

“SMART SANTA”

By:

Steve and Debra Gillham

(Abridged Version)

For the full story buy the book “Santaology, The Art of Becoming a Great Santa Claus!”

After twelve seasons of doing Santa Claus when people ask us, “What do you think is the most important technique or effect you use as Santa?” Without any hesitation both of us will say “Smart Santa!” at which time some folks will look at us and say, “What’s that?”

Deb and I always thought it would be great if Santa knew all about the boys and girls that come to see him. It is quite sad when a child reaches the age where they begin to doubt and question the very existence of Santa. Both of us knew that if we could figure out a way to get the “inside information” to Santa’s ears, then the child’s belief could be extended....no matter what they were hearing from school mates. So, with this in mind, about eleven years ago we began our search for the ultimate system that would allow us to relay pertinent information about each child as they approached Santa’s chair. Each Christmas season our technology as well as our approach has advanced to our current setup, though even now our plans continue to evolve. Our goal is to share with you the mistakes we’ve made, the lessons we’ve learned, the equipment we used and most of all the thrill of seeing the child’s face as you share information with them that only Santa could know.

Things We Learned:

- Two Way Radios are not good. Don’t use them long term. If you want to “test the water” then try them once or twice but stay away from them. They lack the clarity that you need to understand what is being said to you.
- Cell phones should work but don’t. With blue tooth technology you would think this is a no brainer. Best thing about cell phones is they can be an emergency back-up for equipment failure but you will slowly lose your mind working with them. The lack of clarity of the voice is such that you can’t be sure of how to pronounce the child’s name or the teacher’s name or their pet’s name, etc...
- We have found that there is a really good use of cell phones and that is FACETIME. This is worth its weight in gold. Facetime is now what we use when we need video for my assistant. You can hide one phone out of sight where Santa is and your assistant can use their phone or iPad for the monitor. We use the small portable tripod that looks like this:
If using Facetime, be sure to carry the power cords for your phones and iPads. The battery will never last through a four-hour engagement. We have never had a child notice the phone. They don’t think a thing about it. Of course it helps that they are not suspicious about how you are doing what you are doing. After all, you are Santa!



- The equipment for Smart Santa is called a Queing System or Tour Guide System. It was with the help of our good friend “Leon McBryde” that we found out about this. Leon is the one that turned us on to using a professional Queing System. With Leon’s help we started using the Gentner Q-System Venture 1 which sold for \$427.00. This system has since been discontinued and the replacement system that Leon sells now is made by Mipro. You can buy one from Leon here: http://www.proknows.com/MiPro_Wireless_Bundle_p/mtg-100rta.htm
PRICE IS: \$550.00 but includes the mic and ear bud.



Includes Ear Buds & Microphone!

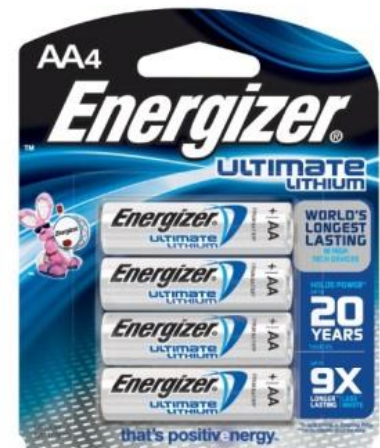
- Once of the most important things we learned doing this for 12 seasons is **BUY TWO SYSTEMS!** This effect is so powerful that if you are anything at all like us, soon it will be what you do all the time. For a Santa to be “Smart” and all of a sudden go “dumb” is really bad. You cannot afford to all of a sudden go from “all-knowing” to “not-knowing anything” in front of the children. Equipment failures are a fact of life. Everything will one day stop working as it should and when that happens, you need a backup. We carry two complete systems, three mics, three ear buds, extra batteries and a really good battery checker. You’ll find my favorite battery tester here:

http://www.amazon.com/ZTS-MINIMBT-Multi-Battery-Tester-Battery/dp/B0002EH4YO/ref=cm_cr_pr_pdt_img_top?ie=UTF8



- One of the advantages of having two complete Queing Systems is you will have two-way communication with your assistant. I wear a receiver to hear the information that Deb provides and I wear a transmitter to send her my conversations with the child. She does the same. With both units working we set each system on a different channel and are able to communicate back and forth with crystal clarity. This is the ultimate Mobile technique and has allowed us to do corporate parties, malls, schools, just about anything you can imagine.

- Use only Energizer Ultimate Lithium Batteries. I buy mine at Sam's Club. The transmitter is the device that uses the most power. We never start an engagement with batteries below 100%. This is where the battery checker comes in. Every time we go out, I check all the batteries. I can't even tell you how much money I have saved since buying the battery checker. Prior to being able to check the batteries we always started with new batteries – which were not always necessary.



- Use a decent ear bud. My favorite is a white one made by Sony that I purchase from Best Buy. For \$10.00 each, order three. Plug it into your system and put one in your ear, I'm right eared. Once you have made sure you have sound, cut off the other ear bud. You will never wear both buds since you have to be able to hear the children. I'm "left knee'd" which means I put the children on my left knee to take a photo or talk. I wear my hair long and my hat hangs on the right side to hide this ear piece. I use the white one for obvious reasons.



- Always, always, always, use toupee tape around the ear bud. I learned this lesson after the second or third year. We sweat and when we sweat things fall out. It's really hard putting an ear bud back in your ear in front of a group of children without them wondering what you are doing. This is one of the best

things you can have in your kit:

Vapon Topstick 1" X 3 yard roll of Grooming tape: \$8.25 from Amazon. Cut a strip of the tape lengthwise so that it is 1/2" wide. Wrap the ear bud with this sticking tape and seat it in your ear canal deep. It will not fall out ever and you will have a hairless ear canal. ☺



- Buy some Mini Binder clips like this:

These are wonderful for relieving the strain of the wire to your ear. Deb always has me turn my head to the far left and then clips the wire from the ear bud to the collar on the back of my shirt. This prevents the ear bud from pulling out as I work and move around. It's also really good for securing a mic to your fur and clipping a wire to your suspenders. One bag should be enough and you will find them at any business supply store or you can order them from Amazon.



- The Mic for the transmitter **MUST** have an on and off switch. This is **really important**. If your assistant does not cut off after giving you the information you need, you will lose your mind listening to the noise around them. One of the best lavalier mics we have found is this one from Audio-technic: Cost is \$24.79 from Amazon and at that price, purchase three. Are you starting to see a pattern here? Three mics, three ear buds, two Queing systems. You cannot afford for anything to stop working that you don't have an instant replacement for. Also, go ahead and order some LR-44 button batteries for this mic. If you leave the switch on you will be happy you have extra batteries for it. The model number for this mic is:



ATR-3350 The mic that Leon supplies with the system is very good also and doesn't cost you any additional money.

Types of Visits

The Short Visit:

For a child to think they have found the real Santa it takes what we call three **Santa Qualifiers**. These are three bits of information that the child knows you couldn't know unless you are the real Santa. For example, the first might be their name. Usually as the child gets within earshot I will call out their name and say something like, "Well hello Jason! Oh, it's good to see you again!" Lots of times this will stop them in their tracks. It's important if you have helpers to make sure they **DO NOT** say the child's name. You want the child to know that no one said their name and yet you know it. The second qualifier I use is their age. As the child approaches my chair after hearing their name, I stop them again with "Hey? Aren't you five this year?" and I hold up five fingers towards the child waiting for affirmation from them. Now just before they get picked up and put in my lap I say, "Hey, can I ask you a question?" followed with a pause. Then "How did you like that red bicycle I gave you last Christmas?" So there just in the time it took them to get to my chair I hit them with their name, age and their favorite gift from last Christmas.

Once you have given them these three qualifiers you can go on with your visit. Find out what they would like for Christmas and then just when they are leaving, I look them in the eye and tell them my favorite thing, the response their parents gave us when we asked them on the short form, "What about this child makes you proud?" I take their parent's response to that question and say to the child, "You know...I am so proud of you! Do you know what I'm most proud of?" Wait for them to say no, "I'm proud of you because you treat people so well. You never make fun of others and you always treat people with respect. I'm so proud of you and you know what? Your parents are proud of you also!" I usually give the child a hug and tell them "Keep up the good work!"

For most line work you will only have time for three Santa Qualifiers. Deb and I can see 55 children an hour doing Smart Visits for each, and that includes taking a pictures as well as finding out what the child wants for Christmas. This is major though and takes someone with a really good assistant and a Santa that is used to working with them. After four hours (220+ Children) you will be tired. After 6 hours (330+ Children) you will be exhausted!

The Santa Admission Ticket is below. I have these on a PDF file that I mail to the event coordinator so they can pass out the forms to the parents before the event. These are the filled in forms that are handed to your assistant to feed you the information.

SANTA ADMISSION TICKET
CHILD'S NAME: _____
AGE: _____ CHILD IS CURRENTLY WEARING: _____
FAVORITE "SANTA" PRESENT LAST YEAR: _____
(**DO NOT ASK THE CHILD** IF YOU DO NOT REMEMBER SIMPLY COMPLETE NEXT QUESTION INSTEAD)
SCHOOL GRADE AND TEACHER'S NAME: _____
WHAT ABOUT THIS CHILD MAKES YOU PROUD? _____

- Always have a backup plan. Things will go wrong with equipment. Try to have at least two of everything you use and then still plan on what you will do if something doesn't work. Cell phones are a last resort.
- Always buy good batteries and always start out an engagement with fresh batteries in the transmitter. You can get away with two engagements on the receiver...but don't risk it with the transmitter.
- Be careful what you say! At times parents will ask you to correct bad habits their child may have or threaten to not bring presents if behaviors do not change. We believe that Santa should deliver positive feedback to a child. When a parent gives us information that doesn't feel fitting with the Santa image we want to portray, we simply leave it out. Then we really are "Smart Santa".
- Large groups (4 or more) can be difficult. Often the children are close in age and identical in size, or the mom has dressed them all in matching outfits. If they all have blonde hair and blue eyes and are wearing the same outfit you could be in big trouble. Our solution is to have the children line up according to age. Deb will already have their information sheets arranged by age and bingo – Santa is a genius!
- Twins can also be an issue – especially if they are identical and mom thinks it is cute to dress them just alike (thank goodness that is not always the case). When that happens, I will look in their general direction and ask who was born first...David or Grayson? They will always point to the oldest twin and then say the name. Deb will help keep me straight from then on, remember she can hear what is going on also. But, never take your eyes off of both of them while they are in motion...the trick only works once.

- Cell phones work in a pinch, but have some major drawbacks. When we had an equipment failure three years ago we used our cell phones for 4 hours of visits!! First – be CERTAIN that you have the air minutes! Second – the clarity is just not there. Deb would tell me a child’s name was Faye and I’d call her Kay. Deb would correct me and then I’d call her May. In frustration, Deb would then spell the name FFFF-A-Y-E, and by that time she was tickled and so was I. It made for a very long night with numerous apologies to the kids for being old and having a poor memory in addition to numerous long pauses while I tried to figure out what Deb could possibly be saying. It wasn’t just names I had issues understanding...many of the toys were also lost in translation.
- Speaking of Hearing issues...We know that many Santas have hearing aids. If you wear a hearing aid and want to try “Smart Santa” there are some things that will help. Bluetooth capability is built into many hearing aids now. Having Bluetooth as a part of your hearing aid means a hand held microphone with Bluetooth can be used by your assistant to feed you the information on the child. Unfortunately, the range of Bluetooth technology appears to be 30 feet. You can do smart Santa within the 30-foot range. We do it frequently, but it does limit you. One of the more interesting and promising routes to go may be a Hearing Loop. Many churches already have them as do meeting rooms in businesses around the country. The following links are provided for hearing aid Santas so they can do their own research. My only request is, if you find a successful method of doing Smart Santa while wearing a hearing aid, please share your method with me so I can share it with everyone else. I’ll give full credit to the Santa that comes forward with the information. Personally I think the Loop technology holds the most promise. With a Loop for the chair and Bluetooth mic for working a party, you should be set.

LINKS FOR HEARING AID RESEARCH:

Let’s Loop Wisconsin

<https://loopwisconsin.wordpress.com/2013/03/02/ready-to-buy-a-new-hearing-aid-be-sure-it-includes-bluetooth-and-telecoil-technology/>

Excellent article about Bluetooth and Loop technology.

For a two minute animated YouTube Video on Loop technology:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hlnx3ZImTw0>

For a detailed 50 minute YouTube Video on Hearing Loops the Basics:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OUgDs4W8szU>

What’s a T-Coil plus this exposes the existence of a portable t-coil system:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q2zpJo1G2VA>

Portable T-Coil system for \$250.00

https://www.harriscomm.com/catalog/product_info.php?cPath=46_158&products_id=20770



To purchase the book: “Santaology The Art of Becoming a Great Santa Claus!” written by Stephen F. Gillham Contact Steve at: sgillham@nc.rr.com