

Florida Trend
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Gadgets and Gizmos Galore

Some devices are just eye candy. Know which can help increase productivity.

Robert Parker is a self-admitted gadget freak. His desk is littered with five different cell phones, three MP3 players and four Palm Pilots. "I pretty much get every gadget that comes out," says Parker, chief executive of Digi-Net Technologies, a software technology provider based in Gainesville. "You can tell the kind of gadgets that are simply eye candy from the ones that are imperative for what I do by where they are on my desk."



Right now, the Kyocera QCP-6035 "smart phone" takes center stage on Parker's desk. This nifty little cell phone has a Palm-based PDA built right in; Parker can use it to check his calendar, send e-mail messages and surf the internet. Plugged into Parker's laptop, the Kyocera functions as a wireless modem with fax capabilities.

"It's incredibly more convenient because I only have one device now," says Parker, who used to travel with both a cell phone and Palm Pilot. It increases his productivity as well. "It's just as powerful as my desktop PC," he says.

But convenience comes at a price; the Kyocera retails for about \$400, and that doesn't include the monthly fees that companies like Sprint PCS charge for wireless internet and e-mail access.

Parker isn't alone craving high-tech gadgets; many small-business owners share his "techno-envy." They see a cool gadget and just have to have it. But how to avoid wasting money on shiny new devices that don't improve productivity or add to the bottom line?

"Small-business owners need to be careful," says Neil Strother, a senior analyst with Cahners InStat who covers mobile computing devices. "The gadget may be cool, but does it really help?"

Useful Toys ...

Here are some "must have" gadgets that experts say really do help you run your business better:

A cell phone. A cell phone is an absolute necessity for nearly any small-business owner these days because it enhances communication. The newest trend in cell phones is "smart

phones,” phones that marry cellular capability and other applications. Nokia recently launched phones that include digital cameras, multimedia messaging, stereo FM radios, games, digital music players and color displays. But that might be overkill for most people. “Whenever you put that many things together, you often have to compromise,” says Ken Dulaney, an analyst with Gartner Inc. “You might have a smaller screen than you would with a PDA by itself or you might have a bigger phone than normal.”

A PDA. If you haven’t yet made the investment in a smart phone, you’re probably using one of the many personal digital assistants available. Most function as more than mere planners. Just ask Terry Brock, an Orlando-based professional speaker who considers his Palm Vx to be his prize possession. On the road, Brock uses LandWare’s GoType! Keyboard with his Palm. “When I go to a seminar, I can take notes and go for 24 hours without having to recharge my battery,” he says. Brock also uses an OmniSky modem to stay in constant touch with clients via wireless e-mail.



A Research in Motion (RIM) BlackBerry.

For those looking for just wireless e-mail, BlackBerry is the way to go. These tiny devices, which retail for \$400 to \$500, allow users to stay in touch without dialing in to retrieve e-mail. Your e-mail finds you via the pager-like device, which notifies you discreetly when you have new messages.

A Memory Key. The IBM Memory Key is a hard drive on a key ring. This portable device allows you to share data between any notebook and desktop via the USB port. It holds 32MB of data, compared to the 1.44 MB held on a standard floppy, and retails for about \$89.

With so many gadgets out there, how can you be sure you’re getting the most bang for your technology buck? Use common sense, say the experts. “Before you get sucked into purchasing something via an ad, talk to other folks who have bought the product,” says Jerry Osteryoung, a professor of finance at Florida State University. “The more advice you get before you purchase, the less the buyer’s remorse.”