

Retailers' mailings create holiday cata-logjam

by Michael Stetz

The mailbox is solid and sturdy. It's bolted in, good and tight. It looks like it can withstand a lot of weight - even the Visa and Capital One and MasterCard and American Express offerings that show up every day.

Still ...

HOLIDAY CATALOGS - Holiday catalogs are stacking up and they're stacking up fast. American households get 19 billion catalogs annually, leading some to push for reform. CNS Illustration by Cristina Martinez Byvik. The poor thing.

Ever since Halloween - or maybe it was the Fourth of July - it's been facing an annual, Herculean, near-impossible challenge: absorbing the crush of holiday catalogs.

The catalogs are easy to spot. Their covers depict snowmen and Christmas trees and reindeer and cookies and Santa and gaily wrapped presents and happy little children and fire-crackling logs in fireplaces

They're stacking up and they're stacking up fast. Together, they could be used as a doorstep for one of those giant, creaky doors you see in medieval castles.

They can be full of surprises, too.

Got one that touts rugs, for instance. Rugs? For Christmas? How do you gift-wrap an 8-foot-by-11-foot shag?

Me, to Wife: "I hope you like it."

Wife: "Oh wonderful. And does it come with a vacuum cleaner? Because that would really make my day."

Got one that sells holiday pears.

Here's one selling just pajamas. Got to sleep on that.

A holiday catalog that specializes in quirky gifts offers a children's book titled "Walter the Farting Dog." You also can buy a plush dog that, when you squeeze it, produces a sound similar to that of a whoopie cushion. Who says Christmas has lost its meaning?

Even the National Geographic Society produces a catalog. And talk about a great gift idea - award-winning remote-controlled tarantulas with realistic moving legs.

Me, to Wife: "I hope you like it."

Wife: "I hope it's poisonous."

Who buys this stuff? Who can afford to buy such things? These aren't exactly 99-cent store catalogs. In one from Herrington, a pair of sunglasses goes for - ho, ho, ho - \$149.95.

The Christmas catalog deluge is just part of the year-round catalog deluge. American households get 19 billion catalogs annually, leading some to push for ways to slow down the solicitation.

Environmental groups have created something called Catalog Choice. The free service contacts the retailers you select and asks them to remove your name from their mailing lists. The Web site is www.catalogchoice.org. But this goes beyond environmental concerns.

One wonders: What's become of the joy of strolling down Main Street on a chilly winter night, checking out decorated storefronts and - lo and behold - spotting the perfect gift for that someone special?

Oh.

I'm, like, so living in 1940.

To do your holiday shopping these days you have choices: fight traffic, find parking, navigate crowded malls and stand in long lines. Or, hunker down at home and leaf through catalogs or surf the Internet, which, for some, probably sounds more inviting.

Many shoppers apparently hit the Web after seeing products in a catalog. You can order by phone, by mail, by fax, by computer.

Hence, the catalogs keep coming. And coming.

Catalogs offer gifts just for children, adults, the green-minded, wine lovers, art enthusiasts, sports fans

So, in theory, even the lamest of gift givers can find something that just might just put a smile on someone's face on Christmas morning, given all the choices available.

Take this beauty that I found in a Brookstone catalog. A reading lamp featuring a "golfer who putts a golf ball into a cup while the crowd cheers in the background."

Me, to Wife: "I hope you like it."

Wife: "Wow! It's perfect."

Well, I'm guessing that will be her reaction. It's really cool.

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