composite of recycled wood and reclaimed plastic — no paint (so no lead). They've tested negative for potentially harmful chemicals BPA (bisphenol A) and phthalates. Best part?

No batteries. The LED light and sound features are powered by your child pumping the vehicle.

■ **Idbids (idbids.com)** These plush "iddy-biddy" creatures are 100% organic Egyptian cotton and colored with organic dyes. Each one comes with a storybook (starring the Idbid) and a "field guide" (spelling out ways kids can be good to the Earth), both printed on recycled paper with eco-friendly inks.

■ **Green Toys (greentoys.com)** These are made 100% in California, so parts aren't shipped from overseas. All the toys are classics — the kind that rely on imagination, such as a tea set or gardening set. And they're made from recycled milk containers, which contain no BPA, phthalates or lead.

— Natalie Ermann Russell



during the year and you see things that could work for the holidays, make a note to yourself. If you can't buy them right then and there, put a reminder in your o-calendar to buy them when the right time comes.

**Can a gift that is bought six months or a year in advance still be meaningful?**

**Spizman:** Why not? Especially if they're what I call "together gifts," which are my favorite — like when a grown son buys tickets for a football game that he and his dad can go to.

**Baroni:** Don't forget that, when it comes to gift-giving, one plus one equals more than two. If your niece needs a new violin case, you can buy one, and that's nice. But if you buy a case, then fill it with CDs and sheet music that she loves — it becomes a wonderful gift. Giving yourself the time throughout the year to assemble these kinds of gifts is only an advantage, not a disadvantage.


**Can this approach actually save you money?**

**Dimond:** Yes, you can save a lot by taking advantage of seasonal sales. It's a great way to shop, really. You pace yourself throughout the year and reduce the negative effect of the sticker shock you get by cramming holiday shopping all into a few weeks at the end of the year.



**Year-round shopping requires great hiding skills. Where do you stash gifts for the long haul?**

**Smith:** Your office space can be useful, like an empty filing cabinet, or the space under your desk.

**Dimond:** Or if you're a parent hiding gifts for your kids, how about underneath their beds? It's the last place they'd look because they never clean their rooms! 

# M Space Right

dimensions: 6.62" x 9.75"