

Product Spotlight



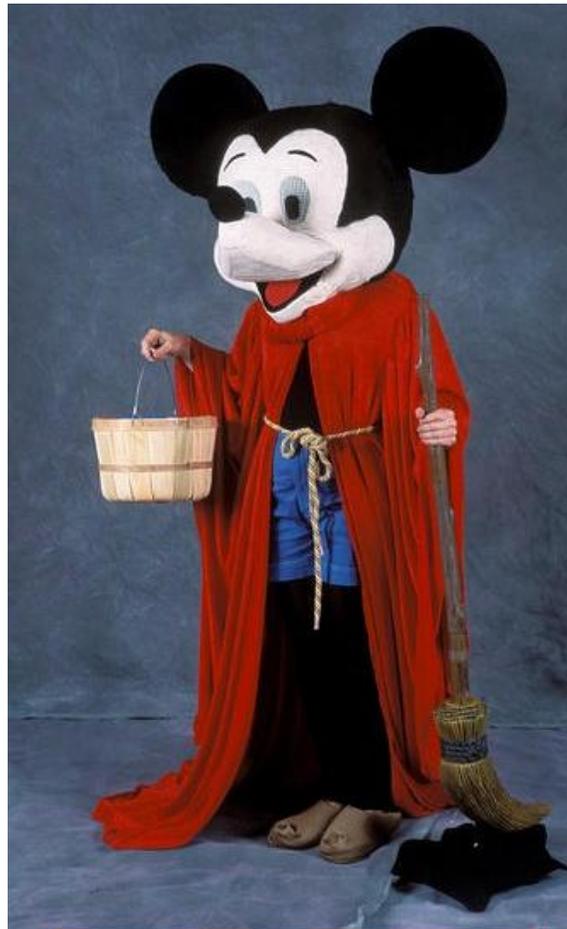
After-Halloween Special Effects Buyer's Guide *Philip Gust**

After-Halloween sales are a great place for costumers to stock up on “special effects” items that are hard to find almost any other time of the year, at bargain prices.

Stores like the [Spirit Halloween](#) store chain that sprout up every Halloween, your local costume shop, and even merchandizers like Orchard Supply Hardware (OSH), stock a wide variety of Halloween-oriented supplies. Even in mid-August as I write this, the first displays of decorations and costumes have begun to appear. Thrift stores are also getting into the act, with second-hand toys, costumes, and selections of clothing that appeal to trick-or-treaters.

Halloween is a great time for costumers to stock up on hard-to-find items. Sure, there are cheesy costumes and bad wigs that “real” costumers sniff at as they pass by, but there are also some true gems that deserve a second look. For me, Halloween is the time that I stock up on things that can be used to create costuming special effects (*cFX*). Items that are normally expensive and extremely hard to find are plentiful and relatively inexpensive.

If you already have costuming projects in mind, and keep your eyes open, you may find exactly what you're looking for, or even something that you hadn't considered, during Halloween. Several years ago, my wife Kathe and I were planning on entering



Kathe Gust as The Sorcerer's Apprentice with animatronic broom. Photo by [Richard Man](#).

a masquerade as the sorcerer Yensid with Mickey Mouse as the Sorcerer's Apprentice, and we need a broom for Mickey. I could have built one, but while walking through a Halloween store, I spotted the perfect broom, made of hollow plastic, which looked like like it could have come from the Disney prop shop. It even lit up and had thunder sound effects built in. The original price was over \$30, but it was marked down to around \$12 because this was the day after Halloween and it was the only one left.

Needless to say, we grabbed it immediately, and I used it to create an animatronic broom that chased Micky off stage at the end of the masquerade presentation. Pure luck? Sure, but also keeping a list of things I was looking for in mind during the Halloween season.

While you might find something just too good to pass up before Halloween, the best time to shop is a few days before and the morning after, when stores put their merchandise on sale. You'll find items from 25% up to 75% off, making them an even better bargain. Oddly enough, the highest discounts seem to be on *cFX* items.

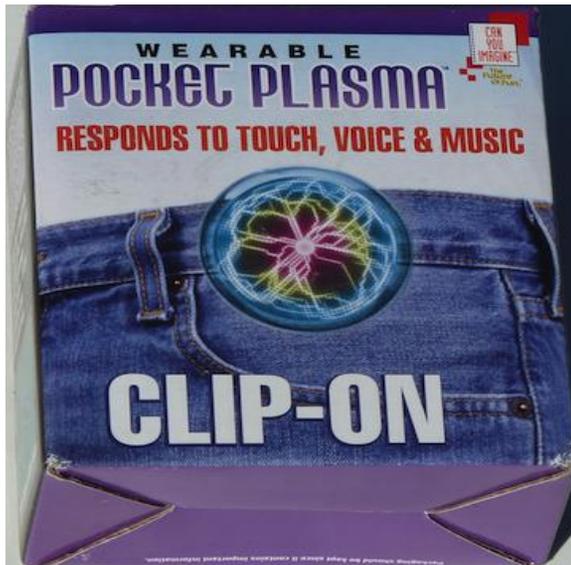
Because I do enough of it, I buy items even if I don't have a project in mind. My guideline is that if it grabs me, buy it. When I use it in a costume, it will probably grab a masquerade audience or people in the

hallway who see me walk by, too. And if it really grabs me and they have more than one, I buy several. Things break, so having a spare is handy, and I often find uses in other costumes, too.

To illustrate, here is a little post-Halloween buyer's guide of a few things that I've found in stores and on-line at post-Halloween sales in the last few years.

Pocket Plasma

In the last several years, plasma-type devices suitable for use on costumes have become widely available at reasonable prices. One of the first was the wearable Pocket Plasma, a clip-on disk with a battery that produces similar effects to a plasma ball, but on a flat surface instead of in a globe. These devices have settings for a constant glow, pulsed effects, and even one that reacts to sounds.



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The device is around three inches in diameter and about an inch thick at the electronics box attached to the back. The glow effect is a little subtle, and best used for hall costumes and in controlled lighting conditions. Regular price: \$15, found at an after-Halloween sale for \$6.50.

Thunder and Lightning FX Box

This is an effects box that includes thunder effects and a flashing strobe light that simulates lightning. It includes a strap that can be used to wear the device around the waist. A button on the front allows you to manually trigger it, but there is also a sensor that allows you to activate it with a sharp sound, like clapping your hands. You can dismantle the box and repurpose the electronics into whatever enclosure suits the costume. Buy several if you plan to do this.

The box is around four inches wide, two inches high, and about an inch thick. The thunder sound is quite loud, and the strobe effect is strong, although not as strong as a real strobe. Still, it could be used in a more intimate masquerade setting or for a hall costume in normal lighting and sound conditions. Regular price: \$24.99, found at an OSH after-Halloween sale for \$8.99.

Voice Disguiser

There are a number of voice disguisers on the market throughout the year, but these items are especially inexpensive during Halloween. You'll find a various kinds of voices listed, depending on which model you find, including killer carnivore, evil



wizard, warty witch, and space alien. Most of these boxes include a microphone that enables you to disguise the voice changer itself somewhere on your costume, and run the microphone cord up in to your mask or helmet. The box also also includes a built-in speaker.

Some of the boxes are easily modified, such as adding a jack to unplug the mic cord from the box to make putting your costume on and taking it off easier. The electronics can sometimes also be repurposed into whatever enclosure suits the costume. Buy several if you plan to do this.

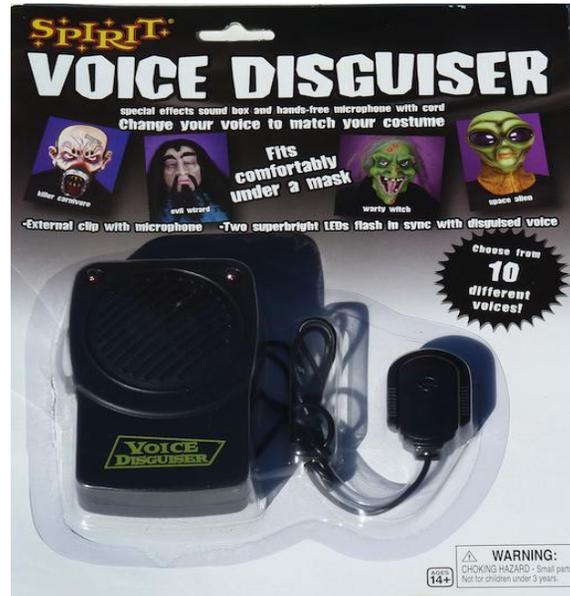
Boxes for this kind of product are typically the size of a credit card and around ½ inches to ¾ inches thick. The output volume is typically suitable for a hall costume in a small convention hallway. The unit pictured is made for the Spirit Halloween stores. Regular price: \$15, found at an after-Halloween sale for \$7.95.

Halloween Strobe Light Set

This battery operated string of twelve LED lights produces a strobing effect as well as a thunder sound. All the lights flash at the same time, and there is no option on this Spirit Halloween store distributed set to select other patterns, such as a chase effect. You can either press the button to get a one-minute duration thunder and lightning show, or turn it on and off using a switch on the electronics box at one end of the wire that connects the bulbs together. The individual LED lights are built into reflector hoods that enhance the brightness of the effect. The enclosures can be embedded into a costume,



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be a little tricky because the wires are not detachable from the enclosures.

The output volume is suitable for a hall costume in a typical regional convention hallway. The strobe effect is bright enough for a masquerade with controlled lighting conditions. Regular price: \$19.99, found at an after-Halloween sale for \$9.99.

Candle Set

This battery operated set of candles is meant to simulate lit candles that can be safely carried in places where open flames are not permitted. Sets are available in many sizes, and provide “realistic” flickering flame effects. The light source for recent models is high-

intensity LEDs with a yellow cap that diffuses the light and gives it a flame color. Candles are useful accessories for ghostly apparitions or pre-electricity period outfits.

The light from these candles varies, depending on the brand. They are certainly good enough for hall costumes, or for presentations with controlled lighting. Prices vary considerably, depending on quality. Price for this set: \$19.98, found at a craft store after-Halloween sale for \$7.98

Sound/Light Laser Sword

This keychain packs a wallop! It includes a strong red LED light and the sound effect of a ray-gun in a tiny package. You press a small button on the handle of the “laser sword” to activate the sound and light effects, and release to stop them. The light illuminates the hollow transparent rod from the base, and the sound and light warble to create a dangerous looking effect.





You can use these swords to create interesting lighting effects when concealed in various parts of the costume, or in the palm of your hand. I typically take these units apart to conceal in props, such as a prop blaster or even a thermal detonator where I want both light and sound effects. I normally buy a dozen or so when they're available. Regular price: \$4.95, found in a variety store bargain bin after-Halloween close-out for \$2.98.

Super Bright LED Flasher

While not strictly a Halloween item, Halloween stores do sell these for kids to wear while trick-or-treating. The unit can strap onto an arm, and the row of embedded LEDs can flash in a variety of patterns, including a slow pulse that could be used as

the heart beneath the shroud of a ghostly bride, or a chase pattern that could be the eye of a cyborg cyclops.

Since it is meant as a safety device, the lights are very bright and the unit can easily be seen from a masquerade stage as well as in a convention hallway under daylight conditions. Regular price: \$5.95, found at an OSH after-Halloween sale for \$3.95.

Wizard Stick

This is a functioning smoke machine toy. It uses glycol fluid, like regular smoke machines. The difference is that this one runs on six size AA batteries rather than house current, and you can hold it in your hand. When you pull the trigger partially, a blue LED lights up, and the heating element begins to heat up. After a few seconds, a stronger pull on the trigger pushes against a medicine dropper, which forces the fluid onto the heating element, causing it to vaporize and be ejected out the top.



Once it gets going, it produces a lot of smoke for its size, though not nearly as much as a full-size smoke machine. With no air currents, the smoke will slowly dissipate over the course of 30 seconds to a minute. This unit is suitable for hand-held use, or embedded in a tank of a Steampunk hall costume. *CAUTION: Glycol may stain clothing – take precautions.* Regular price: \$24.95, found on sale at an after-Halloween costume store sale for \$10.99.

Philip Gust enjoys sci-fi and fantasy costuming, and has particular interests in props, special effects, and prosthetic makeup. He also costumes in historical periods, including Regency, Victorian, and early 20th C.