

*Examine the periphery.* I despise gift shops because I feel like they are nothing more than a series of visual bull's-eyes. You're supposed to look at the key rings sitting next to the cash register. *Bing.* You're supposed to see the janky stuffed animals in the windows, the display rack of miniature airplanes. *Bing. Bing.* Don't hit the targets. I once found a box of unopened ten-year-old baseball cards in a gas station in Murfreesboro, Tennessee, tucked behind a rack of sunglasses. And I got some really nice Kampia olive oil from Cyprus in a casino lobby shop once. Bottom shelf, to the right of the register. No one remembered it was there. They knocked it down 20 percent simply because I leaned over and picked it up. The same applies for the places you shop. Buying for a woman? Go to a hardware store. Seeds are always winners. Laser levels are coolly useless. Plastic owls. You gotta figure you know someone who might like a plastic owl, if only to keep the pigeons off her fire escape. Don't hit the targets.

*Invert money and size.* Spend more on small things. Spend less on large ones. People remember things they can carry with them. Ties are a good example. Spend a lot on ties or forget them altogether. I saw a great handmade money clip at the airport in Albany last weekend, made from about seven different kinds of native wood. I shoulda bought that fucker. It was thirty-five bucks. A lot for a wooden money clip, I guess, but not much when a month from now I'm trying to think what to get my brother for his forty-second birthday. Damn. Thirty-five bucks was a steal. I should have bought three.

Which brings me to the next rule, and the

one beyond that: *Always buy.* And *Stockpile.* If you think it's right, it probably is—or it could be on the right occasion. You buy it. You put it on a shelf in a closet somewhere and you forget it until the moment is right. If you have stockpiled well—wine, olive oil, remarkable coasters made from hammered tin—buying more trifles will create an inventory and choices, putting you in a position to never, ever have to take an enervating trip to a wonky local shopping mall to cruise aimlessly for a birthday present at a chain store. This—the time saved, the suburban trip avoided, the chance to have an obligation fulfilled before it even

influence in the world—among the people you know well and, more important, the ones you don't? That's exactly what these rules afford. Not a better table at a restaurant, not money, not a discount on a car. Influence. Giving gifts on an impulse transforms you in other people's eyes. The person who gives an unexpected—or unexpectedly thoughtful—gift knows something, reads something in others that no one else picks up on. It's a form of connection, of inside information. By gifting intelligently, you show you're smart enough to be mindful of the lives of others—their needs, their particular delights, a person to

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comes up—that's the mitzvah of giving. It's why you buy and why you stockpile. So what if you have a few extra jars of marmalade in your closet?

*Don't use greeting cards.* Ever. I will not go long into the thoughtlessness of greeting cards. You may swear by them. But listen, bub: No one buys the effort. Just write a note instead. Two lines. No Snoopy. No poems. No hot chicks. A greeting card is a reference to your own effort, emanating the stench of routinely shopping for presents in stores where greeting cards are sold. These would include, though are not limited to, supermarkets, big-box stores, and gas stations. Surely this is not your scent.

*Expect no return.* You want to have some

be listened to. *Influence.* So wake the hell up, look around, and stop seeing the act of giving as something done in one great bull rush of Christmas shopping. Make it a part of everything you do. Collect information. Be curious. Ask questions. Buy. If there is one rule to influence, it is: Act first. Just, in this interaction, expect nothing specific in return. A good gift cannot be outdone, nor should it be. It should stand on its own as a kind of memorial—to friendship, kinship, love, whatever. If you sit around expecting the same gesture in return, you only risk feeling forgotten or shortchanged by those whom you most want to affect.

Me? I'm never unhappy to get a present. This, even though there's only one thing I ever want. A couple of decks of Copag playing cards. My favorite. I also like old poker chips from defunct casinos. I always tell people that. For some reason, no one hears me. Then I get a life-sized inflatable Ben Wallace, or a wicked-ugly 7-iron I wouldn't hit out of a chicken yard, or a tie, and I know what to do. I'm as good as the next guy at mustering the countenance of elation. The smile. The little head tilt. The moan from the center of my chest. And I'm not even faking. I promise. That's my final rule, in fact: *Gifts should be an act of appreciation, not a search for ecstasy.* Same with receiving. Skip the orgasm. Leave porn where it belongs—in its case, on the bookshelf, beneath your plastic owl—and appreciate that someone thought of you in the venerable fashion of their own generosity. ■

# The Influence Library

→ THE RACKS OF READABLE BOOKS on influence and power rise up in spinning towers in airport bookstores all over this great land. They're leeringly promising on the cover, demanding nothing less than an immediate start to your

self-improvement. Yet they rarely deliver prose that can outlast the 10:05 nonstop to Denver. But *Power and Influence: The Rules Have Changed* (McGraw-Hill, \$23), a recent book by Robert L. Dilenschneider, is remarkable because it survives in your mind in small ways, veering productively and spryly toward lessons about humility, adaptation, and change as a means of gaining power. Dilenschneider, yet another successful executive on the book rack of achievement (he runs a powerful public-relations firm), illustrates the concept in prose that is surprisingly engaging, with pointed anecdotes that reveal the depth of his experience and, most of all, with some serious measure of heart. It's a book worth carrying on a plane, then onward to the cities beyond.

—T. C.

