



# Rod Johnston's Real Estate Reader



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Tired of dropped calls and dead zones? Use these helpful tools to find the best mobile provider in your area.

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Thanksgiving is almost here. Make this year's holiday an event to remember by following these simple tips.

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The Oscar season is upon us. We preview some of the most highly anticipated films coming out before the New Year.

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## Finding Your Home's Value in a Turbulent Market

It's a strange, once-in-a-lifetime real estate market. Even the most seasoned Realtors are working overtime to understand the rapidly changing

values within their primary markets. Here are three things to consider when valuing a property in these conditions.

### Know your price range

In the current market, different price ranges are moving in different directions. Since many homeowners are downsizing and the government has offered incentives to first-time homebuyers, there is a race for homes at the lower end of the market, leaving many higher-end homes to languish on the market without much interest or activity. The result is that in some markets lower-priced homes are increasing in value, while higher-end homes are decreasing in value. Of course, the reverse can also be true, which is why it's important to understand the local trends within your price range.

### Understand the foreclosure market

No one is exactly sure how many foreclosures are currently on the market, how many are being withheld from the market, and how many are yet to come. However, we do know that there are a lot in the pipeline and they affect neighborhood home prices drastically. If there are a number of bank-owned properties in your neighborhood, conventional wisdom dictates that housing prices will decline throughout the neighborhood to compete with the artificially deflated prices of the bank-owned properties.

### Don't trust the internet

Over the past several years, many websites have emerged that "estimate" the value of your home based on current market conditions. Unfortunately, these estimates are often misleading or downright wrong, particularly in a turbulent market. Sellers, agents and appraisers pay no attention to these sites when assigning value, and neither should you. If you want a realistic estimate, call your agent.



## Start the New Year with a Bang

The New Year is rapidly approaching. Now is the time to consider your goals for 2010 and put your action plan together. Here are a few

simple things you can do during the holidays to hit the ground running next year.

### Talk to people who have achieved your goal

Is your resolution something that many people have accomplished before you, such as losing weight or starting a business? If so, take these last couple of months of the year to meet with people who have succeeded at your goal and ask them for advice.

### Ask for gifts that align with your goals

When people ask you what you want as a gift this holiday season, talk to them about your resolutions and describe the items you will need to complete your goals. For example, if you are trying to lose weight, you might explain how you are planning to jog regularly and ask for a new pair of running shoes.

### Make and rework your plan

Most people wait until a week or two before the New Year to begin thinking about resolutions. If you begin putting a plan together now, you will have the opportunity to consider every aspect of the plan, rework the plan, and provide every resource you need to execute your plan. The more time you spend thinking about your resolution, the more committed you will be when you start to work the plan.

# Four Creative Ways to Make This Thanksgiving More Memorable

Thanksgiving is among the most traditional of holidays, but some traditions could use a little rethinking. Here are four fun ways to spice up this Thanksgiving:



## Pass the camera around

Usually, one person gets stuck with the camera, becoming the de facto photographer for the entire holiday. Unfortunately, that person never ends up in any pictures and no one takes any pictures whenever that person is busy. Instead, set a timer for small intervals (such as 30 minutes) and have

someone new take the camera each time the timer resets. Encourage each person to take pictures of whatever or whoever they want to. This will allow everyone to be in an equal amount of pictures, while providing a continuous view of the event from several different perspectives.

## Take drink orders ahead of time

So much attention goes into Thanksgiving dinner that it's easy to overlook beverages. However, most people will go through several drinks before dinner even begins, and will continue drinking long after it ends. Take the time to call everyone who will be in attendance and ask what beverages they would like to have available. Encourage them to be specific—explaining exactly what brands and quantities they prefer. Nothing says “welcome home” quite like having someone's favorite beverage waiting for them.



## Video chat loved ones who can't be present

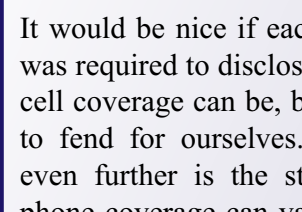
If one of your loved ones can't make it to your dinner table, you may find a video chat more satisfying than a phone call. Video chats are fun because they allow everyone in the family to communicate at once (better, cheaper and quicker than passing the phone around) while also allowing for visual feedback. These days, it takes

nothing more than a webcam (about \$10) and some free video chatting software to chat with loved ones in real time.

## Add more games to game time

For many families, watching NFL games is as much a part of Thanksgiving as eating turkey. However, sitting in front of a TV for six hours doesn't encourage family members to mingle and enjoy each other's company. Think of ways to include everyone in the games. For instance, you could let the children develop a half time show and/or propose a toast each time the home team scores.

# Tools to Find the Best Cell Phone Provider



It would be nice if each cell phone provider was required to disclose just how spotty their cell coverage can be, but until then, we have to fend for ourselves. Complicating things even further is the stubborn fact that cell phone coverage can vary so widely between different regions, even among the same provider. Here are four websites designed to help you find the best cell phone carrier in your area.

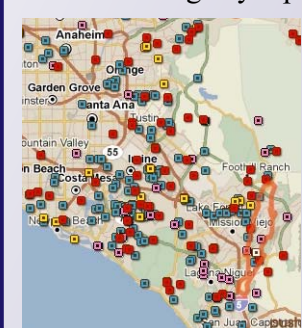
Carrier	Avg Rating	No. of Comments
▶ T-Mobile	2.38	45
▶ Nextel	2.27	11
▶ Sprint	2.2	40
▶ Verizon	2.08	79
▶ AT&T	1.49	85

## Coverage Ratings

<http://www.cellreception.com/coverage/>

Perhaps the most straightforward

resource listed here, this web application allows you to rate the cell coverage in your area, based on your own experience. Then, the site compiles all of these ratings into a simple interface that allows you to see cell carrier rankings by zip code.



## Dead Cell Zones

<http://www.deadcellzones.com/>

Having great coverage in your area won't mean much if your home or office is in a dead zone for your carrier. This

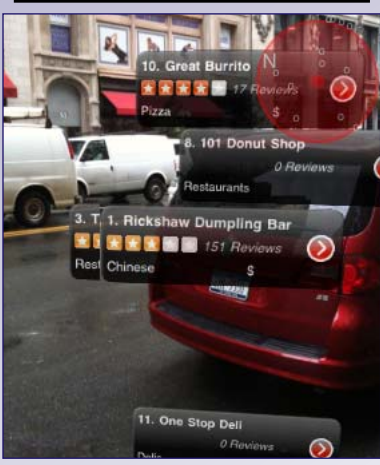
site allows you to search among reported dead zones in your area, categorized by carrier. Pay special attention the areas you spend a lot of time in, and avoid carriers that perform poorly in those areas.

## 3G Maps

<http://morethanpoints.com/2006/10/23/3g-coverage-maps-for-verizon-cingular-and-sprint>

For many smartphone users, having cell coverage is just part of the equation; it's also important to find a carrier that can deliver high-speed data to your phone without interruption. 3G is the network protocol employed by most cell carriers who offer high-speed data. Use this site to find 3G coverage maps in your area. *(continued on page 3)*

## Hot New Product



## The Future of “Augmented Reality”

Sunglasses that help you repair your car, remember names and find great restaurants may be available soon thanks to a new tech trend known as augmented reality. Augmented reality refers to computer interfaces that overlay with real-time video feeds to “augment” reality. For instance, a Yelp! application for the iPhone allows savvy users to see reviews of restaurants simply by viewing the restaurant through its camera. BMW has demonstrated how augmented reality eyeglasses could be used to repair cars with ease. Over the next several months, augmented reality applications will begin to change the way we interact with the world.

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### Mobile Towers

<http://www.cellreception.com/towers/>

The best way to guarantee great reception is to find a carrier with a cell tower in your area. All cell towers are registered with the FCC. You can find a map of cell towers in your area (categorized by carrier) at this site.



## Prepare for the Twitter Search Invasion

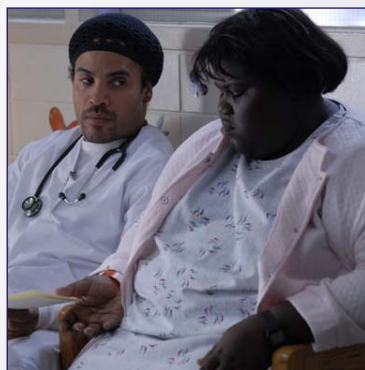
Over the last month, Twitter has signed deals with Yahoo!, Bing and Google to make search results available for indexing. In other words, in the not-so-distant future, Twitter results may appear alongside

Google results when potential customers search for your business online. Savvy businesses will begin the process of improving their Twitter presence immediately to avoid being hurt by the inevitable web search shakeup. Among the more useful tools you can use during this process is <http://twinfluence.com>, a site that scores Twitter users on a variety of metrics important to businesses, such as concentration of followers within industries or regions.

# Five Surefire Oscar Contenders for 2009



As 2009 comes to an end, studios are releasing their Academy Award contenders. As you might image, some favorites are already emerging. Here's a look at five films either highly reviewed or highly anticipated by Oscar voters.



### Precious

The clear standout at this year's Sundance Festival, *Precious* is a raw, gritty, emotional film about a 16-year-old girl born into a life of physical and emotional abuse. Critics can't stop talking about the powerful acting in this film;

don't be surprised if this movie produces a few Best Actress and/or Supporting Actress nominees as well as a Best Picture nod.



### An Education

A coming-of-age story that takes place in 1960's suburban London, this film is already out in limited release, and has collected rave reviews. Smart writing, strong acting, and

a fully-realized aesthetic make this movie a natural Oscar contender.



### Avatar

If any movie will benefit from the expanded awards format this year (there will be 10 Best Picture nominees instead of the usual five), it will probably be *Avatar*—director James

Cameron's wildly imaginative, CGI-heavy action movie about a human invasion of an extraterrestrial moon, inhabited by sparkling blue humanoid creatures.



### Nine

Critical darling director Rob Marshall (Chicago) teams up with Daniel Day-Lewis, Nicole Kidman, Penelope Cruz, Judi Dench,

Marillon Cotillard—to name a few—in what figures to be the surest thing this award season.



### Up in the Air

George Clooney has been a constant at the Academy Awards over the last several years. This year's Oscar vehicle is *Up in the Air*, a dramedy that pairs him with Juno director

Jason Reitman in a movie that promises to be both entertaining and insightful