



## Stocking stuffers: Gifts for under \$20

By Allison Ashton  
special writer

ONE OF the best presents I got last Christmas was a shiny new Slinky in my stocking. The little plastic frog that leapt when I squeezed a pump ran a close second.

The very idea of stocking stuffers conjures up images of merry, inexpensive gifts, all piled up in an enormous, cheerful stocking — the first to greet family members on Christmas morning, before the present-opening frenzy begins.

What makes a sensational stocking stuffer? Some people fill their yuletide socks with an array of goofy toys.

Others use stockings to dispense with more practical goodies — items too small to rate as full-fledged presents.

The best-stuffed stockings are a combination of the two.

Many of the goodies that find their way into holiday hosiery also make innovative low-cost gifts for acquaintances and business associates. A \$2 yo-yo is a fun form of "stress management" for a harried executive.

**MEMORABLE STOCKING** stuffers lurk just about everywhere. Look in discount stores and flip through mail-order catalogs.

Specialty stores are a good source of special-interest stuffers. And department stores are tops for little knickknacks, often all wrapped up and ready to go for busy shoppers.

Popular generic treats for men and women include picture frames (everyone has some favorite picture lurking in the back of a drawer to display) and coffee mugs (available in elegant and novelty varieties, these can easily be matched to the recipient).

Give coffee and tea lovers a small sampler of exotic coffee beans and tea blends. A small box of Godiva chocolates in the signature gold box is a welcome touch of luxury to any chocoholic.

Send adults down memory lane with a selection of junky kid-type candy.

How about a small jar of Pez, Zots or licorice?

Audio cassette tapes and compact discs also fit into any stocking. Computer buffs will appreciate blank floppy disks.

Add a dash of fun with one of those disposable cameras to capture the festivities. If your recipient is already a camera buff, put in a few rolls of film and flash bulbs.

And take the time to wrap each goodie individually to prolong the gift-opening fun.

### GOODIES FOR GUYS:

When asked what makes good stocking stuffers for men, one lad responded, "I can tell you what isn't good: toothpaste and cheap men's aftershave."

Men, it appears, are used to getting the short end of the stocking stuffer stick. While their wives, sisters and girlfriends are lashed with trinkets, men and relegated to the mundane world of underwear and pen sets.

But practical gifts don't have to be boring. Instead opt for a mix of useful and entertaining tokens he would never buy for himself.

Try socks. Not boring blue and black, but bright wool argyles or luxurious cashmere.

If he must have underwear, give him something silky and racy.

A handsome tie bar is always debonair. Also pick up a small carton of collar tabs — he'll appreciate them when his dress shirts come back from the cleaners minus their originals.

Sports fans and fitness freaks are easy to buy for. Scout out tickets to an upcoming sporting event.

Fun golf and tennis balls always get high marks. So will a handwritten token for a lesson with the best pro in town.

Swimmers can always use a new pair of goggles, cyclists a new pair of cycling gloves, a water bottle or a tire pump. Runners can keep pace with a new watch/timer.

Other stuffer ideas for men include goofy cuff links, a good leather belt or a pair of suspenders in a splashy design. A leather business card holder is another executive idea.

**FOR THE SMALL FRY:** Stocking stuffers are supposed to be kid stuff. And they are your chance to indulge every fantasy of what small-time kid goodies are supposed to be.

Look for things that challenge the imagination. Kaleidoscopes are visually pleasing. Small puzzles are good brain teasers for little ones.

This is also a good time to stock up on crayons (maybe try out a carton of fluorescent colors to fire their imagination). Pencils sporting trendy designs might get them to do their homework.

Don't forget a few comic books featuring their favorite he-man heroes, as well as anything (small notebooks, pens, erasers, cups) sporting beloved cartoon characters. Disney characters are perennial favorites. And this holiday season will find legions of young Roger Rabbit fans.

Cram the stocking full of lots of little dime-store toys. Match Box cars, windup toys and small stuffed animals are perennial stocking favorites.

**PRESENTS FOR PETS:** "It is not all extraordinary on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day to hear the mother or father say to the children, 'We can't open the packages yet; Kitty isn't here.' This is a well-trained family," says the feline heroine of "The Silent Minnow" by Paul Gallico (Crown Publishers).

"Irrespective of special presents for us in the shape of catnip mice, ping-pong balls or other toys, we can also sniff into and play with everybody else's presents."

As any pet owner knows, holiday cheer extends to the family pets. And what better time to spoil Fido and Princess with every little toy on the market?

Cats will lunge at a mink mouse. Dogs will chew for hours on a beef-flavored rawhide bone. Give each a selection of topdrawer gourmet treats (although if you spoil a cat with Nova Scotian salmon, she will never deign to eat canned cat food again).

The most high-tech animal gift this year has to be an electronic flea collar. Apparently a high-frequency sound that cats, dogs and humans can't hear keeps fleas and ticks at bay. Look for the collar in your local pet store.

Your fish is sure to appreciate new aquarium accoutrements, especially a castle he can swim through or a pile of rocks he can hide in.

Birds love mirrors, bells and toys they can peck. Hamsters and gerbils can always use a new feeder, a wheel to run in or a maze to climb through.

If a fanatical pet owner is on your list, pet care books are always in order. Gallico's book will charm cat owners.

So will Desmond Morris' "Catwatching" and "Catlore" (both from Crown Publishers), which conjecture on the often vexing feline. Morris' "Dogwatching" (Crown Publishers) is a must for dog owners.

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