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Things to snap on or plug into your handheld

By JULES ALLEN
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Once you pick a personal digital assistant from all the offerings, you can start working your way through the array of accessories that are turning handheld organizers into the electronic equivalent of a Swiss Army Knife.

Before you whip out your credit card to buy one, though, make sure that the gadget you're buying really works with the particular brand and model of PDA you have or are thinking of purchasing.

Cameras: First on the must-have list is a snap-on camera, even if it takes lousy pictures compared with regular digital cameras. The photos can be saved in your PDA (at least until it runs out of memory) or transferred onto a PC.

My favorite is the \$149 EyeModule 2 (www.eyemodule.com/) for the Handspring Visor line of handhelds. It's perfect for snapping photos of meeting presentations before they're erased from a board, as well as impressing geeks during social gatherings. On the other hand, I was disappointed in the \$169 Sharp camera for its Zaurus handheld. The images were all but unusable in anything other than perfect lighting conditions.

Software: PDAs are for more than just names and addresses. From traditional card games to racing to arcade-style action, handheld organizers have become minigame machines. You can buy games packaged in stores or find a good selection at Web sites such as ZDNet's Download.com. How do you get them into your handheld? You download them to your PC or Mac, then use the synch function to transfer them to the handheld.



[Photo: PalmSource]
Extra memory and other features often can be added to a handheld through small add-on cards.

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Software offerings also include business applications, such as auto mileage trackers, and personal programs such as diet and health advice. Organizers using the Palm operating system have a big advantage over other operating systems, with more than 15,000 titles available from third-party softwaremakers. (If you have a Handspring, be aware that some of the Palm-produced software works only with Palm-brand handhelds.)

About six years ago, the Palm Pilot started a tech revolution by making the personal digital assistant suddenly useful. Today's handhelds have advanced beyond simple datebooks and contact lists.

Wireless connections: Staying connected is important to me. If it doesn't involve wires, I'm happier still. Palm's \$129 Bluetooth card

(www.palm.com/wireless/bluetooth/) is a must-have for Palms and Handspring Treos that have Secure Digital, or SD, memory card slots. The card lets your organizer talk to your phone and synch with your computer if it's Bluetooth-enabled.



A Bluetooth card can add short-range wireless connectivity to a PDA.

Bluetooth connectivity is built into the high-end Palm Tungsten and some Pocket PCs, and can be snapped on to any of the Palm m series handhelds with a cradle-like device. My favorite in that category is the TDK m Series Adapter at \$199.

My other favorite network device is Linksys' (www.linksys.com/) nicely priced WCF12 Wireless Compact Flash card. With a street price of about \$65, it's a bargain that will get your PDA online with any Wi-Fi base station, such as the Apple AirPort. I've used this card with my Linux-powered Zaurus at Starbucks while out of town, even though the card's target market is for the Microsoft-powered Pocket PC.

Handspring modules: Handspring offers plug-in modules to expand the functions of its devices, from wireless network cards to games to reference material to voice recorders and MP3 music. (Modules and other add-ons plug into expansion slots.)

Protection: If you're a serial PDA buyer, you're going to have to keep your latest toy in tip-top condition in case you want to sell it someday to a friend or acquaintance. A snazzy PDA case not only keeps the scratches at bay but gives you the perfect excuse to pick up a new briefcase while you're at it.

Vaja (www.VajaCases.com/) is the Rolls Royce of whizzy protection and makes something to cover your Palm, Sony, Handspring, iPod or Pocket PC device. If your budget is more Buick than Benz, head over to Targus (www.targus.com/) or peek at Fellowes' Body Glove line (www.fellowes.com/).

A scratched screen is a potential disaster, so you owe it to yourself to buy a screen protector. Nobody does it better than NuShield (www.nushield.net/personal_home.htm), and nobody does it worse than

iConcepts, mostly because the sticky shields have been the wrong sizes for my PDA collection.

Finally, if you move your PDA and laptop computer around at all, a Cable Turtle might be your new best friend. Available at various online stores (search Google for "Cable Turtle," including the quotation marks), you'll neatly store computer and power cables in these inexpensive cases. About \$7 and up.



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