

The Bulletin

Technical Tips

By Tom Snyder Ph.D.

Handheld Buying Guides

Choosing the right handheld is all about finding the balance between size, weight, performance, features, and cost. From there, a Personal Digital Assistant (PDA) can become an indispensable tool for staying organized, connected, and productive. This guide steps you through the decision-making process.

What Handheld Fits my Needs?

Handheld manufacturers offer dozens of models, each targeting a slightly different user. Your first step should be to decide which of the following profiles best suits your wants and lifestyle.

Budget Buyer For those on a budget who need a pocket-size device to keep their address book, their calendar, and their to-do list organized, as well as synchronize that information with a PC, a basic handheld will suffice.

Recommendations: PalmOne Zire 31, HP iPaq rz1710

Business Person In order to get the job done, you need a tool that can keep you organized and that works with your company's e-mail.

Recommendation: RIM Blackberry 7250

Road Warrior For those who get most of their work done on the go, a handheld can stand in for a full-fledged laptop in many situations. In this category, connectivity, battery life, and size are key factors. Integrated Wi-Fi or Bluetooth connectivity lets you check and send e-mail outside of the office, while the right software lets you edit Word and Excel files. If you plan on typing a lot of short e-mails or memos, a PDA with an integrated keyboard will come in handy. Many models are powered by batteries that are both replaceable and rechargeable, so you can swap in a fresh battery when needed. You'll also appreciate a device that's truly pocketable.

Recommendations: Dell Axim x30, Palm Tungsten C

All-in-One If you prefer to carry a single gadget, a smart phone that combines the features of a traditional handheld with those of a cell phone is the right choice. Striking the balance between size, ease of use, and convenient data entry is especially important with these devices. You'll find some models that are more phone-centric and others that are designed for those who can't be separated from their e-mail.

Recommendation: PalmOne Treo 650

Trendsetter If you're a trendsetter, you always want the latest and greatest technology. For handhelds, this means models that let you listen to music, watch videos, play games, surf the Web, and snap photos. You will get the most out of high-end handhelds with fast processors, lots of built-in memory, high resolution color screens, graphics accelerators, expansion slots, and other bells and whistles.

Recommendations: Palm One LifeDrive, HP iPaq rx3715 Mobile Media Companion

Should I choose Palm or Windows Mobile? For years, these two handheld operating systems have competed fiercely to woo handheld buyers. Both do an admirable job with the core applications: address book, calendar, to-do list, and memos. And since the release of Palm OS 5.0, they're nearly evenly matched in terms of processors, screen resolutions, and multimedia functions. There are, however, still some key differences.

Microsoft touts the fact that Windows Mobile resembles desktop versions of Windows, and is therefore easier to use. However, we feel the learning curve is actually steeper than Palm devices.

Windows Mobile 5.0 is intended to mesh with all of Microsoft's software. It comes with a copy of Outlook Mobile, and the synchronization is top notch. All the fields from your Outlook contact list are sent to the handheld, and you can even access Hotmail and MSN in-boxes within Outlook. However, if your business uses Lotus Notes or some other e-mail system, you're in a bit of a pickle.

And if you're on a Mac, you'll need to purchase third-party synchronization

software. In addition to Outlook, Windows Mobile 5.0 replaced the old Pocket versions of Word and Excel with Word Mobile and Excel Mobile, which now support tables, lists, embedded images, and charts. And finally, you can now view (though not edit) PowerPoint presentations on your handheld.

Do I Need Wireless Connectivity? If you want your PDA simply for organization, you may not need any special wireless connections. But it seems like everyone today wants to stay connected. The following are your options. Please note that the more connected you are, the more set up and support your handheld requires.

Bluetooth This technology allows PDAs to communicate with other Bluetooth-enabled gadgets such as some cell phones; thus, you can dial numbers straight from your handheld's contact list or use your cell phone as a modem to check e-mail. You can also print to a Bluetooth printer or sync with a Bluetooth-equipped computer.

Wireless Local Area Networking With a Wi-Fi-enabled handheld, you can connect directly to the Internet at high speeds to check email, browse the Web, and even access servers via secure virtual private network (VPN) connections. Like Bluetooth, Wi-Fi requires that you be near (typically 75 to 300 feet from) an access point in order to connect. Additionally, Wi-Fi requires a lot of power and quickly drains most PDA batteries.

Wireless Wide Area Networking Wi-Fi works great when you're close to a hot spot but not if you wander far and wide. Instead, you should consider handhelds that use cellular data networks, although not a lot are currently available. Smart phones typically employ this method to keep the device connected. Alternatively, a Bluetooth PDA with a separate data-capable cell phone can achieve the same end. In either case, you must purchase an unlimited, separate data plan above and beyond your cellular plan.

The Cingular Edge network is the closest thing to a truly nationwide cellular high-speed data network today. You can access the internet almost anywhere you can get a Cingular cell-phone signal. However, "high-speed" may feel more like dial-up than broadband at times. Verizon Wireless EVDO is the only cellular high-speed network that feels like real broadband. However, it is expensive and only

available in 32 cities and many of those cities' suburbs.

===== If you have questions or concerns about your particular situation, please e-mail me at tpsnyder@xantrion.com. I will use your input to direct future columns. =====