A new guide gives you the lowdown on must-have items

By Lisa Sweetingham

Jobs, apartments, boyfriends—the best of these usually come from the recommendations of people we trust. And the same ought to be true of the gadgets and everyday items we buy: That's the idea behind Cool Tools, a new collection of reviews on hundreds of useful products, edited by tech guru and Wired cofounder Kevin Kelly.

Cool Tools sprang from Kelly's personal website (kk.co...ooltools), where he collects reviews and information on tried-and-true "tools"—from the best spam filter (Spamfire, $40 at matterform.com/spamfire) to the best noise filter (Max earplugs, $80 a pair at store.yahoo.com/earplugstore).

Last November, Kelly (whose book Out of Control: The New Biology of Machines, Social Systems and the Economic World was required reading for the cast of The Matrix) decided to take his favorite tool reviews from the website archives over the past three years and compile them in a softcover book. While the 140-page, low-design Cool Tools lacks a table of contents, has b&w Xerox photos and includes a number of items that can be filed under "Duh!" (double-stick tape is useful, Mephisto shoes are comfortable), more often than not it's a fascinating read, with such gems as how to buy Silly Putty by the pound and reviews of the 300-page Cartoon History of the Universe Vol. III and the iPod Tuna that uses radio bandwidth to let you listen to your friends and reviewers. He then put the rest on Amazon.com for about three years and there were 500 orders on Amazon. I was so embarrassed—I didn't have 500 copies! He's since cooked up another 700 copies, and the orders keep coming.

So what are the criteria for inclusion on his hot list? "I require that someone really be using this tool for a while," Kelly says. "There's a Darwinian force at work here: I'm not interested in things that look cool or are the newest, I'm interested in the things that survive. If someone says, 'I've used this for five years, and there's newer stuff, but this is still the best—that's the kind of thing I love.' What Kelly loves right now is his chainless bike (chainless.com)—an easy-to-shift alternative to standard bikes that pinch pant legs and leave greasy chain marks behind. For hearty weather New Yorkers, Kelly recommends Yaltrax (yaltrax.com), plastic "chains" for the bottom of your shoes, to keep you from slipping on snow-covered roads (a boon for die-hard joggers who need extra traction); and studded bicycle tires (peterwhitecycles.com/studdedtires.asp) for those who get a charge from icy off-road cycling.

Kelly plans to expand Cool Tools to include more of the items he's accumulated over the past 30 years. But the real impetus, he says, is to create a send-off package for his three kids—ages 7 to 15—when they leave for college. "I want to be able to hand them a crate full of tools, to include the kind of things and ideas they might not encounter in college—sort of hard-won knowledge and secrets," Kelly says. "And in addition to that would be a copy of the book, pointing them to things that didn't fit inside the crate."

Pod people
You win some, you lose some with the new iPod mini. First the bad news: It lacks the voice-record and image-storage functions of its 40GB elder, and instead of 10,000 songs, this 4GB version holds about 1,000. The good news? It's superlight, about the length and height of a business card, and at just $249, who needs more than a 1,000-song capacity? But best of all—the original oh-so-sterile white has been supplanted by silver, gold, pink, blue and green versions. It's like Easter in January ($249; Apple.com).