



Paul DuRoss' Real Estate Reader



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Last month's devastating quake in Haiti probably has you wondering about your own preparedness. Follow these guidelines to prepare for a quake.

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Looking to make this year's Valentine's Day special? Check out these tips to make this year's holiday one to remember.

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Technology and financial experts can't stop talking about Mint.com, a free, online financial tool. See what all the fuss is about.

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What to Do if You are Underwater

Housing experts estimate that up to 25% of American homeowners are "underwater" (owe more on their mortgage than their home's market value). If you are one of these homeowners, you have three main options.

Option #1: Bail on your mortgage

Bailing on a mortgage might seem to be the most attractive option, but if you choose this option, it will be difficult to qualify for another mortgage for up to seven years. A lot can happen in seven years. For instance, in the years between 1998 and 2005, housing prices nearly doubled in some areas, which means you might be priced out of the market by the time you are capable of qualifying for another loan.

Option #2: Relentlessly pursue renegotiation

For qualified homeowners, renegotiation could be available. You might be able to reduce the principle, reduce the interest, or restructure your loan's repayment schedule. However, be prepared for a long, arduous battle. Banks are unlikely to roll out the red carpet for you once you explain that you want to pay them less than you agreed, with no penalty.

Option #3: Think long term

Today, it's popular to say that the housing bubble was caused by a false sense of certainty that housing prices would never fall. However, this certainty really is true over the long term. Housing prices have never fallen during any 10-year period. If history is any indicator of the future, housing prices inevitably will rebound. If you're underwater right now, you can think of your situation as a temporary fluctuation in what is likely to be a good long-term investment.



Get More Out of Your Workouts

Millions of Americans take regular trips to the gym to bulk up and slim down. Wouldn't it be nice if you could get the most out of your workouts without spending extra time or effort at the gym? Here are three simple ways to do just that.

Listen to music

Studies have shown that people can lift more, run farther, and exercise longer when they are listening to a playlist of upbeat tunes than when they work out in silence. You can use iTunes' genius function to create a playlist that is perfect for working out. Select one great workout song (e.g., "Eye of the Tiger"), then select the genius option. iTunes will automatically make a playlist of 25 similar songs from your own collection.

Work out at the same time every day

The human body goes through daily cycles. If you work out at the same time each day, your body soon will adapt and give you extra energy right as you enter your prime time for working out.

Finish your workout with a meal

Working out depletes energy stores, which can lead your body to enter starvation mode (a period of decreased metabolism). If your metabolism slows, you will have a harder time burning fat and gaining muscle. Instead, finish your workout with a meal that is tailor-made for your workout's goals. For instance, if you are trying to gain muscle, eat a protein shake. If you are trying to lose weight, opt for a healthy energy boost, such as yogurt, berries, and/or granola.

Prepare for an Earthquake



Last month's tragic earthquake in Haiti has many Californians wondering how they would fare in a similar quake. As the "Big One" still looms on the horizon, we look at ways to prepare for an earthquake.

Safeguard your home

In Haiti, whole buildings collapsed. In the U.S., superior building codes make it unlikely that we would see devastation on that scale. The danger to American buildings is the huge amount of heavy items kept on walls, shelves, and closets, which can become dangerous projectiles during a quake. Try to store anything breakable low to the ground, in an enclosed cabinet with a sturdy latch. Do not place anything heavy or sharp on shelves or walls above beds, sofas, or anywhere else where people are likely to be during a quake.

Make an emergency communication plan

During a disaster, mobile phone traffic spikes dramatically, which tends to overload networks and make it very difficult to call. This effect is particularly noticeable on local calls in the affected area. In other words, after an earthquake, you might be unable to get through to your family members on their cellphones if they also are in the affected area. Designate an out-of-area family member as an emergency contact who everyone can check in with. This person can collect status updates and locational information and share it accordingly. Just make sure every family member has the emergency contact's phone number committed to memory. If you are tech-savvy, you might consider teaching your family to use Skype or similar online services, which tend to be more reliable than mobile phones during emergencies.

Plan your escape

As we have seen in Haiti, the earthquake is just the first stage of a disaster. Aftershocks, fires, electrocutions, and looting can make a bad situation even worse. Your best move could be to exit the region as quickly as is safely possible. Begin by thinking about what room gives you the best chance to exit your home safely. This will be the place you go to as soon as you know about a quake. Next, think about what roads are likely to be blocked after a heavy quake and plan an exit route accordingly. Bridges, overpasses, and roads lined with rocks or trees are all areas to avoid on your exit route.

Hot New Product



Apple Reinvents the Tablet

Apple has announced its newest device, a touch-screen, tablet computer with a 10" screen. Dubbed the iPad, this new device will attempt to create a new market category between smartphones and laptops. The iPad is a lot like an oversized iPhone, complete with mobile apps, an iPod, and a modified iPhone operating system. Its most notable new function is a link with Apple's new online bookstore, iBook, which allows users to download books and read them immediately (much like Amazon's Kindle). The iPad starts at \$499 and can cost as much as \$829, depending on features—no word on shipping dates.



Wow Your Valentine

You don't have to spend a fortune to sweep your valentine off his or her feet. Here are several creative ways to make this V-Day one to remember.

Make him/her feel special at work

Sending flowers or a big card to your significant other's workplace does more than show your valentine how much you care; it shows everyone she works with how much you care. This year, Valentine's Day falls on a Sunday, so it might take a little extra planning to coordinate a workday surprise. Set the mood for the weekend by hand-delivering a bouquet and a card to your loved one's workplace on Friday, Feb. 12th.

Love your gift

It's easy to get so wrapped up in the mission of finding the "perfect" gift that you forget the other side of the equation: your own gift. When you open your gift, try to appear genuinely excited and happy. Explain why you love the gift and how you will use it, and take the time to notice and appreciate the effort that went into it. An easy way to appear excited is to ask questions about the gift. For example, "How did you find a bracelet that...?"

Learn a new skill

If you want to wow your valentine, learn a new skill that you can debut on Valentine's Day. You can learn how to give a mean oil massage or how to cook a gourmet meal. The more difficult the skill is to acquire, the more impressed your loved one will be.

Publicize your love on social networks

If your valentine spends a lot of time on social networks such as Twitter and Facebook, find a fun way to publicize your love on those networks. For instance, you can upload a video of yourself talking about why your loved one is perfect for you, or post a link to an e-card.

Include family and friends

If you want to plan a truly special day, enlist some help. Call your valentine's close friends and family members and ask for ideas. They likely will be impressed by your
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initiative and offer to do some of the legwork for you. For example, your valentine's mom can make reservations at your loved one's favorite childhood restaurant while your valentine's best friend picks out the perfect piece of jewelry. Make sure you are open about all of the help you received. Your valentine will be overwhelmed by all of the people who worked together to make a special day for him or her.

The History of Black History Month



February is Black History Month. The remembrance was originated in 1926 by historian Carter G. Woodson and has been celebrated in the United States and Canada ever since. Woodson chose February because it contains the birthdays of two Americans who improved the lives of black Americans, Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass. Black History Month is a time to remember and celebrate the lives and achievements of individual black Americans throughout history. To learn more about those achievements, visit <http://www.history.com/content/blackhistory>.

5 Reasons to Check Out Mint.com

If you're looking for a great way to manage your finances online, it might be time to check out the online sensation Mint.com.

Everything in one place

Mint's most useful feature is its ability to integrate all of your bank accounts, investment portfolios, and credit cards into a personalized home page for your personal finances. This allows for all-inclusive expense tracking, sophisticated trend analysis, and real-time updates to your net worth, assets, and liabilities.

Security

One of the first questions people have about moving all of their financial information to one website is, "How safe is it?" Mint has a stellar record; the website has no recorded security breaches in its three-year history. Mint uses the same security protocols as your bank's website—the most

reliable in the industry. However, you should still take the time to select a complicated password with more than eight characters and involving both numbers (not in sequence) and letters (e.g., spike47go).

Hassle-free expense tracking

One of Mint's great innovations is that it enables users to tag expenses for certain budgets. For instance, you can set up each transaction at Starbucks to be taken out of your coffee budget. As soon as such a transaction posts to your bank, the amount will be deducted from the amount of money you have set aside for coffee, which is also customizable. After just a little time tweaking your preferences, you can see richly displayed budgetary graphs and trends, pushed automatically to your e-mail or cellphone.

Alerts

To take full advantage of Mint, you can customize your alert settings. Users can set alerts for all sorts of activities and customize them for each account. For instance, you can set an alert for whenever you go over your budget in one area, whenever you are charged a bank fee, or whenever a large deposit clears. Alerts can be sent to your e-mail, as SMS alerts to your cellphone, or to your iPhone via Mint's full-featured iPhone application.

Suggestions for better accounts

Mint is designed to help you make good decisions about your spending, investing, and saving by suggesting actions based on your account history. For instance, if you spend a lot of money at a particular gas station, Mint might suggest a gas card—even showing you precisely how much money you would save if you owned that card. Though the suggestions are sponsored (i.e., paid advertising), they tend to be useful.