

DECEMBER 2011

The Holiday and New Year's technology gift guide

All you really need to know about the latest wave of technology

By Michael Mortimer

Ah yes, here come the holidays, again. Real trial lawyers dread this time of year. After all, when we are litigating cases, who has time for shopping, office parties and two months of frolic?

As before, the goal of my holiday shopping guide is to help you cope this holiday season by suggesting some great gifts to give yourself, provide shopping ideas for those last minute purchases and, my favorite, some business expenses to put on your 2011 Schedule C.

Update: Analysts predict that people will do 35 percent of their shopping online. More and more people are realizing that fighting traffic, risking road rage, wasting fuel at $4 a gallon and fighting lines makes no sense when one can shop online.

Dual-Monitors for your desktop

Dual-Monitor Setup – My top gift suggestion is for your office. This also qualifies for listing on your Schedule C. Prior to 2011 a dual-monitor system would have been quite expensive ($2000+), the biggest cost being the monitors, followed by a powerful video card. With LCD TV/monitor prices falling to below $200, and probably $150 this holiday season, total cost is now about $400 to $500.

A dual-monitor setup means that you are running two computer displays on your office desktop computer. If you are not using multiple monitors, you are really missing out.

The benefits are numerous; for example, you can have MS Word on one screen and an appellate opinion on the other. You copy and paste text from one screen on to the other simply by dragging text from the opinion into your Word document. When conducting research on the Net you can have a different page on each display. You can use one display as your primary screen and the other for a work set aside. Proofing, editing or comparing two Word documents is far easier when not having to constantly minimize/maximize windows; or, you can have research on one monitor and a pleading on the other.

- ***Video card ($100):*** A medium grade video card will do; make sure it has dual monitor ports. The more expensive the card, the better it will power dual monitors. But since you are not using this for games, you do *not* need the highest spec'd card. (tinyurl.com/MMeBayVideoCard)
- ***Software ($0):*** Windows XP and Windows 7 come with multiple monitor support. They automatically detect that you have two monitors connected to the computer. You go into "Control Panel," "Display," and configure your connected monitors.
- ***Computer Table (As found or $100):*** This is where you place your monitors. What works best is a utilitarian L-shaped desk where one arm of the L is used for all your computer stuff. If you don't have an L-shaped desk, then get a computer stand large enough to hold the monitors.
- ***Swinging Arm: ($50 each):*** This is the coolest office setup. You attach the mounts to your walls, then the monitors to the mounts. You now have adjustable monitors that can be positioned any which way you desire. (tinyurl.com/MMLCDWallMounts)
- ***Cables (0 to $20):*** If you don't have cables around the office, on eBay you can find any cable you need, for dirt cheap prices.
- ***LCD TV/Monitors ($200 each):*** Sure you can shop around, but Costco is still the best place online to get an office LCD TV/Monitor. Remember, for televisions and monitors, Costco extends the manufacturer's warranty to two years from date of purchase. (tinyurl.com/MMCostcoLCDTV)

Desktop Notebook Computers ($650 to $900)

Manufacturers continue to move toward making notebook computers as replacements for your desktop computers. This is not the manufacturers' idea, it is because consumers and business are buying fewer desktop computers.

This is a good thing for lawyers because the price of high-powered notebooks keeps declining. Less money gets more features and ultimately you can save lots of space by eliminating a big metal box sitting under your desk. For business use, expect to pay about $650 to $900 for a full-featured, powerful "desktop notebook".

My opinion: the best law office notebooks are Toshiba (tinyurl.com/

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PMCostcoToshiba) and the Lenovo IdeaPad and Thinkpad lines (formerly IBM Thinkpad) (tinyurl.com/MMLenovo)

Bonus Tips: On the Costco site, make sure to look at the detailed user reviews. Also, Costco is a great place to purchase computers because Costco extends the *manufacturer's warranty* to two years from date of purchase!

Depo/Travel Notebook Computers ($350 to $700)

These are notebook computers that fall in-between netbooks and desktop-replacement notebooks. They can be low-priced when on sale, have great features (far better than last holiday season), boast a 13" to 15" display, often have no optical (DVD) drive, and weigh less than four pounds, making them easy to tote to a deposition or on the plane. The best depo/travel notebook computers are Acer and ASUS. Since it made netbooks popular, ASUS is a master at producing high quality, long-lasting notebooks. (tinyurl.com/MMCostCoAcer). If you intend to give a notebook to the college or high school student, you can't go wrong with an ASUS or Acer machine.

Look for a machine that has long-lasting battery power. That's the number one feature users look at: How long can I use the notebook without being connected to a charger? This is important for lawyers traveling by air and for students who need a notebook battery to last through an entire day of classes.

An optical drive is what lay people call a "DVD player." I believe a lawyer considering a "travel notebook" (remember, that's under four pounds – total weight) must have a computer with an optical drive. Why? In federal court and to some degree state courts, parties continue to exchange documents, etc. on DVDs. Many offices scan all case documents into PDF or other digital format and those files are backed up onto a DVD drive. Flying over Nevada is not the time to find out your cool notebook lacks an optical drive.

As to the display, if your vision is not 20/20, consider getting a notebook with a larger display so you can easily read the screen.

And if it's a gift for your student, one parent can give the notebook and the other a backpack designed to carry notebooks (they are padded to protect the computer from the abuse students inflict).

Tablets and e-Readers

Tablets have yet to develop into a complete work tool for lawyers. And while some industries are using iPads for certain functions, e.g., doctors taking iPads on hospital rounds, lawyers are using tablets primarily as multi-media viewing devices and as glorified e-readers (to read books, magazines and newspapers).

This time last year there were about three legitimate tablets on the market. This holiday season there are hundreds. As I said before in my article on tablets, the main consideration is to determine if you will really use the tablet. Again, I suggest you shop at Costco because, unlike other retailers, Costco has a very liberal return policy (full cash refunds) on tablets and it extends the manufacturer's warranty. (tinyurl.com/MMCostcoTablet)

Bonus Tip on tablets: Having used five tablets this year, I can say that weight is very important. This is because a heavy tablet is awkward to hold at an angle while reading and you will tire holding it up. Both Samsung and Apple have tablets that include a large display, but are super light.

Visit a local store to look over the various tablets. Let your conscience be your guide if, after looking at the brick-and-mortar store's tablets, you then scurry home to buy it online from the cheapest possible source.

Regarding e-readers, it's really a personal decision. As to technology, the new color Kindle Fire is very nice. I am tempted to try one out. (tinyurl.com/PMKindleFire) In all likelihood, if you are buying a tablet or e-reader as a gift, you have been told ahead of time which one to get. If it is a surprise gift, I would again recommend Costco because of its liberal return policies.

Cell Phones & Plans (Prepaid Has Arrived)

The big news in 2011 is *not* the iPhone, it is the developments in prepaid service, specifically handsets, the money savings, and people (even businesses) flocking to prepaid wireless service to save *big* money. Because of the significance of cost savings and prepaid now having a technology that will please most of you, I will explain things in more detail here.

• ***Better handsets:*** Before April 2011 prepaid was an embarrassment. Pity the loser who could only qualify and afford prepaid service. Prepaid forever changed around April 2011 when prepaid carrier MetroPCS debuted the Samsung Galaxy Indulge. This handset was the first on the prepaid market with specs similar to medium priced handsets featured by national carriers, and most significant, it used an Android-based operating system.

Fast forward a few months, all prepaid carriers have decent Android handsets and MetroPCS has the $250 LG Esteem, a phone with similar specs that Verizon retails for $560 under the name LG Revolution.

Also just debuting at MetroPCS is its first HTC handset, the HTC Wildfire. This is newsworthy because HTC is known for making outstanding handsets (Samsung and HTC produce the best handsets in the world). The Wildfire possibly signifies a long-term relationship with MetroPCS. (tinyurl.com/ PM-MetroPCSWildfire)

The reason you want to consider switching yourself and the family to prepaid is because of *money*. Simply put, you will pay hundreds to thousands less by "going prepaid." For example, assume after overages on talk, data and text you

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are paying $100 monthly for each of four lines (you, your wife, and two kids in high school), fees and taxes included. That's $9,600 over 24 months.

Compare that to MetroPCS running a special until December 31: four (04) unlimited talk, Web and text lines for $100 monthly (taxes and fees *included*). Even though prepaid is month to month (no long-term contract) Metro's plan would be $2,400 over 24 months. $9,600 compared to $2,400? In this tanked economy, that kind of math is easy to understand.

As for handsets, remember, MetroPCS sells Verizon's $560 LG Revolution for $250. And MetroPCS has other phones, such as the Indulge, that are quite impressive for the price. Of course, if you and family members just have to have the iPhone, please realize that it is costing *you* an *extra* $6,200 to own it. Ask yourself if there's a $6,200 difference between the two phones (the MetroPCS LG Esteem and the iPhone). (tinyurl.com/Metro100Deal; tinyurl.com/MMMetroPhones; tinyurl.com/MMLGRevolution)

Navigation systems

Cell phones, the Net, tablets and built-in units have chipped away at the dedicated nav market. Fact is, stand-alone nav systems have taken a big hit. In response, manufacturers have loaded units with features and lowered prices dramatically.

A dedicated nav system makes a great gift. Before buying, check reviews online. Also, look for a unit with a 5-inch display, free lifetime traffic, and free lifetime map updates. (Incredibly, a unit like that might cost less than $200, even less on sale during the holidays).

And remember, a dedicated nav does a lot more than simply map routes. Newer units can navigate traffic according to congestion, function as trip calculators, and provide an audible tone when you are exceeding the road's posted speed limit. Some act as Bluetooth hands-free speakers for your cell phone.

Another benefit of a dedicated nav device is that it keeps working when you get a phone call. When someone calls on a cell phone that you are using as a navigator, your navigation system goes offline while you are on the phone. Not good with a turn coming up!

Digital Cameras and Camcorders

The same fate that has befallen nav systems has affected other electronics: most people are fine with using their cell phone as a camera and camcorder.

So as with navigation systems, digital camcorder prices have plummeted (and most likely will vanish from the main retail market in a year or two) and digital cameras are priced at $200 to $300 for the prosumer units and under $130 for consumer models.

Keep in mind that for the law office, a few dedicated digital cameras are essential evidence-gathering tools. You can't go wrong with a camera from the Canon Powershot series, or something from the Panasonic Lumix line.

In regards to camcorders, all middle-grade and above digital cameras come with at least 720p HD video recording capability.

Gifts for everyone else

• ***Sound Therapy Machine ($110+)***

This is perhaps the most significant gift suggestion on the planet.

Here is a message I got when I mentioned this device on an online blog:

> *Some time ago in the comments about a star projector on Kids.woot you mentioned the "sleep machine" you use. My spouse has developed wicked snoring, and I already had occasional insomnia all by myself, so sleep was becoming "AN ISSUE" in the house and our marriage.*
>
> *We decided to buy the Ecotones machine you mentioned and have now had it about a week. I have no idea what the "ocean" or "waterfalls" settings sound like beyond about 5 minutes in because I am fast asleep and don't wake up. Maybe this is only temporary, but your suggestion has saved a week of my sleep and THAT means at the very least I owe you an adult beverage or something. THANK YOU!*

For new and used on eBay (tinyurl.com/eBayEcotones; and on Amazon: tinyurl.com/Ecotones) (There are 312 reviews on Amazon; read some).

• ***Cell Phone Headsets*** – Bluetooth and corded cell phone headsets make great inexpensive gifts. Just like my LED flashlight suggestion, everyone loves getting a cell phone headset, mainly because everyone drives and most know the law, "No talking on the phone in the car, without a headset."

Best place to buy is on eBay. Brand name wired headsets are less than $5 each. Buy 20 and pass them out like candy. I suggest you give everyone TWO headsets so people can keep one in each car.

I would stick to buying people wired headsets because most people cannot figure out how to turn on a Bluetooth headset and people don't want to hassle with keeping the battery charged.

• ***LED Flashlights:*** After years of giving LED flashlights to people, I discovered something: people absolutely love getting flashlights as gifts. The reason is obvious: Few people have even one working flashlight in the house. And the car?

There's a zillion places online to buy LED flashlights. One place I like is in Hong Kong called LED Shoppe. (tinyurl.com/MMLEDLights) The lights at LED Shoppe are the same lights you see in hardware stores and checkout counters. At hardware stores the flashlights are going for four times the price. If you do order from LEDShoppe, keep in mind they are in Hong Kong so shipping might be an issue. An alternative is to search "LED flashlight" on eBay. You will get 55,000 lights to choose from, many from U.S. sellers who will assure delivery in a few days. Also, people love getting lights they think the police use (trust me, cops don't buy their flashlights on eBay.) (tinyurl.com/MMLEDeBayPolice) Only buy flashlights

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that use AA or AAA batteries. People have or can easily buy those batteries. When obscure batteries wear out the light will sit in a drawer forever forgotten.

Pet gifts?

Forget electronics. Nothing will get you loved faster by a client, colleague, friend or neighbor than by getting a gift for their pet. If they have a dog, the coolest gift is giving a Snuggie for dogs. (tinyurl.com/MMeBayDogSnuggie. Make sure to get the correct size Snuggie, which is easy to do since the Snuggies are sized by breed and pounds.

Michael Mortimer is a federal trial lawyer located in San Francisco. He is spending most of his time now authoring a number of books including Welcome to the World of Big Time Litigation. *Mortimer is also the regular technology columnist for* Plaintiff Magazine. *You can e-mail him at sanfrancisco@att.net*


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