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EcoConsumer

Green holiday shopping has another name: common sense

Reducing the environmental impact of our holiday gifts shouldn't be a major effort or expensive proposition. Think of green gifts as the...

By Tom Watson
Special to The Seattle Times

Reducing the environmental impact of our holiday gifts shouldn't be a major effort or expensive proposition. Think of green gifts as the norm, and toxic or wasteful gifts as a mistake that many of us used to make.

Q: Isn't that over-simplistic?

A: Perhaps, but it's also increasingly a reality. Trends show that shoppers, retailers and manufacturers are all moving toward products with a smaller environmental footprint. The holiday season, when consuming hits its peak, provides a festive showcase for these products.

But the perception of green products and gifts has changed. Consumers seem much less interested now in green products that exist just to be green. For example, one major manufacturer of ballpoint pens recently introduced a biodegradable pen with great fanfare.

Wouldn't that be a nice stocking stuffer? Well, no. That product doesn't really make sense, since nothing degrades in a landfill very quickly. Because it also doesn't add value for the customer, the biodegradable pen has not been a big hit.

Apple's iPad, on the other hand, exemplifies the new generation of green products. No one buys it just because it's green, but many experts consider the iPad one of the more eco-friendly consumer-electronic products. That's primarily because its designers have reduced or eliminated several toxic substances commonly found in other electronics, including arsenic, mercury and brominated flame-retardants.

Q: What does this trend mean for holiday shoppers?

A: Rather than buying a gift just because it's marketed as green, a better approach is to decide on the most appropriate gift for the recipient. If that gift is a product, consider the environmental attributes along with other qualities such as style and price.

Q: That's especially important for children's gifts, isn't it?

A: Absolutely. When shopping for kids, the No. 1 priority should be to avoid potentially toxic products. The shocking wave of toy recalls a few years ago, primarily because of lead contamination, showed that toxics in toys is not a hypothetical problem.

Most major manufacturers and retailers have responded well to pressure to make toys safer, but consumers still should look for "lead-free" and other pledges of safety on toy labeling. Avoid inexpensive, "no-name" toys and cheap costume jewelry. Even though Washington state and the federal government have begun to tighten regulations on toxins in children's products, hazardous substances such as cadmium may still be present, especially in the cheapest toys.

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Q: How about not giving "stuff" at all?

A: Although a material item is often the best option for kids on your list, you still can make that gift greener by choosing something practical, such as clothing. For adult gifts, alternatives to stuff can make your shopping greener and easier.

This is familiar ground. Every year we hear the eco-advice that people should give an experience gift such as tickets to an event, or make a donation, or volunteer in someone's name. These ideas never go out of style because so many new and creative choices become available locally every year, and recipients tend to love these non-stuff gifts when they are chosen well.

Q: Where do I find those gifts?

A: Experience gifts that support local businesses are everywhere, from gift certificates for restaurant meals and massages to tickets for any event imaginable. Tell the seller it's for a gift and ask if they will provide a discount. For donation and volunteering suggestions, try www.charitynavigator.org or www.volunteermatch.org, and see www.KCgreenholidays.com for additional green gift ideas.

Q: So how do I pick a green gift someone will really want?

A: A present should always be about the recipient, not the giver, so that might mean giving a gift that doesn't wear its green qualities on its sleeve. Even when you're the only one who knows your gift was green, it still makes the world a better place.

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