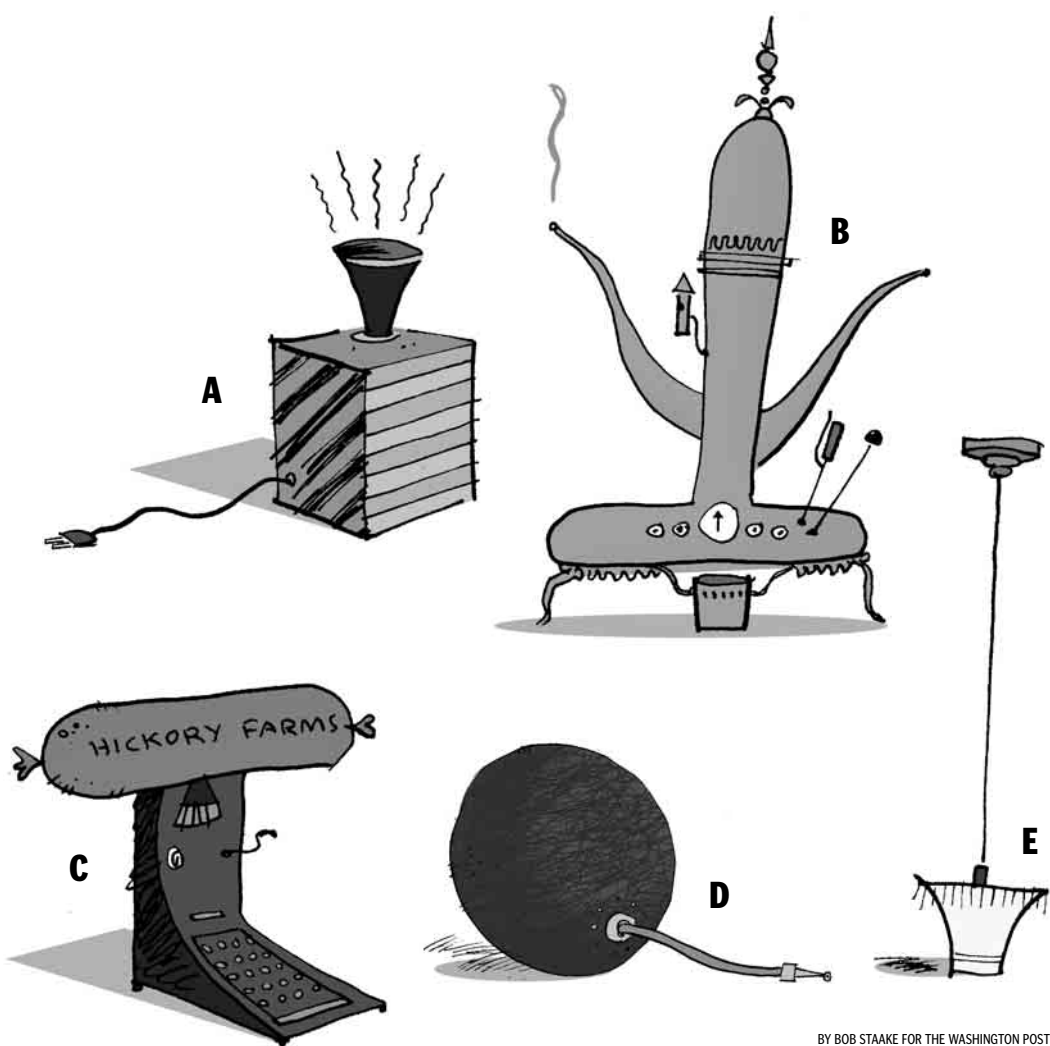


The Style Invitational

Week 588: Gadget if You Can



BY BOB STAAKE FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

This week's contest: Esteemed Loser Cartoonist Bob Staake has once again, just in time for holiday gift-giving, come up with these nifty, indispensable items. Unfortunately, once again, he forgot to tell us what they are. Help us out here.

First-prize winner receives the Inker, the official Style Invitational trophy. First runner-up gets yet another souvenir from Transylvania courtesy of Elden Carnahan of Laurel. Unlike Elden's previous contribution from the Romanian economy, this one is perfectly wholesome: It's a small wooden plate from the town of Sighisoara featuring favorite son Dracula (1431-1475). Mr. Dracula, pictured here in a wood-burned portrait, looks a bit crazed but not fangy or dripping blood or anything.

Other runners-up win a coveted Style Invitational Loser T-shirt. Honorable mentions get one of the lusted-after Style Invitational Magnets. One prize per entrant per week. Send your entries by e-mail to losers@washpost.com or, if you have to, by fax to 202-334-4312. Deadline is Monday, Dec. 20. Put the week number in the subject line of your e-mail, or it risks being ignored as spam. Include your name, postal address and phone number with your entry. Contests are judged on the basis of humor and originality. All entries become the property of The Washington Post.

Entries may be edited for taste or content. Results will be published Jan. 9. No purchase required for entry. Employees of The Washington Post, and their immediate relatives, are not eligible for prizes. Pseudonymous entries will be disqualified. The revised title for next week's contest is by Roy Ashley of Washington. In case you haven't been keeping track, today marks the first anniversary of the Empress's reign. In commemoration, she gives you permission to take the day off from work or school.

Report from Week 584, in which we asked you to come up with new Cabinet or other government positions: It seems that some of the Losers are perhaps still a wee bit upset in the wake of the presidential election, and when they're upset they're just NOT SO FUNNY, OKAY? In general, as usual, the less bitter, less screedy entries tended to be funnier this week. Some people offered up agencies instead of positions; we couldn't afford to quibble.

♦ **Third runner-up: Office of Environmental Improvement:** Charged with creating nicer words for pollution. Elevated mercury levels in streams will be called "fast water"; elevated CO₂ levels will be called "carbonated air." (Art Grinath, Takoma Park)

♦ **Second runner-up: Agency of Tactical Intelligence on Rogue Alien Nations (ATAC IRAN):** Charged with determining alternative solutions to diplomacy. (Jerome Alfred, Annandale)

♦ **First runner-up, winner of the risqué wooden soldier from Transylvania: Chief Scientist, Division of the Perpendicular Universe:** Explores latest scientific advances from a "traditional" perspective, such as erasing national debt through alchemy. (Peter Metrinko, Plymouth, Minn.)

♦ **And the winner of the Inker: Secretary of Globalization:** A position that exists solely to give college students something to protest without actually getting in the way of the operations of the government. (Russell Beland, Springfield)

♦ **Honorable Mentions: Secretary of Just Us:** Seeks to strengthen our nation's approach to foreign policy. (Steve Shapiro, Alexandria)

The House Whisperer: The person who feeds lines to the president through that box on his back. (Michelle Stupak, Ellicott City)

Department of Offshore Technical Support: He is normalizing this problems you are having of the computer, please. (Jerry Ewing, Orlando)

Undersecretary for Bouncing Up and Down and Repeatedly Asking "Are We There Yet?" in an Annoying Singsong Voice: A junior position in the Department of Transportation, it serves to remind the secretary that the department's progress is too slow. (Russell Beland)

Office of the Out-of-Control Special Prosecutor: What's a second term without one? (Thad Humphries, Warrenton)

Department of Budgetary Strategy: Will be headed jointly by the Undersecretary for Robbing Peter and the Undersecretary for Paying Paul. (Brendan Beary, Great Mills)

Office of Buy Partisan Cooperation: A congressional liaison also known as the Office of Spending Political Capital. (Jack Held, Fairfax)

Secretary of the Interior Decoration: A token post to be filled by a Log Cabin Republican. (Chris Doyle, Forsyth, Mo.)

Secretary of Lethargy: New position intended to offset some of the power of the Secretary of Energy. (Russell Beland)

Consumer Product Softy Commission: This office is staffed entirely by self-policing industry members. (Chuck Smith, Woodbridge)

National Designated Driver: Anyone who needs a sober driver can call this guy. Expect to wait a few minutes. (Seth Brown, North Adams, Mass.)

Federal Bureau of Instigation: An ongoing commission that meets annually to decide which country to attack next. (Michelle Stupak)

International Park Service Misdirector: Protects U.S. tourism by persuading other countries to underfund their national parks, too. (Ken Gallant, Little Rock, Ark.)

Bureau of Taxidermy: This new arm of the Smithsonian will preserve and display species not expected to survive the next four years. This program has the added benefit of solving unemployment. (Dave Prevar, Annapolis)

Secretary of HUH (Department of Helping Understand Him), whose job it is to explain what the president means when he says things like "We're making the right decisions to bring the solution to an end" and "Families is where our nation finds hope, where wings take dream." (Joseph Romm, Washington)

Save money by merging the National Institute of Mental Health with the U.S. Postal Service to create the **U.S. "Postal" Service.** (Steve Fahey, Kensington)

Department of Federal Government: The sole Cabinet department remaining after outsourcing. (Dave Prevar)

The Priss Corps: A group of well-behaved young women designated to hang out with Jenna and Barbara and keep them out of trouble. (Michelle Stupak)

Department of Long, Slow Kisses With Beautiful Women You Just Met: No real mission, but a great gig nevertheless. (Jeff Brechlin, Eagan, Minn.)

And Last: Department of Debt Denial: Complete with its own anthem (to "We're in the Money"): *We're in denial! We're in denial! Ignoring bitter truths is how we get along! When debts compiled put us on trial We just suppress them—people think that nothing's wrong! Who cares of mounting debt rates, Public, credit and trade? We'll just deny and let rates By the unborn future folks be paid. We're in denial! We've spent a pile! We'll fiddle while we just keep burning along!* (Phil Frankenfeld, Washington)

MISS MANNERS

Judith Martin

Charity Gall

Now is the season to think of those more fortunate than ourselves.

At least so it appears from the flood of solicitations that are made toward the end of the year, requesting donations of money from those who are deemed to be such. Hardly anyone seems to be considered below the financial cut-off line for being importuned by friends, relatives, colleagues and strangers alike, through the mail, e-mail, the telephone and both door-to-door and desk-to-desk visits.

Collecting for charity is such a widespread activity that there are entire income brackets who depend upon it for a meal. Miss Manners is not referring to the poor, who can hardly consider such largess dependable. She means that segment of the rich who give lavishly, but who expect something in return: not only a tax deduction, but a social life, complete with gift bags.

Miss Manners heartily supports charity, and, as in Victorian times, she expects good behavior in return. The difference is that the Victorians expected the objects of their charity to behave well. At best, this led to a lot of showy shuffling, and at worst, it ruled out some of the needy on the basis of their neediness.

The good behavior Miss Manners expects is from those who collect for charity. She expects them to observe social decencies toward potential and repeat donors, and not to claim that violating etiquette is permitted "because it's for a good cause."

As they know, pity and shame are basic to the disposition to donate money—pity for the plight of others and shame if one remains selfish. But what many charities prefer are the implied threat of social embarrassment and the enticement of social aggrandizement.

That people give to charity to get their names and reputations around is an occasionally amusing sport that Miss Manners considers unobjectionable. There are worse reputations for which to strive than that of philanthropist. There may be none better, although the difference between acquiring it through others' noticing one's deeds and through trumpeting it oneself is not a small one.

That people also give because they are embarrassed to say no to the particular person who asks is also effective, Miss Manners is aware. This is why charities send friends, neighbors, colleagues and children to do the asking. The onus then is on the prospective donor to weigh the factor of pleasing the importuner along with his interest in the cause and assessment of what

he can spare.

It is invaluable to know that there is nothing rude about saying pleasantly, "Thank you, I'll pass on this." Really. Deciding where and how much to give is a serious responsibility of the giver, which should not be abandoned.

But the agents of charity often try—indeed, are often instructed to try—to engineer deeper embarrassment. Using such insidious techniques as familiarity with the income and possessions of the prospective donor to extract or raise the donation is a common—and rude—practice. Using a venue where cooperative behavior is expected, such as the workplace (especially when a higher-ranking person or, worse yet, a high-ranking person's child, does it) or a social occasion that the guests were not warned was for fundraising, is also rude.

What is fair, and more effective in the long run, is working up an impassioned speech about the goodness of the cause and the good that donations will do: wrenching the heart, rather than tweaking the ego.

Dear Miss Manners:

What are chocolate spoons? Are they for stirring hot chocolate (as teaspoons are for tea), or are they for eating chocolate desserts such as mousse or pots de creme? I have a chance to buy some in my pattern, but I am unsure as to their proper use. I even asked a good friend who is a former White House social secretary, and she's not sure.

Then she could not have worked for an 18th-century administration, which was when chocolate became such a prized drink that it developed its own spoons, pots and cups. However, your other guess has some validity, as the hot chocolate of that time was so thick that it might well be mistaken for a pudding.

Chocolate spoons are short and round-bowled, but the pots and cups are tall and lack the bellies of coffee and teapots and cups. Miss Manners is afraid that the same cannot be said of people who (understandably in her view) prefer chocolate to coffee and tea.

Feeling incorrect? E-mail your etiquette questions to Miss Manners (who is distraught that she cannot reply personally) at MissManners@unitedmedia.com or mail to United Media, 200 Madison Ave., New York, N.Y. 10016.

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DEAR ABBY

Dear Abby:

My 13-year-old daughter, "Dena," is in the same grade as her friend "Amanda." Amanda has a sister, "Barb," who turned 15 last month. Amanda told my Dena that Barb's 16-year-old boyfriend has been sneaking in Barb's bedroom window several nights a week for a while now, after their mother and stepfather have gone to bed. Amanda also confided that Barb told her that she and the boyfriend have had sex a couple of times, including before Barb turned 15.

I am not close to the mother and stepfather, although I do run into them at school functions. I wouldn't begin to know how to approach the parents and tell them what I know. Should I be concerned with what's happening in other people's homes after they've gone to bed? Or should I keep this to myself and let them find out the hard way down the road?

Another Mother in Oklahoma

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Call that girl's mother and tell her what you know and how you learned it. If what your daughter's friend confided is true, they need bars on the windows and a chastity belt for Barb (and some serious counseling).

Dear Abby:

I work in the mailroom of a large company. Every day we deliver the mail that is sent to the people who work here. On some occasions, I deliver mail to people who have private offices. Sometimes, these people are having a meeting in their office and do not shut the door.

When this happens, should I just give them their mail, or wait until they are finished talking to that person? I'm asking because sometimes I get dirty looks from those people while I'm giving them their mail—like, "How dare you come into my office while someone is in here!"

Abby, I don't talk to them and I try to stay out of their way, because I know that someone

walking in can be distracting. What is the correct mailroom etiquette?

Confused Deliverer

The universal signal for "Do Not Disturb" is a closed door. If the door is open, then you should be free to enter. However, since you are being given dirty looks for making deliveries while there is a conversation in progress, the next time the person is alone, ask what he or she would prefer under those circumstances. Another suggestion would be to stand quietly in the doorway for a few seconds and wait for the person to acknowledge you and motion you in.

Dear Abby:

I have been married to "Kurt" for 13 years. It's a second marriage for both of us. Kurt consistently fails to introduce me at social functions and leaves me to fend for myself. At the last party we attended, he left me to talk to the most attractive blond woman there—someone we had both just met. At the end of the evening he hugged her and told her to call when she's back in town.

I told Kurt his behavior hurt my feelings, and if he respected me he wouldn't act this way. He says I'm out of line. What do you think?

Socially Abandoned in Bend, Ore.

Your husband appears to suffer from social amnesia—he "forgets" he's married when the two of you go out. You are not out of line; he is. If he had any consideration for your feelings, he would at least check back every 15 or 20 minutes to see if you're still breathing. Shame on him.

Dear Abby is written by Abigail Van Buren, also known as Jeanne Phillips, and was founded by her mother, Pauline Phillips. Write Dear Abby at www.DearAbby.com or P.O. Box 69440, Los Angeles, Calif. 90069.

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BRIDGE | Frank Stewart

Both sides vulnerable

NORTH (D)			EAST		
♠ A 10 9 3			♠ 7 4		
♥ Q 2			♥ J 9 8 7 4		
♦ 10 7 4			♦ 5 2		
♣ K 8 5 3			♣ Q 10 9 6		
WEST			SOUTH		
♠ Q 5			♠ K J 8 6 2		
♥ 10 6 3			♥ A K 5		
♦ A K Q 9 8 6			♦ J 3		
♣ J 4			♣ A 7 2		

The bidding:

North	East	South	West
Pass	Pass	1 ♠	2 ♠
2 ♠	Pass	3 ♠	Pass
4 ♠	All Pass		

Opening lead: ♦ K

When I watched today's deal, North and South got into a fine wrangle over South's play of the trump suit.

South ruffed the third diamond—East threw a heart—led a trump to the ace, returned a trump and finessed with the jack when East played low. West won, and South also lost a club and went down.

"Ever hear of 'eight ever, nine never?'" North demanded. "The odds favored taking the A-K."

"I've heard of the Tooth Fairy, too," South retorted. "Once West showed six diamonds to East's two, the odds changed. East was likely to have spade length."

Who was right? With nine cards in a suit missing the queen, the unvarnished odds only slightly favor cashing the top honors. Hence South's remark

about changing odds was on target. Nevertheless, South misplayed: After he ruffs the third diamond, he should cash his three high hearts. If West could ruff the third heart, dummy would overruff, but when West follows, dummy throws a club, and South continues with the ace and another club.

If West could ruff the second club, dummy would play low, saving the king. When West follows, South takes the king and leads the ace and another trump. When East plays low, South finesses with the jack.

South would be home if the finesse won but is still safe when West takes the queen. Since West has shown six diamonds, three hearts and two clubs, he'll have only diamonds left to lead, and then South can ruff in dummy and discard his losing club.

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Next Week: It's Parody Time, or Satire Clauses Coming to Town