

Thank goodness for paradigm shifts. What misconceptions I would now be languishing in if I had never developed my infallible strategy for The Noble Art of Holiday Shopping! For a sad, but thankfully small portion of my life, I went through the painstaking, entirely unnecessary process of selecting the perfect gift for each individual on my list. Now, I breathe the clean air of enlightenment, for those sorry days are far behind me - ground into the dirt and abundantly spit upon, I might add. And while I do hold a certain contempt for my past naiveté, with it comes the warm glow of one who can shake one's head wisely and smile at the follies of youth.

This transformation came directly from the realization that though Christmas is all about giving gifts, it doesn't matter so much what the gift is, just that there is one. My shopping strategy now is ingenious, simple, sophisticated. It has only one tactic, and that is convenience. Everything else falls out quite beautifully.

On my list, I have two main categories: adults and children. Within each of these are two subcategories: male and female. Within each of these four categories I have four more: \$75 minimum, \$50, \$25, and \$10 maximum. And so, only three easy decisions need be made when Christmas rolls around each year: the age of everyone I know, the gender of everyone I know, and the material worth of everyone I know.

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September First. The delicate six-week process of decking out department stores and shopping malls for Christmas is finally complete. Once again, Commercial America has aptly anticipated the season.

As I casually pull into the parking lot in my custom-built H2 SUV Purity White 5-wheel drive Dummer with hidden missile launchers, and park it squarely on the line between two parking spaces, I heartily congratulate myself on my initiative this year. And armed with my complete deck of credit cards, I am prepared for whatever the Wonderful World of Capitalism will persuade me, quite rightfully, to buy.

I waltz into ConsumerParadiz Ultra-Elite Shopping Center, clad in the full regalia of an enterprising shopper, which necessarily includes a twenty-gallon designer tote, spindly high heels, and the unmistakable swagger that comes with them. Merry holiday music pipes in from the beribboned speakers, reminding me to forget autumn and think of roasting chestnuts and jingling sleigh bells before it's too late. Artificial boughs of holly and trees frosted like massive wedding cakes add a genuine cheer to the holiday atmosphere.

In the central courtyard the North Pole is fully operational. It's a massive replica of the snow globes being sold in a nearby kiosk. Santa's workshop looms under the giant dome, from which fully glittered snowflakes are suspended. In a thirty-foot radius around the workshop sprawl rolling hills of glistening snow. The snow looks so perfectly real that I suspect it of being fake. A miniature train intended for decoration chugs in a merry, winding path through the white mounds. Children tug on their parents' hands to be allowed a ride, but are instructed in stern voices that "this is the North Pole, not an amusement park." The disgruntled children pour their woes into the

padding lap and plastic beard of a compassionate Santa, who assures them they'll get everything they want for Christmas and more.

Despite this impressive and engrossing spectacle, I can smell my first stop from across the courtyard: Body and Bath Factory, where I'll be purchasing gifts for the \$10 maximum girls. Squeezing past the display of everything "Holly Berry and Nutmeg," I make it to the neatly arrayed shelves of the \$9.50 body lotion. There are twenty-four fragrances, just the right number for each of these girls to feel unique. As I pluck them one by one and place them carefully into my shopping basket, I admire the ingenuity of whoever thought of such alluring names as "Magical Waters," "Enchanting Orchid," and "Twilight Pomegranate." In fact, some are so descriptive that I don't even need to open the bottle to know exactly what each smells like. "Starlight Path," "Midnight Woods," and "Lustrous Amethyst" speak for themselves.

As I wait for the cashier to print out the twenty-four gift receipts, the woman behind me taps her foot indiscreetly on the tile. My heart squeezes in sympathy for this woman who clearly has not learned The Art. I bestow on her the kindest of condescending glares.

Leaving the store, I unconcernedly relieve myself of the hefty shopping bag. I press it into the hands of my fiancé, who I had forgotten about until I realize how heavy twenty-four eight-ounce bottles of glycerin, scented or not, really are. We bustle our way out past the towering "Peppermint Gingerbread" display.

Next are the \$50 men and women. There are only five of them. I don't remember who they are, but it's all in a spreadsheet on my computer. Once again, I can find my way like a bloodhound, this time to the Maisy's fragrance section. I swipe two Bobby Filhigers and three Alf Laurels for Her into my basket, glide through the checkout, and garnish my fiancé with his obligatory bag. He is now an itinerate perfumery, but what can I say? It shows my good taste.

The day continues to go smoothly; I am more enthused with each new purchase. I am a generous friend, fawning employee, and loving family member, but most importantly, a model consumer. Elaborate displays in immaculate store windows catch my discriminating eye and secure my purchase. The mall is a veritable potpourri of everything a person needs to feel that true Christmas spirit.

Buckstar's Coffee and Llama Juice, sporting beguiling holiday flavors, are no exception. Each time I pass by, they convince me that I am thirsty enough to try a new drink. Currently, I'm working on a large white chocolate-vanilla-cranberry-cinnamon-high fructose corn syrup-caramel-mint mocha (low-fat, decaf, sugar-free) heaped with heavy whipped cream, dark chocolate shavings, and cranberry-flavored gelatin chunks. It's quite delightful actually, an interesting combination of tangy, mellow, and a few other things I can't quite identify. But after a few sips, I decide it surely can't be low-fat as advertised, and toss it into the nearest snowman-disguised trashcan. At least it came with a coupon.

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9:57 PM. Content and thoroughly completed with Stage One Christmas

Preparations, I stroll out into the balmy autumn evening thrumming with cicadas. I breathe deeply of the fragrant air and sling my tote triumphantly over my shoulder. As my fiancé staggers beside me, under a load of gifts worthy of Santa's sleigh, I notify him of my plans for next weekend: an excursion to Holiday Lighting Industries, where we will procure enough Christmas lights to ensure that this year our yard is visible from outer space.

We neatly pack the Dummer with the cheerful plastic shopping bags. And as we drive home through the night, the radio festively broadcasts "Christmas Time is Here."