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A timely lesson in how good deeds can pay off

The Virgin Pulse desktop CD/clock radio made its debut last October. Available only at Target, it sold briskly but not spectacularly last Christmas season, probably because, when you get right down to it, there are just not that many Target shoppers in the market for a \$70 alarm clock, even if it is extremely cool looking.

But, sometime last spring, people started noticing it.

First, the Fine Living Network, a digital cable channel that airs shows about interior design, high-end travel, gourmet food and entertaining, named the clock one of its "Fine Living Selects."

Then, the clock won a prestigious red dot award, a prize given to new products for outstanding design, and was included in a German museum exhibit of contemporary design.

By summer, design groupies were eagerly snapping up the fabulous clock radios. But it was already too late.

The Virgin Pulse desktop CD/clock radio had been discontinued.

Naturally, that's when its popularity really began to soar.

"People started calling me to ask where they could get one," said Eric Chan, the New York industrial designer who came up with the clock's funky, sloping shape. "But I only had a few extras we'd held onto in the office. So I kept sending people out to different Target stores to see if they could find any."

An oddly romantic gift

I did not, of course, know any of this, when I decided, a few weeks ago, that a beautiful, well-designed alarm clock would make a nice Christmas gift for someone special, a gift that says, "I'd like to be the first person you think of when you wake up in the morning."

It is also, to be truthful, the kind of gift that says, "Your current alarm clock is sort of ugly. And, in case we ever decide to combine households, I want you to own some beautiful things so that it won't look like I'm disposing of all your personal possessions and replacing them with mine."

When I first saw a photo of the Virgin Pulse clock, I decided it was the perfect clock to give a guy. There's something almost sexy about it, the way it curves in the middle, like a woman's waist. But it still manages to be very functional-looking. Plus, it has enough cool features, like a slot-load CD rather than one of those easily breakable pop-out tray-style ones, that its \$70 price tag does not seem entirely outrageous.

The shopping begins

None of the online retailers that sell Virgin Pulse brand products had any of the clocks left in stock. And, because the brand has been phased out — replaced by the more widely available Virgin Electronics — and the 2003 product line discontinued, there were no

new ones coming in. The only way to get one, I found out, was to happen upon one in a Target store that hadn't yet depleted its stock from last year.

I was starting to feel like the clock was more legend than actual thing. But then just when I'd be ready to give up, I'd hear about someone who got one. Or almost did.

A New York interior designer visiting in Ohio found one in a Target Greatland store outside Columbus. A Chicago friend missed her flight home from a business trip to Cedar Rapids, just so she could check out a Target. A North Shore designer was rumored to have a stock of them in his hall closet, but swore it wasn't true.

Exploring the options

It is possible that I began to get a little obsessed with the clock, which, incidentally, is really not a metaphor for anything else. Even as I looked for other gifts, I kept the clock in mind, trying to fool myself into no longer wanting it, so maybe it would turn up unexpectedly, the way things sometimes do.

Last Sunday, I found myself standing in yet another Target store. But, this time, I was not thinking about the clock. I was focused, instead, on the embarrassingly modest items on the Christmas lists of the kids whose letters to Santa I'd decided to answer through the Sun-Times' Season of Sharing program. After 10 minutes in the toy department, I had checked off most everything. Except one doll.

"Excuse me," I said to a red-vested employee who happened to be walking by. "Where could I find a Dora the Explorer doll?"

"Well," she replied, barely suppressing a laugh at my ignorance, "If we had any, they'd be in that aisle. But they're the most popular toy this season, so I'm pretty sure we're out of them."

I walked over to the aisle she'd pointed out and looked forlornly at the empty space in the middle of the shelf. All at once I felt exhausted, and more than a little ashamed. There's probably something very wrong with a world in which \$70 alarm clocks exist side-by-side with little girls who must ask Santa not only for toys but for warm winter clothes as well.

I found the Dora the Explorer doll.

And, then, when I'd pretty much given up, I found the clock.

I'd tell you where, but, the thing is, I got the last one.

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