

Suggestions for tech-happy holidays

November 25 2009, By Troy Wolverton

The holiday season is as much a time for tech as for toys. Electronic gadgets are at the top of many wish lists and account for an ever-growing share of holiday shopping budgets. Fortunately for shoppers, tech gifts don't have to break their budgets.

One big trend this year is sharp discounts on products in many of the most popular categories. Many televisions, video game consoles, cameras and other tech goods are cheaper than last year, with more features.

Here are some electronics gift ideas for the special people in your life. You shouldn't have a problem finding something they'll like at a price you can afford.

TELEVISIONS

If you're shopping for a [television](#) this year, get ready to spend a lot less money. You can find name-brand 40-inch 1080p LCD TVs with 120Hz refresh rates for less than \$1,000 at Best Buy. Such TVs would have sold for at least \$2,000 as recently as two years ago.

If you're willing to spend several hundred dollars more, you can get a TV with newer picture technologies, most notably LED backlighting. These sets, often called "LED TVs," are illuminated by a collection of LED light bulbs rather than a fluorescent picture tube and tend to be more energy-efficient and thinner than older LCD TVs. They also can display pictures with more contrast and deeper blacks. You can find a 40-inch LED-backlit TV for about \$1,500 to \$1,600.

Many of the newer and more expensive televisions also can be connected to the Internet. Through that connection, they'll display weather reports, sports scores and pictures, and show streaming movies from [Netflix](#) and YouTube, without need of a computer or a set-top box.

VIDEO GAMES

The game industry has had a tough year. That's a good thing for consumers, because in recent months, hardware makers have cut prices and added features.

Nintendo's Wii (\$200) is \$50 cheaper than a year ago. Sony's PlayStation 3 (\$300) and Microsoft's Xbox 360 Elite (also \$300) each cost \$100 less than last year, even though they have larger hard drives and, in the PlayStation's case, a new, smaller, more energy-efficient design. And the game machines all have new features or accessories, such as MotionPlus for the Wii, which gives users more precise control over their on-screen movements. Both the Xbox 360 and the PlayStation 3 provide access to sites like Facebook and new movie streaming services.

The handheld game systems also got a refresh this year. Sony recently released the PSP Go (\$250), a smaller version of the PlayStation Portable that plays only digitally downloaded games. Meanwhile, Nintendo introduced the DSi (\$170), the latest version of its DS handheld, which has two digital cameras and the ability to download simple games from an online store.

Sony and Nintendo also have some new competition. Apple's iPod touch, a sibling of Apple's iPhone that can surf the Web and play music, has been gaining traction as a game machine. Prices range from about \$200 to \$400, depending on the model. Touch owners can choose from thousands of games available at Apple's App Store, including versions of ones they'd find on more traditional game machines, often at lower

prices.

Among the top game choices this holiday season: "Super Mario Bros. [Wii](#)," and "Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2" for the PC, [PlayStation 3](#) and [Xbox 360](#).

SMART PHONES

Computing is quickly shifting from PCs to smart phones, which are pocket-size computers with always-on Internet connections and the ability to make phone calls.

The leader of the pack is the iPhone 3GS, which is noticeably faster than the previous iPhone models and adds the ability to take videos. It ranges from about \$100 to \$300, depending on the model, with a two-year AT&T contract.

Other smart phones worth considering include Motorola's Droid (\$200 with a contract), which includes a free turn-by-turn navigation program from Google; Palm's Pre and Pixi (\$150 and \$100, respectively, on Sprint), which feature perhaps the most elegant smart-phone operating system on the market; and the Motorola Cliq (\$200 on T-Mobile), a device that integrates messages and contacts from a variety of social networks and online sources.

For consumers who aren't interested in a full-blown smart phone but still want special features, there are lots of choices. Garmin's nuviPhone G60 (\$200 from AT&T) includes a sophisticated turn-by-turn navigation program. Samsung's Instinct s30 (\$100, Sprint), is a touch-screen device, and the LG enV Touch (\$100, Verizon), offers both a touch-screen and a full keyboard.

DIGITAL MUSIC PLAYERS

In digital music, it's still an iPod world. The biggest changes in Apple's lineup of music players have been in the iPod nano line (about \$150 and \$180, depending on storage size). Apple added an FM tuner and a video camera to the slender, flash-based players. Other models got less noticeable tweaks: The new iPod touch has a faster processor; the hard drive-based iPod classic (about \$250) was given more storage space; and the small iPod shuffle comes in a new \$60 version with less storage.

For those wanting something different, Microsoft offers two models of the Zune HD (\$220 for the 16-gigabyte model and \$290 for the 32-gigabyte one), which have a revamped design and interface, a touch screen, an HD Radio tuner and the ability to download a limited number of games and other applications.

COMPUTERS

The number of netbook models has grown in recent months and they've gotten new features. Netbooks fully capable of doing the basics are available for less than \$400.

One new feature for these compact computers is Windows 7, the new version of Microsoft's operating system. Asus, Toshiba and Samsung, among others, are now offering Windows 7-powered netbooks for about \$350 to \$500.

Another new feature available on some netbooks is a built-in 3G antenna that allows them to connect to the Internet through the cell-phone networks. If you subscribe to a data plan with one of the carriers, you often can get a discount of up to \$200 or more on the price of such netbooks. AT&T, for instance, is offering the Lenovo S10 for \$100 with a two-year contract.

Manufacturers have started to promote a new class of laptops dubbed

ultraportables or ultrathins, which typically sell for between \$550 and \$1,000. They generally include larger displays, bigger keyboards, more memory, larger hard drives and faster processors than netbooks. Computers in this category include models from Toshiba, Dell, HP and Asus.

Another feature gaining popularity is touch-sensitive screens, which are found in Hewlett-Packard's TouchSmart series of all-in-one desktops and laptops and Toshiba's Satellite U500 and M500 laptops.

On the Mac side, Apple has refreshed its laptops and desktops and upgraded its operating system -- the latest version is dubbed Mac OS 10.6 Snow Leopard. Its consumer-oriented MacBook laptops start at \$1,000, while its professional MacBook Pro line starts at \$1,200.

E-BOOKS

Electronic book readers aim to do with books what the iPod did with albums and songs: allow consumers to carry around entire collections on a portable device. Amazon.com sparked renewed interest in the devices two years ago with its release of the Kindle.

This year, Amazon introduced a new version of the Kindle with a thinner design, a screen that more quickly shows new text, longer battery life, more storage space and a text-to-speech feature that allows the device to "read" some books aloud. The company also introduced a new, larger screen model, the Kindle DX (\$490), and cut the price on the smaller Kindle to about \$260, down from \$300.

Barnes & Noble's Nook (\$260) distinguishes itself from the Kindle by including a Wi-Fi antenna that can tap into faster Internet hot spots and a second, full-color, touch-sensitive screen. According to reports, the Nook has sold out for the [holiday season](#).

Meanwhile, longtime e-book maker Sony has upgraded its Reader line. The company now offers the Daily Edition (\$400) with a built-in Internet connection, as well as two other models that require users to download books first to their PC. Those are the Touch Edition (\$300), which has a touch screen, and the Pocket Edition (\$200).

GIFT CARDS AND SUBSCRIPTIONS

These are always a favorite around my house, because they allow you to get the gift you want.

Among the best choices is Amazon.com, because of its broad selection of products and its digital music store, which rivals Apple's iTunes in selection. If the person you're buying for has an iPod or an iPhone, an iTunes gift card can be used to buy not only music, movies or television shows, but also games and other software programs from Apple's burgeoning App Store.

Finally, you can give the gift of movie rentals and streaming Internet video through a subscription to Netflix. Rates start at \$9 a month.

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