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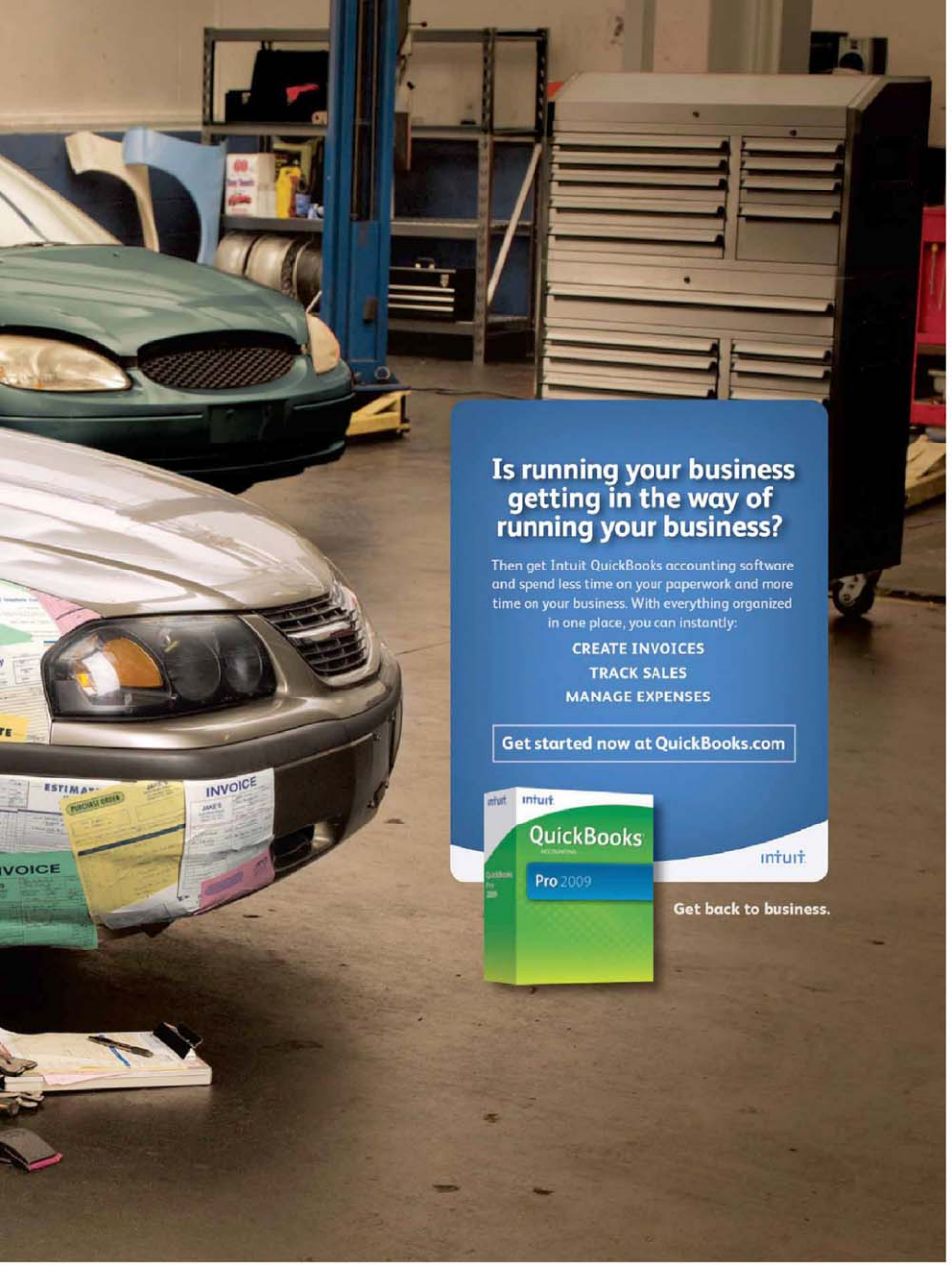
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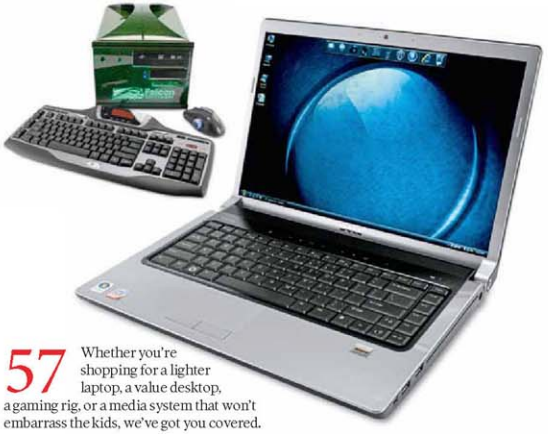

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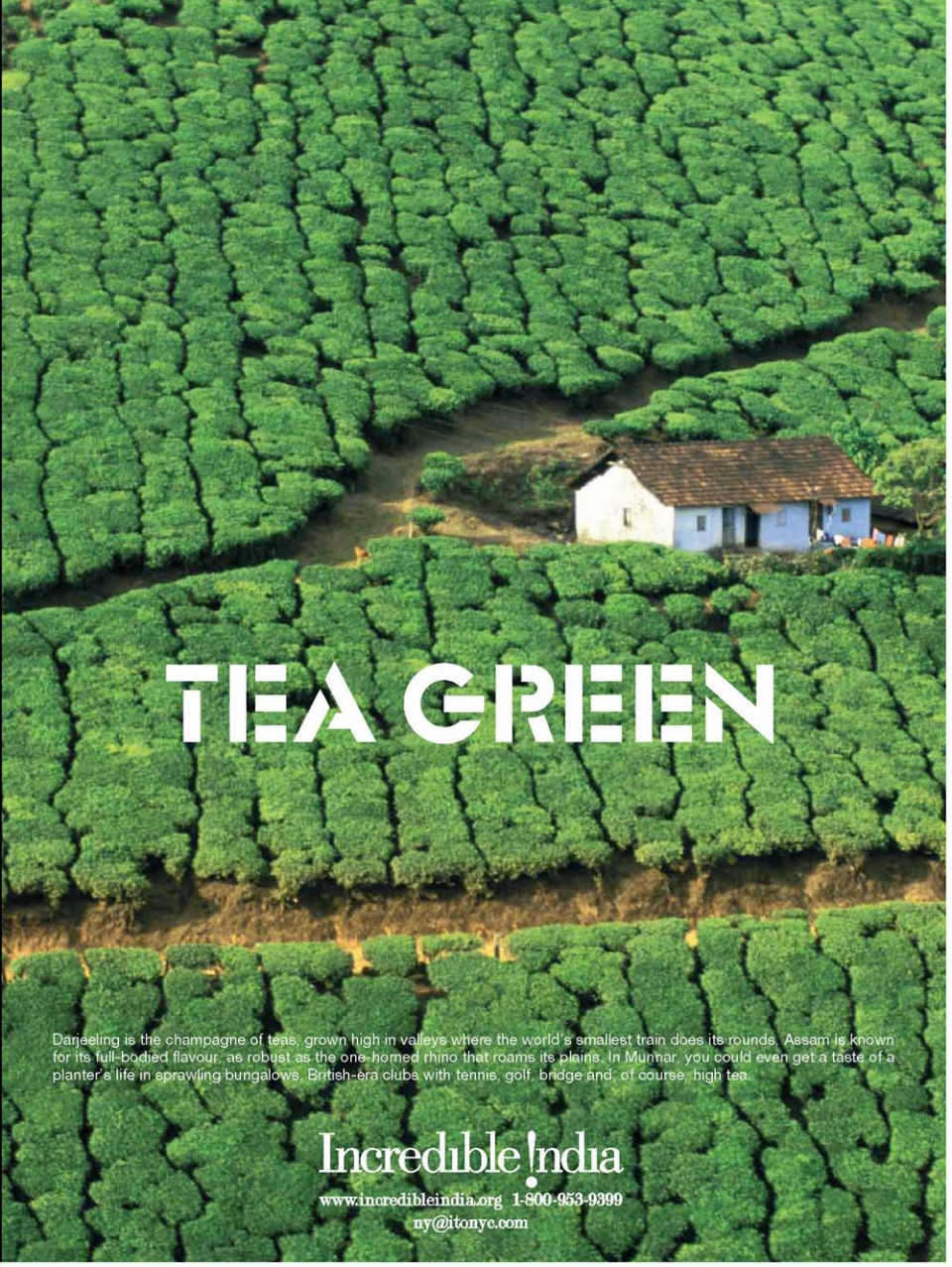
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When Your PC Is a Born Loser

A few weeks ago, a friend of mine told me about his wonky laptop. It was a familiar story. His newish Vista box had, without much warning, begun collapsing into a blue-screen funk almost daily. He complained that he'd spent countless hours on the phone with Dell support techs, all of whom were kind, polite, and intent on being helpful.

Unfortunately, none of them had actually helped him at all.

We were near my friend's office, so we stopped in so he could show me the laptop. It was barely two months old. The blue screens had begun within a few weeks of his buying this Dell XPS M1530—one of PC Mag's favorites (laptop analyst Cisco Cheng gave it four out of five stars). I asked my friend the usual questions: Had he installed any unusual apps, visited any odd sites, or opened an e-mail attachment that he probably shouldn't have?

His response: "No. It happens when I use the browser."

That seemed somewhat specific. In my experience, it's usually pretty hard to re-create a blue-screen experience. But my friend walked me through a simple series of steps.

"I start it up, open the browser, visit this site [one chosen from his favorites in IE7], and then…."

He trailed off as the system lapsed into a blue-screen coma. I was surprised. Rarely had I seen a consumer so expertly re-create a PC malfunction.

Holding a sheaf of papers in his hand, my friend pointed out notes from six different multi-hour support calls. He'd recorded the names of the support techs, as well as the time, date, and duration of every call. Each support tech had tried something different. For example, even though the PC came with security software, one tech had him install new protection from Trend Micro. In fact, there was a lot of utility installing and uninstalling. None of it worked.

At no time did the techs offer to take the PC back. That's not too surprising, since no manufacturer wants to get back every PC with a problem. Typically, system issues arise from user ignorance or a simple setting change that's easily reversed or altered. For my friend, though, this was not the case.

I spent 45 minutes looking through the computer's processes in the Task Manager to see if I could find anything that could be hijacking his system or causing what I assumed was a driver collision leading to the blue screens. I found nothing.

Are some PCs born bad? Our reader survey indicates that they are. Manufacturers and their support techs need to accept this as fact and act accordingly.

In the end, the PC was returned to Dell, and my friend got a new laptop that works. This brings me back to my big question: Are some PCs born bad? Are they, like bad cars fresh off the assembly line, lemons?

Some of the results from our recent Service and Reliability survey support this notion. Nearly 20,000 *PC Magazine* readers responded to our questions about their experiences with new laptops and desktops (as well as a host of other product categories). In the case of one manufacturer, HP, 2.3 percent of desktops and 3 percent of laptops needed to be replaced entirely. For Dell laptops, the figure is 2.8 percent, and my friend had the bad luck to fall into that percentage. With so many systems sold each year, inexplicable glitches and subsequent returns are probably to be expected.

Honestly, my own still relatively new PC at home has certain issues that persist to this day. For example, the wireless mouse and keyboard have a heck of a time communicating with the wireless USB dongle, despite being just 5 feet from one another. Here's a second example: The multiformat media card reader regularly acts as if it doesn't exist. I plug in an SD or compact flash card and nothing happens. If I had more time, I guess I'd contact HP tech support, but I usually forget about these issues until I'm once again sitting down in front of the PC. Then I grumble and remind myself that I have to contact HP. Still, why doesn't the damn thing work?

But I digress.

If we accept that some of the PCs that come off the assembly line are duds, should the support techs working for Acer, Dell, HP, Lenovo, and other manufacturers also be able to recognize this? If they did, then they'd know by the second 2-hour call that they are dealing with a problem that can't be solved over the telephone, and they should simply take back the PC. A new system could go to the frustrated customer, and the manufacturer could take the lemon, tear it apart, and see exactly where those malfunctioning parts reside. The computer maker thus gains some valuable information for future system builds, and at the same time satisfies someone who is now more likely to remain a customer and buy another system in the future.

I doubt this will happen, though. Most PC manufacturers seem to believe it's more cost-effective to have some guy in India try gamely to coax you into believing the problem is with you, and not with your PC.

TALK TO THE CHIEF *You can contact Lance at* Lance_Ulanoff@ziffdavis.com. *For more of his columns, go to* go.pcmag.com/ulanoff.

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FeedBack

Audiophiles Are Not Snobs

I have to express my disappointment with Tim Gideon's comment, in his review of the iriver Lplayer ("Slick Little Player Excels at File Support," September, page 49), calling those of us who prefer high-resolution music files "snobs." It's ironic that in an issue comparing the best and worse, Mr. Gideon seems to have no problem with the multitudes who seek high-resolution content in the video world with Blu-ray, HDTV, and the variety of monitors that have replaced CRTs. MP3 is an archaic format and should be relegated to the scrap heap—especially at the miserable bit rates offered by most of the download services.—*Robert Bullion*

Another View of Bill Gates

In regard to *PC Magazine*'s interview of Bill Gates in the September issue ("Bill Gates: The Exit Interview," page 74), in the eighties many of us took great pleasure in the success of fellow geek Bill Gates. He is not, however, Henry Ford. Microsoft did not become big and wealthy because of any technological prescience, nor by any great business acumen. It became great because IBM sought out Bill Gates to provide an operating system for its newly developed microcomputer, and then proceeded to include that operating system in millions of PCs. IBM immediately set the standard, and third-party software developers proceeded to provide applications for Microsoft DOS. Other microcomputer manufacturers (with the exception of Apple and a few others) preloaded their machines with DOS to be as much like IBM as possible. Windows was not an immediate success, because most users did not need the Apple-like graphical interface.

Microsoft did do one clever thing with Word: It provided an option to allow it to run as if it were MultiMate or Word Perfect. When a user did something in one of these modes, the software advised them of how that task would have been done in Word's native mode, thus teaching the user how to use Word. Microsoft also gave away many thousands of copies of it to corporate users and provided them with a special 800-number help line. Finally, it started packaging Word together with other software at a very attractive price.

Bill Gates took an opportunity and made the most of it. He deserves a great deal of credit for this, but let's not overstate his accomplishments.—*Bruce Powell*

Don't Jump the Gun, Microsoft

I nearly cried when I read the various articles in the August 2008 issue of *PC Magazine*. How can Microsoft even contemplate "pillars" and touchscreens when it still hasn't given us two things we all would like: (1) a system that is robust enough to do two things at the same time without freezing and requiring a restart, and (2) the ability to print a directory from Windows Explorer?—*Joyce McDowell*

A Mac User's Take on Vista

I have to disagree with John C. Dvorak in his Inside Track column in the August issue (page 53). He says: "The PC users familiar with Vista hated it, but the Mac users said it was great. I've now concluded that the Mac users were just playing with it and enjoyed its fancy look-and-feel. They never really used it."

I see it differently. I've used Macs from OS 10.1.0 through Tiger and found them to have great stability. They weren't always able to run what I needed, however (compatibility issues in a business environment). In 2005, I formed a hate-hate relationship with Win XP—lockups and blue screens galore. I couldn't wait to ditch it.

Vista has a much easier network setup (almost as easy as OS X) and printer setup (at least using TCP-IP). I've never gotten a blue screen of death with Vista. And, yes, it is pretty.

I suspect Mac users are more tolerant of change. Vista demands a brief yet steep learning curve, creating newbies out of many experienced users (including the experts). Change is difficult, but as I see it, Vista has many more pluses than minuses.—*Tony DeAngelis*

CORRECTIONS AND AMPLIFICATIONS
In our October Front Side story, "The Most Wired Campuses," we incorrectly stated that at Kansas State University more than 76 percent of instructors deliver lectures online. According to the university, the actual number is below this percentage.

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The Best Tech You Can't Get

Overseas technology often trumps even the best gear we have in the U.S.

Everything is better here in the U.S., right? While that may be true for cheeseburgers, colleges, and pop music, it's not always the case with technology. In fact, there are many devices that are sold only overseas that would make U.S. technophiles drool.

For example, how would you like a handheld device that could replace your laptop, cell phone, camcorder, GPS, and iPod? The Miutech Hybrid Dual (sold only in South Korea, for about $500) is slightly larger than an average cell phone, runs Windows XP and Linux Qplus, and contains a 30GB or 60GB hard drive, a processor that can be up to 1 GHz, a full QWERTY keyboard, a 4-inch LCD, Wi-Fi, and Bluetooth 2.0 compatibility. And if you think the iPhone is slim, take a look at the Samsung SGH-U100, the world's thinnest smartphone. It's 5.9mm thick and—you guessed it—sold only abroad.

HDTVs are another category with amazing models sold elsewhere. The Sony Bravia KDL-32JE1 is an eco-friendly LCD that runs on only 89 watts of power (as opposed to the 160 watts that Bravia models in America use) and is made from recycled plastics from old color CRTs and polystyrene foam from packaging. And Pioneer is entering the LCD game—but only in Europe—with its KURO line, including many of the same features as the company's plasma sets. Korea is taking GPS to the next level with the JATY DR7200 (below), which crams in mountain, car, and golf navigation, video playback, a photo viewer, an e-book reader, and even a breathalyzer behind its 7-inch touch screen.

So why not sell this device and other gadgets like it in the U.S.? The answer lies in the culture of American consumers.

According to Jeff Yang, a columnist for the *San Francisco Chronicle* who writes about Asian culture, the market in Japan, for example, is driven by early adopters (in many cases, teenagers) who want nothing short of the bleeding edge—and are willing to pay for it. But in the U.S., Yang writes, "the average U.S. electronics consumer is driven more by cost and value than by features and technological sophistication."

Two other factors that come into play are the market influence of U.S. businesses and consumers 50 years and older. Both groups want affordable, trusty tech instead of the smallest, fastest, or flashiest.

But for U.S. early adopters there's some hope that products like these will make their way here soon. Increasing interest in UMPCs and multifunction cell phones among U.S. consumers, for example, has already led to an increase in products available here from companies such as HP, ASUS, LG, and Nokia. Apple's innovations have driven demand for high-end tech products besides the iPhone and iPod. A number of products that are released overseas eventually make it to our shores. Since we ran our 2007 list of foreign gadgets, devices such as the Sony Rolly, LG Prada, and Nokia E90 have become available stateside.—*Corinne Iozzio*

To see more gadgets that are available only in other countries, check out our slideshow at go.pcmag.com/foreigntech.

JUST OUT OF REACH Some of the cool gadgets sold overseas include a pocket video cam and slim waterproof phone.

The Slowdown of SuperSpeed USB

The much-anticipated USB 3.0 promises breakneck speed—if developers can get it to market.

Imagine uploading an entire HD movie to your laptop in just over a minute. Or how about downloading all the MP3 files of an audiobook to your player in seconds? Sounds great, right?

Developers of the next-generation of USB technology are hoping to deliver on that promise when they release the spec for USB 3.0—also known as SuperSpeed USB—in the fourth quarter of this year. In August, Intel released the larger part of the spec for the Extensible Host Controller Interface (xHCI) for USB 3.0. The company is part of the USB Implementers Forum, a group of tech giants including HP, Intel, Microsoft, and Texas Instruments who create the USB protocols. The xHCI interface is 90 percent of what manufacturers need to build silicon compatible with the new standard.

Once the standard is released, Intel says, the results will be dramatic. Jeff Ravencraft, president and chair of the USB-IF and a technology strategist at Intel, boasts, "It's going to have over ten times the performance [of USB 2.0]." With USB 3.0's dedicated lines going in and out, communications between host and device will be simultaneous. Also, the data-transfer rate will jump from 480 megabits per second to a whopping 5 gigabits per second.

Because the spec has been on the table for over a year, many are wondering what's holding up its release. Intel competitors AMD and nVidia complained that Intel was unfairly delaying release of the spec to give itself an advantage. To counter, Intel spokesperson Nick Knupffer points out that Intel was absorbing the cost of developing the spec, thus saving AMD and nVidia the cost of developing one themselves. "This is the same way we've done it with USB 2.0," Knupffer says.

So when will USB 3.0–compatible products hit stores? Manufacturers are expected to release the first round in late 2009. —*Anne Louise Bannon*

BEST OF OUR BLOGS

TECHNORIDE *www.technoride.com*

Toyota Wheels Out Segway-Like "Winglet"

The Winglet is Toyota's newest attempt to upstage the American-made Segway by delivering its own funky, battery-powered personal transport device. Offered in three iterations, the "S," "M," and "L," the Winglet is based on some of Sony's latest robotics technology. The Winglet "robotic transporter" certainly scores points for agility and a roller-skate-like, fun-to-ride character. However, it's only good for roughly 3.7 mph and just over 6 miles between charges across all models. By contrast, the Segway is nearly four times heavier but can speed up to 12.5 mph and go 24 miles on a single charge. Toyota is hoping to introduce a market version of the Winglet by 2010.—*Steven Volynets*

SMART DEVICE CENTRAL *www.smartdevicecentral.com*

How To: Listen to Internet Radio on Your Windows Mobile Handset

With today's high-speed broadband connections and Wi-Fi-equipped handsets, almost any smartphone can act as a radio player, but since Windows Mobile is the most prevalent smartphone OS, here are a few resources for listening to Internet radio on that platform. e-Mobile Radio 1.5, $19.95, *www.handango.com;* Mobile Satellite Radio (XM), $21.95, *www.handango.com;* PocketStreamer Pro, $19.95, *www.pocketgear.com;* Resco Pocket Radio, $19.99, *www.resco.net/pocketpc/radio.*—*Jamie Lendino*

GEARLOG *www.gearlog.com*

Hands On: Jakks Pacific EyeClops Night Vision

Though this is a kids' gadget, we still had fun testing it. The EyeClops ($79.99) takes five AA batteries and includes a small display and LED light for seeing at greater distances. Amazingly, though my test environment consisted of almost total darkness, I was able to see people and objects pretty clearly up close. Because of the small virtual display, objects in the distance can look pretty murky. The goggles diminish your peripheral vision and depth perception, so I had to flip up the eye piece to get my bearings.—*Brian Bennett*

GOODCLEANTECH *www.goodcleantech.com*

New Low-Cost Solar Cells Made Using Pizza Oven

Even with the impending price drop for PV cells, many people in developing countries can't afford solar installations. A process called iJET, from Australian PhD student Nicole Kueppers (above), produces solar cells using low-cost materials and has low energy requirements. iJET enlists an inkjet printer, solvent, and a pizza oven. It might take five years for the technology to be commercialized. —*Mariella Moon*

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Rather than focus on lengthy descriptions of the author's background, influences, and similarities to other works, LitMob cuts to the core of a book, giving you a plot synopsis, enough information to get you interested, and enough background information to get you reading.—*Alan Henry*

SPORCLE
www.sporcle.com
Take hundreds of race-against-the-clock quizzes covering every subject from politics and geography to sports and television. Sporcle developers are working on letting users create their own quizzes.
—*Brittany Petersen*

THEMOVIEMAP
www.themoviemap.com
This community-sourced Google Maps mashup allows members and visitors to populate an interactive global map with locations of scenes from their favorite movies, and even add photos of the locations and the filming.—*AH*

For more cool Web sites and handy utilities and apps, visit PC Magazine's *blog AppScout* (www.appscout.com).

CONNECTED TRAVELER

Speed Through Airport Security

These TSA-approved, checkpoint-friendly laptop bags can save valuable time and avoid hassles at the x-ray machine.

Getting through airport security isn't exactly painless for the 25 percent of travelers who carry laptops. You're asked to remove your laptop from its case or bag and place it into a bin, which tends to hold up the line of passengers. But as of August 16, air travelers who use a "checkpoint-friendly" laptop bag or case don't have to remove notebook computers before the X-ray.

Forty manufacturers submitted laptop case prototypes to the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) for testing, and at three airports live tests of these prototypes have been under way. For a bag to be considered checkpoint-friendly, the TSA states that it must meet the following five standards: it must have a designated laptop-only section; the laptop-only section must completely unfold to lie flat on the X-ray belt; there can be no metal snaps, zippers, or buckles inside, underneath, or on top of the laptop-only section; no pockets are allowed on the inside or outside of the laptop-only section; nothing can be packed in the laptop-only section other than the computer itself. Here's a look at some of the models that meet these criteria.

The **(1) Briggs & Riley Travelware Speed-Thru** ($89.99) is a laptop sleeve that's not only checkpoint-friendly but also integrates with the company's "@work" and "verb" business case collections. **(2) Mobile Edge** recently introduced three new TSA-compliant case designs as part of the company's **ScanFast** collection. This product line includes a backpack, a briefcase, and a messenger bag ($99 each), all designed to open easily for airport screeners. The backpack can hold a laptop with a screen up to 17 inches, and the briefcase and messenger bag will accommodate screens up to 15.4 inches. The **(3) Aerovation Checkpoint-Friendly Laptop Bag** ($129.95) is a no-nonsense bag designed by engineers and pilots. It has two compartments—one with 4mm of EVA foam padding for a laptop with a screen size of up to 15.4 inches and another to store accessories. And its handy top hinge simplifies the process of folding it open and laying it on the conveyor belt.

Specifically designed for the MacBook Air, the **(4) Incipio Orion** laptop sleeve ($34.95) is made from high-density foam, lined with suede microfiber, and comes in seven colors. The company also makes the QuickCheck bag series for other MacBook models. Finally, the **(5) CODi Phantom CT3** ($225) features three stylus/pen pockets, four elasticized pockets, dual business/credit card pockets, a key fob, and an ergonomic shoulder strap.
—*Jennifer L. DeLeo*

CASIO

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http://exilim.casio.com

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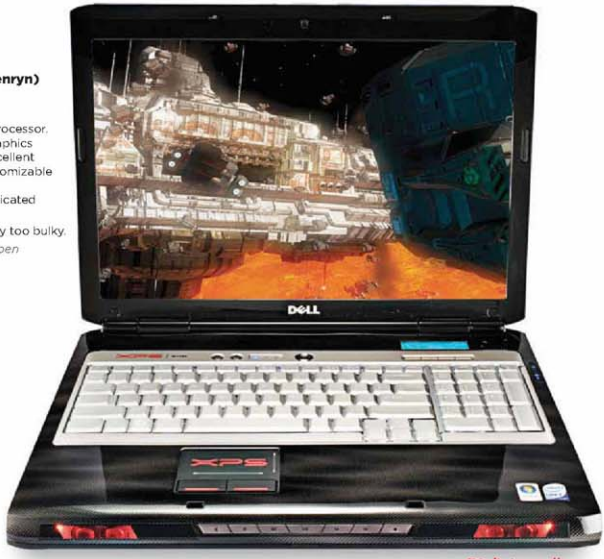
Dell XPS M1730 (Penryn)
$4,184 direct
●●●●○

PROS Intel Extreme processor. Best mobile nVidia graphics to date. 4GB RAM. Excellent LED accents with customizable themes and colors. SLI configuration. Dedicated Ageia PhysX card.

CONS Very pricey. Way too bulky.

go.pcmag.com/m1730pen



LED lights all around the laptop

DELL XPS M1730 (PENRYN)

Mobile Gaming Beast

The newest Dell XPS M1730 (Penryn) is an awe-inspiring piece of technological splendor. A bold statement, yes, but one that's easily warranted by this masterfully designed gaming laptop, despite its size and heft.

Weight is, in fact, this rig's only limitation. With its gigantic AC adapter, the weight of the 17-inch, widescreen M1730 jumps to almost 14 pounds. Nonetheless, the M1730 is a terrific example of where technology is heading. LED lights shine out through the grilles of the front speakers and from underneath the keyboard, the numeric keypad, and the center of the lid. You can also customize the lights with Dell's Quickset software. If you're more interested in conserving power or battery life, the intensity of these lights can be lowered or turned off.

The feature set is solid, for the most part, except for the aging DVI-out connector. The 2.8-GHz Intel Core 2 Extreme X9000 represents the M1730's move to a "Penryn" core. The M1730 also includes a built-in PhysX card from Ageia—a first for a laptop, as well as dual nVidia GeForce 8800M GTX graphics cards.

The M1730's SYSmark 2007 Preview Overall score was slightly behind our comparison system, the Alienware Area-51 m15x (by 6 percent). The system's video-encoding score also came up short. Scores on CineBench R10 and Photoshop tests, on the other hand, were as impressive as those of the Alienware laptop. Results on the World in Conflict and Crysis gaming tests were 1.7 times and 7.2 times as high, respectively, as those of the Alienware. As for battery life, the Dell laptop's score of 1 hour 30 minutes on MobileMark 2007 sentences it to a life near a power outlet. But for serious gamers, the game experience is what counts the most. Here the M1730 easily takes first prize. If you're looking for an all-around laptop that's still strong on gaming, however, I'd recommend going for the Alienware system.—*Cisco Cheng*

Specs: Intel Core 2 Extreme X9000 (2.8 GHz); 4GB DDR2 SDRAM; 250GB, 7200-rpm hard drive; SLI nVidia GeForce 8800M GTX, 512MB; 17-inch, 1,920-by-1,200 display; Intel Wireless Wi-Fi Link 4965AGN; 10.7 pounds (13.7 pounds travel); dual-layer DVD±R; four USB ports; one FireWire port, 85-Wh, 7.7-Ah, lithium ion battery; Windows XP Professional.

INSIDE

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External antenna for reliable surfing

ASUS Eee Box PC
$350 list
●●●◐○

PROS Tiny. Quiet. Energy-efficient. Express Gate pre-Windows quick-boot mode. Windows XP Home. Mountable on VESA monitor. Multithreaded processor.

CONS Smallish hard drive. No real 3D performance. Low benchmark test numbers. Only 1GB of memory. No CD or DVD drive. It's Windows, so you're vulnerable to Windows malware and viruses.

For more: go.pcmag.com/eeebox

ASUS EEE BOX PC

Energy-Efficient Web Surfing

ASUS has developed a reputation for building small, useful PCs on the cheap. The company is expanding the idea with the Eee Box PC, a Windows XP "net-top" system with the Intel Atom processor and impressive energy efficiency (using only 18 watts of power).

This 7-by-1.2-by-8.8-inch (HWD) slab comes with a Linux-based quick-boot environment called Express Gate, which also reduces the time it takes to get online and is fine for Web surfing and making VoIP calls. Running Win XP slows the Eee Box down, because of its poky processor and integrated graphics. The system also has Skype, a chat client, and a photo viewer.

The Eee Box connected in seconds to our 802.11n wireless router. If you don't have a wireless network, you can connect via Ethernet. Though this system had abysmal benchmark test scores, it handles its primary task of Web surfing adeptly enough.

In addition to the Eee Box's small size, the system also has RoHS and Energy Star certification. It lacks EPEAT certification, however, so it just missed receiving our GreenTech Approved seal. Nonetheless, this is a cheap, compact, and energy-efficient system that does everything it promises in a predictable manner. *—Joel Santo Domingo*

Specs: 1.6-GHz Intel Atom N270 processor, 1GB 533-MHz DDR2 SDRAM, 80GB 5,400-rpm SATA hard drive, Intel Integrated GMA 950 Graphics, four USB 2.0 ports, Windows XP Home Edition.

Canon CanoScan 8800F
$199.99 direct
●●●●○

PROS High-quality scans, particularly for prints. Backlight correction feature. LED light source eliminates warm-up time.

CONS Scratch removal feature has little to no effect. Scans only four slides at a time.

For more: go.pcmag.com/canon8800f

CANON CANOSCAN 8800F

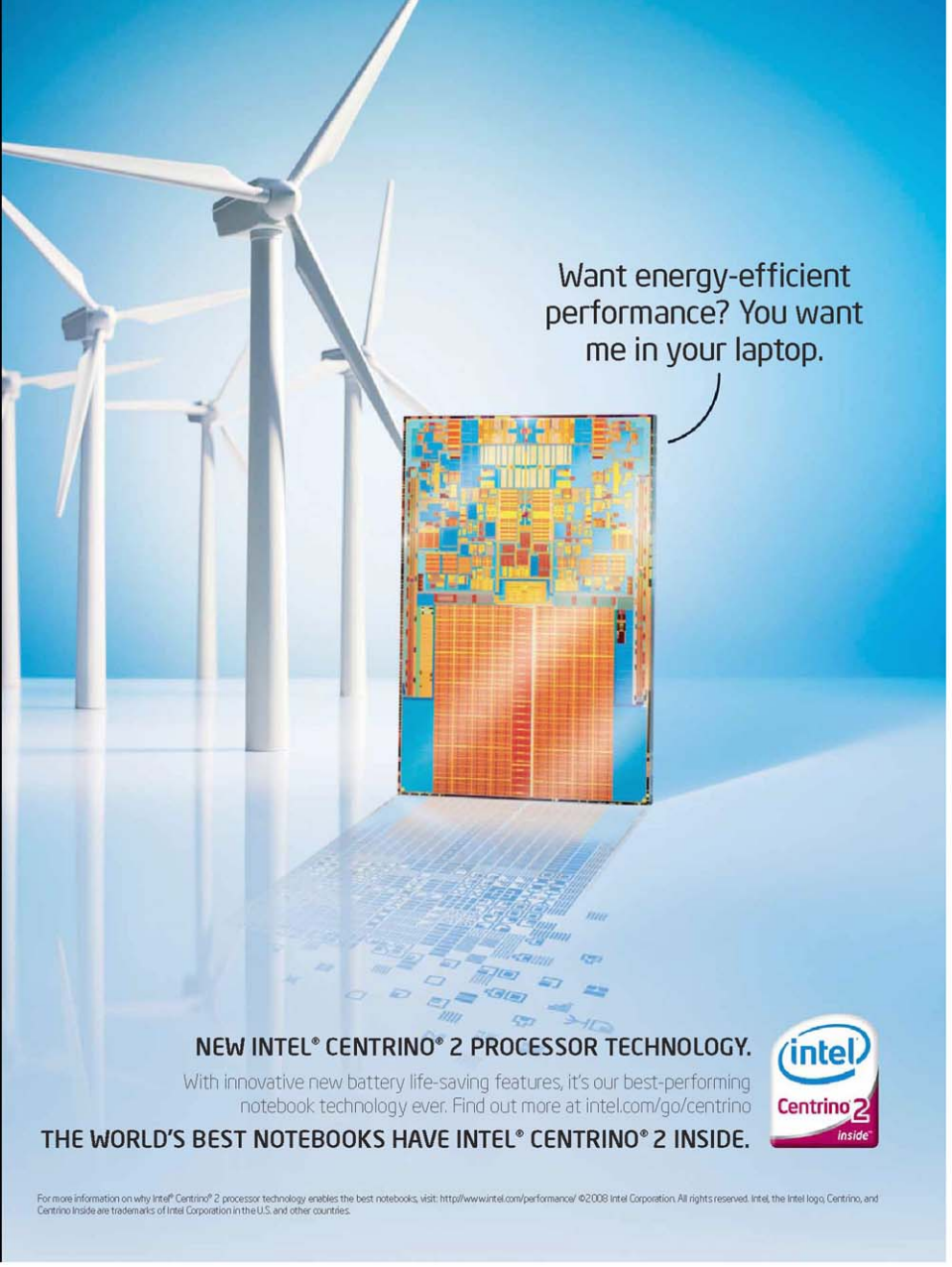
Fast, Accurate Photo Scanning

Canon's recipe for the 8800F seems simple: Start with the previous generation—the CanoScan 8600F—as the foundation, boost the scan quality, replace the light source with LEDs, and, unfortunately, raise the price by about 20 percent. The result is a scanner that does an excellent job with photographic prints, does a reasonably good job with film, and just misses out on earning an Editors' Choice.

Like the 8600F, the 8800F offers 4,800-pixel-per-inch (ppi) optical resolution and similar scan speeds. One noteworthy limitation, however, is that the 8800F can scan only four slides or two six-frame strips of 35mm film at a time.

The Twain driver of the 8800F offers Simple, Multi-Scan, and Advanced modes; backlight and color correction; and features for restoring color and removing dust and scratches. Scan quality for photographic prints was excellent—and actually a bit better than what you get with the current Editors' Choice, the Epson Perfection V500 Photo. Scan quality for film, however, was not as good as that of the V500. The 8800F's LED light source gives it a fairly consistent scan speed, resulting in a zippy 8 to 12 seconds for scanning a 4-by-6 at 300 ppi and saving the scan as an uncompressed TIFF file. For slides, it took 20 seconds to prescan, and 1 minute 11 seconds to scan one slide at 2,400 ppi. But the lack of an automatic document feeder (ADF) means it's not great for office use.

Although the 8800F doesn't offer enough to replace the V500 as our Editors' Choice, it is worth considering. *—M. David Stone*



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MAXTOR ONETOUCH 4 MINI (250GB)

Storage with the Right Touch

Small enough to fit inside a coat or suit pocket, this Maxtor drive has received a nice speed boost (from 5,400 to 7,200 rpm) over last year's Editors' Choice 160GB model. Suitable for transporting and syncing data between multiple machines, the OneTouch 4 Mini stands out from its rivals. Although its disaster recovery is only for Windows XP or Vista users with NTFS-formatted drives, the OneTouch 4 Mini is one of the best portable drives available, and it once again earns our Editors' Choice.

This drive is relatively small at 0.6 by 4.9 by 3.2 inches (HWD). Its brushed-aluminum top, thick plastic sides, and rubberized bottom convey a sense of security. Maxtor's OneTouch backup software is installed on the drive itself and gives you the option to back up or sync an entire drive or specific folders. You can't, however, sync a Windows Vista and a Windows XP PC. You also get DrivePass, a powerful security utility with AES 256-bit encryption. The SafetyDrill utility creates an image of your PC's drive and backs it up to the OneTouch 4 Mini—but it is still limited to NTFS drives.

Maxtor OneTouch 4 Mini (250GB)
$129.99 direct
●●●●○

PC MAGAZINE EDITORS' CHOICE

PROS: Fast data transfer. 256-bit encryption. Five-year warranty.

CONS: SafetyDrill does not work with Fat32 or Mac OS. Cannot sync data between Vista and XP systems.

For more: go.pcmag.com/4mini250gb

The OneTouch 4 Mini is also a speedy drive, taking only 49 seconds to back up our 1.22GB test folder via drag-and-drop and 50 seconds using the OneTouch software. These times, nearly identical to those of the previous OneTouch 4 Mini, remain impressive. Costing about $20 less than competing drives with the same capacity, this device is still the hard drive to beat.—*Brian K. Neal*

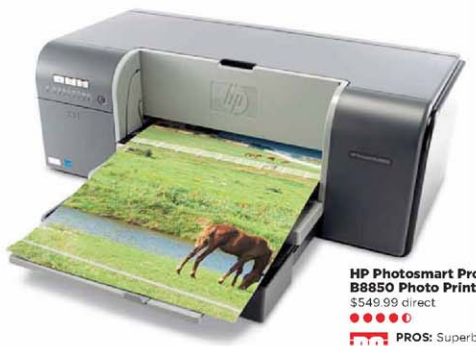
HP PHOTOSMART PRO B8850 PHOTO PRINTER

Pro-Quality Photos on the Cheap

File this HP photo printer under "pleasant surprises." It has several features that make it one of the best sub-$1,000 photo printers available, most notably fully automated self-calibration and a pigment-based ink system. Although it does not include a network connector, it is still an impressive choice.

The B8850's ink system uses eight inks, with a separate cartridge for each color. The pigment-based inks, as opposed to dye based, go hand in hand with better longevity for prints. Finding a spot for the B8850, however, could be a challenge. The printer weighs a hefty 37.7 pounds and measures a relatively large 9.5 by 26.5 by 16.9 inches (HWD). This printer also has a second paper feed slot for printing up to 13 by 19 inches.

In terms of test results, the B8850's total time on the business applications suite was 15 minutes 30 seconds, the same total as that of our previous Editors' Choice, the HP B9180. On our photo suite the B8850 averaged 1:49 for each 4-by-6 and 3:53 for each 8-by-10. For this class of printers, photo quality is a lot more important than speed, so whatever points it loses on speed is more than made up on quality. The results for both color and monochrome prints were as good as those of any printer I've tested, with realistic color, appropriately subtle shading, and impressively smooth gradients. Graphics and text output on photo paper is similarly high-quality. Because it offers enough extras over its competition at a good price, the B8850 earns our Editors' Choice for low-end prosumer photo printers.—*M. David Stone*



HP Photosmart Pro B8850 Photo Printer
$549.99 direct
●●●●◐

PC MAGAZINE EDITORS' CHOICE

PROS: Superb photo output at sizes up to 13 by 19 inches. Fine-art papers available.

CONS: Photos and graphics on plain paper are disappointing.

For more: go.pcmag.com/b8850

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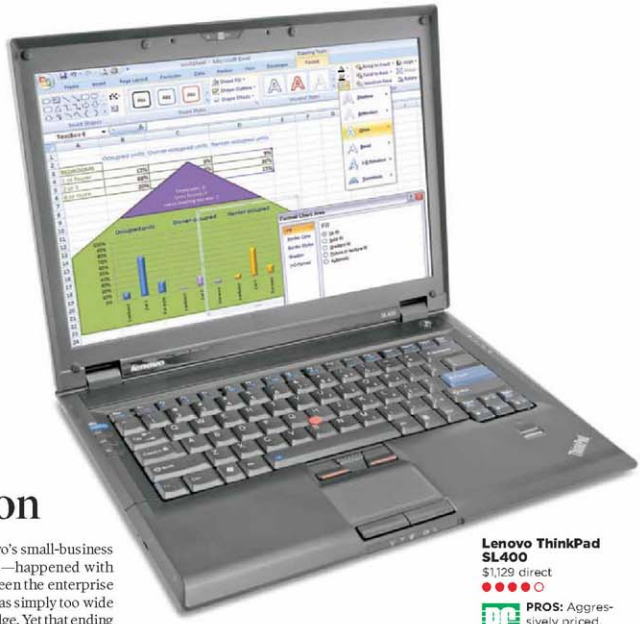

LENOVO THINKPAD SL400

Lenovo's Small-Biz Resurrection

The predictable demise of Lenovo's small-business notebook line—the 3000 series—happened with little or no notice. The gap between the enterprise ThinkPads and the 3000 series was simply too wide for any small-business user to bridge. Yet that ending allowed a new line of Lenovo small-business laptops to emerge. The ThinkPad SL400 looks as if it's from the same gene pool as its enterprise brothers, and it inherits many of the classic ThinkPad design features, such as the signature keyboard and TrackPoint pointing stick. No slouch, the SL400 blazes the performance trails with a variety of processing options.

Although the SL400 retains many of the ThinkPad qualities, several things differentiate it, among them a glossy black top. And to keep production costs down, Lenovo constructed the SL400 of part plastic, part magnesium alloy, so it's not as sturdy as, for example, the ThinkPad X200. This laptop's 14-inch screen is bright and easy on the eyes, while the 1,440-by-900 resolution is perfect for this screen size. The rest of the feature set is built for hard-core business professionals. The SL400's cellular modem has a GPS module and is compatible with AT&T, Verizon, and Sprint service. Top it off with Bluetooth connectivity and you're esentially getting the same wireless options that the ThinkPad X200 has.

The SL400's 2.24-GHz P8400 processor delivered SYSmark 2007 Preview Overall scores that surpassed those of our Toshiba Satellite Pro U400 comparison system by 15 percent. Even more impressive is the system's energy efficiency, especially considering its discrete graphics card, the nVidia GeForce 9300M GS. The SL400 achieved 4 hours 38 minutes of battery life on MobileMark 2007. And this system also meets the standards for Energy Star 4.0, EPEAT Silver, and RoHS certification, as well as our own: It earns our GreenTech Approved badge.

The ThinkPad SL400 demonstrates that an inexpensive small-business laptop doesn't have to sacrifice performance and features. You're basically paying consumer prices for all the best things that are associated with the ThinkPad moniker. —*Cisco Cheng*

Specs: 2.24-GHz Intel Core 2 Duo P8400; 2GB DDR2 SDRAM; 160GB, 5,400-rpm hard drive; 256MB nVidia GeForce 9300M GS graphics; 14.1-inch, 1,440-by-900 display; Intel Wi-Fi Link 5100; 6.0 pounds (6.8 pounds travel); four USB ports; 84-Wh, 7.8-Ah, lithium ion battery; Windows Vista Business.

Lenovo ThinkPad SL400
$1,129 direct
●●●●○

PC MAGAZINE EDITORS' CHOICE

PROS: Aggressively priced. ThinkPad keyboard and pointing stick. Excellent performance scores. Battery life is very good, even with discrete graphics. Environmentally sound. Superior wireless options. Excellent array of connectivity ports.

CONS: Frame is a little bulky.

For more: go.pcmag.com/SL400

PERFORMANCE TESTS

▲ High scores are best.
▼ Low scores are best.
Bold type denotes first place.

	MOBILEMARK 2007 ▲ hr:min	SYSMARK 2007 OVERALL ▲	MULTIMEDIA TESTS: WINDOWS MEDIA ENCODE ▼ mm:ss	MULTIMEDIA TESTS: CINEBENCH R10 ▲	MULTIMEDIA TESTS: PHOTOSHOP CS3 ACTION SET ▼ mm:ss
Lenovo ThinkPad SL400	**4:38**	**122**	**1:13**	**4,628**	**0:32**
Toshiba Satellite Pro U400-S1001X*	3:28	106	1:17	4,354	0:36

* Reported for comparison.

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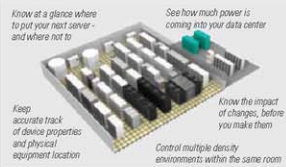

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HP Officejet Pro L7590 All-in-One Printer
$299 direct
●●●●○

EDITORS' CHOICE

PROS Fast printing for business apps. Prints, scans, faxes over network. Stand-alone copier and fax.

CONS Slow photo printing. Photo quality is a touch below par for an inkjet.

For more: go.pcmag.com/hpl7590

HP OFFICEJET PRO L7590 ALL-IN-ONE PRINTER

Small-Office Champ

The features that distinguish an office inkjet all-in-one (AIO) from a home model are all represented in the L7590. You get an Ethernet connector; an automatic document feeder (ADF); and the ability to print, scan, and fax over a network, send e-mails with scanned attachments, and make photocopies. But this model's print engine sets it apart as a truly office-centric printer. The L7590 prints text surprisingly well for an inkjet but falls short with photos. The result is an AIO that's truly focused on office use, and squarely targeted at the small and home office.

The L7590 weighs 34.3 pounds, which is on the heavy side for an inkjet but still light enough for one person to move around. A potentially more troublesome issue is the size. At 14 by 20.7 by 18.4 inches (HWD), it's larger than I'd want to have sitting on my desk. More important, it's large enough that you may have trouble finding room for it in a small office where space is tight.

Its bulkiness, however, does not slow it down in text print speed. I timed the L7590 at a total of 9 minutes 14 seconds for our business applications suite, which is significantly faster than some more expensive models and just a touch slower than what has been our Editors' Choice in this category, the HP Officejet Pro L7680 All-in-One. Such speed does not extend to photos, unfortunately. In my tests, the L7590 averaged 2:30 for each 4-by-6 and 5:21 for each 8-by-10.

Output quality for the L7590 was impressive for text and graphics. More than half the test fonts were easily readable, and graphics came out better than most inkjets can manage. The photos, however, were barely true photo quality, with some having colors that were far too punchy and others in which the whole image was darkened. On the plus side, the cost per page for this printer is also an extraordinarily low 1.5 cents per black-and-white page, and 6 cents per color page.

Overall, the L7590 is a close match to the L7680 at a substantially lower price, making it an easy pick to replace the L7680 as Editors' Choice for a top-of-the-line small and home office AIO.—*M. David Stone*

ALSO REVIEWED AT PCMAG.COM

Canon Pixma MX7600 All-in-One
$399 direct
●●●●○

Epson Stylus NX400
$99 direct
●●●◐○

Kodak ESP 3 All-in-One Printer
$129 direct
●●●○○

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- 17" widescreen LCD display*
- Intel® Core™ 2 Duo Processor P7350
- NVIDIA® GeForce® 9700M GTS 512MB GDDR3
- 4GB DDR3 1066MHz memory
- 200GB 7200RPM hard drive

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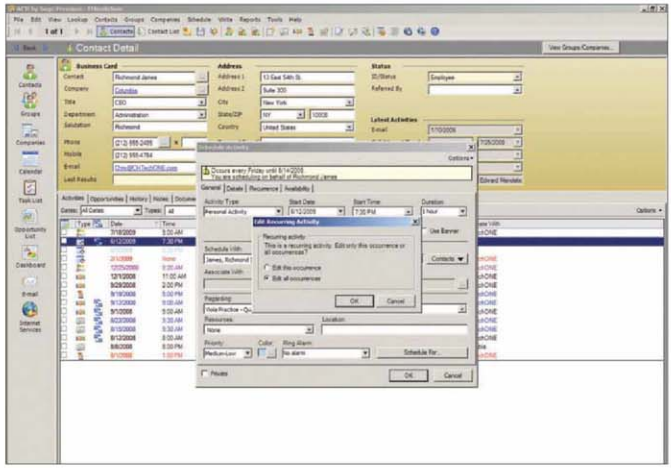

KEEPING ON SCHEDULE ACT! lets you edit either just the selected occurrence of a scheduled activity or every scheduled occurrence in the series.

ACT! by Sage 2009
$229.99 direct; upgrade, $169.95
●●●◐○

PROS Extremely powerful and flexible contact, task, and calendar management. Good Outlook integration.

CONS Confusing interface is a hodgepodge of ancient and modern design and uses unintuitive terminology.

For more: go.pcmag.com/act2009

ACT! BY SAGE 2009

Complex Contact Management

ACT! by Sage 2009 is the newest version of the widely used contact management software. This app lets you bring together many different kinds of information about individual contacts, groups of contacts, and whole companies, so it's great for keeping track of your calls, e-mails, and letters to business prospects and customers. ACT! excels at gathering dozens of different kinds of contact information on a single screen, but this also means that the interface can be intimidating, especially for new users.

ACT! not only tracks your communications, builds mass mailings on paper or e-mail, and alerts you with to-do lists, it also shares your calendar and other data across your company or, in more advanced versions, across a whole enterprise. You can live almost your whole professional life in ACT!, using it to launch e-mails from Outlook or to fire up Microsoft Word to send mass mailings—and you can even use its built-in low-frills word processor if you don't want to be overwhelmed by Word.

The basic ACT! interface is similar to that of earlier versions, and reasonably well organized for the amount of data it supports. It includes sidebar icons for many features and a dashboard that displays a set of brightly colored charts showing the number of activities you've performed, the opportunities you've followed up on, sales you've closed, and other items that you can manually add to the display.

Over the years, the product has built up a staggeringly extensive feature set, but it's still weighed down by a few clumsy interface flaws. For example, too much of the program uses ACT!'s special-purpose vocabulary instead of plain English. There is, however, improved Outlook integration in which ACT! automatically records your e-mail activity and uses your Outlook message-sorting rules. You can also back up your data automatically at almost any interval you choose.

Thanks to its new lookup features and expanded Outlook integration, ACT! 2009 is an essential upgrade for existing users. Potential new users should prepare for a rough initiation period before they can manage this app's dazzlingly wide and powerful range of functions.—*Edward Mendelson*

Panasonic recommends Windows Vista® Business.

LEGALLY, WE CANNOT SAY THERE'S A NEW WORD FOR HANDHELD.

Actual Size: 5.9" (L) x 7.2" (W) x 2.2" (H)

H A N D H E L D

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Canon EOS Digital Rebel XSi
$799 list with 18-to-55mm IS kit lens; $999 with 55-250mm IS lens

●●●●◐

PC MAGAZINE EDITORS' CHOICE

PROS Magnificent resolution and image quality. Uses SD cards. Larger LCD screen. Kit lens now image stabilized. Live View.

CONS Button rearrangement a mixed bag. No ISO 3200. Image editing software may not be compatible with the XSi's RAW format.

For more: go.pcmag.com/rebelxsi

CANON EOS DIGITAL REBEL XSI

Rebel Without Compare

The Canon EOS Rebel XSi is the fourth in Canon's Digital Rebel series and a worthy successor in the lineage that sparked the prosumer D-SLR revolution. This version has 12.2 megapixels (up from 10MP in the XTi), an image-stabilized kit lens, a larger LCD display, Live View, a new control scheme, compatibility with SD and SDHC cards, more battery capacity, and a new color scheme. Add to that the same great performance as its predecessors delivered and you have a new Editors' Choice.

On the outside, you'll notice a few changes in this new Rebel. Gone is the silver trim in favor of all black. The LCD is a bit larger (3 inches, 230,000 pixels), and the column of buttons to the display's left has been removed. Also, the new Live View system lets you accurately frame shots with the LCD without looking through the viewfinder, a boon to macro photographers. What has remained is the very thorough menu system, which shows you ISO, aperture, shutter speed, white balance, focus type, exposure compensation, battery life, image size, and more. A particularly pleasing feature is the dust reduction system, which incorporates a vibrating filter that shakes dust away from the camera's sensor.

The included 18mm-to-55mm kit lens (which now has optical image stabilization) takes exquisite photos. Colors were well balanced, focus was sharp, and daytime shots rarely showed any fringing. But if you want to take your photography to the next level, opt for the 55mm-to-250mm image-stabilized lens ($299 list). A complaint we'd had about the XTi, a somewhat weak flash, seems to have been resolved.

In our testing, the XSi showed excellent boot and recycle times of 0.6 and 0.8 seconds, respectively, though shutter lag, at 0.7 seconds, was more than we'd like. Wide-field images showed a touch of barrel distortion. I also tested the XSi's continuous shooting speed in "burst mode." The initial burst, in Fine JPEG format, netted 23 images in 6.6 seconds, or 3.5 images per second, more than an image per second better than the XTi's (slightly longer) burst.

My quibbles with the EOS Digital Rebel XSi are minor and don't detract from its high quality and the features Canon has added while keeping the price in check. Though other manufacturers have tried, none have kept pace with the XSi in its combination of price, performance, features, and image quality.—*Tony Hoffman*

DON'T BE SO SAD. YOU WERE VERY GOOD, ONCE UPON A TIME.

Most of today's Internet security technologies are awkward and cumbersome. They just plain slow you down. But with Kaspersky, you can experience a whole new level of security unlike anything you've known before. A system so intelligent it actually knows what's good, what's bad, and what to keep a close watch on.

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IPOD NANO (4TH GENERATION)

A New Nano to Envy

Apple's fourth-generation (4G) iPod nano melds the best of nanos old and new. Specifically, this version combines the older, more popular tall-and-slim design with the newer, larger screen from the third-generation player. It is also impressively priced given its additions, including on-the-go Genius playlists and a built-in accelerometer, which flips the screen orientation and adds a gimmicky but fun "shake to shuffle" feature. It's one of the best looking and most successfully executed flash players ever created, and like any good gadget, it's fun to use, despite its sophisticated user interface.

At 3.6 by 1.5 by 0.24 inches (HWD), the nano 4G comes in a rainbow of nine colors; some of those are seriously flashy, but there are also the basic silver and black. This nano is much thinner than its predecessor and weighs in at 1.3 ounces. The two-inch, 320-by-240-pixel LED screen is the same size as on the previous nano, but it has a curved glass surface. Although the nano 4G has voice recording, there is no built-in mic.

One big addition is the Genius feature, which works both within iTunes 8 and on the nano. (For more on how it works, read the iTunes 8 review below.) One of the more frivolous delights of the nano 4G is the new shake-to-shuffle feature: The player will switch to Shuffle mode when physically shaken—provided you're in the Now Playing screen.

The nano 4G represents a clear improvement in both form and function. The scroll wheel and subtly tweaked user interface are as intuitive as ever, and the screen-shifting option is a nice touch. Continual minor tweaks like these are what keep Apple's stronghold on the portable media player market intact and the reason the nano 4G easily earns our Editors' Choice. It's also why the new iPod touch (2nd generation) earns our Editors' Choice; for more on that, check out *go.pcmag.com/touch2g*.—*Tim Gideon*

iPod nano (4th generation)
8GB, $149 direct; 16GB, $199

●●●●◐

PC MAGAZINE EDITORS' CHOICE

PROS Sexy, thin, rounded design. Screen shifts for horizontal viewing (like on the iPhone and iPod touch). Genius feature creates on-the-go playlists around a single song.

CONS No built-in mic—you need to upgrade earbuds to use the integrated voice recorder. Apple still hasn't upgraded those lame bundled earbuds.

For more: go.pcmag.com/nano4g.

APPLE ITUNES 8

iTunes 8 Gets with the Times

Apple iTunes 8
Free

●●●●○

PROS Custom-automated playlist generation. HD TV episodes available for purchase. Simple network sharing.

CONS Music subscription service still AWOL. No easy way to rip or transcode video content.

go.pcmag.com/itunes8

Whenever Apple upgrades iTunes, people take notice. The new version, iTunes 8, brings some noteworthy additions—some of which are cosmetic and others that bring it more in line with how people are using digital music these days. The new window dressing in iTunes 8 consists of a tiled album-cover view and Visualizer update.

The big news, however, is Genius, a feature that in one click creates playlists from songs in your library that go together. It's somewhat similar to Pandora's seeded, automated playlist building, but it works locally, with pre-existing music as opposed to streaming Internet radio. Although Genius brings iTunes closer to Rhapsody, Pandora, and Slacker, two shortcomings still exist. First, Genius pulls from your existing library instead of exposing you to some new and perhaps undiscovered music. Also, if you get new recommendations from the iTunes Store, you have to pay to download them, instead of checking them out for free the way you can with Pandora and Slacker.

Other upgrades in iTunes are harder to fault, such as its reconciliation with NBC, offering *Battlestar Galactica*, *30 Rock*, *Monk*, and *The Office* in HD. Finally, new accessibility features are a nice inclusion, such as VoiceOver (for Leopard users) and Window-Eyes (for XP and Vista users), and a screen reader for downloading content.—*Jamie Lendino*

The Bose® QuietComfort® 2 Acoustic Noise Cancelling® Headphones.

Think of them as a peaceful getaway from the world around you. Whether it's the engine roar inside an airplane cabin, the bustle of the city or the distractions in the office, Bose QuietComfort 2 headphones help them fade softly into the background with the flick of a switch. You can savor delicate musical nuances without disturbing others. And when you're not listening to music, you can slip into a tranquil haven where you can relax and enjoy peace and solitude. Clearly, these are no ordinary headphones. It's no exaggeration to say they're one of those things you have to experience to believe.

Use them as a concert hall – or a sanctuary.

"It's as if someone behind your back reached out, found the volume control for the world, and turned it way, way, down," reports *TechnologyReview.com*. Bose QC®2 headphones incorporate patented technology that electronically identifies and dramatically reduces noise, while faithfully preserving the music, movie dialogue or tranquility you desire. We designed these headphones primarily for airplane travelers. But owners soon started telling us how much they enjoy using them in other places to reduce distractions around them. They're excellent for listening to music whether you're on the go, at home or in the office.

"Forget 'concertlike' comparisons; you'll think you're onstage with the band." That's what *Travel + Leisure Golf* said when these headphones were first introduced. You'll relish the sound of a bass guitar. Or a flute. Or the delicate inflections of a singing voice. The audio is so clear you may find yourself discovering new subtleties in even your favorite music.

"The QuietComfort 2 lives up to its name, enveloping you in blissful sound in the utmost comfort. It's easy to forget they are on your head." That's what respected columnist Rich Warren reports. To enjoy peace and tranquility, simply turn them on. To add Bose quality sound, attach the included audio cord and connect them to a laptop computer, portable CD/DVD/MP3 player, in-flight audio system or home stereo. They also offer a fold-flat design for easy storage in the slim carrying case.

Try the QC2 headphones for yourself, risk free. You really must experience them to believe it. Call toll free to try these headphones for 30 days. Use them on your next trip, in your home or at the office – satisfaction guaranteed. If you aren't delighted, simply return them for a full refund.

Call 1-800-901-0256, ext. Q6946 today. The QC2 headphones are available directly from Bose – the most respected name in sound. When you call, ask about making 12 **easy payments,** with no interest charges from Bose.* And discover a very different kind of headphone – QuietComfort 2 Acoustic Noise Cancelling headphones.

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Customizable skins are painted on the phone

T-Mobile Sidekick 2008
$149.99 direct (with contract)
●●●○○

PROS Smaller than previous Sidekicks. Easy to use. Fully customizable case.

CONS Very small mailboxes for text messages and e-mail. Poor camera. Not great at playing video.

For more: go.pcmag.com/sidekick08

T-MOBILE SIDEKICK 2008

Customization over Quality?

The Sidekick 2008 is a fashion item and an expression of identity, not a geeky toy. Its choice of customizable, interchangeable skins is its best feature. The designs are painted directly onto the Sidekick's body, an effect that looks classier, feels smoother, and is much more durable than a sticker.

At 4.7 by 2.3 by 0.7 inches (HWD) and 5.3 ounces, this Sidekick is a slimmer version of the Sidekick LX. The 2008 version retains the signature swiveling screen, now a bright 240-by-400-pixel color panel. The trackball, on the right, pulses in multiple colors, and the backlit keyboard is an absolute joy, with firm, nicely spaced keys.

The Sidekick is a terrific gadget for texting, picture messaging, and IM. The IM client supports AIM, Microsoft Live, and Yahoo! Messenger. E-mail performance is a mixed bag. The Sidekick does push messages from its own TMail account and can check up to three accounts, but it stores only a paltry 6MB of e-mail and 100 text messages. Web browsing is mediocre, but the elegant music player supports a good selection of formats. The photos from its 2-megapixel camera were lackluster, and video was shaky.

As a quad-band EDGE world phone, the Sidekick 2008 has decent call quality, but reception was so-so. If you're set on a Sidekick, this is the one to get. But consider whether personalized skins make up for the tiny mailboxes.—*Sascha Segan*

Special Advertising Supplement

When Losing Files Is *Not* An Option

R-Studio from R-Tools gives major boost to data recovery and business continuity

The R-Studio Vista-ready business continuity solution continues to improve. Now **R-Studio** from R-Tools, the industry leader in high-performance data recovery solutions, includes HFS and HFS+ file systems support, UFS/BigEndian support, GPT partition layout schema support and Apple partition map support.

Another recent enhancement is a universal hexadecimal editor to inspect and edit file system structures. These can include NTFS and FAT boot sectors, MFT file record, MBR, LDM structures and others. This advanced tool is particularly helpful for specialists working in lower-level data processing, IT security, data recovery and computer forensics. R-Studio is an ideal file recovery solution for IT specialists and advanced users who need to recover or undelete lost data on a local computer or server only.

R-Tools also recently launched an enhanced version of **R-Wipe & Clean,** which automatically keeps applications free and clear of harmful clutter. R-Wipe & Clean now supports Windows Vista and removes useless or unwanted data from more than 200 third-party applications, including Microsoft Office 2007.

Other business continuity solutions in the R-Tools lineup include **R-Drive Image 4.0,** which enables users to totally, quickly and confidently restore their systems after a major crash, attack or hardware failure. R-Drive Image 4.0 is flexible in that imaged files can be stored in a variety of places and on various removable media such as CD-R(W)/DVD, Zip disks, Jazz disks and so on. The utility is accurate in that image files contain exact byte-by-byte copies of a hard drive, partition or logical disk.

Other superb utilities and solutions from R-Tools include:

- **R-Mail for Outlook** and **R-Mail for Outlook Express**, which reconstruct inadvertently deleted email messages or damaged .pst and .dbx files
- **R-Word** and **R-Excel**, which recover damaged Word or Excel files that have been corrupted or attacked

To learn more about the latest release of R-Studio and the rest of the exceptional solutions from R-Tools designed to keep your business up and running efficiently, visit **www.r-tt.com**.

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NOKIA N78

A Slim, So-So Smartphone

Joining Nokia's diverse line of multimedia-focused smartphones is the midrange N78, a stylish, minimal phone with hidden talents. It forgoes all the extra controls but includes Assisted GPS (A-GPS) for faster position locating, image geotagging, and a robust music player. It's also 3G and Wi-Fi capable.

At 4.5 by 1.9 by 0.6 inches (HWD) and 3.9 ounces, the N78 features a slick, glossy-black face and a chocolate-brown back. The display is a standard-issue 2.4-inch, QVGA 240-by-320-pixel LCD, oriented vertically. There's also an ambient light sensor on board to adjust screen brightness. The keypad lights up whenever the phone is activated, but typing is difficult. There's no touch screen, QWERTY keypad, or SureType-style setup, but the N78 does include the Navi wheel, a square version of an iPod's click wheel.

In testing, the N78 turned out to be a solid voice phone, with calls sounding clear in both directions. Its speakerphone sounded well balanced but was loud enough only for indoor use. The N78 is an unlocked GSM phone that works with either AT&T or T-Mobile SIM cards; it's also the first U.S. model to include the Symbian Series 60 3rd Edition Feature Pack 2. The N78 is great for playing music, but its 3.2-megapixel camera was a bit disappointing. Overall, this phone is a decent option. But at this price, you should also look at the $500 N82 with its far-better camera.—*Jamie Lendino*

Nokia N78
$520 direct
●●●○○

PROS Lightweight. Clear voice quality. Supports Wi-Fi, HSDPA, and GPS. Full-featured (and great-sounding) music player.

CONS Cramped numeric keypad. Camera performance lags behind Nokia's N82 and N95. Some built-in apps could use an overhaul. Quiet speakerphone.

For more: go.pcmag.com/n78

Times are tough.....Money is tight
Can you afford to replace your notebook computer?
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RED indicates Editors' Choice.

	PROS	CONS	BOTTOM LINE	SPECS
DIGITAL CAMERAS				
Casio Exilim EX-Z80 $180 street ●●◐○○	• Compact, handsome design • Comfortable feel • Good macro shots • Smorgasbord of scene modes	• Mediocre pictures and video • Abysmal resolution • Blue-green fringing • Underexposed flash shots • Noise at relatively low ISO • Atypical USB jack/cable	The Casio Exilim EX-Z80 is a tiny point-and-shooter with great looks and a riot of scene modes, but it shoots mediocre video and problematic photos.	8.1MP resolution; 3X optical zoom; 2.6-inch LCD; 12.4MB onboard memory; accepts SD, SDHC, MMC, and MMCplus flash memory; 2.0 by 3.5 by 0.7 inches (HWD); 3.5 ounces.
SMARTPHONES				
Verizon G'zOne Boulder $329.99; $129.99 and up with contract ●●●○○	• Indestructible • EV-DO Rev A high-speed data • Uses Verizon's new push-to-talk system	• Muddy voice quality • Short battery life	The toughest phone you can find takes a licking and keeps on calling, but we wish those calls sounded better than they do.	CDMA; accepts microSDHC; 2-inch, 320-by-240 LCD; 1.3MP camera; 2.5mm headphone jack (with adapter); 3.9 by 2 by 0.9 inches (HWD); 4.9 ounces.
Nokia 6301 $179.99; $79.99 and up with contract ●●●○○	• Sharp design • Great Wi-Fi call quality • Syncs well with PCs	• Quiet speakerphone • Relatively short battery life • Truly awful Web browsing	The Nokia 6301 is your best bet for a voice phone on T-Mobile's HotSpot @Home Wi-Fi calling system. We only wish the Web experience were better.	GSM; GPRS, EDGE data networks; accepts microSD flash memory; 2-inch, 320-by-240 LCD; 2MP camera; 2.5mm headphone jack; 4.2 by 1.7 by 0.5 inches (HWD); 3.2 ounces.
GPS				
Garmin nüvi 500 $499.99 list ●●●○○	• Rechargeable, user-replaceable battery • IPX7-rated waterproof • Topographic maps are included	• Lacks text-to-speech conversion in automotive mode • Poor track log handling • Distance to destination didn't work in compass mode • No Bluetooth phone integration	The Garmin nüvi 500 is a good crossover choice for those who don't want or can't afford separate dedicated automotive and outdoor enthusiast GPS devices.	3.5-inch, 320-by-240-pixel screen; accepts microSD flash memory; rated IPX7 waterproof; walking and bicycling modes; 3.4 by 4.2 by 0.9 inches (HWD); 7.6 ounces.
Garmin Oregon 400t $599.99 list ●●●●○	• Sensitive receiver • Quick satellite acquisition • Multiple profiles for various outdoor activities • Highly configurable • IPX7-rated waterproof	• Expensive • Main menu has too many choices	It's pricey, but this handheld touch-screen GPS device makes an excellent hiking companion—and a fun gadget for high-tech treasure hunting.	3-inch, 400-by-240-pixel screen; accepts SD, microSD, and MMC flash memory; topographic maps included; 16-hour rated battery life; 2.3 by 4.5 by 1.4 inches (HWD); 6.8 ounces.
AUDIO				
Samsung YP-S3 $99.99 list ●●●◐○	• Stylish design • Lots of storage for a low price • Excellent user interface • FM radio and recorder	• Small screen not ideal for video • Poor video support—conversion software needed • Touch-sensitive buttons can be unresponsive	The S3 brings the typical sleek styling of Samsung players to a new level—and it all comes at a very reasonable price.	4GB flash memory; 1.8-inch screen; supports MP3, OGG, and WMA formats; 1.73 x 3.74 by 0.39 inches (HWD); 1.7 ounces.
Apple iPod touch (2nd generation) 8GB, $229 direct ●●●●●	• Stunning, sprawling glass display • Access to App Store and iTunes Store via Wi-Fi • Built-in Internet browser • New Genius feature	• Very expensive • Fingerprint magnet • File support is still extremely Apple-centric	While the second-gen touch is very similar to its predecessor, it has enough extra features, like Genius playlists and excellent games, to maintain its standing at the top of the PMP heap.	Remote control; two 8.7-by-5.5-by-5.1-inch (HWD) speakers; alarm clock; 2.7-by-1.7-inch LCD; 3.5mm headphone jack; Wi-Fi; supports MP3 and WMA formats.
Philips SHE9850 $99.99 list ●●●◐○	• Affordable • Commendable low-end performance • Excellent fit	• Not the crispest treble response	Philips's affordable SHE9850 earphones fit well and offer decent low-end response.	In-canal; passive noise canceling; sensitivity, 115 dB SPL per 1 mW; frequency range, 20 Hz to 20 kHz; impedance, 12 ohms.
Blue Ant Z9i $99.95 list ●●●●○	• Clear sound quality • Stylish • Comfortable fit • Large, easy-to-press controls	• Battery life is on the short side • Noise cancellation falls behind the class leaders	BlueAnt's Z9i is a stylish, comfortable Bluetooth headset with crystal-clear sound quality, although its noise suppression isn't quite as effective as it could be.	Supra-aural; wireless; Bluetooth 2.0; 4.5-hour battery life; 1.6 by 0.7 by 0.4 inches (HWD); 0.4 ounce.
ROBOTICS				
WowWee Tri-Bot $99.99 list ●●●○○	• Affordable • Solidly built • Easy to program • Unusual omnidirectional wheeled base • Unique gyroscopic remote	• Navigation sensors miss many objects • Repetitive comments can become tiresome	The cute and sometimes-entertaining Tri-Bot from WowWee offers a new way to move and control mobile bots, but it doesn't raise the robotic bar much otherwise.	Remote control; internal gyroscope; free roam mode; IR sensors; takes eight AAA batteries; 14 inches tall.

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- Heather Clancy, ZDNet.com

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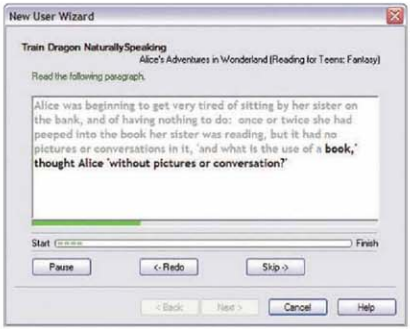

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CONS: Occasionally makes computer unresponsive.

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DRAGON NATURALLYSPEAKING 10 PROFESSIONAL

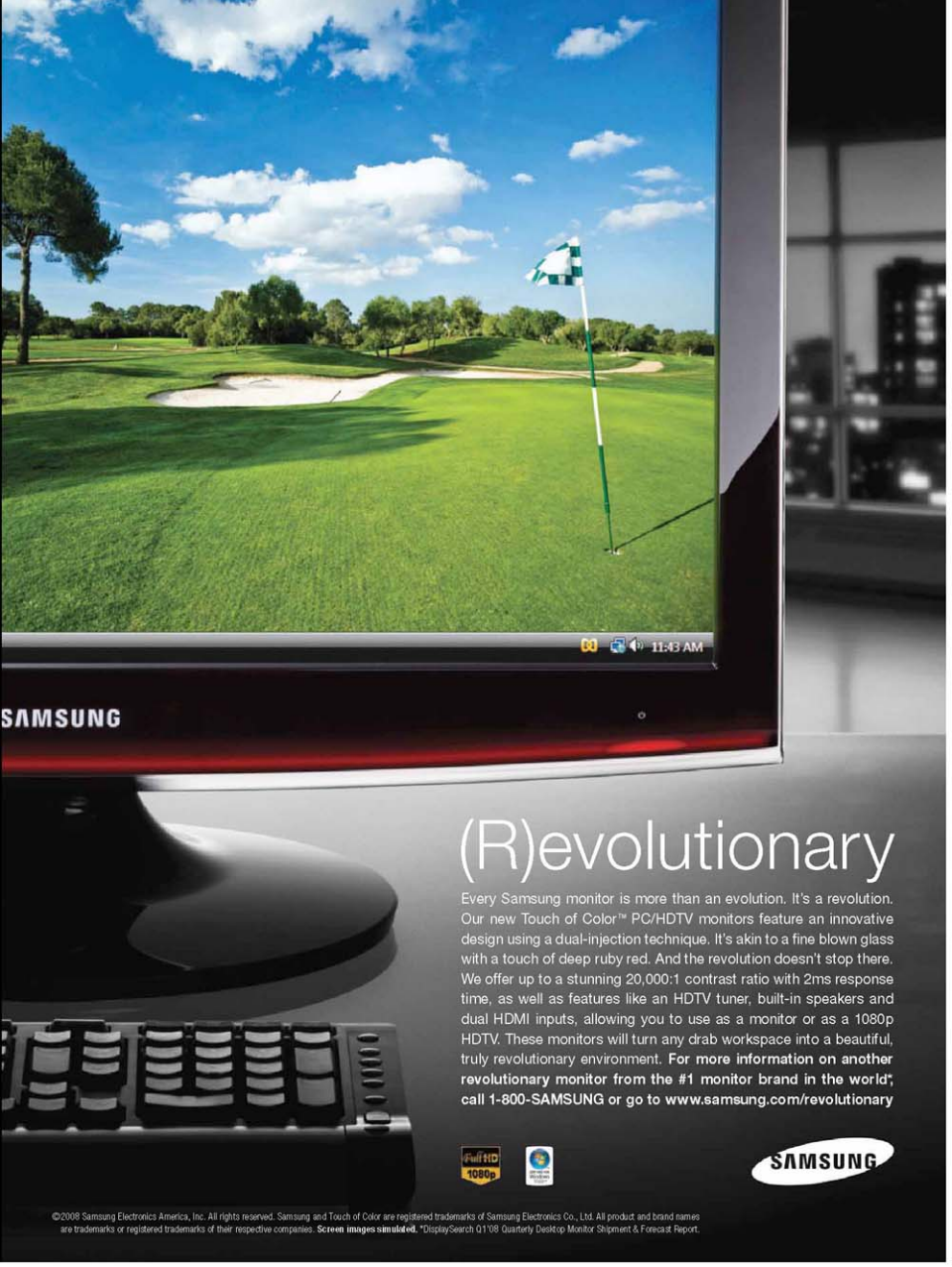
Talk to Your PC

Say the words "speech recognition software" and most people think of Dragon NaturallySpeaking. Dragon has ruled the roost for years, partly because it's a perennially great piece of software, and partly from lack of competition. Even though Dragon now has rival products to contend with, it has secured its position as the leading voice-recognition software with this new version. Here you get new automation tools, improved hands-free navigation, updates to the interface, and increased accuracy and speed.

Most general-purpose versions of the product include an Andrea NC-19 monaural headset, but the $349 Preferred Wireless Edition substitutes a slick little Calisto Bluetooth headset from Plantronics. Dragon requires considerable PC muscle: a 1-GHz CPU and 1GB of free hard drive space at minimum, as well as 512MB of RAM. During setup, you create a user account, which involves choosing a language (U.K., U.S., Australian, Indian, or SE Asian English), a regional accent, and a microphone connection type. A Vocabulary option lets you specify General, Commands Only, or Teen. The setup routine also requests that you read some of your e-mail and word-processing documents. All told, the installation process took me about 45 minutes.

I was very impressed at how accurately and quickly the program transcribed my test script, showing only occasional blips even when I spoke without pauses between words. You can actually decide on how much speed to trade for accuracy using a slider—a handy feature. But is Dragon better than the free translation feature in Vista? With straightforward text both were identical, but on more difficult material Dragon made fewer mistakes than Vista. The more significant difference is that Vista shows a delay before producing text; Dragon was more prompt. Both programs let you launch other apps from the Start menu by speaking the command "Start menu." For subsequent commands, Vista was more intuitive, but with Dragon, you also get time-saving Voice Shortcuts.

Despite some problems—for example, typing while Dragon is running sometimes slows your system down—and an interface that's not as polished as Vista's, Dragon is a serious dictation tool that beats Vista in accuracy, speed, and customization options, thus earning our Editors' Choice.—*Michael Muchmore*



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SIMPLER AND CLEARER The main window in Norton Internet Security 2009 is simpler than that of the previous edition, and drops the confusing distinction between "Norton Protection Center" and "Norton Internet Security."

Norton Internet Security 2009
3 licenses, $69.99 direct

●●●●◐

EDITORS' CHOICE

PROS Minimal performance impact. Extremely effective spyware and virus protection. High-powered, comprehensive firewall. Free, proactive support. Phishing protection. Automated log-in, form-fill. Network map with remote configuration.

CONS Antispam misses too much, blocks too many valid messages. Rudimentary parental controls. Network map allows no remote correction of reported problems.

For more: go.pcmag.com/nis2009

OFFERING INSIGHT Norton Insight checks all executable files and their support files against a huge database of trusted programs.

NORTON INTERNET SECURITY 2009

Norton's Powerful Protection Won't Slow You Down

Most users love the protection security software gives them but hate the way it drags down their daily activities. Good news: Norton Internet Security 2009 affects performance less than any suite I've tested. Most security tasks happen in the background during idle time. My performance tests confirm that Norton slows systems less than the rest.

The big independent antivirus testing labs all certify the effectiveness of Symantec's antivirus technology; those who have tested the 2009 edition find it improved. It scans files on demand, on access, and during idle time. A full scan took 50 minutes on my standard test system, but the Norton Insight feature reduced that to 5 minutes on later scans.

Norton scored better than other suites in the malware removal test, and it was unusually thorough. In the malware blocking test it eliminated all but one of the malware samples before they launched. Overall it did better than all the other suites and standalone antispyware products that I've tested with my current collection of malware. Norton's phishing protection works the same as that of the 2008 edition and continues to be extremely accurate.

The firewall is hardened against malware, and it easily passed my barrage of Web-based assaults. And when I attacked a test system using the Core Impact penetration tool, it blocked all the sample exploits.

The Network Security map shows all the devices connected to your network and reports whether your wireless network is secure. From the map you can remotely monitor other computers on the network that are also running Norton. And you can lock out specific devices by setting their trust level to restricted.

Spam protection, however, is useless. In testing, it tossed more than a third of my valid personal mail into the spam folder and missed nearly 30 percent of undeniable spam. Don't rely on this feature.

Norton's Identity Safe is a password-protected way to store credentials and log in automatically. It also fills Web forms with your predefined personal data, all protected by a strong master password.

This is definitely the slimmest, most unobtrusive Norton ever, yet its protection is top-notch where it counts. Despite a few weaknesses, it is the best all-around security suite I've ever seen; I'll be installing it on my own systems.—*Neil J. Rubenking*

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	PROS	CONS	BOTTOM LINE
ONLINE VOICE AND VIDEO CHAT SERVICE			
Paltalk Express (beta) Basic, free; other plans, up to $14.95 per month or $60 yearly ●●●◐○	• Responsive • Works with any computer that has an Internet connection and a browser that runs Flash and Java • Lets thousands video chat simultaneously • Basic service is free	• No PC-to-phone calls • No interoperability with IM services	Plenty of user-generated and original content, along with a good voice- and video-chat system, makes this a useful service for large-group chats, demos, seminars, and more.
TokBox AIR Free ●●●●○	• Free • Attractive, clean Web interface • Public feed to send video message Twitter-style • Simple videoconferencing with unlimited participants • Video e-mail doesn't require recipients to sign in	• No connection with the public telephone network • Voice and video don't sync up in conferencing	TokBox is a one-stop shop for all your video-communication needs. Its desktop-like Web interface is attractive and clear, and the desktop client, based on Adobe AIR, lets you be available to your fellow video chatters without being on the site.
ONLINE WORD PROCESSORS			
Adobe Buzzword Beta Free (online service) ●●●◐○	• Visually elegant online word processor with flexible sharing features • Mostly elegant typography	• Runs entirely in Flash player, so it's slower than rival services • Typographic elegance is diminished by use of straight, not curly, quotation marks	A visually elegant online word processor, but not powerful or fast enough to take the place of Google Docs, and certainly not that of Microsoft Word.
OPTICAL CHARACTER RECOGNITION			
TypeReader 2008 $695 direct ●●◐○○	• By far the fastest OCR software on the market • Watched-folder feature for fully automated high-speed processing	• Not as accurate as rival products • Clumsy interface • Limited options for proofreading • Some standard-format PDF and image files wouldn't open	TypeReader is worth considering for enterprise-level high-volume, high-speed OCR where absolute accuracy isn't a goal. However, its lack of proofreading abilities and dated interface mean that most people would do better to look elsewhere for their OCR needs.
VIDEO EDITING			
VideoSpin 1.1 Free ●●●●○	• Good input/output support (if you buy the codec pack) • Very easy to use • Good output quality • Direct export to YouTube and Yahoo! Video	• You need the codec pack ($15) for many high-end formats • No special effects • Fixed-resolution interface feels tiny	The best choice of the "free" programs, but expect to shell out $15 for the codec pack.
VideoThang Version 2.0.1 Free ●●○○○	• Simple interface • Very easy to use • Good compatibility with video from digital cameras • Stable operation • FLV input support	• No widescreen projects • Very limited features • Doesn't deinterlace while encoding • Poor output quality	VideoThang offers great ease of use, and it's free. But quality-related issues make this program a poor choice for most users.
Windows Movie Maker 6 Free ●●◐○○	• Configurable interface • DV capture capabilities • AutoMovie function • Many useful corrective and artistic effects • Good support for AVI/WMV input	• Clunky audio editing • Can't input QuickTime movies or output any formats other than AVI or WMV • Lack of deinterlacing during output	Microsoft's Windows Movie Maker will appeal only to those who want to work with AVIs and WMVs. But if you fall into that camp, it's worth taking a look at the app. After all, if you have Vista, you've already got it.
EDUCATION			
WorldWide Telescope (spring beta) Free ●●●●○	• A visual extravaganza • Educational, fun, free • Smooth pan-and-zoom viewing • Has full-sky imagery at multiple wavelengths, from visible light to gamma rays • Lets you view, create multimedia sky tours	• Weak solar-system astronomy • No realistic Moon, planet views • Tour creation is unwieldy • Navigational glitches • Communities not interactive yet	Even in its first public beta, Microsoft's WorldWide Telescope is an awesome resource for astronomy appreciation and education. Just like the universe, it has the potential to expand at an increasing pace.
VOICE OVER IP			
Vonage Pro $34.99 per month ($335.99 annually) ●●●◐○	• Easy setup • Solid selection of features • New softphone app lets you make and take calls on your PC • Superb voice quality • Free calls to select international cities • 24/7 technical support	• New features aren't worth an extra $10 per month • Visual Voicemail is limited to 25 free messages per month and raises privacy concerns • Dated-looking account-management site	Though still a terrific home-phone service, Vonage Pro doesn't offer enough added value to justify its higher price. Most users will want to stick with the original package.

Courtesy NASA, JPL.

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JOHN C. DVORAK

Microsoft vs. the iPhone

I was called out by my younger staff of producers at a recent Cranky Geeks recording session. (This is the weekly video podcast I do for Ziff at *www.crankygeeks.com*.) I was debating with a guest over the relative difficulty people have when they go to the Web using a cell phone. With the new iPhone it's very easy, and I was obviously out of touch since I do not use an iPhone.

My experience going online with a mobile phone has never been pleasant, dagnabbit!

Maybe I am getting old, but going online and surfing the Net on a mobile phone just seems like a ridiculous experience that should be done only in an emergency. And, yes, I have been at lunch or dinner with a group where some odd question cropped up and someone whipped out a mobile phone and went online for the answer. It did resolve the question and kept the party moving along.

But how far does this go? Well, based on the claims just a few years ago from experts and pundits, the mobile phone will become the number one access point for the Internet. These people still believe this prediction, by the way.

But the Web-browsing smartphone is not new. Because of its moribund history many of us did not expect that yet another attempt at this market—from Apple—was going to change anything. But it did, and now we have to reanalyze the trend and look at the culprit for the earlier lack of interest: Microsoft.

Smartphones were derided as losers a few years ago, when Microsoft was promoting the idea as we were evolving beyond the pocket computer idea. But smartphones are now the future, thanks to Apple.

You really have to wonder what goes on at Microsoft. The company gets into something early—along with Palm, Microsoft can perhaps be seen as the inventor of the smartphone—only to have the market pulled out from under it in an instant.

If given a choice between a Microsoft-based smartphone and an iPhone, who would take the Microsoft product? Everyone likes to think that the company is generally clueless about design. This has been in the back of everyone's mind as the Zune and other products have emerged.

Smartphones were derided as losers a few years ago when Microsoft was promoting the idea. But now they're the future, thanks to Apple.

People are predisposed to use a harsh analytic perspective, predefining whatever the company does as bad taste, when talking about Microsoft. But this is bogus: Microsoft uses good design firms, and a lot of its products are actually quite beautiful.

It's the lack of the single-vision product. With Apple, generally speaking, it is one guy, Steve Jobs, who defines a product and the vision for that product and is a dictator when it comes to its execution. With Microsoft there is no dictator like this, except perhaps when David Cutler was dictating the development of Windows NT to its culmination as Windows 2000, which in the opinion of many is the greatest OS ever done by the company.

In most instances at Microsoft, there is no dictator. There is a committee of individuals, all of whom have to like each other (because of the odd employee grading system for promotions) and tend to use a hodgepodge of ideas to make what amounts to an agreeable soulless product.

In fact this is the reason almost everything Microsoft does is bland; it's not because of a lack of taste. This is why the company never gets in the news for coming out with a wild, crazy-idea, weird product that gets attention. The people at Microsoft want to keep their jobs more than make great or fun products.

The stodginess probably began around the Microsoft Bob era. I was one of the few writers at the time who defended the product, once I saw how my then-young son was using it and enjoying it. But it was too late. Microsoft was so freaked out by the derision and ridicule that it even took Bob off its corporate timeline. A company with moxie would joke about it to this day, but instead Microsoft limped off like a spurned teenage boy at a school dance.

Obviously, the failure of Bob resulted in more than a few people at the company becoming pariahs and an example to anyone else there that this is what happens when you try to do anything different.

What's interesting is that these two companies are about the same age, but Apple still has the pizzazz. I'm also considering that this entire situation was inevitable based on the respective localities of the companies. Microsoft is up in the often gloomy and downbeat Pacific Northwest, and Apple is smack in the middle of warm and up-tempo Silicon Valley. In Silicon Valley, everywhere you go there are people talking about start-ups and wild new ideas. In the Pacific Northwest they are talking about hiking or bike trails.

So we're left looking at a decimated smartphone scene, with the iPhone the model for the future. It is selling like hotcakes, and everyone wants one. Microsoft, meanwhile, goes off to service the enterprise. That can't be much fun either.

DVORAK LIVE ON THE WEB *John's Internet TV show airs every Wednesday at 3:30 ET on CrankyGeeks.com. You can download back episodes whenever you like.*

Dvorak's InsideTrack

Everyone's Trying to Get into the Act Dept.: While **AMD and Intel** are fighting each other for market share in the microprocessor game, two new competitors are looming: **Russia and China.** While I'm sure numerous jokes could be compiled about this, the fact is that the equipment needed to build a **fabrication facility** is easily obtainable and comes from global suppliers. The intellectual property needed for the chip designs is also up for grabs.

But there are patents and other issues, so the Russians and Chinese will have to do a lot of their own **design work from scratch** (using freely available design tools). The point is: You can get all the parts for a BMW, but actually making one from the parts is not so easy.

China has a shot, but after its miserable attempt years ago with its **"Dragon" CPU,** I do not have high hopes, unless they **hire engineers from India** who once worked for Intel. Russia has earmarked over $20 billion to get into the 65nm CMOS game while targeting 45nm. It has decided to attempt this with partners.

When you do the final analysis, **you have to look at Japan** and its on-again, off-again love affair with the CPU business. Japanese chip companies from NEC to Toshiba have **dabbled but have always backed away.** For good reason: Intel and AMD are both lockstep developing to the beat of Moore's Law, and they are used to the rhythm. Nobody else can handle it for long. Simply put, they can't dance.

Trend Watch Dept.: When nVidia recently declared **that the next personal computer** would be a mobile phone, I had to laugh. It's not as if I and others have not been predicting a real pocket PC for years; it's that there is now a supposition that it will **replace** the desktop computer somehow. This despite the fact that today's desktop computer is bumping up against a terabyte's worth of storage and an eight-core CPU.

That said, it should be possible for the smartphone to **function as a low-end PC** if the makers of these devices adjust their thinking a bit and look back at what was hoped for with the pocket-computer predictions years ago.

What is missing from the picture is the all-purpose cradle/docking station. While some of these phones do a reasonable job of hooking up to a normal PC via some sort of USB connection, none are designed to replace the PC via a docking station lash-up.

Motorola, here is your opportunity!

The transition to the laptop computer shows that for many low-end computing needs you **do not need a full-blown desktop** with three monitors. The power users want the big machine, but most users do not. They just want to browse the Web and do e-mail, word processing, and maybe a spreadsheet. Some may want to sort photos and do some simple photo editing. This can all be done on a pocket computer or smartphone. Cloud computing can help.

About two years ago I built a minimalist machine as a backup, and it consisted of a sub-megahertz CPU, 256 megs of main memory, and a 3-gig hard drive. I ran Windows 98 on it. It was fine as an all-purpose machine. **I was actually surprised** how well it worked compared with what we think we need today. This was essentially a machine from 1998—ten years ago. In fact, it had the power of today's smartphone.

It's just that nobody can make the conceptual leap from **interesting gizmo** with wacky free applications that are essentially **stupid and goofy** to a desktop-replacement computer. All that is needed is a cradle that hooks to a real keyboard and a monitor. It has to have a lot of USB connections that allow the user to attach a media burner and other peripherals.

And, more important, the public mindset has to approve and adopt the idea. **Palm, are you listening?** Sony Ericsson? Samsung? It's staring you in the face.

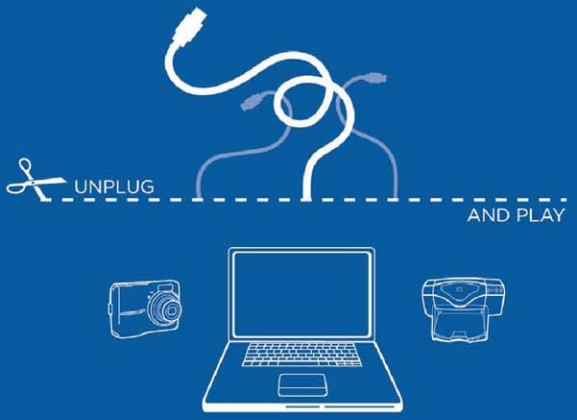
Never mind. I suppose that if **Apple** doesn't do it, nobody will. I'm not seeing Apple headed in that direction. Sigh. *End of fruitless good idea rant number 1123.*

Compact Camera of the Year Dept.: So I had a meeting with Kodak at which the company was showing off an aggressive line of new products, including the **slick Zi6 pocket video camera** that shoots an HD vid optimized for uploading to online video services. This is going to be a hot product for the company.

I was shown another relatively new device, the 10MP M1033—a small still camera that takes the same 720p HD movies in 16:9 format as the Zi6, costs about the same (under $200), but incorporates Kodak's new "Smart Capture," a technology that is actually **astonishing.** The camera senses what sort of pic you are trying to shoot and **adjusts the entire profile** as if you were using the "scene" modes. Get too close and it switches to macro mode instantly. Shoot mountains and it goes automatically into the scene mode for shooting mountains.

On top of that it handles backlighting better than any pocket camera ever. I have never gotten such **outstanding still pictures** from a pocket camera. This has to be one of the best cameras ever produced by Kodak. The Zi6 looks to be the trendy toy for this Christmas, but if I had to choose between the two I'd get the M1033. Oh, the best part? It weighs only 5 ounces. **Highly recommended.**

WANT MORE DVORAK? *John writes a weekly column for our Web site, too. Log on to* go.pcmag.com/dvorak. *Or you can e-mail him at* pcmag@dvorak.org.



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HOTTEST NEW PCs

Whether you're shopping for a lighter laptop, more thrilling game rig, or media system that won't embarrass the kids, read on. *By Joel Santo Domingo and Cisco Cheng*

Value Desktops

Money *is* an object, and PC makers are meeting that reality with budget systems that deliver more bang for fewer bucks.

Webcam's also a security device

Lenovo IdeaCentre K210
$449 direct
●●●●○

PC MAGAZINE EDITORS' CHOICE

A cool, consumer-friendly design, solid performance, easy expandability, and top-notch features make the IdeaCentre K210 almost a steal. While on a par with other budget systems in performance, it excels by including things like a keyboard with an antibacterial surface and a webcam with face-recognition security. The keyboard offers one-button access to backup and restore functions. The 320GB SATA hard drive should satisfy the average home user's storage needs for years, and a multicard reader comes in handy for quick downloads and uploads.

Dell Inspiron 530
$499 direct
●●●○○

Dell's latest budget offering is a very competent system for everyday home use, and it handles more-processor-intensive tasks, like editing images in Photoshop, with ease. Unfortunately, it's priced at least $50 more than many of its peers and comes with Vista Home Basic (so no Media Center functions). On the upside, the Inspiron 530 does have a front-facing multi-card reader that will accommodate nearly any digital camera and room for extra storage, plus a PCIe slot for a better graphics card.

eMachines T5274
$399 list; with 19-inch monitor, $609.98
●●●◐○

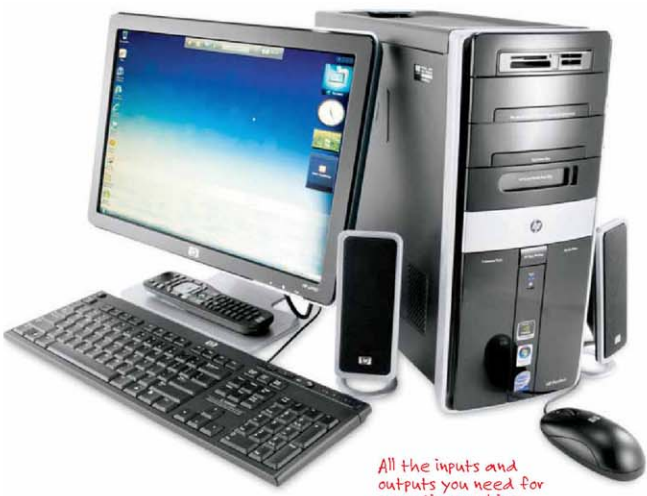
The price is right for budget-minded people looking for a starter system or a basic second PC. For $400 you get solid if unspectacular performance and features. Unlike its predecessor, the T5254, this system is powered by Intel CPU and graphics processors rather than AMD/ATI. Its respectable(for a value desktop) Photoshop CS3 score makes it a good PC for a Flickr fanatic or digital imaging buff. Hardware includes a 320GB hard drive, a DVD burner, six USB ports, and, sadly, a ball mouse.

HP Compaq Presario SR5610F
$430 street
●●●○○

This no-frills under-$500 machine capably handles basic daily computing tasks (Web browsing, archiving CDs, e-mailing, standard office productivity), so it makes a decent student PC or second home computer. HP doesn't give you as much as similarly priced offerings like the Lenovo IdeaCentre or eMachines T5274, but in testing, the Presario's performance was nearly identical. An open memory slot lets you add another gigabyte, for 3GB total and a speed boost.

Mainstream Desktops

Technology marches on, and these advanced but nicely priced systems proceed accordingly with high performance and the latest multimedia features.



All the inputs and outputs you need for a media machine

HP Pavilion Elite m9400t
$843 list; $1,174 with 20-inch widescreen monitor
●●●●○

PC MAGAZINE EDITORS' CHOICE

The m9400t is optimized for the multimedia enthusiast: in other words, the member of your tribe who thinks the current PC is "too slow" or "doesn't do enough." The m9400t has as many inputs and outputs as a typical A/V receiver in your home theater, plus a Blu-ray/HD DVD combo reader and 500GB drive. This is the system you want to buy if you're graduating from the basic "rip and burn" PC. The 3GB of memory and quad-core Q6600 processor helped the system obtain impressive benchmark results.

Dell Studio 540
$1,079 direct; $1,369 with 20-inch widescreen monitor
●●●○○

The Studio 540 is a solid system, with some good technology and a decent feature set, including wireless networking, a TV tuner, 15-in-1 card reader, 640GB hard drive, and I/O connections for plugging into a home-theater setup. Multimedia performance on our benchmark tests was better than average. However, Dell's omission of a Blu-ray drive and a price above competing offerings hold it back from getting a higher score.

Velocity Micro Vector Z20
$1,699 direct; $2,198 with 26-inch widescreen monitor
●●●◐○

The Vector Z20 epitomizes the powerhouse multimedia box, and it has a little gaming secret sauce slathered on top. Where you really want a multimedia box to perform is at media tasks like photo editing and video transcoding, and this is one space where the Z20 shines. The BD-ROM drive lets you watch Blu-ray movies, and with connections for HDTV and an A/V receiver, this desktop would serve as well in the rec room as in the office.

Gateway DX4710-UB002A
$899.99 list, $1,220 with 22-inch widescreen monitor
●●●◐○

This is a decent multimedia PC and would be fine in most media enthusiasts' homes. The DX4710's particularly high scores on our video-transcoding tests make it a good choice for the handycam-addicted. A couple of omissions, like that of an HD DVD/Blu-ray reader, keep the system from taking the top spot, but it is a solid choice just the same. It's too bad there's more than the usual amount of crapware. Available in a big-box store near you.

HP Pavilion Slimline s3600t
$986 list, $1,316 with 20-inch widescreen monitor
●●●◐○

As its name suggests, the Slimline epitomizes the strengths of a small-form-factor PC. HP packs a lot of impressive hardware into a small package, combining Intel quad-core power with nVidia graphics hardware to produce a very desirable system. With its multimedia prowess, this Slimline is very good for casual photo and video work—the sort of tasks you do before posting to YouTube or FaceBook. It's a pity that there's so much crapware to contend with.

Affordable Luxury

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Gaming Desktops

Increase your chance of surviving, and maybe even winning bragging rights, with one of these lightning-fast rigs.

Velocity Micro Raptor Signature Edition
$6,999 direct; $7,498 with 26-inch widescreen monitor
●●●●◐

PC MAGAZINE EDITORS' CHOICE

The best gaming system we've seen. Its blazing, top-of-the-class performance coupled with its middle-of-the-pack pricing makes the Raptor a hands-down winner. The quad-core QX9650 processor, overclocked all the way from 3.0 GHz to 4.4 GHz, is one of the more impressive displays of tweaking we've seen in a gaming system. The Raptor smashes the 90-frame-per-second barrier, reaching 91 fps on the Crysis test at 1,280 by 1,024. The system's scores provide rock-steady playability that will have you staring in wonder at the lush 3D visuals in each game.

Overclocked CPU and SSDs mean blazing performance

Falcon Northwest FragBox QX9650
$4,095 direct, $4,495 with 22-inch widescreen monitor; custom paint job about $50 extra
●●●●○

Along with the speedy Intel Extreme quad-core processor inside, Falcon installed a superb ATI Radeon HD 4870 X2 graphics card with two GPUs. Combined, these equal a gaming system that has the potential to keep most hard-core players happy. It's not cheap, but it is a bargain compared with high-end gaming PCs that reach closer to $8,000 for a similar level of performance. Plus you can get that paint job with the new "rain" effect.

HP Blackbird 002 Exhilaration Edition
$6,590 direct
●●●○○

The Exhilaration Edition surpasses the original Blackbird 002 on the game grid with the latest Intel Core 2 Extreme QX9770 processors and GeForce GTX 280 SLI graphics inside its beautiful case. Though it's still fast, the system we tested didn't fly as high as similarly priced quad-core rivals (except on the Crysis benchmark); some of them have a third graphics card. But the bottom line is that for its price, the HP is a very fast machine that, as a gaming system, should be even faster.

Polywell i790SLI3
$5,749 direct, $6,999 with 30-inch widescreen monitor
●●●◐○

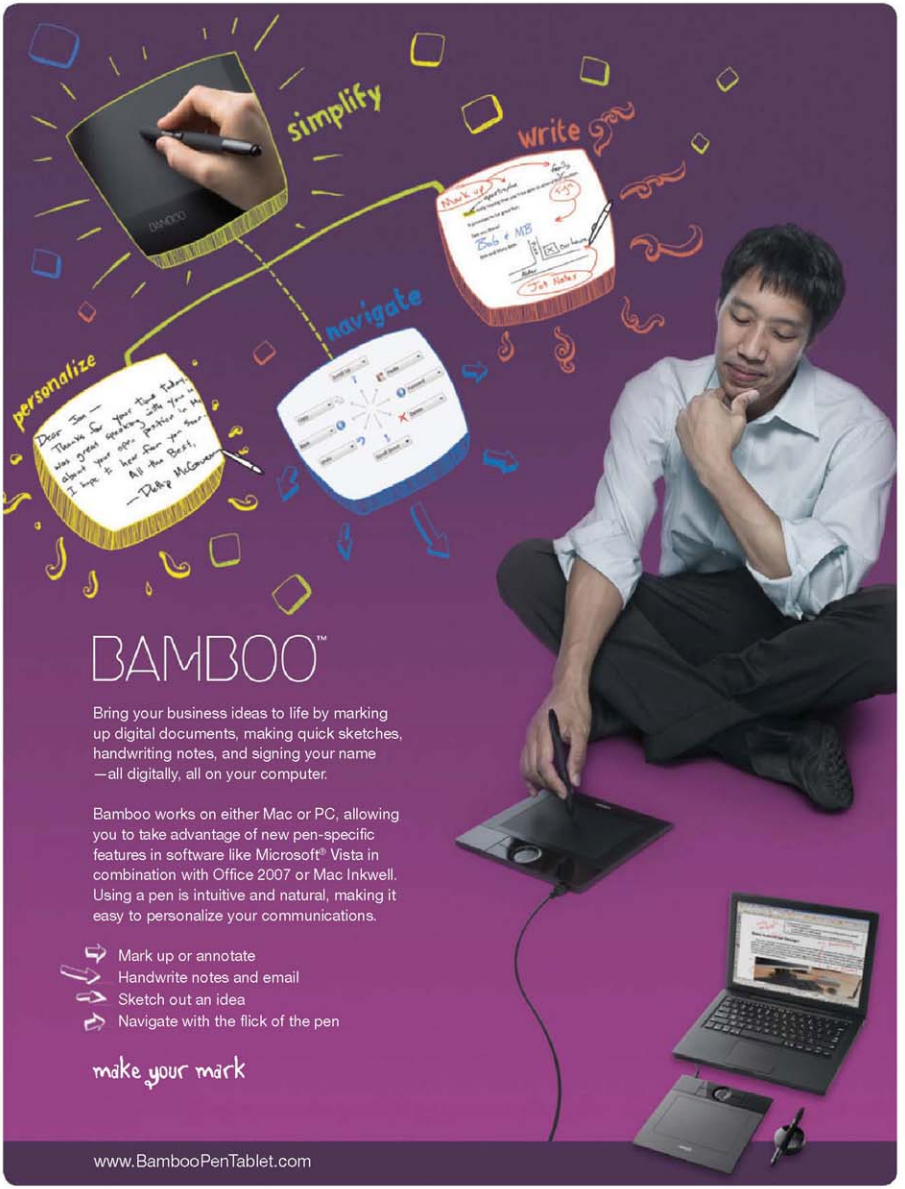
As the model name hints, the Polywell comes with an nVidia nForce 790i chipset-based motherboard and triple SLI graphics. That means it's a high-powered gaming system, and all those nVidia-sourced components are good for 3D play. The heavy-duty components and cooling fans do make this imposing system a bit noisy, but it's a solid choice for the high-end gamer who wants a machine with brag-worthy benchmark numbers.

Alienware Area-51 ALX (Radeon HD 4870 X2 CrossFireX)
$9,507 direct
●●●◐○

The latest from this high-end system builder has a new heart: dual ATI Radeon HD 4870 X2 graphics cards—and they are screaming (at least on World in Conflict). They might scream louder once driver issues are resolved. The overclocked Yorkfield CPU, speedy SDRAM, and pair of Velociraptor hard drives helped the ALX score high on system benchmark tests—but there are less-expensive models that can keep up with and even outpace it.

Vigor Force Recon QXN
$7,499 direct
●●●◐○

The Vigor Force Recon QXN kicks serious butt and qualifies as one of the more audacious systems we've reviewed, with an overclocked Intel Core 2 QX9770 Extreme processor, three GeForce GTX 280 graphics cards, and a boatload of storage space. All its scores are competitive with those of other gaming boxes overclocked to 4 GHz, but it falls a bit short of the leader in this category. When playing at a machine that costs almost $8,000, coming in second or third just won't do.



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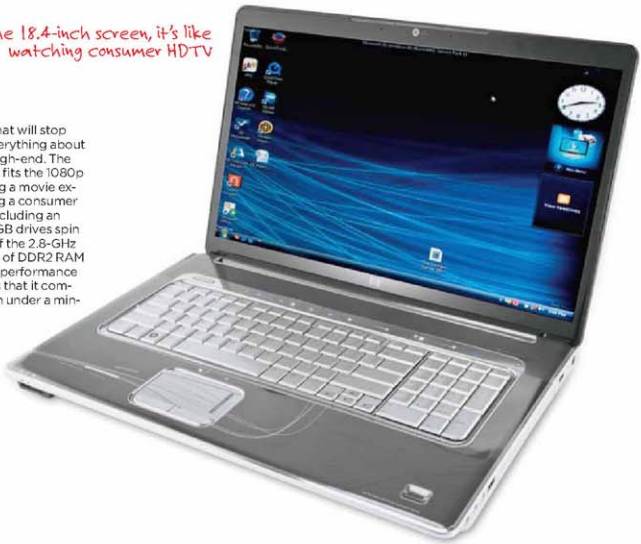
Desktop Replacement Laptops

Downsizing is a good thing when you can get performance, expandability, most of the usual options, and mobility, too.

With the 18.4-inch screen, it's like watching consumer HDTV



HP HDX 18
$2,000 direct
●●●●◐

PC MAGAZINE EDITORS' CHOICE

It's the 18.4-inch screen that will stop you in your tracks, but everything about the HP HDX 18 screams high-end. The 1,920-by-1,080 resolution fits the 1080p moniker exactly, providing a movie experience comparable to watching a consumer HDTV. The feature list is stellar, including an internal ATSC TV tuner. Two 160GB drives spin at 7,200 rpm. The combination of the 2.8-GHz Intel Core 2 Duo T9600 and 4GB of DDR2 RAM helped the HDX 18 dominate our performance tests. Even more remarkable was that it completed the video-encoding test in under a minute—a rare feat for a laptop.

Acer Aspire 8920G
$2,600 street
●●●●○

Just when you thought Acer couldn't come up with another beastly laptop, the Aspire 8920G "Gemstone Blue" series emerges to wow high-definition aficionados. With an 18.4-inch screen, top-notch performance scores, 4GB of RAM, Blu-ray burner, and amazing sound quality, this is a nice, but expensive, movable media center. Though still bulky and 8.8 pounds, it doesn't seem like a nightmare to lug around. FireWire and S-Video-out ports are glaring omissions.

ASUS M70Sa-X2
$1,550 street
●●●●○

The feature set and the price will blow you away. The ASUS M70Sa-X2 isn't shy about being a plus-size 17-inch laptop that weighs 8.7 pounds. In fact, it makes the most of it by including a terabyte's worth of storage and a Blu-ray burner. Performance scores rival those of big names like HP and Toshiba. The assortment of A/V ports is a boon for home-theater heads and video editors. The downside? The ASUS M70Sa-X2 is hard to find in stores. Your best bet is online, at sites like Newegg.com.

Gateway P-7811FX
$1,399 list
●●●◐○

Multimedia buffs and casual gamers will love the 1080p-quality resolution and energy-efficient premium parts. Gateway had to make some tough choices to get the price down to $1,399, but it made the right ones. The Centrino 2 processor, HDMI port, 4GB DDR3 RAM, and gorgeous 17-inch display come together to create a solid desktop replacement. If you can handle the 8.8-pound weight and potential incompatibilities with 64-bit Vista, the price makes this a compelling system.

Apple MacBook Pro 17-Inch (Core 2 Duo T7700)
$3,799 direct
●●●●○

The lightest 17-inch laptop on the market delivers fantastic performance with the 2.4-GHz Intel Core 2 Duo, 3GB of RAM, and gaming-worthy graphics card (nVidia GeForce 8600M GT). The screen calls out to video pros, photographers, gamers, and media enthusiasts. And it's definitely cooler than its predecessor; it gets lukewarm, not hot. The 160GB hard drive is fast but skimpy for a machine at this price. If only Apple offered less-costly configurations.

Toshiba Satellite P305-S8825
$1,050 street
●●●●○

Toshiba's 7.5-pound laptop takes up less space than a conventional desktop without forcing you to scrimp much on screen size (17 inches), feature set, or ports. The 1.83-GHz Intel Core 2 Duo T5550 processor won't win any performance races, but it can handle photo editing, movie viewing, office tasks, and so forth—which is what you should expect from a laptop at this price. The full-size keyboard and numeric keypad ease the transition from a desktop.

Another Day, Another Crisis?

The Common Denominator in Performance Nightmares

Just Another Day at the Office

You've probably had it happen, and there's nothing quite like it. First thing Monday morning, a "MUST be handled before noon!" list of emergencies hits you in the face:

- The sales manager is squawking because CRM database is slow
- Accounting is nagging because email is slow
- The NAS server is averaging unacceptably high counts of queued disk I/Os
- You're getting constant poor performance alerts from the SAN
- Backups have not been completing during the backup window

These nagging, ulcer-creating problems are also the subject of several emails from the CFO because, on top of being bad for company production, in this time of economic uncertainty they're also bad for business. Work is being slowed down and the company is losing money.

The Culprit

The common hardware denominator to all these crises is the hard drive—the slowest link in a computer system. If the data on a hard drive is fragmented, that already dragging weakest link becomes agonizingly slower.

With frenetic requirements for continuous data access, enormous files and huge disk capacities, fragmentation is worse than ever; files in hundreds or even thousands of fragments aren't at all uncommon. Brett Taylor, of Van Wert Medical Services, discovered just how bad it can get. "Our electronic medical records server is a Microsoft® SQL Server® and one day it came to a halt," he says. "I did everything: ran spyware software, deleted numerous temp files, ran Windows® update, etc. but nothing would allow the server to run. It turned out that the hard drive was horribly fragmented."

Craig Merchant of Pace Engineering, San Francisco, discovered very similar problems. "I get a huge amount of fragmentation when I run multiple virtual machines on my system using VMware®," he reports. "I've had as much as 20% fragmentation that the Windows defrag utility couldn't get rid of. In my experience, virtual machines fragment their disks as much as real machines. But Windows systems running VMware tend to have extreme fragmentation problems, particularly when running multiple VM's."

Making Mondays Go Away

Making the right defragmentation technology choice in today's frantic fragmentation environment is vital. Scheduled defragmentation has become a problem due to the IT hours required to schedule defragmentation and the downtime required for the defragmenter to run. But worst of all, scheduled defragmentation is no longer fully addressing fragmentation.

The only solution that stands up to today's escalating fragmentation is Diskeeper®. Diskeeper's proprietary InvisiTasking® technology makes for completely automatic, invisible defragmentation. Because it utilizes otherwise idle resources, it requires absolutely no scheduling, freeing up IT time for more important tasks. There is never a negative performance hit during defragmentation, and system performance and reliability are consistently maximized.

Reliability and Performance Issues Become Nonexistent

Mike Driest, Network/Systems Administrator for Industrial Control Repair in Warren, Michigan, has found Diskeeper to be the only solution. "Automatic disk defragmentation for a server is like oil for the engine in your car," he says. "One of the most useful features about Diskeeper, when using it on our 20+ servers, is the automatic defragmenting with InvisiTasking.

Diskeeper helps all of our servers (Domain Controllers, File, Exchange, SQL, Web, etc.) perform at their very best. Reliability and performance issues relating to a lack of defragmentation do not exist in our environment."

Diskeeper has proven the solution for Andrew Wise, Senior Network Engineer at Datacore Marketing in Westwood, Kansas as well. "We run Diskeeper primarily on our SQL database servers with Fibre Channel SAN connectivity," he says. "It keeps the database and log files defragmented at the OS level to reduce the I/O on our SAN. After installing Diskeeper and doing a full defrag, we noticed around 10–15% reduction in the amount of I/O generated and in the amount of time it took for the SAN to service each request. We are a Microsoft SQL Server database shop and we process terabytes of SQL data on a daily basis, so any reduction in the amount of time it takes to do that processing save us money."

Diskeeper with InvisiTasking makes for smooth, calm Monday mornings for these and thousands of other enterprises the world over. Take advantage of our special offer and find out, free of charge, what it can do for you.

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Ultraportable Laptops

Shrinkage continues, but performance and features of the tiniest laptops will meet the needs of traveling business professionals.

Intel's energy-efficient Atom inside

MSI Wind
$480 street
●●●●○

It's the best ultraportable deal on the market, complete with the Intel Atom platform, Windows XP Home Edition, a full range of connections, and a very good user experience. The 10-inch screen is practical for both Web surfing and word processing. Unlike the HP Mini-Note's VIA C7-M processor, the Atom is more energy efficient and is a much better performer. And the 1GB of memory is more than enough to run Windows XP. One knock: The keyboard should be bigger.

Lenovo ThinkPad X200
$1,199 direct
●●●●○

The X200 has several features that make it a terrific business ultraportable, including a Centrino 2–based processor that has a very favorable effect on battery life (6 hours on our tests) and performance that currently bests other ThinkPads. Furthermore, it puts every wireless technology imaginable at your disposal. At 3.7 pounds, the X200 is heavier than some competitors.

Sony VAIO VGN-SZ791N
$2,499 direct
●●●●◐

With its debut SZ ultraportable (the VGN-SZ170P), Sony showed it understood the importance of discrete graphics and optical drives to speed-seeking travelers. The SZ791N provides a compelling performance boost with a 2.5-GHz Core 2 Duo Intel "Penryn" processor. Also, the SZ791N's battery sustained it for over 5 hours, a needed improvement.

ASUS U2E-A2B
$2,499 list
●●●○○

This gorgeous, leather-clad ultraportable weighs next to nothing (okay, 2.7 pounds). But it could use a price reduction and a processor lift. The 11-inch widescreen is big enough for business road warriors, and the unique HDMI port can drive high-quality video to a bigger, external display. ASUS is one of the few vendors that doesn't support internal cellular modems, so the U2E is not "mobile-broadband ready."

Voodoo Envy 133
$2,449 direct
●●●◐○

It fits in a manila envelope, and if looks could kill, the 3.5-pound Envy 133 would be to die for. But setbacks like meager battery life and a high price might keep it from being your best choice. The 13.3-inch widescreen is backed by LEDs and looks great in various light settings. The 133 has an ExpressCard slot, which you might need because it doesn't have an option for an integrated cellular modem.

Toshiba Portégé R500 (SSD)
$2,599 direct
●●●◐○

It seems inconceivable that a laptop with a 12-inch screen and full-size keyboard can weigh only 1.7 pounds. Of course, compromises were made—a lesser Intel CPU and no optical drive—but the unit is fine for office-type tasks. The widescreen looked a bit washed out under fluorescents, but the antiglare film coating is effective. The R500 carries our GreenTech seal.

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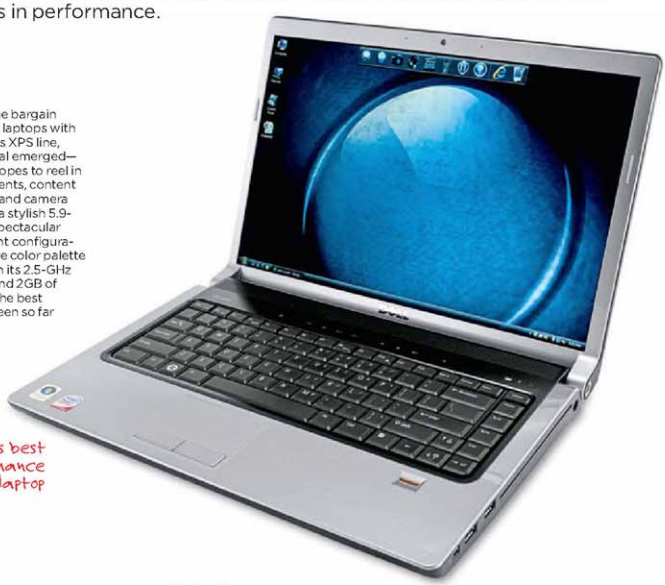
Access Your PC from Anywhere

Mainstream Laptops

Screens are bigger and better, media capabilities are richer, and these systems rival many desktop PCs in performance.

Dell Studio 15
$1,199 direct
●●●●◐

When Dell crossed the bargain pricing of its Inspiron laptops with the design sense of its XPS line, something sensational emerged—the Studio line. Dell hopes to reel in the latest generation of students, content creators, social-networkers, and camera enthusiasts. The Studio 15 is a stylish 5.9-pound, 15-inch laptop with spectacular performance scores, excellent configuration options, and an extensive color palette (Plum Purple, anyone?). With its 2.5-GHz Intel Core 2 Duo processor and 2GB of RAM, the Studio 15 showed the best overall system score we've seen so far from a mainstream laptop.



2.5-GHz CPU drives best system performance in a mainstream laptop

Acer Aspire 6920G-6071
$980 street
●●●●◐

Not only is this the first laptop to incorporate a 16-inch widescreen, it's also the first to bundle a Blu-ray drive and discrete nVidia graphics for under $1,000. The 1.83-GHz Intel Core 2 Duo T5550 is fine for watching movies. An HDMI-out port is included, along with four USB ports. In many ways it's the perfect media center for a cramped room or studio apartment: It sheds the weight but doesn't sacrifice screen real estate.

Fujitsu LifeBook T5010
$1,869 direct
●●●●○

The T5010 convertible tablet straddles the line between portable and "maybe I should leave this at home," but a lot can be forgiven when you put in a 13.3-inch widescreen, an optical drive, and the latest Centrino 2 parts. The digitizer and the pen-on-paper feel are truly impressive. The 80GB drive seems insubstantial, but it can be upgraded. Though battery life was disappointing, this is still a terrific mainstream laptop.

HP Pavilion dv5t
$1,525 list
●●●●○

HP makes over its Pavilion line with Centrino 2 processor technology and a shiny chrome interior. The feature set is probably among the best in the industry and includes an HDTV tuner, a powerful 3D graphics card, four USB ports, a FireWire port, a webcam, and a 5-in-1 card reader. As always, HP offers several options for screen resolution. In the configuration we tested, the 1,680-by-1,050-pixel screen really made videos and photos pop.

Sony VAIO VGN-FW198UH
$2,099 direct
●●●○○

One of the first media center laptops to hit the scene with a 16.4-inch widescreen, this 6.4-pound VAIO is also one of the first based on Intel's Centrino 2 platform. Performance numbers are formidable, battery life a letdown. Wireless, three USB ports, FireWire, an HDMI-out port, 4GB RAM, a Blu-ray burner, and a 320GB hard drive round out the package. High prices and too much useless software are issues that continue to plague Sony laptops.

MORE ON THE WEB Read in-depth reviews with complete specs of each machine at *www.pcmag.com*.

The Top 100 Undiscovered Web Sites

From the supremely useful to the sublimely ridiculous, these sites belong in your Favorites folder or RSS reader.

Please open a few extra browser tabs. You're going to need them.

Each year, our editorial team assembles to find the best Web sites of the year. We then painstakingly whittle the list of nominations down to The Top 100 Undiscovered Web Sites—those that might not be household names but capture the best trends of the online universe.

Some of these sites are surely known to you, and might even have large followings within their particular niche. But given the list's broad range of categories, we're certain there's plenty of new stuff here for everyone to discover.—*Kyle Monson*

Apps and Services

Animoto www.animoto.com
Upload photos and music (from your hard drive or sites like Flickr and Facebook) and Animoto will auto-generate a cool slide-show video. You end up with a polished product complete with transitions and effects. Thirty-second clips are free, longer clips cost $3.

Drop.io drop.io
The best file-sharing service we've seen. Just type in the URL you'd like to use, upload your files (up to 100MB), and set a password. Sharing files is then as easy as sending the URL around.

Ecosystem: The Netvibes Widget Directory eco.netvibes.com
Tons o' widgets for users of the Netvibes personal start-page service. They're compatible with OS X, Vista, iPhone, and iGoogle. Besides searching for cool widgets or code, you can upload your own.

Jooce www.jooce.com
Access your personal stuff from any computer. Just load up your browser-based

Illustration by Ken Orvidas

BIZARROWORLD So the cartoonist says…

Jooce desktop with files, music, videos, IM buddy lists, and anything else you might need, and get to it all by logging in.

Jott www.jott.com
One of the coolest applications of speech-to-text technologies we have seen. Sign up for a free account, then call Jott on your phone and leave a message. The message will be converted to text and posted on your blog, Twitter feed, or to-do list. The conversion is surprisingly accurate.

Mux www.mux.am
An excellent video conversion/sharing site. Enter the URL of a video clip (or its location on your hard drive) and specify what format you want the video in—iPod, PSP, DivX, MPEG-4, and so forth. Give it a few minutes to work its magic; Mux will send you an e-mail with the location for downloading your new clip.

PageOnce www.pageonce.com
Maintain all your online account info in one spot. Keep tabs on your bank or investment accounts, your social-network profiles, minutes left on your cell-phone plan, or which Netflix movies are on the way.

Plurk www.plurk.com
Go beyond Twitter with this microblogging service that lets users share images and video clips. The interface is also a lot more fun to use.

PurpleTrail www.purpletrail.com
This event-planning site will need to build a lot more momentum before it can challenge Evite or the invite functions built into Facebook and MySpace. But PurpleTrail has the features to give them a run for their money.

Scrapblog www.scrapblog.com
Grab your photos from Flickr, MySpace, Facebook, Picasa, and many other photo sites and use them to construct cool (and free) multimedia scrapbooks. You can add video clips, too.

Utterz www.utterz.com
Post your content (text, audio, photo, or video) across multiple blogs and social networks. Utterz is specially optimized for use with mobile phones, letting you update your blog from anywhere.—*Kyle Monson*

Fun and Games

BizarroBlog
bizarrocomic.blogspot.com
The syndicated comic strip Bizarro is even more enjoyable with cartoonist Dan Piraro's commentary, which usually follows on this blog a few days after the panel has run in newspapers.

Chime.TV www.chimetv.com
There are plenty of aggregated video sites, but Chime.TV pulls from the best (Break.com, Dailymotion, Veoh, and others) to make editor-created channels filled with stuff you'll love.

Group Card www.groupcard.com
An easy way for officemates, friends, or family to circulate, sign, and send a free e-card. The selection isn't much better than at your local drugstore, but anything that saves spending $5 on a paper card is good.

JakeandAmir.com
www.jakeandamir.com
Jake Hurwitz and Amir Blumenfeld deliver twisted video sketches that tend to be funnier than the material they create in their day jobs at CollegeHumor.com.

Oddee www.oddee.com
A landing place for the weird photos blowing around the Internet, broken down into Digg-friendly, easily digestible lists.

PointlessSites.com
www.pointlesssites.com
Beneath its circa-1995 exterior lies the ultimate portal to online time-wasting. If you need to play a silly Flash-animated game, and you need to play it now, this site has you covered.

RulesofThumb.org
www.rulesofthumb.org
Want to harness the collective wisdom on managing money, finding the perfect mate, or getting rid of back pain? Whether the collective wisdom is on target, however, is a call you'll have to make.

Someecards www.someecards.com
It comes as quite a shock that one of the funniest sites on the Web is an e-card service. Browsing through the enormous collection was enough to make us wish we had friends to send cards to.

Totlol www.totlol.com
Actual human beings vet videos from all over the Web as suitable for kids ages 6 months to 6 years and embed them here—from classics like Kermit singing "It's Not Easy Being Green" on up to modern Veggie-Tales and obscure stuff in between.

TypeRacer play.typeracer.com
Put your typing skills to the test with TypeRacer for the chance to win money, fame, women, and a slot on TypeRacer's leaderboard! (You actually get only one of those wonderful prizes.)

WonderMark www.wondermark.com
If you like your Web comics to have that old-timey feeling—we're talking 19th-century-woodcut-illustrations old-timey—check out David Malki's twisted twice-a-week strip featuring Victorian-era characters and punch lines you won't see coming.

YouTomb youtomb.mit.edu
The MIT Free Culture student group tracks the top videos removed from YouTube for copyright violation, and retains the metadata so that we, the public, can decide if the removal was justified.
—*Kyle Monson and Eric Griffith*

Health and Science

Atmospheric Optics
www.atoptics.co.uk
This site's stunning pictures illustrate the strange and beautiful phenomena created by light, weather, and our atmosphere.

CalorieLab www.calorielab.com
Check the nutrition info for just about every restaurant chain and type of food before you head out to eat. Then consult the calorie-burning statistics for day-to-day activities.

Exploratorium www.exploratorium.edu
An excellent resource for kids interested

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The Hannspree HT09 is the world's first Full HD 27.5-inch LCD television, delivering stunning imagery and sharp picture quality typically found on most large-screen LCD TVs. The HT09 provides nine video inputs, including two HDMI™ ports, for connecting devices such as HD antenna, cable set-top box, gaming console, DVD/Blu-ray™ player, PC, and camcorder, making it truly a multi-function display. Combined with Full HD 1080p resolution, ultra-fast response time, and high contrast ratio, users will enjoy an enhanced viewing experience whether watching a movie, sporting event, or playing a computer game.

Technical Specifications

- Screen Size: 27.5" TFT LCD
- Aspect Ratio: 16:10
- Resolution: 1920x1200
- Response Time: 3ms(GTG)
- Brightness: 500cd/m2
- Contrast Ratio: 3000:1 DCR
- Viewing Angle: 160°/160°
- Tuners: ATSC + NTSC + Clear QAM
- Inputs: RF, HDMI x2, Component, S-Video x2, Composite x2, VGA, Mini-Stereo

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7" Digital Photo Frame - SD7021

- Ideal for Displaying Kids, Family, Wedding, Party, and Vacation Photos
- 7" Widescreen LCD Delivers Stunning Picture Quality
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- Automatically Rotates Photos in Portrait or Landscape Mode
- Displays JPEG Photos
- 3-in-1 Memory Card Reader

27.5" LCD Monitor - HF-289HJB

- 27.5" Widescreen TFT LCD
- Resolution: 1920x1200
- Response Time: 3ms(GTG)
- Brightness: 500cd/m2
- Contrast Ratio: 2400:1 DCR
- Inputs: VGA, HDMI x2, Component, Mini-Stereo

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in finding out how the world around them works. Like its meatspace counterpart, it emphasizes scientific discovery through activities and demonstrations.

OrganizedWisdom
www.organizedwisdom.com
Taking a different approach to health-related searches, this site presents results in the form of "WisdomCards," curated topics pages with info and links.

ZocDoc www.zocdoc.com
We absolutely love this idea: a directory of doctors and dentists that you can search by insurance plan, location, or available appointment times. (Currently limited to New York City.)—*KM*

Info, Search, and Reference

blippr www.blippr.com
You've got 160 words to weigh in on a movie, book, music, or game, so make them count; as with Twitter, the enforced conciseness often results in some brilliant writing.

Common Sense Media
www.commonsensemedia.org
For parents who want to know more about the media their kids are consuming, CSM offers detailed, clear-eyed reports on the content of movies, music, and video games without resorting to rants or value judgments (you can post those yourself in the reader reviews section).

Criminal Searches
www.criminalsearches.com
Scary-but-useful data on criminals who live in your neighborhood, crimes they were convicted of, and, in some cases, names and personal info. It's all culled from public records.

Damn Interesting
www.damninteresting.com
It's possible that a severed head may actually feel pain for a while, post-separation. If you find that kind of fact damn interesting, well, you know where to go.

ExpoTV www.expotv.com
Videotaped opinions offer unique insights into products you might not have considered reading reviews of, such as yoga mats or highlighter pens. Tape and submit your own review and ExpoTV may pay you $10 if it runs.

EASY SLIDER Scroll horizontally through stacks of results pages at Searchme.

glassbooth www.glassbooth.org
Take a short quiz and glassbooth will tell you how your views line up with each presidential candidate's, and why. The site also provides links for further research.

Howcast www.howcast.com
The best-looking how-to videos on the Web. Learn "How to Become an Ultimate Fighter" or "How to Get Rid of a One-Night Stand." Sign up to get a How-To Video of the Day via e-mail.

HowToCleanStuff
www.howtocleanstuff.net
Whatever you get dirty, this site can probably tell you how to clean it: white-wall tires, LCD screens, golf balls, fake plants, furniture, venetian blinds, clothing, pets, and, yes, even people.

NationMaster www.nationmaster.com
Offering world data on a staggeringly wide variety of subjects, this site lets you compare nations based on different criteria. For instance, America kicks the rest of the world's butt at soft-drink consumption.

RepairPal www.repairpal.com
Until recently, God and your mechanic were the only ones who knew how much it actually costs to replace the fuel injector on a '95 Toyota Previa. Punch in your car info, necessary repair, and ZIP code and RepairPal will tell you how much to expect to pay and where you can get the work done.

Searchme www.searchme.com
An innovative search engine that essentially uses Apple's Cover Flow interface to present results. Enter a term and then scroll horizontally through full previews of each relevant page, or create "Stacks" of bookmarked pages to visit later.

Viewzi www.viewzi.com
Viewzi aggregates search results from Google, Yahoo!, YouTube, and others and lets you pick how you want them presented (just photos, for example). It can actually be more convenient than a simple Google search.

WhatTheFont www.whatthefont.com
To find out which font is being used in an image or on a Web site, upload a scan of it to WhatTheFont, or submit the URL. The service analyzes your submission and sends you the name of the font.—*KM and EG*

Lifestyle

BleacherReport
www.bleacherreport.com
Fans get to become sports journalists via this "open-source sports network." It's a vast site, full of news and, above all, opinions ("Most Unwearable Jerseys").

Crazy Blind Date
www.crazyblinddate.com
Fill out a simple profile, upload a picture, and if you're lucky, the service will send you a match (description and "super-blurry" photo). Interested? The service will then set up the date.

DailyLit www.dailylit.com
You can never again use the excuse that you're in front of the computer too much to read a good book. Sign up, find a book you'd like to read, and then start receiving the tome in easily readable chunks every day, every other day, or once a week via e-mail or RSS.

Design*Sponge
www.designspongeonline.com
This DIY blog sets itself apart with the practicality and doability of the projects.

Presenting the Bose® Computer MusicMonitor®

Performance you may never have thought possible from only two speakers this small.

The Bose Computer MusicMonitor® was developed for the growing number of people who use their computers for personal entertainment, and want accurate sound reproduction from a small and elegant system. According to Rich Warren of the *News-Gazette*, "If you want a pair of exceptionally small speakers with incredibly big sound for any purpose, listen no further."

Our best two-piece computer sound system. Until now, the rich low tones necessary for high-quality desktop sound have come only from large speakers or three-piece systems with a bass module. The MusicMonitor® establishes for us a new threshold in the accuracy of music reproduction. As Arlen Schweiger of *Electronic House* reports, "The folks at Bose really know how to shrink a product while maintaining a big sound." It is the first time we have been able to produce sound quality like this with only two such small enclosures containing all the electronics and speakers.

Proprietary Bose technologies. The unexpected sound quality is made possible through a combination of unique Bose technologies, including our dual internal opposing passive radiators. This invention allows the system to deliver faithful low note reproduction and musical accuracy, despite its small size. Dennis Barker says in *Digital TV DesignLine* that "after a listening test, I was quite impressed with this tiny pair of speakers."

Enjoy all your digital entertainment with the richness it deserves. The contemporary metal design and small size make the MusicMonitor® system a welcome addition to your desk or workspace. Digital music files sound more lifelike than they would with ordinary computer speakers this size. Downloaded videos sound better, too. And setup is simple. It should take you about as long to connect this system as it takes to remove it from the box.

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Listen risk free for 30 days. The best way to judge the performance of any sound system is in the unique acoustics of the environment where you'll use it. That's why we invite you to try the MusicMonitor® risk free for 30 days. When you call, ask about using your own major credit card to make **12 easy payments,** with no interest charges from Bose.* Then listen, and discover why Bose is the most respected name in sound.

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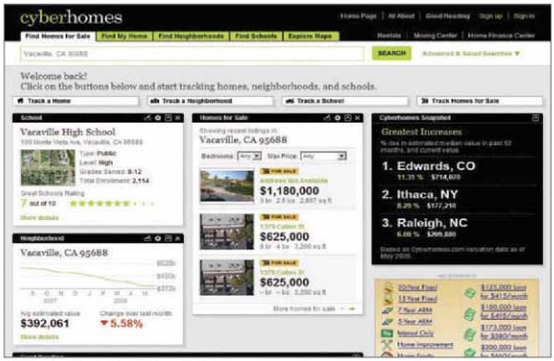
*Bose payment plan available on orders of $299-$1500 paid by major credit card. Separate financing offers may be available for select products. See website for details. Down payment is 1/12 the product price plus applicable tax and shipping charges, charged when your order is shipped. Then, your credit card will be billed for 11 equal monthly installments beginning approximately one month from the date your order is shipped, with 0% APR and no interest charges from Bose. Credit card rules and interest may apply. U.S. residents only. Limit one active financing program per customer. ©2008 Bose Corporation. Patent rights issued and/or pending. Financing and free shipping offer not to be combined with other offers or applied to previous purchases, and subject to change without notice. Risk free refers to 30-day trial only and does not include return shipping. Delivery is subject to product availability. Quotes reprinted with permission.



WON'T YOU BE MY NEIGHBOR? Find more than the right house at Cyberhomes.

As in: You and I could actually do most of this stuff and make it look great.

Fantasy Football Hub
www.fantasyfootballhub.com
It may be the most hideous site in this year's collection, but it's a massive clearinghouse of links for everything you'd ever need to know about virtual pigskin, from finding a league to getting those all-important stats and injury reports.

Feministing www.feministing.com
Tackling subjects ranging from the serious (women denied a standard rape-kit exam) to the absurd (abstinence thongs!), dedicated bloggers make the site informative, fun, and balanced, and a lively community gives readers a chance to contribute and debate.

Inhabitat www.inhabitat.com
With style and substance, this site focuses on forward-looking design that emphasizes sustainability and efficiency. Chock-full of cool stuff, like a solar-powered tote bag and a collapsible stadium that seats 3,500.

LoveFoodHateWaste
www.lovefoodhatewaste.com
Tell LFHW what you've got on hand in the kitchen and the site suggests recipes that'll help you clean out your fridge and save money at the same time. Hmm…stale bread…wilted lettuce…

Serious Eats www.seriouseats.com
This foodie megablog serves a ton of tasty content, including recipes and restaurant reviews, reader photos (think cupcake-decorating achievements), offbeat product reviews (David Lynch's new organic coffee), and video clips (Charlie Rose chatting with Momofuku restaurant impresario David Chang).

WooMe www.woome.com
Being rejected by a string of would-be dates is less painful when it's online. No cumbersome profiles to (over)analyze here—just join a video-chat session and talk with five people in 5 minutes. If the 60-second date was good for both of you, WooMe charges a buck to swap your contact info.—*Sean Carroll and Kyle Monson*

Money and Real Estate

BillShrink www.billshrink.com
If you think you're paying too much for your wireless plan, BillShrink can help. Just tell it how much you pay monthly, your ZIP code, and usage details like how often you send text. BillShrink will suggest which wireless carrier plan is best and estimate your potential savings.

Cyberhomes www.cyberhomes.com
Find not just the right house but the right neighborhood, too. Get info and ratings for local schools, mine demographic data to find a neighborhood with (or without) children, or even search for a neighborhood by affluence.

Glassdoor.com www.glassdoor.com
Ever wonder what your cubicle neighbors' salaries are? Or what they really think of the boss? Glassdoor.com collects and posts anonymous employer reviews and salary info.

Stockhouse www.stockhouse.com
Half social network for investors, half information resource. Track stock prices, swap trading tips, and even add other users as friends. Just like Wall Street, but without the golf and cigar smoke.—*KM*

Music

Create Digital Music
createdigitalmusic.com
Whether you're a ProTools wiz or a GarageBand hobbyist, or just like to jam on your iPhone, Create Digital Music can help perfect your sound with product reviews and news, production tips, and an active community offering music-making advice.

Favtape.com www.favtape.com
Muxtape used to be in this spot, but as it's been taken down "temporarily," we're swapping in Favtape.com, which lets users build playlists out of their favorite tracks from Last.fm or Pandora. Share your "mixtapes" with friends, or listen to others'.

RadioTime www.radiotime.com
Tune in to the online streams of terrestrial radio stations, whether they're in your neighborhood or across the country.

Songza www.songza.com
Enter a song, artist, or both, and if it finds what you're looking for, Songza will serve it up free of charge—you can even build play-lists. Where does all this free music come from? Best not to ask.

TheSixtyOne www.thesixtyone.com
Discover new tunes at this Digg-like music-streaming service, which lets you vote songs up or down.

Wolfgang's Vault
www.wolfgangsvault.com
Free access to vintage recordings of thousands of live shows by legends like Clapton, Zeppelin, Hendrix, the Allman Brothers, Muddy Waters, and many more. These aren't crappy bootlegs; they're master recordings from Bill Graham's archives and other reputable catalogs.—*KM*

News

AMERICAblog
www.americablog.com
This left-leaning blog takes an activist slant on political reporting and turns a sharp eye on the 2008 presidential campaign and its coverage by the media. You might not know this site, but you've probably read political stories that were broken here.

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MobLogic.tv www.moblogic.tv
The man-on-the-street interview gets a nice treatment here. Host Lindsay Campbell covers more than just the usual stuff; she even gets arrested at a New York City protest. News commentary on the Web is seldom more engaging.

Orato.com www.orato.com
Citizen journalists get a chance to break free of the mainstream media by writing the news themselves. There's a good mix of political news and lighter fare, and many of the user-submitted articles are surprisingly compelling.

ScotusBlog www.scotusblog.com
Keep up with what's going on in the secret chambers with this site's expert and exhaustive coverage of the U.S. Supreme Court. There are quickie news updates but also in-depth analyses of rulings.

Townhall.com www.townhall.com
Aggregated content from leading conservative columnists and right-leaning partner sites.

Truemors www.truemors.com
Don't call it a gossip site; it's a user-generated rumor/news site. Submit your own, or just browse stories posted by others and vote for your favorites.—*KM*

Photography

BLDG BLOG bldgblog.blogspot.com
That Geoff Manaugh's blog has won awards for its eclectic coverage of "architectural conjecture, urban speculation, and landscape futures" is no surprise. Even if you're not into reading about buildings, you'll be sucked in by the stunning artwork he digs up.

Boston.com: The Big Picture
www.boston.com/bigpicture
Three times a week, Alan Taylor posts a series of big, beautiful pictures depicting stories currently in the news.

Earth Album
www.earthalbum.com
Not the first mash-up of Flickr and Google Maps, but it's one of the best. Click on any location on a map of the world and geotagged photos appear. Click on a photo to see it larger and to get a description from the photographer.

PHOTO PLANET At Tag Galaxy, you can search for photo subjects, or waste time.

PicApp www.picapp.com
A free stock-photo service that lets you quickly grab images of whatever subject you need for use on your blog or site. Photos range from run-of-the-mill shots to celebrity pics.

SquareAmerica
www.squareamerica.com
We can't promise that you'll find personal memories in the vintage snapshots collected here, but you will see primo examples of that type of family photography—mostly in black and white but sometimes in glorious Kodachrome.

Tag Galaxy www.taggalaxy.de
Tag Galaxy takes visual representations of data to new heights in searching Flickr photos. Enter a keyword ("frog") and you'll see a 3D representation of a solar system with the keyword as the sun, orbited by related word "planets" (for example, "amphibian," "green," and "toad"). Click planets to combine keywords, or just click the sun (main keyword) to get a photo-sphere covered with up to 236 images from Flickr. A fascinating time waster.—*EG*

Shopping

Catalog Choice
www.catalogchoice.org
If you're tired of your mailbox being stuffed with annoying catalogs, take advantage of this free service that lets you refuse catalogs you wish to no longer receive. Clean out your mailbox and save a few trees at the same time.

Gazelle.com www.gazelle.com
Earn cash for all that not-quite-obsolete tech gear you've already replaced. Enter the make, model, and condition of your gadget and you'll get an on-the-spot offer. The service accepts cameras, MP3 players, cell phones, laptops, and more.

The Impulsive Buy
www.theimpulsivebuy.com
Basically, TIB is just some guy writing about consumer products, but both the products he selects and the words he uses to describe them are truly inspired.

SomethingStore
www.somethingstore.com
For an even ten bucks, SomethingStore will send you . . . something. You don't get to pick. Maybe you'll get a laptop bag, maybe you'll get a GPS device, maybe you'll get a tacky piece of costume jewelry.

Typo Buddy www.typobuddy.com
One tip to save money on eBay is to look for auctions with the fewest bidders. TypoBuddy helps out by searching for commonly misspelled words on eBay, pointing you to gems that remain hidden because of a mistyped keyword.

Wigix www.wigix.com
A cheaper alternative to eBay. If you're a disgruntled PowerSeller or bidder, you might like this site's low fees and wealth of features like price histories and social-shopping options.

Zilok us.zilok.com
People who have stuff to rent can connect with people who need to rent stuff. Instead of buying a Nikon D80 to take on vacation, rent one for a few bucks a day.
—*Jared Preusz and Kyle Monson*

Social Networking

Eons.com www.eons.com
Boomers too old for MySpace will love this site. They can explore their interests, keep in touch with friends and family, connect with people sharing similar experiences, and even play games.

FriendFeed www.friendfeed.com
We have stared into the social-networking abyss and it is the information overload named FriendFeed. The service aggregates all your content and activity from Facebook, Flickr, Digg, Twitter, Last.fm, blogs, and so on, and aggregates your friends' activity, too, giving you a meta-feed of your online social life.

SocialVibe www.socialvibe.com
Maybe those millions of eyeballs staring at social networks every day can be used

OVER 100 5 STAR RATINGS

PC MAGAZINE EDITORS' CHOICE

May 24, 2005
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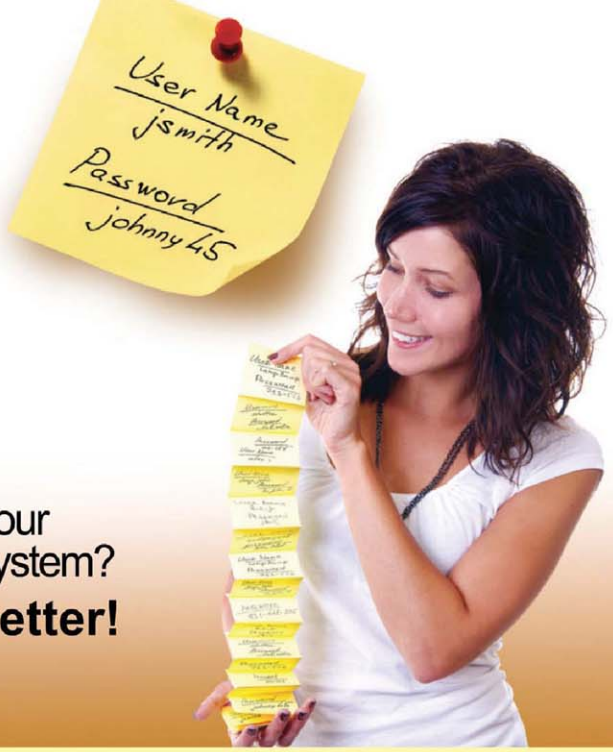

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for good. SocialVibe thinks so. You select a charity, then a favorite brand or product. An ad for that brand goes on your social-network profile, and proceeds from the ad go to the charity.

SoSauce www.sosauce.com
Photography and travel fans can upload photos, blog about their experiences, and even play multiplayer games. The site is not as profile-based as other social networks but instead is built around sharing content.—*JP and KM*

Technology

Coding Horror www.codinghorror.com
Proof that blogs about programming don't have to be boring. Posts are full of information for Web programmers and developers, but they're also surprisingly readable for the rest of us—well, the rest of us geeks.

FixYa www.fixya.com
If it's broken, post your problem. FixYa aggregates user-generated how-tos about products ranging from iPods and GPS devices to washing machines and SUVs.

Google Operating System
googlesystem.blogspot.com
A great source for anyone with heavy interest or investment in Google services, such as Docs, Apps, Maps, iGoogle, Picasa, and on and on. Not affiliated with Google.

Hack n Mod www.hacknmod.com
What, you don't know how to turn a GameBoy into an iPod, or transform an old PC into a server? The kindly folks at Hack n Mod can help you construct pretty much anything out of pretty much anything else.

Malware City www.malwarecity.com
We're not sure of the latitude or longitude of this place, but we imagine it's adjacent to Sin City and Cape Fear. This BitDefender-owned site is a great resource for malware information, packaged in a digestible film-noir style.

OhGizmo! www.ohgizmo.com
When you're sick and tired of reading about the umpteenth Apple rumor, check out OhGizmo!, which covers offbeat gadgets like MP3 players devoted to the band Journey and Louis Vuitton Trash Bags.

Phone Arena www.phonearena.com
Phone blogging is a fairly crowded space, but Phone Arena stands out with in-depth reviews, great design, plenty of pictures, and an active user community.

Rock, Paper, Shotgun
www.rockpapershotgun.com
The world might not need another gaming blog, but heck, we can always use another one that's well-written, clever, and frequently updated.

SafeSurfer www.safesurfer.org
Protecting your kids on the Internet and teaching them safe browsing habits doesn't have to be dull. The site is jam-packed with games, news, and resources to help.

TechDailyDose
techdailydose.nationaljournal.com
A fantastic resource for exploring tech policy inside the Beltway. People interested in the role technology plays in government and the role government plays in technology would be hard-pressed to find a better news outlet than this *National Journal*–run blog.

Web Designer Wall
www.webdesignerwall.com
It's a touch ironic, to be sure, but it's rare to find a Web design site that's actually, you know, well designed. Featuring tips, tricks, and tutorials, Web Design Wall will help amateurs and professionals alike.—*BH*

Travel and Maps

EveryScape www.everyscape.com
Newcomer EveryScape goes further than the big mapping sites by letting you explore both the street view and the interiors of buildings. Photographers on the ground are shooting as many building interiors as they can as the site rolls out to new cities. The service also helps users find hotels, restaurants, and popular tourist sites with reviews from Yelp.com.

Farecast farecast.live.com
Plane ticket prices go up and down seemingly at random; you could buy a ticket today only to see the price sink (or spike) the next day. Farecast makes sense of it all by tracking pricing trends. Enter your travel dates, and Farecast will give you a pricing chart going back several weeks, along with a recommendation of whether to buy or wait.

Happy Median www.happymedian.com
This quirky mapping site lets you type in as many as four addresses and offers meeting places in the middle, whether you're looking for a restaurant, movie theater, golf course, or lodging.

InsideTrip www.insidetrip.com
Zillions of flight search engines find flights based on travel dates, airports, and price. InsideTrip takes it a step further by letting you add comfort level as a search parameter. Is legroom important? On-time percentages? InsideTrip has you covered.

TripIt www.tripit.com
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HDTV Screen Test

Our tips and reviews will help you get the best LCD TV for your needs. *By Robert Heron*

Sleek and thin LCD and plasma HDTVs are becoming the viewer's choice, dispatching bulky CRTs and rear-projection systems to the blurry past. The LCD TV, the focus of our roundup, is at the top in worldwide sales because prices have steadily decreased while picture quality and integrated features have made regular, albeit incremental, improvements. Yet there are wide price variations among similar-size models. Before you spend your cash, brush up on these basics to make sure you choose the right LCD HDTV for your needs and budget. And if you're thinking about a plasma TV instead of an LCD, check out *go.pcmag.com/buyplasma*.

Resolution

1080p resolution (1,920 by 1,080 pixels progressively scanned) is currently the pinnacle for consumer home theater material, and with all other things being equal, you want the screen resolution of your HDTV to match this format in order to provide the most detailed picture possible. Some manufacturers advertise

LG Electronics 47LG60
$3,499.95 list
●●●●◐

LG's new 47LG60 LCD HDTV offers a blend of colorful modern style along with the finest picture quality we've seen from an LCD TV. The set's high-speed LCD technology proved adept at minimizing detail-destroying motion blur while maintaining good color quality at even the widest viewing angles. Videophiles will also appreciate the excellent HD video processor and the great set of picture controls. This 47-inch set isn't inexpensive, but you'll be hard-pressed to find another that delivers this level of picture quality.

All screen photographs: Corbis

Samsung LN52A750
$3,999.99 list
●●●●◐

PC MAGAZINE EDITORS' CHOICE

The 52-inch Samsung LN52A750 delivered superb contrast results and outstanding color quality, and with both standard and high-definition video it preserved fine detail while minimizing distracting image artifacts. The 120-Hz display technology added some motion-interpolated frames to the video stream to produce smoother movement—which also reduced the shaking artifacts known as judder. With a useful selection of network-enabled features and an excellent set of picture controls, the LN52A750 adds up to one of the most capable LCD TVs we've seen.

Toshiba 32CV510U REGZA LCD TV
$899.99 list
●●●●○

Among the most important qualities of an HDTV are contrast, color, and detail, and the 32-inch Toshiba 32CV510U REGZA LCD TV delivers a near-clean sweep by producing excellent picture contrast and image detail—especially with quality HD material. As for color quality, it's above average, but somewhat inconsistent when the TV is depicting darker scenes. Still, anyone looking for a space-efficient HDTV that delivers superb picture detail with video content such as Blu-ray movies, broadcast HD, and even the latest console game systems will find this set to be a solid choice.

"1080i" LCD TVs, but there is no such thing—it simply sounds better than saying that a particular model has half the screen resolution of a true 1080p display. Most of those 1080i LCDs have an actual widescreen resolution of 1,366 by 768 pixels, and they generally cost less than similar models with 1080p resolution. But many factors affect the perception of picture detail, including distance, eyesight, and the quality of the video material. At a distance of 12 feet, it would be difficult for a person with normal vision to distinguish between a 720p/768p and a 1080p display showing the same 1080p video (like a Blu-ray movie). If you often watch high-quality 1080i/1080p video at closer distances, and you can afford it, go with a 1080p set.

Contrast Ratio and Pixel Response Rate

The problem with these two specs is that there are several variations, each calculated in significantly different ways, and marketing folks tend to focus on whatever calculation provides the most impressive result. In the case of pixel response rate, what you really want to know is if a particular LCD is optimized to minimize image smearing when displaying fast-motion video—an ongoing issue with LCD technology. Nowadays, the LCD feature that best addresses this artifact is 120-Hz display technology. Most 120-Hz LCDs insert interpolated frames into a traditional 60-Hz video signal. When combined with advanced pixel driving techniques, this produces a clearer, more detailed picture when the TV is depicting motion. Like 1080p screen resolution, 120-Hz technology usually comes at an extra cost.

In my years of analyzing home-theater equipment, I've yet to see a modern LCD that I would describe as having a dim picture. Given that most LCDs are relatively bright to begin with, don't think too much about the stated contrast ratio. It's better to focus on which model produces the deepest, darkest representation of video black (black level). If two properly configured LCDs are placed side by side, the TV with the darker black level often has the more detailed, better-saturated, and more appealing picture. Don't judge picture quality using an HDTV's default picture settings. When possible, compare relative picture quality using a picture preset mode labeled Theater, Natural, or Movie—these modes do not guarantee proper video settings, but they do typically minimize the more heinous "enhancements" (like increasing picture brightness at the expense of detail) to produce a more accurate-looking picture. Also pay attention to fine shadow detail, particularly in dimly lit scenes—these can be some of the toughest video scenarios for LCD screens to get right.

Screen Finish

The screen of an LCD TV can produce more than twice the light output of a plasma display, and that extra brightness is

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Quad Q9550 2.83Ghz ..... $ 915
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Quad Q9400 2.66Ghz ..... $ 859
(3MB Cache, 1066Mhz FSB)
Quad Q8600 2.40Ghz ..... $ 789
(6MB Cache, 1333Mhz FSB)
E8600 3.33Ghz ..... $ 859
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Quad Q9400 2.66Ghz ..... $ 1345
(6MB Cache, 1066Mhz FSB)
Quad Q8600 2.40Ghz ..... $ 1275
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Sharp Aquos LC-32D44U
$999.95 list
●●●◐○

Even seasoned shoppers puzzle over the significant price differences among HDTVs of similar size. Screen resolution and integrated features are usually the main factors. The Aquos LC-32D44U is a 32-inch LCD HDTV that is one of Sharp's most affordable models, but its relatively low cost doesn't—for the most part—require the sacrifice of performance or features. The LC-32D44U offers excellent HD video processing and delivers a well-contrasted, well-detailed picture. We did note some smearing in scenes containing motion, and limited HD color range, however.

Sony Bravia KDL-46Z4100
$2,699.99 direct
●●●◐○

Sony's new Bravia KDL-46Z4100, a 46-inch LCD TV, incorporates many of the latest trends, including a slim frame design, a good selection of HD inputs, and 120-Hz technology to help reduce motion blur. Unfortunately, you also get some less-than-optimal picture settings that sacrifice detail when the TV is displaying the highest-quality video sources. Media mavens will appreciate the solid selection of audio and video connection options. The 1080p-compatible connections include three HDMI ports, two component video inputs, VGA, and an RF input that feeds the TV's combo terrestrial/cable tuner. A USB port can be used to access digital pictures and music files stored on removable media.

most useful in environments where ambient lighting is difficult to control—like a sun-drenched room in daytime. In a well-lit environment, the extra brightness that an LCD can provide helps maintain picture detail by improving the apparent contrast (dynamic range) of the image.

Many LCD screens have a matte finish to minimize distracting light reflections; some new LCDs, however, are incorporating glossy top filters that boost apparent contrast and color saturation by making video black appear inky dark.

Glossy LCD screens produce a slightly crisper picture than a matte-finish surface filter, with its light-diffusing qualities, can manage. When you're deciding on the type of screen finish, always try to consider the typical ambient lighting conditions of the room where you'll be looking at the display.

Backlight Control

An LCD generates its picture by channeling the output of a very bright backlighting system through a series of optical filters. So you want to find an LCD that lets you adjust the level of backlighting, manually or automatically. The ability to control an LCD's backlight can help minimize eyestrain in a darkened viewing environment. What's more, the brightness level of an LCD's backlight directly correlates to its power consumption: The less backlight, the less energy the set uses. Reducing the backlight output to eye-friendly darkroom viewing levels can result in one-half to two-thirds less power consumed. Lower backlighting also extends the life of the lamp module.

Screen Size

Selecting the right display size for your viewing environment is simple: Go as big as you can fit and as big as you can afford. One tip for estimating the best size screen for an available space is to measure the width of the area you have for the set and then buy an HDTV with the largest screen size (measured diagonally) that's no bigger than that horizontal measurement. Of course, this technique works only for HDTVs with bottom-mounted, hidden, or removable speakers, not for those with fixed side-mounted speakers.

You should also consider optimal viewing distance when deciding where to set up your new TV. If you sit too close, you'll notice the pixel structure of the display. Try this rule of thumb for viewing quality HDTV material: For a 73-inch screen, sit 7.3 feet away; for a 52-inch screen, 5.2 feet away, and so on. Standard-definition (SD) video will look disappointing at these distances, so you'll want to move your seat back.

Ports

The High-Definition Multimedia Interface (HDMI) is the standard for digital video transport in today's home-theater environments. HDMI will be around for many years to come. It delivers the clarity of a digital signal, and it streams audio and video over a single cable connection.

Common devices that can be connected to an HDTV via the HDMI port include upscaling DVD players, Blu-ray players, cable or satellite set-top boxes, and premium game consoles. More ports are generally better; most LCD TVs provide two to four. You can purchase HDMI switches to increase the number of HDMI-based devices that can be connected at once.

MORE ON THE WEB For full reviews of these HDTVs and more, visit *go.pcmag.com/hdtvs*.

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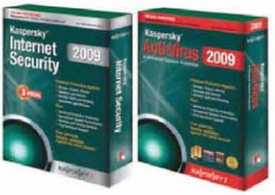

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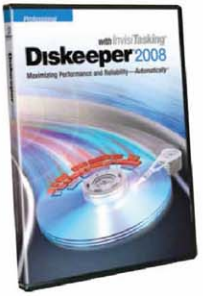

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Solutions

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14 Steps to a Brand-New Web Storefront

Have a product to sell, but no place to sell it? Follow our checklist, and in no time you'll be ready for the world of e-commerce. *By Eric Griffith*

Setting up an electronic retail (e-tail) Web site—especially one that will let you interact with customers—is a juggling act. Drop one of the many balls you have in the air, and the act may come to a screeching halt. Follow this checklist to make sure you have the essentials covered. And for even more tips, check out *go.pcmag.com/webstore*.

1. PICK A DOMAIN NAME Most likely you've already got a name for your business. Make sure it's available as a domain name (the *name.com* part of a Web address) by visiting a Whois service such as *www.whoisweb.org*.

Try to avoid using the name searches at domain registrars—at least one, Network Solutions, does what is called *domain name front running*. This means that when you find an available domain name, the service instantly reserves it for a period of time, forcing you to get the domain name through that company or jump through extra hoops to register it elsewhere if you can't wait.

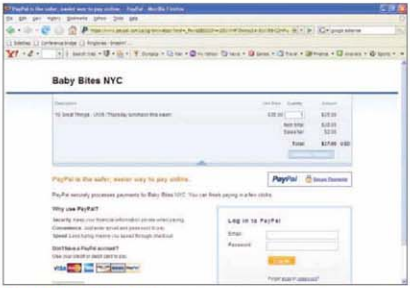
2. REGISTER YOUR DOMAIN, AND CHOOSE A WEB HOST You can do some one-stop shopping with these two tasks. Lots of domain registrars also serve as Web hosts—Network Solutions, GoDaddy, 1&1, eNom, Tucows, Yahoo!, and many more. Keeping registration and hosting in one place simplifies the process.

WHAT'S IN A NAME? Make sure that the name you pick for your online store isn't already taken. Check a Whois service like *www.whoisweb.org*.

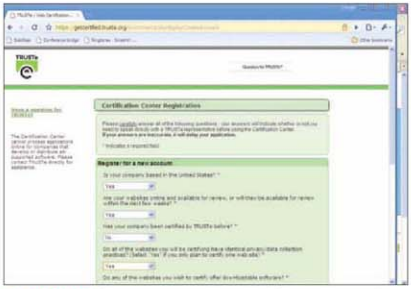
Try registering the domain name for a couple of years or more; the longer you register it, the better the price. And you don't want to have to think about reregistering the domain name in a year. Better yet, set it to renew automatically.

3. DESIGN FOR THE FUTURE Whether you're creating the site by yourself or working with a pro, it behooves you to make decisions about the look-and-feel of the site immediately. Sit down with a piece of paper and sketch it, or if you're well schooled in software like Photoshop and InDesign, mock up exactly what the site should look like. The file you create may be the perfect template to hand off to a pro to do the actual coding.

4. SAMPLE SITE STATISTICS Keep an eye on how much traffic visits your site. The natural choice these days for measuring traffic is Google Analytics (*www*



THE PAYPAL SOLUTION You can easily accept payment on your site by using one of PayPal's merchant services.



BUILD TRUST Smart consumers want proof that your store is trustworthy. Register with TRUSTe to earn one of its seals.

.google.com/analytics), which provides all sorts of graphs and charts about your visitors and what they do when at your site. Woopra (*www.woopra.com*) is another up-and-comer. Both are free.

5. OPTIMIZE FOR SEARCH SEO is the art and science of search engine optimization. You need to plan for this early on to ensure your site is at the top of results for any searches related to your products. For example, if you sell only coonskin caps, but a search on that term doesn't yield your store, you've got problems. Carefully consider the metadata for your site—keywords, descriptions, headers, and so on. The more specific the terms used, the better. Although Flash content is now searchable, don't get into the habit of doing in Flash or graphics what you can do in nice, searchable text. The ALT attribute in HTML image tags is your friend.

6. CHOOSE SHOPPING CART SOFTWARE You could set up a store simply with a site such as eBay or Yahoo! Small Business, but if you're willing to be more hands-on, there are better tools out there. Volusion (*www.volusion.com*) is a Web host that caters toward e-tailers. For selling products that can be sent electronically, via e-mail or download, Zipidee (*www.zipidee.com*) is a good option. If you've got the technical acumen, install some cart software yourself, like the open-source Ubercart (*www.ubercart.org*). Whatever you pick, it must handle sales tax if needed in your home state (or states if you actually have multiple locations).

7. ENSURE SSL IS APPLIED Short for Secure Sockets Layer, SSL is a protocol for secure Internet transactions. When a Web address starts with *https://* instead of *http://*, that's SSL. No one should ever give out credit card info to a Web site that lacks it—even yours. Some Web hosts may charge a little extra for SSL.

8. SET UP PAYMENT METHODS You can't take cash under the table online. There is no table. You have to accept credit cards. Pros set up a *merchant account* so that money from secure online transactions is funneled straight to them. A *payment gateway* is a service that makes this work online; think of it as a virtual point-of-sale credit card swiper.

PayPal (*www.paypal.com*) can function as your payment gateway, and the site offers other merchant services as well. Or you can put *Pay with PayPal* buttons next to items on your site instead, and simply have funds go to your account—no merchant account required. Google Checkout is similar. Each takes its cut, but neither is that expensive.

9. MAKE THE SITE SEARCHABLE In this case, the search is for the customer. Unless you sell only a handful of products, all found on your top page, your site *must* have internal search so customers can find the products they want. Get it through Google AdSense—really, why would you get it from anyone else? Google will even pay you a few cents for specific searches. It won't make you rich, but the extra dough might pay some Web-hosting expenses.

10. POST PRIVACY, RETURN POLICIES Before you collect even one bit of personal data, make public the privacy policy for your site, so customers know exactly what they can expect. Sign up with TRUSTe (*www.truste.org*) to get your site audited and earn its seal of approval to show customers they can trust you. Also, post a clear returns policy, and also include it with every shipment as part of the invoice.

11. MARKET VIA E-MAIL Not everyone reads blogs or RSS readers, but everyone has e-mail. Create an opt-in e-mail newsletter with a service like emma (*www.myemma.com*). Put the form for it (or at least a link to the form) on every page of the site. You can start out with something simple and manage it with e-mail software like Outlook or even Gmail, but once the list gets big, use a service so you don't get identified as a spammer when you're not.

12. BETA-TEST THE SITE If you don't test your new site thoroughly, we can guarantee that something, if not everything, will be broken on opening day. (Actually, that could happen even with testing—from the crush of customers, if you're lucky.)

13. SEND OUT A PRESS RELEASE You're nearly open, so tell the world! A professional press release to the right places can make all the difference. Hit the blogs that love your kind of product—if you can, give them incentive to share by giving something to the blog readers, perhaps a code for some money off if their visitors are among your first 100 (or 1,000) customers.

14. PAY FOR PLACEMENT It's time to think about advertising. You can actually pay to get decent placement on a search engine. Google AdWords may cost you only a few bucks a month. Do some research on the best combination of keywords to drive the most searches to your ads.□

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Ask the Experts

Unblock Start-Up Programs in Vista

Q I downloaded and installed the latest rendition of Startup Cop Pro from PC Magazine. It works great, but I am not happy with the way it interfaces with Windows Vista. I always get the bubble stating that Windows has blocked some programs from starting. The only program that is blocked is Startup Cop Pro. I have not been able to find any way to authorize this program to run without my intervention each time I start the computer. Is there a way to add it to an authorized list, or does the author of the program have to create it as an authorized Windows Vista program? It would be great if the end user could modify the authorized list, but I cannot find such a reference at the Microsoft site.—Gordon Gipson

A UAC WORKAROUND: To allow Startup Cop Pro to actually launch unfettered, you must schedule a task that runs at start-up.

A Startup Cop Pro is a program that must run at start-up but that requires User Account Control authorization to proceed. For security, Vista just won't let such a program launch from any of the standard start-up locations. So what can you do?

The solution lies in scheduling a task that runs at start-up. You might think Vista would block this too, but there's a reason it doesn't. Any process can tweak the standard start-up locations without triggering UAC, so those locations are considered dangerous. But launching Task Scheduler requires UAC confirmation, and thus Vista trusts scheduled tasks. Here's what you do:

Click the *Start* orb and enter *Task Scheduler*. Enter an Administrator password or click *Confirm* as required by UAC. Click the *Create Task* link (not *Create Basic Task*). On the general tab name the task *Startup Cop Pro*. Select a user account that has Administrator privileges. Check the option *Run only when user is logged on*. Check the box *Run with highest privileges*. Click the *Triggers* tab and click the *New* button. Select *At log on* from the drop-down list at the top. Check the *Any user* option. At the bottom under *Advanced Settings*, check the *Enabled* box and click *OK*. Click the *Actions* tab and click the *New* button. Click *Browse* and locate the utility. In the *Add arguments* box enter `/Startup`. Click the *Settings* tab. Check the box *Run task as soon as possible after a scheduled start is missed*. Uncheck the box *Stop the task if it runs longer than:*. Click *OK*, *OK*.

Whew! Now launch Startup Cop Pro, click *Settings*, and uncheck the *Run Startup Cop Pro at startup* box. When you reboot, Startup Cop Pro will launch at start-up with no gripes from Vista. Of course, you can apply this technique to any program that's blocked from ordinary start-up by Vista's UAC.—*Neil J. Rubenking*

Updating an Old PC

Q Is it possible to update an old Compaq computer? It's about nine years old (I bought it in 1999). I added memory to its max of about 500MB. The operating system is Windows 98 Second Edition, and I want to move to Windows XP SP2.

I would also like to update the computer with a newer microprocessor and new memory—up to 2GB if possible. Are plug-in parts and circuit boards still available? —lbenetier

A Yes, but why would you want to? You can pretty much build a complete system to replace that Compaq with $400—and it will be faster, and run Windows XP better. The $400 budget will cover the case, power supply, motherboard, CPU, memory, graphics card, hard drive, and optical drive.

Invest in something a little newer, whether you buy it already assembled or build your own. A new system will run your software better. And you can donate that Compaq; there's always someone who could use an older system.—*Loyd Case*

NEED ANSWERS? *PC Magazine* software expert Neil J. Rubenking and ExtremeTech .com editor Loyd Case tackle readers' questions in each issue. Send your toughest to *askneil@ziffdavis.com* or *askloyd@ziffdavis.com*.

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Thwarting Identity Theft

The number of cases is shrinking, but you still need to protect yourself. *By Matthew D. Sarrel*

Identity theft has been a federal offense since 1998. But are we getting any better at dealing with it? Actually, we are. The number of identity theft victims per year in the U.S. fell by nearly 2 million from 2003 to 2007 (10.1 million to 8.4 million), according to a Javelin Strategy & Research survey, as reported by the Privacy Rights Clearinghouse. And the mean time required to undo the damage in each instance was down from 40 hours in 2006 to 25 in 2007.

Most of the financial losses in an identity theft are suffered by credit issuers and banks, as victims are rarely held responsible for fraudulent debts incurred in their name. But victims often bear the responsibility of contacting their banks and credit issuers after an identity theft has occurred.

Even these declining numbers are fairly high, however, and learning that your credit card has been used by a stranger can chill your blood. As in nearly every endeavor, prevention is the best medicine. To thwart identity thieves, maintain these practices:

SAFEGUARD YOUR SOCIAL SECURITY NUMBER. This is perhaps the single most important bit of information about you. Don't carry your card with you, and, if possible, don't even tell anyone the number.

SHRED EVERYTHING THAT HAS YOUR NAME, ADDRESS, AND OTHER PERSONAL INFORMATION. Use a cross-cut shredder, not a strip-cut shredder, because cross-cutting creates fragments that are much harder to piece back together.

DON'T PROVIDE PERSONAL INFORMATION TO PEOPLE WHO CONTACT YOU OVER THE PHONE, THROUGH THE MAIL, OR BY E-MAIL. Ask them how you can get in touch with them so you can investigate. You might start with a simple Internet search for complaints, or check with the Better Business Bureau (*welcome.bbb.org*).

KEEP SENSITIVE DOCUMENTS IN A SECURE PLACE. Birth certificates, Social Security cards, tax returns, insurance policies, and the like should go in a fireproof safe or at least a locked drawer at home, or in a safety deposit box in a vault.

NEVER GIVE ANYONE YOUR PASSWORD FOR ANYTHING. No tech support or customer service rep should ever ask you what your password is. This is a dead giveaway that you're dealing with a potential identity thief or, at best, an incompetent support tech.

WHILE WE'RE ON THE SUBJECT OF PASSWORDS: DON'T USE A WEAK OR OBVIOUS PASSWORD LIKE YOUR BIRTH DATE OR DOG'S NAME. Strong passwords incorporate capital and lowercase letters, numbers, and, if possible, non-alphanumeric characters.

PROTECT YOUR PC. We've written extensively about this, so we won't belabor the point. But, please, run firewall, antispyware, and antivirus software.

DON'T FALL PREY TO PHISHING. Don't click links in unsolicited e-mail, and don't enter information on strange Web sites. Don't even enter information on familiar Web sites that have changed recently. Call the company and ask if they've redesigned their site. Always check a site's encryption before entering personal information—look for *https://* in the address bar, along with an icon indicating that VeriSign or another independent party has certified the site as secure.□

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2. **CALLS.** You start receiving phone calls or letters about purchases you didn't make.
3. **BAD REPUTATION.** Your application for a new credit card or line of credit is rejected due to a bad credit rating, though you believe your credit is good. You can check your credit report at *www.annualcreditreport.com*.

WHAT TO DO IF YOUR IDENTITY HAS BEEN STOLEN

- **REPORT A FRAUD ALERT.** Contact a credit reporting company and place a fraud alert on your credit reports, and then review the reports. This tells creditors and credit bureaus to follow heightened security procedures before they open new accounts in your name or make changes to current accounts. There are three major credit reporting companies (if you contact one it will alert the others):
  Equifax 800-525-6285
  Experian 888-EXPERIAN
  TransUnion 800-680-7289
- **ALERT THE FINANCIAL INSTITUTION.** Call each credit card company or bank and report each account that has been tampered with or falsely opened. Speak directly with someone in the fraud or security department.
- **TELL THE FBI.** Report the theft to the FBI (*www.fbi.gov*), the Internet Crime Complaint Center (*www.ic3.gov*), and the Federal Trade Commission (*www.ftc.gov/idtheft*). These are also excellent resources for more information on the topic.
- **KEEP RECORDS.** File away copies of all documents and written notes of conversations regarding your identity theft.

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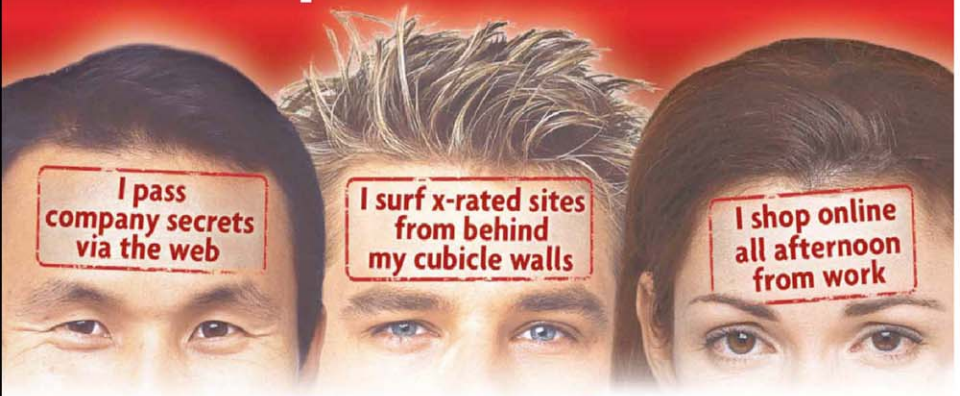

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Eight Handy Tools in Excel You Probably Don't Know About

These simple features in Excel will smarten up your spreadsheets in no time. *By Neil J. Rubenking*

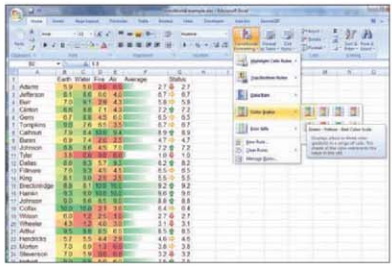
If you use Excel just to keep simple spreadsheets, you might as well be using a ledger and a quill pen. Well, okay, the ledger won't calculate totals for you. But really, there are tons of valuable tools just below the surface that will help you with a wide variety of tasks. Here are eight of our favorites.

1. SUBTOTALS. When you've got reams of data organized by date, it may be hard to see the big picture. Excel's built-in subtotal feature can help. Click *Subtotal* on the *Data* ribbon in Excel 2007 or choose *Subtotals* from the *Data* menu in 2003. By default it offers a sum-type subtotal at each change in the leftmost column, but you can pick the column and operation you prefer. You can even create multiple subtotals, perhaps for month, quarter, and year.

2. AUTOMATIC CONDITIONAL FORMATTING. Conditional formatting in Excel 2003 is a drag. Excel 2007's automatic conditional formatting easily helps point out patterns in data. Highlight a group of cells and click *Conditional Formatting* on the *Home* ribbon. As you mouse over the choices, you see an immediate preview. You can give each cell a color that reflects its rank in the whole range of values, add a transparent data bar whose length reflects the cell's value, and more.

3. PIVOTTABLES. Excel's PivotTable feature offers quick and flexible data analysis. Want to see how many times each value in a long column occurs? Highlight the column, click *PivotTable* on the *Insert* tab (in Excel 2003, select *PivotTable* from the *Data* menu), and click *Finish*. Drag the column-head field name into the *Row Labels* box and into the *Values* box (in Excel 2003, the *Drop Row Fields Here* area and the *Drop Data Items Here* area). You'll get a sorted list of all unique values in the column, and the number of times each value occurs.

4. DOCUMENT INSPECTOR. Your Excel 2007 documents contain a lot more information than just rows and columns of data.



CHECK FOR DATA PATTERNS With automatic conditional formatting in Excel 2007, you can easily view patterns in data through the use of color scales.

They may include tracked changes, comments, private properties, and more. To examine (and clean out) the hidden data in an Excel 2007 document (sorry, you can't do this with Excel 2003), click the *Office* button at top left, point to *Prepare*, and click *Inspect Document*. It's very similar to the Document Inspector in Word, but instead of seeking hidden text it looks for hidden rows and columns, hidden worksheets, and objects formatted as invisible.

5. PAGE BREAK PREVIEW. Excel will print your spreadsheet using as many pages as necessary to display all the data both vertically and horizontally. If the last column doesn't quite fit, printing the spreadsheet may take twice as many pages. To avoid this annoyance, click *Page Break Preview* on the *View* ribbon (in Excel 2003 select *Page Break Preview* from the *View* menu). Now when you resize columns, change font sizes, or make other layout changes, you'll immediately see the effect on page breaks.

6. AUTOSUM. After you've entered a column of figures, nine times in ten you'll end the column with a total. Excel makes it easy to total up a row or column. Click a cell just after the row or column, and click the *AutoSum* button from the *Home* ribbon in Excel 2007 or the toolbar in Excel 2003 (or simply press Alt-=). Excel sums the row or column automatically. Don't want a sum? Pull down the button's menu to choose among the average, minimum, maximum and other functions.

7. EXCEL LISTS/TABLES. Excel 2003 calls them lists, while 2007 changed the name to tables. Whatever you call it, this feature lets you define a range of cells and easily sort, filter, and total the columns and (hooray!) insert or append rows without screwing up your formulas. Excel 2007 also offers dozens of predefined table styles for easy formatting. In Excel 2003 highlight the cells and choose *Data* | *Lists* | *Create List* from the menu. In Excel 2007 click *Table* on the *Insert* ribbon. Done!

8. GET DATA FROM THE WEB. You've found a fantastic table of data on a Web page; pull it into Excel! Click *From Web* in the *Data* ribbon (Excel 2003 users select *Data* | *Import External Data* | *New Web Query* from the menu). Copy/paste the Web page address from your browser to the *New Web Query* dialog. An arrow icon appears next to each table that Excel can import; click one or more of these and click the *Import* button. Presto, the data is in your worksheet. And it's semi-live—just click the *Refresh Data* button in the floating toolbar (2003) or the *Refresh All* button on the *Data* ribbon (2007) to update your worksheet with the latest version of the table. □

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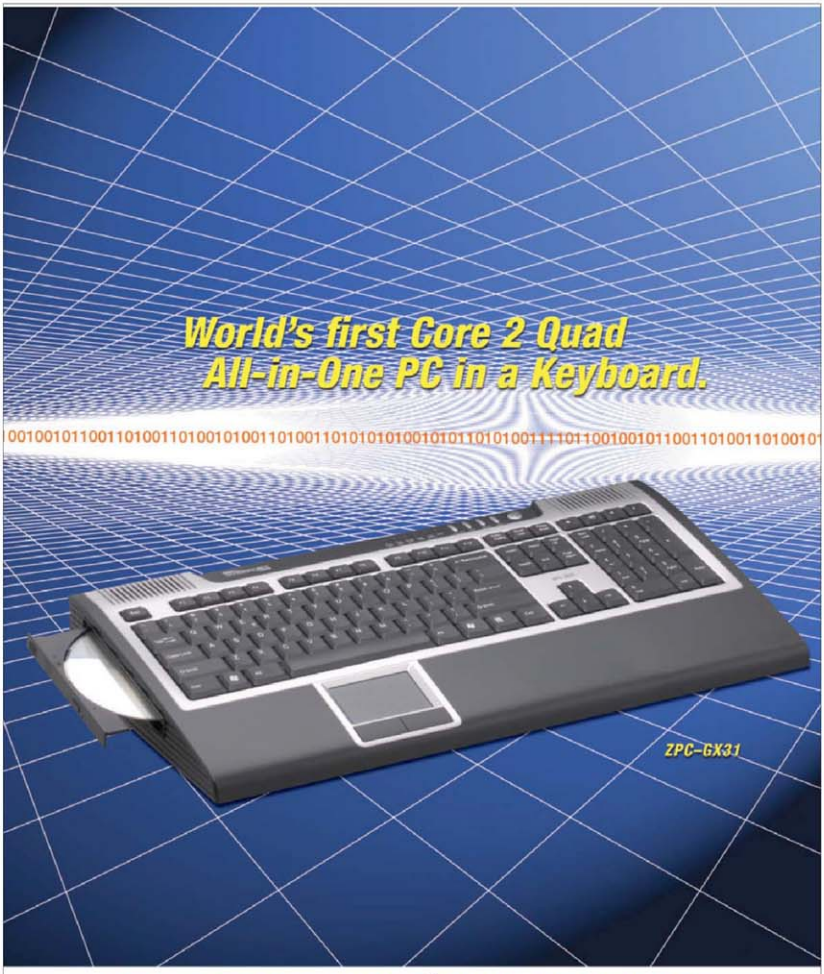

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My name is Dr. J. Richard and for more than twenty years my research team and I have helped thousands of men with erection difficulties and penis size. I personally introduced products for penis enlargement thirty years ago and had the first penis enlargement website in 1995. Please join the many thousands of men who have achieved success with the Super LQ Formula. Thank you.
Dr. J. Richard

WHAT WILL *SUPER LQ FORMULA* DO FOR YOU?

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