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Technology Shopping Guide For Holidays and Beyond

By Suhail Baloch, Technology Director



Shopping for the holidays, birthdays, and other events can be an exhausting venture. Luckily, most people appreciate the gift of electronics. To that end, I am writing this article to help you navigate the saturated electronics market and make some recommendations along the way. Please keep in mind that I am not endorsing any particular product or manufacturer, but providing you with examples of what I personally consider as good buys in that category based on reviews and ratings. Let's start with the smallest ...

CELL PHONES

Not only do the consumers have a choice in which carrier to choose but also myriad of phones furnished by each carrier. Smart phones continue to extend their lead in sales. Let's begin with smart phone operating systems (OS). Apple has a monopoly over their iOS software. This software is used in their iPhone, iPad, and iPod product lines. iOS has the advantage of being a very stable, powerful, and user friendly OS. It has been around for many years and serves as the benchmark for most of other mobile device OS available these days. Recently Apple came out with their iPhone 4S, which looks exactly like their iPhone 4 but with a more powerful processor, noteworthy camera upgrade, latest version of iOS 5, and various other features such as voice recognition and cloud ready applications. Apple has decided to continue with their iPhone 4 product line despite the introduction of iPhone 4S. Prices for 4 models have been reduced to boost sales along with 4S. If you are on a budget, iPhone 4 might be a better choice than 4S. Verizon, AT&T, and Sprint carry iPhones. If you are basically going to use the device as a phone with applications taking a back seat then I recommend the least expensive model with least amount of memory. This would be the 8 GB (gigabyte) model for under \$100. If you plan to install plenty of applications, music and videos on your phone, then 32 GB model might be more to your liking. There are also 16 GB and 64 GB versions. 64GB model will run you about \$400.

The next operating system to consider is Android developed by Google. Although a fairly new arrival in the smartphone arena, Android has quickly cornered 48% of the smartphone market share. Apple has 28%, Blackberry 18%, and the reminder shared amongst Windows, HP etc. What is intriguing is that Android OS continues to extend its lead and applications available for Android OS are quickly catching up with applications for iOS. Moreover, unlike iOS, Android is an open source OS, which means any manufacturer can use it in their phones for free, whereas iOS is only sold by Apple. This creates plenty of competition, which is driving down the prices of Android phones compared to iPhone line. Prices for Android smart phones range from free to about \$300 depending on the model. Most free models are perfectly fine choices for just about any need. Recently new models of Android phone have been released by the carriers which have astronomical hardware specs and amazing design features. For example, Verizon has introduced the Motorola RAZR (thinnest smart phone on the market), HTC Rezound (with Beats audio) and Samsung Galaxy Nexus (only phone with 4th generation Android OS). These phones have easily climbed to the top of the food chain. As for other carriers, AT&T has introduced the Samsung Focus, while Sprint is relying on Sam-

of even the most demanding user. Also, unlike the iPhone, these phones are all capable of utilizing the 4th generation (4G) data networks offered by these carriers. Basically 4G networks provide much greater data bandwidth than 3G networks. However, 4G networks are still expanding and the coverage is less than existing 3G networks. If you like to surf the web, listen to online line music, etc. both 3G and 4G will suffice. However, 4G will offer quicker browsing and very fast downloads.

So which phone should you get? Start by looking at each carrier individually and their customer satisfaction ratings. As of now, Verizon stands on top, then T-Mobile, then Sprint, and finally AT&T. Survey can be referenced via this link ... <http://tinyurl.com/cg7w2kn>. Also consider the plans available, limitations of these plans, and the cost. For example, if you are buying for a teenager, only look at plans that offer unlimited texting.

Once, you have decided on a carrier and plan, it's time to decide on the phone. Phone reviews can be obtained from variety of sources such as cnet.com, laptopmag.com, phonearena.com, etc. After you've decided on 2-3 phones, go to the carrier's store and try out the phones in person. A particular phone may look fantastic on paper but in your hands it might feel clumsy, heavy, or too big.

TABLETS

Tablet sales have been sky rocketing and it seems that a new tablet is introduced each week. In general, tablets offer a lightweight device with similar capabilities as a laptop and with longer battery life, ease of use, tons of applications to choose from, and often additional features such as GPS, built in cameras, access to 3G and 4G networks if brought from a cell phone carrier, etc. Lately, there are also plenty of Bluetooth keyboards and mice available that can wirelessly connect with the tablet and essentially turn it into a laptop with all the previously mentioned advantages still in place.

Once again, Apple set the standard couple years ago with the introduction of the iPad. Even to this day, the latest tablets from other manufacturers are reviewed by how well they match with Apple product. In the spring of 2011, Apple introduced the iPad2. iPad2 surpasses the iPad in every category including weight, dimensions, horsepower, usability, battery life, etc. iPad 2 comes in 16 GB (\$499), 32 GB (\$599), and 64 GB (\$699) models. Some cell phone carriers also carry iPad 2, making it capable of using the carrier's cell phone network.

As with cell phones, the iPad's main competition are Android based tablets. Also, as with cell phones, similarly configured Android tablets cost much less than the Apple product. Moreover, most applications designed for Android phones work equally well on Android Tablets. Also, as mentioned before, the Android market is quickly catching up with the Apple apps market in quantity and quality of applications offered. Android tablets also have the advantage of not being forced to use software such as iTunes to transfer data, media, and applications to the device. Of course if you like iTunes, then you may consider this a disadvantage. Finally, my experience has been that there are many more free applications on the Android market than there are on the Apple market. Leading Android tablets include the Samsung Galaxy Tab (10" and 7" version), Sony Tablet S, Barnes and Noble Nook, Amazon Kindle Fire, Asus Eee Pad Transformer Prime, etc. The last tablet in the previous list is the latest and fastest Android tablet available. Android tablets start around \$200 and climb to about \$600 at the high end. An advantage of most Android based tablets is that unlike the iPad, they provide for memory expansion through microSD cards purchased separately.

As with cell phones, selecting which tablet to buy is a personal choice. Think about how much money you want to spend, what will you use the tablet for, how much memory do you need, etc.. If you want the tried and true, go with the iPad 2, if you want something as equally equipped as the iPad but cheaper and offering more freedom, go with an Android tablet. The Barnes and Noble Nook and Amazon Kindle Fire are great choice in the hybrid tablets and e-book reader category, with prices starting around \$200-\$250. Please keep in mind that both Amazon and Barnes and Noble have free applications to allow any tablet on the market to become an e-book reader and to buy books, movies, etc. via these and other vendors. Reviews for tablets can be found at cnet.com, laptopmag.com, newtabletreviews.com, etc.

LAPTOPS

Laptops come in many varieties. There are small and slow for less than \$300, small and fast starting around \$500 and climbing to over \$1000, and of course the heavy desktop replacement or gaming laptops with amazing amount of

horsepower, plenty of expandability, and very large screens.

When it comes to laptops, you truly get what you pay for. Begin your laptop search by deciding ...

- How much money you want to spend? Laptops range from \$300 to \$2000.
- What will be the main purpose of the laptop? Do you need something which is basically capable of browsing the web and running productivity suites such as Microsoft Office or do you want something powerful and capable of handling 3D gaming and applications such as Photoshop, CAD, multimedia design and directing, etc.
- Do you want something light weight or heavy? Consider if you plan to travel with the laptop or basically use it in your home often sitting on a desk?
- What is the future expandability of the laptop? Do you want the ability to add more storage space and memory to the device? Does it have enough data ports (USB, HDMI, etc.) to accommodate your external devices?
- Do you want to buy locally or via Internet? Often you have more choices and lower prices when buying over the Internet as opposed to going to Best Buy or other local stores.

Keeping above considerations in mind, let's take a look at the available laptop categories.

Netbooks (not notebooks)

These laptops cost around \$300. They are lightweight, small in size, and offer very long battery life. However, they are pretty much only good for surfing the web and using productivity suites such as Microsoft Office, and barely playing 1080p (high definition) video. Forget about even basic 3D gaming on most of these machines. However, not all netbooks are created equal and some are more powerful than others. When buying a netbook, lean towards models that have 1366 x 768 screen resolution, minimum of 2GB of RAM, 160GB or larger hard drive, 11" screen, possibly discreet graphics, and 6 hours or more of battery life. Discreet graphics means that the device contains a processor solely dedicated to graphics so the main CPU doesn't have to burden itself with graphics. Graphics and overall performance is increased as the result. Laptops with discreet graphics perform better than those without. Top rated models in this category include the

1. HP Mini 1103, \$275
2. Toshiba mini NB505, \$300
3. Acer Aspire One 722, \$300
4. Samsung NF310, \$360

Turbo Charged Netbooks or Low End Ultra Portables

These laptops have slightly larger screens than netbooks, include more memory, faster processors, and good graphic capabilities while still providing battery life dimensions/weight similar to netbooks.. This variety of laptop will run just about everything you throw at it, including low-end 3D gaming. Recommended requirements for these laptops include 11-12" screens, 1366 x 768 screen resolution or better, 4GB of RAM, 200GB or larger hard drive, and possibly discreet graphics. This variety of netbooks cost around \$450-500. Top rated models in this category include

1. HP Pavilion g4, \$460
2. HP Pavilion dm1-4010us, \$480
3. ASUS Eee PC 1215N, \$500
4. HP Pavilion dm1z, \$525

Ultra Portables

These notebook computers are designed for power and portability. They are ideal for business travelers and consumers looking for a high end computer in a small package. This category includes many wide ranging prices, sizes, and other features. However, the cost is usually \$600 to \$2000, screen size 12-14", resolution 1200x800 or greater, 4-8GB of memory, latest generation of processors such as the Intel iCore family, 250GB or larger hard drive, and most likely discreet graphics. The best but costly ultraportable on the market these days seems to be the Apple MacBook Air (13-inch) at about \$1600. Windows based laptop manufacturers are rallying by creating a laptop similar in design and specs as the MacBook Air but with a cost of under \$1000. There are several in this category already available in the marketplace. Given the varying range in this category, prices for top rated models vary quite a bit.

1. HP Pavilion dm1z, \$530
2. Alienware M11x, \$600
3. Toshiba Portege R835-P56X, \$830
4. Acer Aspire TimelineX 3830TG (6431), \$1000
5. HP Envy 14 (2011), \$1100
6. Apple MacBook Pro (13-inch, 2011), \$1100
7. Lenovo ThinkPad X1, \$1200
8. Apple MacBook Air 13-inch, \$1600
9. Sony Vaio Z series, \$2000

Budget Laptops

Don't let the name fool you; often these laptops are just as powerful as their lighter and fancier cousins. Think of the budget laptop as an all around laptop that will probably never disappoint you. Most people will gravitate to this category. Screen sizes can vary from 12-15.4", screen resolution is usually 1366 x 768 or better, memory is usually 4GB, hard drives around 250-500GB, some have discreet graphics, weight can be 4-8 lbs. and battery life anywhere from 3-7 hours. Cost is usually under \$800 with most being under \$600. Top rated models include

1. Gateway NV55C54u, \$450
2. Dell Inspiron 14z (budget), \$600
3. HP Pavilion dm4t, \$650
4. HP G62t, \$800

Desktop Replacement and Gaming Laptops

If raw power and performance is your only criteria, then consider these type of laptops. They are a match for any desktop and often better performers. Most demanding 3D games run on these laptops without an issue. Screens are usually 15.4" or larger, screen resolutions up to 1080p-high def (1920 x 1080), memory at or in excess of 8GB, high end discreet graphics, and hard drives usually 500-1000GB. However, the battery life on these laptops can be low to mediocre. Most will last about 3 hours. Cost is usually \$800-\$3000. Top Rated models include

1. Dell Inspiron 17R, \$830
2. Dell Latitude E6420, \$1050
3. HP Envy 17, \$1600
4. ASUS G74SX-A2, \$2050

5. Alienware M17x (2011), \$2100

6. Alienware M18x, \$2800

In conclusion, the consumer has many choices when it comes to laptop purchase, almost too many. However, clearly defining your criteria, budget, reading online reviews, and physically looking over the model when possible, can help you choose the right laptop for your needs. Moreover, the top rated models I have included will likely more than meet your expectations in that particular category. Laptops reviews can be found at cnet.com, laptopmag.com, and notebookreview.com, etc.

For additional Holiday Gift Guides, please check out the following links ...

CNet 2011 Holiday Gift Guide ... <http://reviews.cnet.com/holiday-gift-guide>

Laptop magazine Holiday Gift Guide ... <http://blog.laptopmag.com/top-10-laptop-gifts-for-holiday-2011>

Laptop Magazine Holiday Gadget Gift Guide ... <http://www.laptopmag.com/l/ggg-2011.aspx>

CNet Stocking Stuffer Gift Guide ... <http://www.laptopmag.com/l/ggg-2011.aspx>

CNet Electronic Gifts for Under \$50 ... http://reviews.cnet.com/2300-33338_7-10010351.html

Deal of the Day Websites ...

<http://www.dealcatcher.com/>

<http://www.pricewatch.com/>

My Favorite Blog

By Frank Staffen, Computer/Math Teacher at TJHS



I always get asked, "Where can I find website resources to use in my classroom?"

My reply is, "go to my favorite Blog" by Richard Byrne.

<http://www.freetech4teachers.com>

Richard Byrne is a US History and Civics at Oxford Hills Comprehensive High School in South Paris, ME. He also taught courses in global studies and English/ Language Arts. Richard is Google certified teacher and has a lot of ways to use Google in the classroom. He has won many awards for his blog. In his blog, he usually gives you three websites that you can use in your classroom for all subjects and levels. He also has training resources on his blog. If you have an I-Google page, you can create a widget that directs you to his page. A lot of sites that are found on the following page came from freetech4teachers blog.

www.cfftjresources.wikispaces.com

Have fun blogging and learning :-)

Technology Workshops

By Lindsey Mitko, Mathematics Teacher, Team 7-2 at PHMS



In keeping with the spirit of the 2011 Technology Boot Camp, we continue to offer a variety of workshops for the WJHSD staff

BOOT CAMP SUMMARY

Thank you to everyone who attended the Technology Boot Camp this summer. We also appreciate all of the feedback that you have given us so far. Your input will help us to make improvements to future boot camps. If you have additional ideas or suggestions for future boot camps, please email Lindsey Mitko at lmitko@wjhsd.net.

AFTER SCHOOL SESSIONS

The technology integration committee is holding voluntary technology after school sessions as a follow-up* to the boot camp. All participants will receive Act 48 credit for attending. All sessions will be held from 3-4 pm for PHMS and TJHS staff and from 4-5 pm for Jefferson, McClellan, and Gill Hall staff. The topics and dates of the upcoming events are as follows:

January (Dates -TBA): Digital Storytelling

Presenter: Michael Dobos

Location: McClellan Elementary

Contact: mdobos@wjhsd.net

Please contact Mike Dobos if you are interested in attending.

Live Video Conferencing with Other Schools

By Suhail Baloch, Technology Director



On November 17th and December 15th, Mrs. Sydeski's students at TJHS engaged in lively high definition and real time video conferences with several other school in the county and Via Mundo Exchange School, in São Luís, Brazil.

On the morning of November 17th, schools joining in with TJHS and Via Mundo included ...

- Canon McMillan High School, Canonsburg, PA, USA
- Elizabeth Forward High School, Elizabeth, PA
- Thomas Jefferson High School, Clairton, PA
- Trinity High School, Washington, PA, USA

On December 15th, other conference attendees included ...

- Canon McMillan High School, Canonsburg, PA, USA
- Trinity High School, Washington, PA, USA

These activities were sponsored by World Affairs Council of Pittsburgh, Allegheny Intermediate Unit 3, and CIEE-Council on International Education Exchange. During the first video conference, the students had an opportunity to engage in a town hall-style meeting/Socratic Seminar to discuss global competency. During the second conference, students from various schools discussed nonverbal communications and holiday customs via an engaging Q & A session. Learning about the customs, values, and lifestyles of people living in other countries can truly serve as an insightful and shared experience which can lead to greater global awareness and understanding.

Recording from the first session can be viewed online at the following link ...

<http://video.magpi.net/videos/video/267/in/channel/4/>

Recording from the second session can be viewed online at the following link ...

<http://video.magpi.net/videos/video/296/>

TRIB Live also covered the first conference at TJHS and their write-up can be found at the following link ...

<http://yoursouthhills.com/southhillsrecord/article/technology-makes-it-small-world-students>

Free and Reduced Price Software

By Suhail Baloch, Technology Director



Often software can be just as or more expensive as the computers it is designed to run on. This article will offer you advice on how to reduce the cost of purchasing software either through discounted pricing or free software options.

FREE SOFTWARE

SourceForge

In my many years of working with technology, I have yet to come across a software product that does not have its free equivalent available for download and use. Quiet a few years ago, a movement termed as “Open Source Initiative” was established to counteract the rising prices of consumer software and to give programmers a creative outlet for developing new software to share with others. Since its inception, there have been thousands of open source titles developed for public use. These range from productivity suites to photo enhancement to games. Open source software is completely free, with only stipulation being that one cannot download a given title and turn around and sell it for profit. There are many sites where you can download open source software. One of the most comprehensive sites is called SourceForge and can be accessed by going to the following link ...

<http://sourceforge.net/>

SourceForge has over two and a half million titles in the following categories ... Audio & Video, Business & Enterprise, Communications, Development, Home & Education, Games, Graphics, Science & Engineering, Security & Utilities, and System Administration. Software titles meeting your needs can be easily accessed by searching with a few keywords or by browsing the available categories. SourceForge has software for Windows based computers, Apple, Linux, and other operating systems. Please make sure to filter the software by your operating system. SourceForge also displays user ratings and comments for each title.

Freeware

Another type of free software available at variety of software clearinghouses on the Internet is referred to as “Freeware”. Freeware is available for all major operating systems. This can include either fully functional software packages or tiles limited in their capabilities to compared to their paid versions. There are many place where Freeware software can be downloaded. Some of these include ...

Download.com ... <http://download.cnet.com>

TuCows Downloads ... www.tucows.com/downloads

Freeware Files ... <http://www.freewarefiles.com/>

They are also variety of websites which evaluate and rate freeware software. For example ...

Freeware Guide ... <http://www.freeware-guide.com/>

My recommendation is to define clearly what you are looking for, then search for the available software by using specific keywords. Once you have a list available, narrow it down to only those titles which are rated highly by either the users or editors or both. Once you narrow the selection down to two or three titles, down and install each and see how well it fits your needs or how easy it is to use. You may decide on only one title or determine that you need more than one to accomplish a variety of tasks.

SHAREWARE SOFTWARE

For just about every paid software product out there, there is also a shareware version of the title. Shareware versions can be different than the paid version in a variety of ways. For example, the shareware version may have all the capabilities of the paid version but expires after 30 days of use. Then you either have to uninstall the software or buy the paid version. Some of the other shareware limitations may include partial capabilities only, "nag" messages or forced advertisements compared with the paid version. Software manufacturers are hoping that after you have tried out the free version and decided the software meets your needs, you will elect to purchase the paid version. Well known software packages such as Microsoft Office and Windows, Above Photoshop and other Adobe products all have shareware equivalents. Nothing is better than "try before you buy". One advantage of shareware software which is timed to expire but not limited in its capabilities is that it offers you an opportunity to accomplish a particular task and then determine if you want to erase the software from your computer or purchases the full license.

The sites listed in the previous section on Freeware also provide access to shareware software. Or you can visit the manufacturer's website to download their shareware versions.

EDUCATIONAL DISCOUNTS (Academic Software Pricing)

Many well known software packages have educational discount alternatives. Often this is the same as the fully paid version, perhaps without the fancy box or stuffing, but at a lower price. If you work for an educational institution or are a student or sometimes even parents of a student, you can purchase the software at an educational discount. These discounts can range from 30-50% easily. For example, both Microsoft and Adobe provide educational versions of their popular site. As a comparison, the retail version of Microsoft Office Home costs over \$200 on Amazon.com compared to a little over \$100 for the student version.

Some sites, in addition to Amazon.com, which sell educational versions of software packages include ...

JourneyEd.com ... <http://www.journeyed.com/>

Educational;-Software.com ... <http://www.journeyed.com/>

Academic software can also be purchased directly from the developer.

REFURBISHED AND OLD SOFTWARE

It is also valid to buy used, refurbished, or older versions of a software package. Please make sure the transaction is legal and meets the licensing requirements of the developer. You might be able to utilize sites such as eBay.com, Buy.com, Amazon.com, etc. to buy this variety of software. For example, the latest version of Microsoft Office is 2010, however, the older versions such as Office 2007 incorporate basically the same capabilities and offers similar experience as 2010. An analogy might be that sometimes a used car or older model car is a better choice than the newest model available.

CONCLUSION

Hardware is only as good as the software which runs on it. After spending your savings on the latest and greatest computer, you might consider free or inexpensive alternatives to load up the software on this machine. Often free or reduced price software is just as good as the paid version, however, there are times when the paid version maybe exactly what you are looking for and need.