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Mark F. Welcome to the Cool Tools Show Episode Four. I'm Mark Frauenfelder, Editor In Chief of Cool Tools, a website of tool recommendations written by our readers. You can find us at cool-tools.org. I'm joined by my cohost Kevin Kelly, Founder of Cool Tools.

Hey Kevin!

Kevin Good morning, Mark!

Mark F. Good morning!

Kevin I should say, "Good morning, Marks!"

[Laughter]

Mark F. Exactly! Someday we'll have to have a Kevin on there so I can say "Kevins."

In each episode of the Cool Tools Show Kevin and I talk to a guest about some of his or her favorite uncommon or uncommonly good tools they think others should know about.

Our guest today is Mark Hurst, Founder and CEO of Creative Good and The Gel Conference. Mark has spent his career writing and speaking about how organizations and individuals can create better customer experiences. Most recently he co-authored Customers Included, a book about strategy and customer experience.

Hi, Mark!

Mark H. Hi, Mark! Hi, Kevin! Thanks for having me on!

Mark F. Yeah!

Kevin I'm looking forward to it, yeah! It's really great.

Mark F. Yeah, me too! You're a longtime friend of both of us individually and of Cool Tools, so this is great.

You provided a list in advance of some amazing stuff and I want to just jump right into it, so why don't you tell us about a productivity pick that David Pogue didn't mention called Default Folder X.

Mark H. Sure! And I'll say that I thought that first episode was fantastic and David gave some great productivity picks that I was just nodding my head, "Yep, yep, yep. I agree with everything they brought up."

There was one that I thought I would add to the mix. As you say, it's called Default Folder X. I have used this tool probably for fifteen years at least and it has saved me countless hours. It's for the Mac, either a desktop or laptop computer.

You know how when you save a file it brings up that little popup dialogue box and it shows the file hierarchy? If you wanna save that file in a particular folder, generally you have to click through this morass of folders to go through the hierarchy until you get to the destination folder and you finally drop it in. If you then want to save another file you have to go through the entire maze a second time.

What Default Folder does is it makes that process much easier by letting you set hot keys to go to your most commonly accessed folders with one keystroke. So, for me, I have three or four folders that I go to probably ninety percent of the time if I'm gonna save a file or open a file from one of those folders and it's just one keystroke. Bam!

It also works when you're in "finder" mode looking at the desktop. You can hit the same keystroke and that will magically open the folder onto the desktop. Once you start using it you don't know how you ever used a computer without it.

Mark F. That sounds really good. Mark, one thing that I end up having a problem with is that I kind of run out of keystrokes for doing global commands and stuff. What keystrokes do you use to open your default folders?

Mark H. You can set it to anything you want. What I personally found in my system works is just Command+1, Command+2, Command+3, Command+4.

For whatever reason I don't see those override other commands very often. Remember, these are only active when the open or save dialogue box is up or when you're in the Finder. I've used those keystrokes for, as I say, over a

decade and they've been very constant and never caused trouble.

Kevin That's interesting!

I wonder if someone twenty years ago would have understood that sentence: "I've used those keystrokes for so long and they've really been good to me."

[Laughter]

Mark H. Well, after a while you go to the same places and do the same things.

Kevin Yeah, I know but it was just a moment of realizing that we have kind of an affinity to keystrokes.

Mark H. That's right. I have a good relationship with these keystrokes!

Kevin Exactly!

So, Mark I see one of the other things in this productivity and efficiency and effectiveness that you recommended was an alternative to David Pogue's previous recommendation of a way of remembering and reusing key phrases and words that you use very often. You have another one to suggest that you think is superior to his?

Mark H. No, the one that David Pogue suggested is called Text Expander, which a lot of people use. I think it's a fine tool, just for years I've used something (I think it may be a little bit older) it's called Type It For Me, but I think they're roughly equivalent in their features I think either on is a fine choice.

What I wanted to add to what David was saying is, he was saying very accurately that you can set shorthand (I think he had a sentence like, "Why does my Windows computer always crash?") and he described the shorthand keystrokes or abbreviations that he would use to expand out to that sentence.

In addition to that I wanted to add that whichever tool you use is also good for remembering URLs, web addresses, phone numbers, email addresses and even common misspellings.

So the classic is the word T-E-H that everybody uses to spell the word "the." Some applications like Word will

have some built in spelling corrections, but if you use a text expander that will work on all contexts on the machine.

So I never type my phone number or my email address, ever. I don't type my name, ever because I have those already set up. That's another one even more important the Default Folder is getting good at using a text expander.

Mark F. Wow, and I'm sure Windows has this but also if you are using the Mac OS you can go to your system preferences and I think it's "Keyboard."

If you want the basic ability to type in a couple of letters and expand into a snippet of text, it offers that ability in the OS already but Type It For Me and Text Expander have a lot more functionality, like you can have things saved in your clipboard and it will be part of your expanded text. I use that for HTML kind of stuff all the time to expand links or add an Amazon affiliate code.

Super helpful! If you're not using an expander like that you really should because it's a huge time saver.

So Mark, another one that you wanted to talk about is a text editor that's superior to built in Text Edit called Text Wrangler. Tell us about why you like this better than what the Mac comes with.

Mark H. Well, Text Editor has, as you said, a built in text editor that is the default when you open up a brand new Mac, when you open up a text file or SKU file. It's fine, but you can't do more rigorous "search and replace" that I've figured out, so Text Wrangler is made by a company called Bare Bones Software that has made this very full featured text editor totally free for as long as I can remember.

In the last few years we've seen a lot of new text editors come out. Some of them are pretty or some of them will blank out the rest of the screen so you can focus. There are a lot of neat features available in that little ecosystem.

What I like about Text Wrangler is, as I said, the features like "search and replace" are originally meant for programmers who have some pretty serious needs in this area, but even if you're drafting an email or any block of

text it can really save you time to have that little bit of functionality that Text Edit doesn't have.

Kevin I have used it for several decades it seems to me. At least dating back to when I first got a Mac and if you're moving text around as I do, not as a programmer, but just text that you get from different places and different origins with different styles, this has been indispensable for harmonizing, getting rid of line breaks, adding line breaks, alternating the upper-case, lower-case. All that kind of manipulation that you'd want to do on text, Text Wrangler is made for it.

Mark H. Exactly, and I love that fact that it will take out all the styles.

How often do you go to a webpage and you copy some text and you place it in wherever you're gonna place it, in Word or somewhere else, and suddenly it has the crazy font and italics and the blue color that the original source had an you go, "No, no, no, no! All I want was the text!" And there's no easy way to remove all that stylistic data.

What you do is just paste it in a Text Wrangler file and then copy and paste it out of Text Wrangler to wherever you're going to put it. I think of it as rinsing off the text until you're left with the pure ASCII.

Mark F. That's good!

Kevin The thing I use it most often for is to get rid of hard line breaks. Sometimes when you withdraw something from a text area it has the line breaks that were currently there and if you can remove those so you can re-flow, Text Wrangler is the only think I know that can do that.

Mark F. And if you're doing any kind of HTML work I would recommend getting BB Edit, which is basically a superset of Text Wrangler. You have to pay for it, but BB Edit is the one that I use all the time myself and it's fantastic. It's so good!

Kevin In any case, you should have one of these things whether it's Text Wranger or BBEdit.

Mark F. Yeah, one or the other.

One of our previous guests, Clive Thompson (I think he was one Episode Two) told me later, or he Tweeted, he said the

one tool he forgot to talk about was something called Clean Text.

It's an app that he said does an amazing job of cleaning up text that he copies from one place to another. It's something that I haven't had a chance to check out yet, but I will.

Kevin But a "text rinser" is definitely something that you need.

Mark F. Yeah, exactly!

Mark, why don't you tell us about using a Dvorak keyboard layout.

Mark H. Oh, gosh. Well, this is something that I switched to in the mid-nineteen nineties, so I've been on it for a long time. I had been a touch typer in the QWERTY layout. QWERTY because that's the top layer of keys on the keyboard Q-W-E-R-T-Y, the default layout.

I was fairly fast, but my wrists were acting up and in my commitment to only use the tools that created the best user experience I thought it was silly to use QWERTY when it was not designed to speed up typists and in fact there was an alternative that was proposed that was a superior layout for fast more effortless typing called Dvorak, named after the inventor, not the composer.

And as it turns out, every Mac and Windows and I believe Linux machine has the Dvorak keyboard layout available for free. You just have to go into whatever the keyboard preferences are and you can switch over.

With that said, it's a steep learning curve. It takes a few months to really get comfortable, but in the end if you can get through that you type faster with less wear and tear on your wrists and with fewer errors. So I can type a lot faster than I did before.

Kevin And is the idea that because you can switch that if you find yourself on another computer, like in an internet café or something, that you can just go open the preferences and switch and then therefore you're not stranded, or are you bi?

[Laughter]

Mark H. I can switch fairly well, but if I'm on a laptop or on a desktop it's usually my own. Now, mobile devices are all

in QWERTY, but that's OK because that's typically not two hand typing. That's thumbs and I think QWERTY is fine for thumb typing.

The advantage of Dvorak, incidentally, is that all of the most common letter by usage in the English language are on the home positions of your fingers.

So, most of the vowels are under your left hand fingers and most of the common consonants are under your right hand fingers and that way when you're typing most of the words, your fingers actually don't have to move and that allows you to go a lot faster without taxing your wrists too much.

Mark F. Kevin, Are you a touch typist?

Kevin I am but I'm a very slow and terrible one and I think I should learn the Dvorak keyboard just so I can really get good at typing.

I'm always backspacing and having to redo things because I'm a sloppy typist, so maybe I can use this to actually learn how to nail it down.

Mark H. Oh, you should!

You can get little decals and place them on the keyboard and that will help you learn. It's actually not bad!

Kevin How about you, Mark? Are you?

Mark F. I'm a fast "hunt and peck" typist.

I've kind of stopped hunting and pecking, but the problem is my error rate is just through the roof and so I've been tempted to get one of those blank keyboards for a while and see if that could help.

Kevin Well, maybe you should do both.

Get a blank one and then the Dvorak.

Mark F. Yeah, my output will drop to almost nothing for a few months, but I really should!

[Laughter]

Mark H. The switch is really painful, but when you're through it, it just feels so good to type that much faster.

Mark F. That's great!

And you also mentioned, which we'll put this in the show notes, that there's a web comic that describes the history of the Dvorak keyboard layout.

That sounds like some exciting reading!

[Laughter]

Mark H. It is more fun than you might think!

There is a small band of brothers and sisters out there who love Dvorak and we're quiet, but we're very passionate about the layout.

Three of these adherents, a few years ago, put together kind of a mini graphic novel about how the keyboard layout came to be and it's just interesting to read the story about the inventor who saw that he had a superior user experience and the world was not changing!

I don't know why I'm so passionate about that, but anyways.

Mark F. I wonder how many people use a Dvorak keyboard to write Esperanto essays!

[Laughter]

Mark H. Touché!

Mark F. No seriously, it is a great recommendation, Mark, and I think I should actually check it out.

Mark H. Well, at least read the DV Zine. That only takes a few minutes and there's no learning curve, it's just fun.

Mark F. I will, for sure.

So, tell us about your free indispensable online tools.

Mark H. These I've used for years and I recommend them to anybody who will listen.

The first one is called Pin Board, (not Pinterest!) It has a similar name, but it's different.

Pin Board is at PinBoard.in. I think you have to pay about ten bucks as a one-time fee and then you can organize your bookmarks online.

While that doesn't sound that interesting it's really not so much bookmarks, for me, as it is pointers to any webpage of interest that I come across. It's like "Oh this is neat, I'd like to get back to this if I ever research X or get into topic Y."

With one keystroke, again this is on a hotkey as well on my keyboard, I can tag that URL and get back to it anytime later. All the bookmarks are saved in the cloud. Really simple elegant design. I just love the service.

Kevin Just a second. I wanted to kind of question you on that because that seems to me to be the way I use Evernote and Evernote does so many other things.

I'm wondering, is there an overlap for you or is this better than Evernote for you?

Mark H. Well, I think Evernote does a lot of things.

I haven't personally used Evernote for the bookmarking in this way because I've just used Pin Board for so long that I've had no reason to switch, but I will say this is a tool that is customized to one use.

There's no extra functionality. There's no upsell and there's nothing else you can do but save URLS and tags and comments. It's so fast and elegant. It's hard for me to imagine how it can be improved upon.

Kevin Well, the way Evernote improves it is you're not saving a URL, you're saving an entire page.

Mark H. Right. I think, for me, when I want to save a page I use Instapaper. If I want to save a URL as a pointer I use Pin Board.

Maybe that's one tool too many for essentially the same use, but I find it works well for my purposes.

Kevin Okay.

Mark F. The great thing about Instapaper too is though, for me, I save stuff on the web and I can read it on my iPhone when I'm lying in bed or waiting in line or something like that.

Mark H. Oh, Instapaper is just brilliant!

Just as you said, you save the content of a web page. It's clever enough to save if an article is broken up into three or four click-throughs. It'll pick up all of those pages' content and put it in one long scrolling list and it does a text rinse (speaking of rinsing text) and displays it without all of the cruft that comes up in a lot of the content sites and then makes it available on any mobile device.

One of the best things on my iPhone, bar none is Instapaper.

Mark F. So, go ahead with your third one.

Mark H. Oh, third is a tool I know both of your are very familiar with Ask MetaFilter, but some people still don't know about this and it's, as I wrote in the show notes, it's a way to pull the hive mind.

So, if you just have some random question that you know some strangers out there will probably know the answer to, but you don't know where to look up that answer to, you go to Ask MetaFilter.

I think it's a five dollar one time signup fee. Ask the question and you usually get the answer within a couple of answer.

Over the years I haven't asked that many questions, but I've had some pretty obscure questions, like my most recent question I think was "Can anybody recommend novels that feature a protagonist who has just turned forty years old?" because I had turned forty recently and wondered if there were some good fictional accounts. And right away people said, "Oh, you've gotta read the Frank Bascombe Trilogy by Richard Ford." Boom! Like, three or four people said that in the first day and I said, "I've never even heard of this series," and I've been going through it ever since.

It's been wonderful and it's because the hive mind served up the answer so efficiently. I don't know where else I would have gotten that knowledge.

Kevin Yeah, I've long recommended Ask MetaFilter as a means for asking these kinds of questions that Google can't answer, where you're very vague. You have some unformed or unspecified recollection that you can't really even put

into words sometimes and that's what they're best at; that kind of answering questions and then they're also good at advice in the sense that that's something else that the web itself can't do.

Mark H. I like that these are questions Google can't answer.

Every time I go on somebody's saying, "Does anybody remember that movie? The guy looks to the left and then a watermelon hits the sidewalk." And in three minutes someone gives a link to the YouTube clip of that happening.

Kevin Yeah. Now, I know that Ask MetaFilter was having some financial problems recently and I think they're going to figure that out.

They claimed that Google changed their indexing algorithms to penalize the fact that there was some spam that entered into some of these comments. They didn't really have much control over it and they were dinged and the traffic went down and they now have problems with keeping going, but I think they've solved that so I think you should feel very comfortable in giving your lifetime five dollar fee.

Mark H. I sure hope they'll be around.

Matt Haughey is the founder. He's a great guy and he's really done a service to the online community, so I very much hope that he'll figure out a way to keep this running long term.

Kevin It's a great tool.

Mark F. This is something Kevin will probably be interested in also, Mark: Chinese study tools.

Mark H. Oh, yes. For a few years now I've been studying Mandarin Chinese very slowly. As I said I'm in my forties, so I'm not exactly picking it up like a whiz-kid, but I look at it as a brain game more than anything else to see how I can do.

And the single best iPhone app that I've found that I use all the time is, get ready for this name: K. T. Dict. plus C. hyphen E. Doesn't that sound amazing?

Mark F. Very catchy!

Kevin So memorable!

Mark H. Very Catchy, yes! You'll be whistling it all the way to work.

Kevin I think something was lost in translation, though.

Mark H. I think K. T. are the initials of the creator, Dict. stands for dictionary.

Anyway, find it on the webpage for the show and it's well worth four dollars to pick it up if you're interested in learning Chinese.

There's a Chinese/English dictionary which works great, really simple clear effective design in the interface, but more than that it has a flashcard system that is specifically designed for studying Chinese.

Now there are a lot of flashcard apps out there, but Chinese is a little different because if you're and English speaker learning Chinese, you have three things to memorize, the Chinese character, the definition and then the Pinyin, which is the phonetic pronunciation, including the tone.

Most flashcards will give you two sides to the card, but this one actually does three sides and it has a testing algorithm that will only let you finish a set when you have answered all three questions for each of the cards in the set and it rates you and does tracking of the metrics and everything you'd expect.

I've been using it for years and I've slowly built up to little over three hundred characters and I know that because of the tracking in the app and that's all from one flashcard app.

Kevin And does the app use the "spaced repetition algorithms" that other learning flashcard systems like Anki use and I can explain that if you don't know what that means.

Mark H. Why don't you explain it for the listeners.

Kevin It's this idea where the way your brain works is that you can remember things for a longer time if you are reminded and have to use them just about the time that you're going to forget them.

So, there's this kind of "forgetting curve" and what you want to do is you wanna space out your "forgetting curve" to the longest possible moment so that you can keep learning new things instead of having to practice the old ones, which you already know.

This algorithm will figure out and guess about the time that you're going to forget something and then you get to practice it, so it kind of expands the number of things that you learn all at once.

Mark H. I think that's a great way to approach it and I think this little app does, not exactly that, but a kind of implicit version of that in that it will bring up old cards that you previously learned in every new set and if you get those wrong then those go right back to the top of the pile and it just hammers on you until you get those right again.

So, you're constantly being tested mostly on new material and some on old material to make sure you haven't forgotten it. It's a very very clever system.

Another app that I use in tandem with that called eStroke, much better name. This one is seven bucks and if you're really serious about Chinese study you'll know that when you write in Chines you have to write those in the right order and in the right direction and it's not always clear by looking at the character what the correct order is.

So, what eStroke does (it also has a dictionary that's not quite as well designed) but what it does that the dictionary app does not so is it will show an animation of a character being drawn and that's indispensable.

Kevin If you draw it on the screen, can it correct you or grade you on how you draw it?

Mark H. Yes, it does have a template system where it will give you the outline. I'm not sure if it will grade you like, "Oh, that was the wrong direction," but it will show you the outline and the direction that each stroke has to be in. It has a lot of features.

Generally, I just use it to watch the animations and then I use it outside of the app after that.

Kevin That's great! And now I want to continue my Chinese studies. You make it sound like the tools are there.

Mark H. The tools are there and it's a lot of fun, especially that flashcard app you can use offline.

I live in New York City and I'm on the subway a lot and if I've got nothing else to do on the subway I just pick up my flashcard set and start doing flashcards and it's something you can do for a minute or ten minutes at a spot.

It's like a brain game that may actually have some use at the end of it although I'm still waiting to see if that's the case!

[Laughter]

Mark F. I really like that idea of doing something that can build up your knowledge or skill at something rather than just playing a casual game.

Mark H. Yeah, some people do crosswords or Sudoku both of which I enjoy a lot and used to do more, but Chinese is, for me, so absurdly difficult that just learning the basics of the language are like the most difficult brain game I can come up with so why not just throw myself into that one?

Mark F. So, Mark unfortunately we're out of time, but just a quick word about the healing back pain book because I've had other people tell me about this miracle book.

Fortunately, I don't have back pain but other people have said that it's a lifesaver and it's kind of like a weird theory this author has, but a lot of people swear by it.

Mark H. Well, a few years ago I was really getting tired of this recurring lower back pain that I'd had for a few years.

I was sitting down to breakfast with a friend of mine who said, "Oh, you have back pain? No problem! You just need to read the book!" and "What book? I don't wanna read a book." but he convinced me to read this book and I read it from front to back.

The book is very clear: you just need to read the entire book. A few weeks later my back pain disappeared and it really hasn't come back.

So, the book is called Healing Back Pain by Dr. John Tsarno. It's fifteen years old and it makes so much sense when you read it but it sounds a little "wu wu" if you haven't read the book. How much should I have revealed about the content of this book?

Kevin Well, actually it's a book that's been long reviewed on Cool Tools. I used it probably twenty years ago, so I think it's actually more than fifteen years. I think it's probably at least thirty years old, the book, and it's gone under different names too. I think it was something with the word "mind" in it.

The general theory is that lower back pain is often a psychosomatic disease. That it's caused by stress and mental attitude and partly what people hear is they read the book and their back pain goes away and I think the shift that happened, at least it happened for me, was that you really began to understand that back pain is not originating in something in something physical, but there is a mental component to it and just that shift is sort of enough to bring you on the path to healing.

Mark H. That's great! That a great way to put it. That's the experience I had with it as well.

Mark F. That's interesting. It reminds me about that book by Ferber about how to keep your baby from crying every half an hour when you put her to sleep.

Mark H. Was that The Happiest Baby on the Block?

Mark F. I can't remember the name of the book now but it was a great book and we trained our younger daughter in two nights to not cry every half an hour after we put her to bed so that she would just sleep through the night and it worked wonders. We didn't do that with our first kid.

Mark, I know you have to go. This has been fantastic having you on and we have to have you back on again because there were other things we missed and you're a wealth of fantastic information.

Kevin Yeah, that half hour just zipped by so fast. I think it was because we were being very productive about it!

[Laughter]

Mark F. Yeah, Exactly!

Mark H. I think we were all talking in Dvorak!

[Laughter]

Mark F. Mark, what URL should people go to to find out more about what you're up to?

Mark H. Just go to creativegood.com or follow me on Twitter @MarkHurst, either one is good.

Mark F. That sounds good. So, you can find links to all the items that Mark's talked about and our other show notes by going to cool-tools.org.

Mark, thank you so much!

Mark H. Thank you both very much for having me on.

I'm a huge fan of both of you and it was a real privilege to be on the show.