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## Got Gadgets? The Best New Devices for Your Business

By Wendy Gauntt, President

Each year, right after New Year's, geeks like me converge on Las Vegas. The big draw? The amazing International Consumer Electronics Show (CES). The lines are longer than Disney at peak season, but the gadget selection is unrivaled. Thousands of vendors display their wares to mobs of geeks, press, and celebrities. The show floor is crammed full of elaborate display booths, many bigger than my house.

You could spend days, even weeks, perusing photos, press releases, blogs, and podcasts of the show...but here's a quick "best-of" focused on your business needs.

### **Featherweight Laptops**

Why carry an eight-pound brick of a laptop when you can get the same computing power at half the weight? CES featured oodles of lightweight laptops with powerful processors and long-lasting batteries. IBM/Lenovo, Toshiba, and Sony all offer featherweights; Averatec is a budget line that offers light weight at a value price.

Battery life clocks in at 6+ hours on many of these PCs thanks to low-energy processors and improved battery technology. My four-pound IBM/Lenovo X41 tablet lasts over 7 hours; add an optional spare battery, and it lasts 11! But batteries are heavy—that spare weighs a pound all by itself.

Tablet PCs also attracted attention. A reversible screen on these laptop-like devices allows you to hold the computer like a pad of paper and write directly on the screen. Or flip it back and use it just like a regular laptop. Some tablets skip the keyboard completely—all you get is a "slate" to write on. Handwriting recognition improved significantly last year, when Microsoft released the Tablet PC Edition 2005 update to Windows XP. Improvements continue with Windows Vista, the upcoming replacement for Windows XP, scheduled for late 2006.

Speaking of Windows Vista...if you plan to buy a computer, check whether it is Vista-compatible. Otherwise you'll be stuck with an old operating system for several years or forced to buy a new computer to upgrade. Vista demands more processing power than XP, along with a powerful video card to enable cool new 3-D graphic effects.

### **Really Smart Phones**

When is a phone not just a phone? When it's a smartphone! Smartphones have seen a number of improvements in the last year. All the major wireless carriers have their own assortment with an incredible array of features. All include contacts, calendars, and task lists. Many include wireless email, cameras, MP3 music players, voice memos, and much more.

The most popular smartphones are based on the Palm, BlackBerry, or Windows Mobile/Pocket PC platform. But there are a few need-to-know "gotchas." The ever-popular Treo, a Palm product, has the unfortunate habit of crashing occasionally, despite several software upgrades. The latest version, the Treo 700w, is based on Windows Mobile instead of Palm, so it's unclear where this product is headed. RIM, BlackBerry's maker, is embroiled in a patent lawsuit that could—worst-case—result in a sudden shutdown of all BlackBerry service worldwide. Windows Mobile is the new upgrade to the Pocket PC; these phones show great promise but are too new to be fully established in the marketplace. Despite these issues, smartphone owners love their gadgets. Treo lovers are loudly demanding a Palm version of the Treo 700, and BlackBerrys are often called "crackberries" thanks to the usage habits of their addicted owners.

### **Cut the Cords**

Wireless of all flavors got loads of attention. Regular wifi (variations on the 802.11 protocol) reaches farther than ever with new technologies and range-extending devices. Bluetooth wireless and the brand-new wireless USB give you more flexibility in office setup—you no longer have to worry about running wires between devices or buying longer cables. Many



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printers already have built-in wifi; soon, most printers will connect via Bluetooth or wireless USB. Cable management systems—and that tangled web of wires under your desk—may soon be a thing of the past.

It's time to replace that old wired cellphone headset, too. New Bluetooth headsets have better sound and longer talk times than early models, and just-released Bluetooth stereo headsets can alternate between two devices (a phone and a computer, for example) to automatically pick up calls as they come in.

## ***VoIP Me!***

Voice-over-Internet-Protocol is the latest in phone service. Cut yet another cord: instead use your Internet connection instead of your phone line. VoIP (pronounced voyp) comes with many cool features, including unlimited calling, free long-distance, sophisticated voicemail and “follow-me” forwarding

features, but it's still cutting edge, so beware of occasional glitches. Many VoIP videophones were on display at the conference, as well as petite wifi VoIP phones that work anywhere there's a wireless hotspot.

Does it work? Quality varies widely depending on your service provider, network stability, Internet speed, and the phone itself. VoIP can work very well but doesn't yet have the absolute reliability of traditional phone service. And 9-1-1 calls don't work quite the same way with VoIP, so emergency calls may not be routed as fast (or possibly not at all!). Check with your VoIP provider for details on how they handle this important service.

## ***The Right Gadget for You***

These are just a few of the thousands of gadgets at the conference. An entire hall was

devoted to car accessories; another venue was completely filled with audio equipment. There were cameras and portable photo printers everywhere, in between wall-size plasma TVs, smart appliances, robots, iPod accessories, and other innovative creations.

Want to know more? Check out [www.cesweb.org](http://www.cesweb.org) for conference details, or search [www.technorati.com](http://www.technorati.com) for all the blog posts you could ever read. Manufacturer websites contain details on specific products, and [www.shopping.com](http://www.shopping.com) can help you locate the best price.

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