

A Gift for Someone Who Has It All: Dirt From Liz's Lawn

'Tis the Season for Kitsch,
And the Novelties Range
From Tacky to Tasteless

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Face it. Only five shopping days remain until Christmas, and you are desperate.

But are you desperate enough to consider shelling out \$20 for a referee doll that can be ripped apart limb by limb? What about these slippers shaped like basketballs, footballs and golf balls? Or how about a Fridge Freak, a plastic creature that dwells in a dark refrigerator and screams when the door is opened?

Forget all the talk about a return this Christmas to classic gifts and traditional values. 'Tis the season for kitsch—needless novelties that say it with a smirk. Or a song, if the popularity of plastic flowers that gyrate wildly when activated by music is any indication.

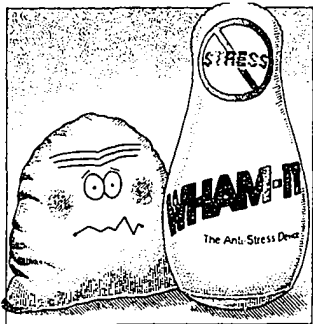
Gifts are getting goofier as marketers seek to match the success of the gimcrack that stole Christmas 1975: the Pet Rock. About 1.5 million were sold at \$3.95 each—and the yule season hasn't been the same since.

Dirt Cheap

That is understandable, if not entirely forgivable. A resourceful entrepreneur can make millions in a matter of weeks, especially during the holidays. "Someone's always looking for an off-the-wall gift," asserts Robert Schnur, a vice president at Hymn Products Inc., a Maryland Heights, Mo., gift distributor. "It's just the nature of the American people."

That may explain the need for Celebrity Dirt, vials of topsoil purportedly stolen from the lawns of the rich and famous. The \$2 vials are the brainchild of Barry Gibson, who runs a janitorial service in Lansing, Mich. He claims to have mined dirt from the lawns of Elizabeth Taylor, Michael J. Fox, Joan Collins, Katharine Hepburn, and 42 other celebrities.

Armed with a shovel, a plastic trash bag and a map, Mr. Gibson sets off in



*O-No Worry Talking Pillow
And Wham-It Punching Bag*

search of pay dirt. "I don't go out at night," he says. "I don't want to be shot at."

Even gift-industry insiders acknowledge the absurdity in all this. "Most of our items are really stupid," says Dan Flaherty, vice president of gift distributor Gemmy Industries Inc. in Irving, Texas. But he justifies his work by telling himself, "I'm bringing joy to people somehow, somewhere."

Stress relief is a hot theme this year. That means record sales for Wham-It, an inflatable punching bag that was introduced in 1986. The popular desk-top model sells for about \$10. "Stress is the major mental health issue of the 1980s," contends

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Jack Behlmer, Wham-It's creator and president of Creative Imaginations Inc., of Costa Mesa, Calif. He claims to have sold 1.2 million Wham-Its to date.

Shoppers will find endless variations on the stress theme: Rx Freud balls that emit either an electronic scream or laugh when touched. Small leather bats and sponge bricks that give off a sound like shattering glass when thrown against a hard surface.

Even Bloomingdale's is cashing in on the trend. Its Chicago store boasts an assortment of pricey anti-stress toys. Among them is the \$25 O-No Worry talking pillow that launches into a litany of anxieties when squeezed. "No. Oh, worry, worry, worry," the pillow's electronic voice whines. "Money. My boss. My mother-in-law. Oh, no. The tax man. Bills. Bills. Bills. Oh, no. The stock market. Oh worry, worry, worry."

For those in search of the thoroughly tasteless, there is Mr. C. More Bunz, a doll that attaches to a car window and drops its trousers when its owner squeezes a plastic bulb. Or Gazzbears, stuffed animals that look cuddly but sound flatulent when hugged. Or a mirror that laughs electronically when picked up. Or a vial of oil sup-

posedly scooped from Alaska's Prince William Sound, site of last spring's disastrous oil spill.

Finding the correct gift for the family pet can be difficult. How about some faux pearls for Fido? If that doesn't seem quite appropriate, consider Rein Dog antlers, which make the pooch look as if it could haul Santa.

Screaming Golf Ball

Andrew Krans, a sales manager for a glass-equipment company, is about to shell out \$9.95 for a screaming golf ball at Bloomingdale's in Chicago. "It's pretty dumb, but it's the kind of thing my boss will get a kick out of," he says.

At an Arcadia gift shop in the Chicago Loop, Laurie Uebel is agonizing over a different problem: choosing an appropriate gift for her psychoanalyst. She eyes an Rx Freud Stress Bouncer, which looks like a child's rubber ball and paddle. She studies an O-No Worry pillow. She considers taking a more serious approach with a book on quantum physics. Eventually, she gives up. "I'll have to decide tomorrow," she says.

Woes B. Gone

If this year's crop seems tacky, consider what may be on the shelves next year. Joseph Bastardi, a 34-year-old weather forecaster in State College, Pa., is trying to launch Tornado in a Bottle, a bottle of colored liquid that, when twirled, looks like a twister. He says has been working on perfecting the gimmick since he came up with the idea for a sixth-grade

show-and-tell project.

Becky Gould, a human-resources consultant in San Raphael, Calif., is trying to market a wind-up doll, Woes B. Gone, that does your pacing for you.

She says she came up with the idea while thinking about her worrywart mother.

But novelties can be a tricky business. Memphis-based Moonies Inc. has filed suit in federal court in Dallas against Gemmy Industries, claiming Gemmy's Mr. C. More Bunz doll infringes its copyright and design patent on its Moonies doll. Gemmy's Mr. Flaherty says his doll looks "very different" from a Moonies doll. In further defense of Mr. C. More Bunz, he claims it outsells Moonies.

Comeback Kids

Gifts of Christmases past sometimes make comebacks, too. Next year, Andrew Abrams plans to revive the rubbery Sammy Slam-Me doll he introduced in 1975 and sold for seven years. When punched, Sammy Slam-Me drives a peg up a carnival-style stress meter topped with a bell.

Pet Rock fans may argue, but Mr. Abrams claims Sammy actually created the market for goofy gifts. "All the novelties that existed before Sammy Slam-Me were joke-and-trick things like joy buzzers and wax teeth," he says. "They weren't things you would put on your desk and show your friends."

Mr. Abrams thinks Sammy will sell well in the 1990s. Sammy, he says, serves a function, ridiculous though it may be. If a novelty is "just plain silly," he says, "you're shooting in the dark."