UNCLE MARK

2014 GIFT GUIDE & ALMANAC

2014 | UNCLE MARK
GIFT GUIDE & ALMANAC

This is the eleventh annual Uncle Mark Gift Guide & Almanac, my offering of a few purchase suggestions and life tips as we head into a holiday season and a new year.

A year ago I wrote about the aftermath of Superstorm Sandy, which affected so many people here in New York City and in surrounding areas. A year later, many people in the Philippines are still suffering the effects of Typhoon Haiyan. Apart from a desire to help (CARE.org is one of many good places to give), I imagine some readers may question the appropriateness of gift suggestions. Why buy "stuff" for each other when some of our Filipino neighbors have lost everything?

There's a philosopher at Princeton named Peter Singer who takes this question to the logical extreme. If you have a dollar, he says, you have a moral obligation to spend it where it helps the most. For example, there's no need (Singer contends) to donate the dollar toward the construction of a new wing of a museum, since those same resources could help save lives elsewhere in the world. Singer argues, more or less, that funding a museum expansion for the benefit of a few museum visitors is equivalent to deciding that impoverished people elsewhere should suffer or even die.

If this conclusion seems a little radical, consider that Bill Gates cited this exact line of thinking in a Financial Times interview about his philanthropic giving. (See also the corresponding response in the Wall Street Journal.) Singer's philosophy can be attractive, at first glance, because of its elegance: with one simple rule we can reliably determine how to always remain on the moral high ground. But I'm not sure if people are ready for the consequences. If Mr. Gates is following Singer's precept, for example, one would expect him to sell all his non-essential possessions; otherwise he's causing impoverished people to suffer needlessly! (An absurd conclusion, of course, given all the admirable and effective work Mr. Gates and his wife have done to help impoverished communities worldwide.)

Most people, following Singer's position to its conclusion, would probably find that things aren't always so clear-cut as to be reduced to a single rule. Which is precisely my response to the argument about the museum-wing donation. It's important to give to the poor. It's also important to give to arts and cultural organizations. A new museum wing, for example, could provide a young visitor with the inspiration to become an entrepreneur, a creative, or some other leader who would then go on to innovate new and better solutions, devices, and policies to improve the lives of others.

So it is with gift-giving. By choosing the right gift, you're creating an opportunity for someone to get inspired, in some way, to achieve their highest life goals: service, learning, leadership, or some other area. The gift isn't the "thing" but the creative possibilities it brings about. Or to use the old phrase, it's the thought that counts.

And that is the spirit of the Uncle Mark guide, my gift to you.

Wishing you a thoughtful holiday season and happy 2014,

– Mark Hurst
New York City
December 11, 2013

MY MAIN PROJECT IN 2013

"Customers Included: How to transform products, companies, and the world — with a single step"

Why do companies so often fail to give customers what they want? This is the question addressed by Customers Included, the book I spent the last two years researching, writing, and (most recently) publishing. I am very excited to present it to you.

Everyone has customers (or users, patients, students, constituents, etc.), and everyone can improve how they create products, services, and experiences for those customers. Almost no matter what you do, in other words, this book is relevant. In fact, **I'd like to ask you to buy the book – and read it – if you enjoy this year's Uncle Mark guide.** I think you'll enjoy it.
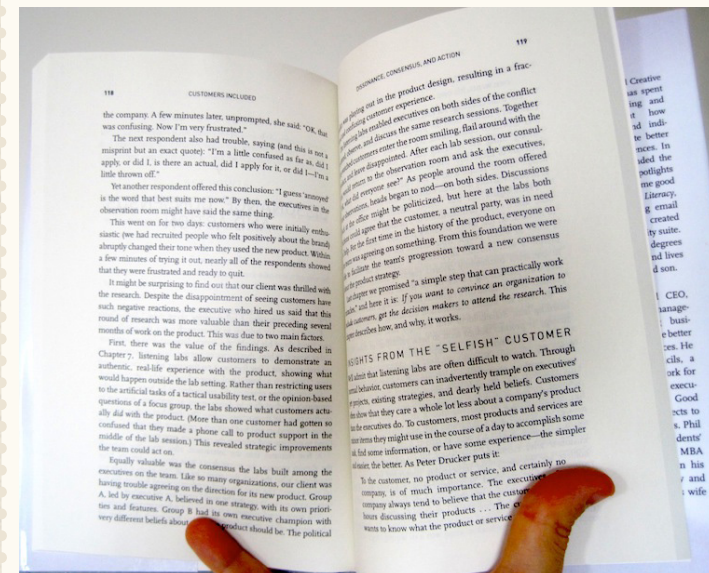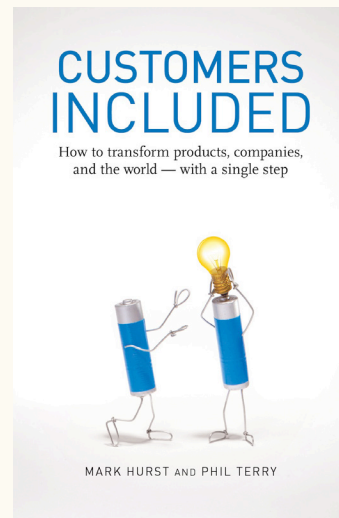
There is a hardcover version of the book, a Kindle ebook, an Apple iBooks ebook, and we can also sell direct to you for large bulk discounts and international orders.

"Customers Included" describes the importance of customers and the methods for gaining insights about them (in other words, "finding out what they want") and, finally, creating change in the organization that might otherwise ignore or marginalize customers. It's also a good introduction to the kind of work we do at Creative Good, my customer experience consulting firm.

According to readers (the "customers" of the book!), the most engaging sections are the case studies. Every chapter begins with a story about an organization ignoring its customers, creating some truly awful outcomes, or a story about an organization including customers, leading to surprisingly impressive outcomes. There are also comic strips, which is nice.

My recommendation? Read the book. The whole thing. I can't think of a more important message today for the world of business (and education, and healthcare, and government, and...). And don't miss the story about Steve Jobs, which to my knowledge has never before been published. (See Chapter 3.)
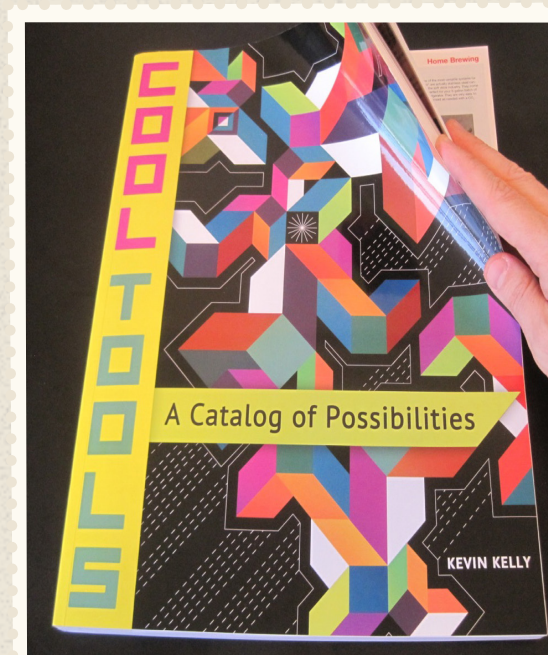

CUSTOMERS
INCLUDED

How to transform products, companies,
and the world — with a single step

MARK HURST AND PHIL TERRY

GIANT BOOK TO EXPLORE

"Cool Tools," by Kevin Kelly.

I have the great pleasure of recommending a giant compendium of recommendations, all Uncle Mark-approved, and to which I contributed two reviews. This is a large, comprehensive, thought-provoking, and beautifully designed book. Cool Tools: A Catalog of Possibilities, by Kevin Kelly, contains hundreds of recommendations for tools, books, products, and other resources. In the Uncle Mark guide for several years I have recommended the Cool Tools website, edited by Kevin (and, joining him recently, Mark Frauenfelder). This book is a kind of best-of collection of Cool Tools reviews – it's like a giant, exhaustive version of an Uncle Mark guide.

The book is physically large, 14 inches by 11 inches (see photo below), allowing the book to lie flat on the reading surface while the reader scans each two-page spread. This allows for connections and relationships between items to become more visible, which creates a uniquely engaging reading experience.

Most of the tools are physical items that accomplish their stated function particularly well. There are some book recommendations (I can't wait to dive into the five-minute bread-baking book that I bought on Cool Tools' recommendation), and there are a few digital or online recommendations as well. My own contributions – see pages 418 and 420 – are reviews of two video games that I believe will still be played in ten years. (Fans of Minecraft and Starcraft II will, I hope, agree.)

The book is reference guide, idea generator, and plain old fun, all combined between two covers. I'd recommend it to anyone.

P.S. In describing his work on the Cool Tools book, Kevin Kelly also wrote a detailed post describing the self-publishing process, which I would recommend to any aspiring author. As someone who recently went through the self-publishing process for the second time (see previous page), I can vouch for the importance and accuracy of what Kevin points out here.

MORE BOOKS TO READ

Three important books.

I know I've been saying a lot about books in this guide, but I have to give three more book recommendations that I'm excited to share. After you read "Customers Included," and pick up a copy of "Cool Tools," I would highly recommend the following, all three of which have enriched my life in 2013.
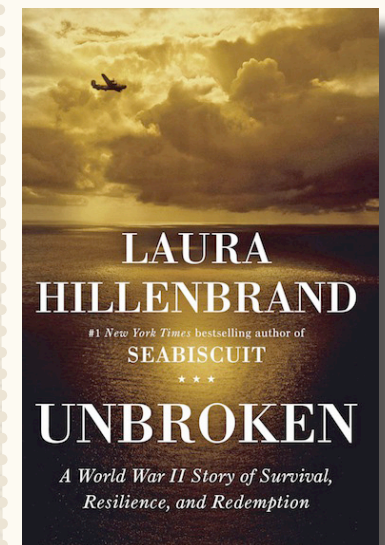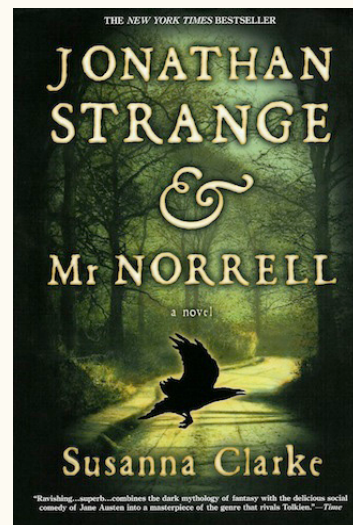
The first book I'd recommend is Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell: A Novel, by Susanna Clarke, which I've raved about to anyone who will listen since I read it earlier this year. My friends Ed and Tony, both constant readers, praised this book so highly that I had no choice but to read it. (It was my treat after finishing "Customers Included.") And as advertised, the book is outstanding.

My best description of Strange & Norrell is four words: Jane Austen With Magic. If you don't like Jane Austen or magic, keep moving. But if you have any interest in either, you really should read this book. (By "Austen" I mean Patrick O'Brien, or Dickens, or other fiction with an 18th-century English feel to it . . . and by "magic" I mean Tolkien, Lewis's Narnia, Harry Potter, and similar works.) I'd recommend the print version instead of the ebook, since the manuscript incorporates a number of footnotes that I think would be easier to navigate in print.

Second up, perhaps the most important technology-related book this year: The Circle, a novel by Dave Eggers. This tells the story of one woman's experiences at a Google-like company which really, really wants to get to know her better. And you, too. Eggers explores the timely topic of benign corporate surveillance, and asks readers to consider whether it's a good thing.

Finally, the book Unbroken, by Laura Hillenbrand (author of "Seabiscuit"). This was a giant bestseller, for good reason – it's not to be missed. The book tells the true story of one man's experiences in World War II, which then led to some pretty dramatic life changes: I won't say more, except to note that the message of the book is universal and very hopeful. If you don't know the story, don't spoil it by reading the reviews – just get the book and start reading. You will feel better after you read this book.

VIDEO GAME SYSTEMS

Don't buy anything yet. When it's time, the PS4 will be better than the XBox.

This is an important year for the video game industry, because the two major consoles – the Sony PlayStation and the Microsoft XBox – are both launching new products. Sony is launching the PS4 (shown below) to take the place of the aging PS3, and Microsoft is launching the XBox One, replacing the XBox360.

This is the first time in several years that Sony and Microsoft have updated their systems, and people are watching closely to see how well these new boxes, and their associated games, will sell. After all, the PS4 and XBox One are the first major console launches since the arrival of the iPhone and iPad, which ushered in the era of ninety-nine cent downloadable games (if that; many

popular games are free to download and ask for money only after the player gets hooked). The most popular PlayStation and XBox games, in contrast, tend to be priced between forty and sixty dollars. The bazillion-dollar question is: will today's video game fans, most of whom have access to a mobile device, pony up several hundred dollars for a new console, and then pay hundreds more dollars for the new games for those consoles, when they could download a new iPhone game instead for less than a dollar?

My own prediction is that the new consoles will do fairly well. The recent success of Grand Theft Auto V (whose sales topped $800 million in the first 24 hours after its release) showed that there's plenty of money still to be made in blockbuster console games. But for Uncle Mark readers, I'm not sure I would recommend either console to a family looking to buy a gift for a kid at home. The consoles are expensive ($400 for the PS4, and $500 for the XBox One, assuming you can find a store where they're not sold out) and the games tend not to be as kid-friendly as, say, the games Nintendo used to create when its consoles were more popular.

With that said, if you are determined to buy one of the new consoles, I would recommend the PS4. Sony has shown more interest in the experience of gamers themselves (and, just as importantly, game developers), while Microsoft has made some regrettable mistakes in its rollout of the XBox – making it difficult, for example, for gamers to share games with each other. As always, you can bank on the more customer-inclusive product to do better in the long run.

It may take some time, but eventually I think the PS4 will prove superior to the XBox One in the most important metric of all: the PS4 will have more games that are actually fun to play (and easy to share). In the meantime, I will continue to enjoy playing older games on my previous-generation consoles – the XBox 360 and the PlayStation 3 – both of which have plenty of excellent games available and are available at the links above for a lot less than the new consoles.

GIFTS FOR KIDS

Three ideas for the holiday, or the birthday party, for kids 7 to 10.

Our little one here at home has entered grade school, and so I've had an opportunity to evaluate some of the toys and games available for the young and curious child (age 6 to 10). As in past guides I have tried to steer away from screens: kids have enough distractions from TVs, computers, iPads, and iPhones without my adding to the mix.

With that said, here are my three recommendations, one of which does appear on a screen (but it's for a good cause).

First up: Snap Circuits, shown below, which allows kids to snap together circuit components, following an easy-to-read manual,

to create a hundred different electronic projects. Children of the 70s and 80s may remember the old "100-in-1" sets of our childhood. This is the same idea, but made much more easy and accessible. It's no surprise that over 900 Amazon reviews give Snap Circuits an almost perfect score. It's fun, educational, just a really well-designed product. And no screens.

Next, a recommendation for Rush Hour, by Think Fun, the creator of many other educational puzzles and games. Here the

child must exercise logical reasoning to move the vehicles in the correct order to get the red car to the exit. I've seen this as an iPhone game, but happily there is no screen here. (And like Snap Circuits, the Amazon reviews are near-perfect.)

Finally, DragonBox (shown below) is a $6 iPad game that teaches kids a few simple patterns for manipulating colorful, friendly icons between two panels. The twist? Without knowing it, the kid is learning algebra. It's brilliant. I recommend DragonBox and look forward to seeing more games that quietly teach skills and knowledge that kids can apply in the real world.
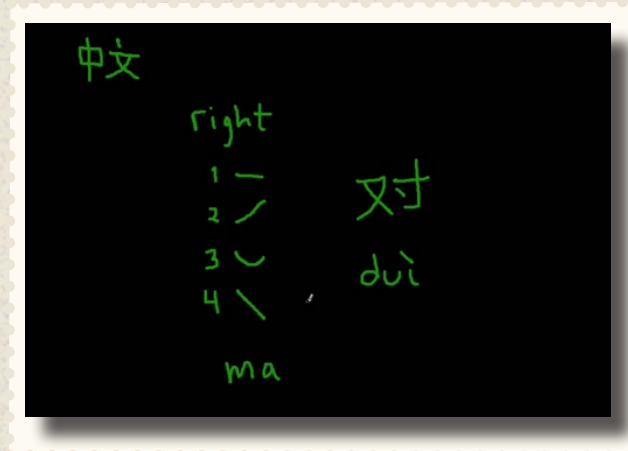
A few final thoughts, ideas, and pointers.

• **Recommended documentary:** Buck, available on Netflix streaming, is among the best movies I've ever seen. It's superficially about horses, which I don't have a particular interest in, but I was riveted throughout due to the universal and profound message of the movie.

• **How to predict the next hour's weather:** I highly recommend the NOAA High-Def Radar app ($2 on the iTunes app store). This elegantly designed app shows the path of thunderstorms or other weather headed your way, allowing you to pinpoint with surprising accuracy when weather is going to arrive. While it doesn't replace multiday forecasts, I haven't found anything like it for predicting weather in the next hour.

• **How to learn Chinese:** I have created a series of 4-minute YouTube videos to teach the basics of Mandarin Chinese. In the space of a single coffee break, by watching them in order, you can learn some good stuff: here are all the videos.

• **How to organize power bricks:** Seems like almost every electronic device has its own unmarked black power brick which works with that device only. They easily get mixed up in drawers and closets, making it hard to match them to the right device. Here's the solution: get a Sharpie metallic permanent marker and write the name of the device directly on the brick. This marker writes in silver ink that reads clearly on the black plastic. (Thanks to the Cool Tools website for the tip.)

• **How to be healthier and more productive with a standing desk:** I switched to a standing desk earlier this year and highly recommend it. It's healthier than sitting all day, and I find I get more done while on my feet. There are many options available for standing desks; I ordered from my favorite desk vendor, Anthrocart (mine is a 24-inch-wide cart with 20-inch extender tubes, with everything set to the top setting). I also highly recommend standing on a GelPro Plush pad. Your feet will hurt for the first week or two – just take breaks to get over it – after which you will find yourself working with more focus and energy. As a bonus, it won't bother you to stand for long periods of time – in airport lines or on the New York subway, for example. This can really improve your life. Recommended.

• **How to be more productive on your laptop or desktop computer:** Mac users, buy Keyboard Maestro and set up macros so that function-keys open the corresponding applications:

F7: Safari (or Chrome, whatever Web browser you prefer)

F8: Mail

F9: TextEdit (or TextWrangler, whatever text editor you use)

F10: BusyCal (much better than Apple's iCal)

With those macros set up, you can switch between common applications with a single keystroke, rather than wasting time moving the mouse around for such common tasks. (Oh, and Windows users, switch to Mac, if you're allowed to!)

• **How to protect your privacy while you browse the Web:** If you're bothered by major tech companies' intrusion on your privacy (see my column on Google Glass, which went viral worldwide in early 2013), consider using Duck Duck Go as your search engine, which unlike Google does not track you as you use the Web. (Duck Duck Go founder Gabriel Weinberg spoke at my Gel conference earlier this year: watch the video.) And speaking of which . . .

• **Watch this year's Gel conference videos:** the tenth annual Gel conference, held in April 2013, featured some outstanding speakers. Watch the videos at gelconference.com. The site looks great on an iPhone, too.

And from last year's guide, these all still apply...

• **Shaving tip:** I recently discovered that you can use conditioner as a replacement to shaving cream. (Did everyone else know this already?) That's one less bottle of stuff to purchase, store, travel with, replace, and recycle.

• **Buying cables:** If you have to buy a replacement USB cable for a hard drive, or an HDMI cable for a TV, don't buy it from a store like Radio Shack or the Apple store. The prices tend to be much lower at monoprice.com. I've bought there several times and have saved a lot.

• Once again this year I recommend **an easy way to get free books**: 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. (And yes, it's important to show support. I donate to the New York Public 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. (More details in my free ebook "Bit Literacy.")

• **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. And a new tip: I'm happy to recommend the London Fog umbrella, which I've been using this year.

Keep in touch:

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

You might also like...

• My free email newsletter – subscribe here.

• My Twitter feed: @markhurst

• If your company wants to create a better customer experience, get in touch with us at Creative Good.

Have a great 2014!

– Uncle Mark
December 2013, New York City

(P.S. Speaking of New York, watch this video for tips on visiting New York. Hilarious and accurate.)