Pocket PC and the Palm OS make Elite's holiday gift list

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Columnist

Look around you. What do you see? You have been carrying a bulky planner, with notes flying

from all ends, while others have a organized to-do lists, address books and their calendars in portable (and stylish) personal digital assistants (PDAs) that fit in a purse or pocket.

Others are going to the gym with portable CD players, hoping to catch some good tunes while breaking a sweat. Instead, the CD skips every time you take a step and you have to stop and switch the CD because you're bored of the beat after 30 minutes.

Technology continues to improve our world through faster and more efficient toys. Think about adding these two gadgets to your holiday wish list.

Personal Digital Assistants

(PDAS). At one time, these personal handheld computers were only capable of basic organization with calendars and to-do lists, but now they have been upgraded to connect to the Internet, download photographs and edit Word documents all in the palm of your hand.

If all you need is that calendar and to-do list then the Palm OS is perfect for you. For those wanting a little more power out of their compact machines, the Pocket PCs offer Internet and editing software.

There are two mainstream PDAs, the Palm OS (Palm, Sony and Handspring) and Pocket PC (HP, Toshiba, Dell and ViewSonic). Deciding on which one to purchase is based on your needs.

Price.

Palm OS devices run from $99 to $800, and Pocket PCs range from $200 to $800. The price differential exists because the Pocket PC has additional multimedia capabilities and increased memory.

Capabilities.

While all PDAs handle contacts, calendars and to-do lists on equal levels, other features are available. Pocket PCs integrate Microsoft Word and Excel with a program called Pocket Office. This allows the user to edit existing desktop files that are downloaded from the desktop to the handheld. While the advanced features of the Microsoft Office programs are not available on the Pocket PC, you are able to work on your files even when you are not at your computer.

The Palm OS uses Documents to Go Professional, a popular Office suite usually bundled with advanced Palm OS purchases, and offers advanced features that support PowerPoint and chart capabilities in Excel.

Size and Weight.

Many people are looking to replace their bulky planners with a small, unobtrusive fit-in-your-pocket PDA. The Palm m500, m505 and m515 are slim and light. The iPAQ 1910 is currently the thinnest and lightest Pocket PC. Generally, Pocket PCs are larger than the Palm OS devices, but that's slowly changing.

Battery Life.

The Palm OS runs on a set of AAA batteries that will last up to one month. Some Palm OS devices can use rechargeable batteries that will last up to a week and will recharge in about an hour. Pocket PCs have rechargeable lithium batteries, lasting approximately 3 hours of solid "on" time. The rechargeable batteries are great for the environment and save money.

RAM.

The amount of RAM listed refers to the amount of storage memory available for any programs and data you choose to install on your PDA. Pocket PC devices actually share RAM between storage and operating memory, which means some of the RAM is dedicated to the brain power required to run program (think of it as sharing RAM between your computer and hard drive). Because the Pocket PC programs share storage and operating memory in RAM, they need more memory. On average, Pocket PC PDAs run on 32-64 MB of RAM. On the other hand, if you are using a Palm OS, 8-16 MB of RAM is average.

MP3 Players.

In 1998, Diamond Multimedia released the Diamond Rio PMP300, the first MP3 player, marking the, beginning of one of the most controversial technology toys. The Recording Industry Association of America instantly took a stance against the company and product.

As the popularity of Napster and other mainstream online file sharing sites prospered, the RIAA legally attacked the copyright infringement violations with law suits.

Claiming that file sharing has resulted in millions of dollars in lost revenue for the record labels and artists, the RIAA recently made their campaign clear when 261 "everyday computer users" were sued for using such services as Grokster, KaZaa and Morpheus.

While concerns about file sharing should definitely be considered, don't scratch the MP3 player off your wish list just yet. There are many ways to legally get the latest music.

With the end of Napster and the slow decline of other illegal file-swapping Internet sites, new download services have emerged to sell songs legally.

Now that you have your favorite tunes downloaded, it's time for a MP3 player. Portable MP3 players allow users to store hundreds of songs. A 32 MB player will store approximately one album of music.

To get your perfect musical companion, check out the two options – hard drive and flash memory players.

Hard Drive-based Players.

The main advantage of a hard drive-based player is the massive storage space available for your music files. For example, the average 64MB flash memory player offers approximately an hour's worth of tunes, while the hard disk holds hundreds of hours.

The high memory also allows faster downloading and transferring of music to the portable system.

Top Rated Products by PC Magazine's Nov. 11, 2003 issue:

The Apple iPod ($499 at www.apple.com/ipod) is lighter and thinner than most hard drive players and uses FireWire for file transfers (a USB 2.0 cradle can be purchased and used for $39) for the 30 GB model. The rechargeable batteries provide nine hours of play.

The Creative Labs Nomad Jukebox Jen NX ($300 at www.nomadworld.com) offers 30 GB of storage with a 14 hour battery life. Music is transferred to the device through a USB cord.

Flash Memory.

The original MP3 players used tiny static-flash memory players. These players can typically store approximately an album worth of songs, and music can be easily added and erased from the player.

Top Rated Products by PC Magazine's November 11, 2003 issue: The Creative Lab Nomad MuVo NX ($150 at www.nomadworld.com) includes a music player, voice recorder and 128MB of storage into the size of a key chain.

The Rio Cali ($200 at www.rioaudio.com) stores 256 MB of music, offers great battery life, and has athletic features such as an FM tuner, stopwatch and button-locking options.

Start that holiday shopping early and keep the wish lists flowing. For information on other technology gadgets, check out next week's article on DVD players and recorders.

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