

Gadgets galore

A stockingful of user-tested, high-tech gifts

By **STEPHEN A. IDE**

If you're a technogeek like me, you are constantly amazed by what companies come up with to lure your holiday dollars. This year is no exception, with many products taking features to a new level.

An amazing remote

This season, Logitech has several computer-related products that impress. The Harmony 676 is one in its series of universal remote controls. It has a daunting array of buttons and an attractive design, with two extra faceplates.

The remote is programmed through your computer (via a USB port) and their software, which connects to a web site.

Unlike most universal remotes, which require finding special device codes, the Harmony asks only for the model numbers of your equipment. With that knowledge, it programs your remote for you.



The Harmony 676 Universal Remote Control by Logitech

Despite a 45-minute setup time, which included crawling under and around equipment to find model numbers, this gadget replaced a pile of remotes in my living room. Once set up, you'll wonder how you lived without it. It can handle up to 15 devices, including Tivo.

If you want to watch a movie, you press one movie button (it comes set up to work with your VCR, but you can change it to be your DVD player). Pressing that button makes sure your TV is on the correct channel, switches it to the correct video setting, turns on your VCR or DVD player and switches on your remote stereo receiver. Put the movie in and all the control buttons are right there for you.

Something not right? It's the only remote I've ever seen with a smart help button that asks you questions via its small display until the problem is solved.

It's an expensive remote, but it may be the last remote control you ever buy. Grade: A. MSRP: \$229; street: \$145.

Knocking out noise

Once you get that portable music player this season, you may want to hear your music with something better than

tiny ear pods. There are plenty of choices, and some offer noise reduction, a nice option for travelers or to cut the din of everyday life.

Back on the market after several years, the Noisebuster NB-FX noise-canceling headphones are powered by one AAA battery. Switching on the headphones makes all the difference. They stack up OK against much more expensive noise-canceling headphones from Bose, though the Noisebusters seemed lacking in dynamic range.

The headphones reduce the constant drone of ventilation systems, road noise and other background sounds by electronically blocking the sound with an external speaker of its own. Apparently, the headphones sense the incoming sound and block it with sound waves going in the opposite direction. All I know is, once on, all you hear is the music.

And it's bright and crisp-sounding, even at low volumes, though somewhat lacking in bass response. "Noise canceling" is a misnomer, because some noise still gets through, but the difference is striking nonetheless.

The headphones have a rated frequency range of 20 to 20,000 Hz, the equivalent of human hearing. The lightweight plastic makes them feel a bit flimsy compared with others. The electronics inside the ear cups are not sealed, which concerns me if using them in the rain. But the headphones are foldable and include an dual-prong adapter for airplanes, along with a travel bag.

Grade: B. MSRP and street: \$69.99

Music in the round

Portable music players like the iPod can be connected to amplifiers and speakers in many ways. One of the latest and perhaps coolest gadgets is JBL's On Stage.

This doughnut-shaped listening station has four tiny, 1-inch speakers and a small bass port. If you own an iPod, this listening station is custom-designed for you, with adapters to dock all styles, from the iPod mini to the newer fourth generation models.

Aside from its sleek design, what make this unit cool are finger-sensitive touch volume and mute controls and a full sound that belies its 6.75-inch diameter size. The unit is



The Noisebuster NB-FX headphones effectively reduce ambient noise.

rated to produce 100 to 20,000 Hz, sending out only 6 watts per channel, but you'll think it cranks out much more.

The unit, which plugs into the wall, can be used to charge your iPod while it plays through the dock. A provided audio cable allows playing older iPods and virtually any other music player, from MP3 players to portable CD players.

Another choice from JBL is the On Tour portable music box, a 7-inch wide battery- or AC-powered collapsible, dual-speaker listening box that also will astound you with the clarity of its playback.

With the same frequency response as its bigger sister but only at 3 watts per channel, the On Tour doesn't quite carry as big a punch. But you'll still be pleased with the overall fullness of the sound, and its portability makes it ideally suited for use with notebook computers as well as portable music players.

Since the On Tour can be powered by four AAA batteries, it has an automatic battery-saving shutoff when no music is playing or when its curved sliding cover is shut. Though JBL recommends the use of rechargeable batteries, the unit does not recharge them for you when plugged in, which is too bad.

On Stage MSRP: \$199.99, street \$110; On Tour MSRP: \$99.99, street: \$72.

Wireless Playstation

Logitech's wireless controller for Playstation 1 & 2 has a powerful signal and makes a good addition. Despite the company's claims, it actually is heavier than a standard Sony wired controller, largely because of its two AA batteries.

In testing, the controller, which uses the same 2.4 GHz frequency as many cordless telephones, performed as fast as a wired controller and could even be used from as far away as the next room (it is rated to 30 feet). I could detect no interference with our cordless telephones – another plus.

Setup requires plugging a small receiver into the Playstation console, where it was instantly recognized. Strangely, it did not work in the second controller port, but that may be because two are required. Beyond that, it was gaming as usual.

Compared to the stock Sony controller, the Logitech was every bit as responsive. Though the directional buttons felt loose, the controller held up well to hours of gaming.

Recommended. Grade: A. MSRP: \$39.99; Street: \$30.

Graphics mouse

I have used a Logitech two-button optical wheel mouse for years and have always liked its low profile, good response time and precision. So when I heard about the company's new MX510 Performance Optical Wheel Mouse, I was very curious.

OK, it looks cool, with a shimmering metallic finish, but that won't get you far. The mouse contains more buttons than you find on most mice – five to be exact. That's likely the reason the mouse is bulkier than most. People with smaller hands may have problems with this. I know I did.

The mouse itself is responsive, smooth and precise for graphics use, rated at 800 dots per inch. Most right-handed users will appreciate its added navigational features much more. Gamers using a mouse may like that you can program a device key for a commonly used keystroke.

Two left-side buttons take getting used to. They control the "forward" and "back" buttons in your web browser. Likewise, small buttons above and below the wheel provide a kind of page-by-page cruise control when traveling up and down long web pages. They also can be used to magnify images in editing applications.

Another button atop the mouse allows you to switch applications or open windows. I found myself accidentally pressing this button.

Grade: B. MSRP: 49.99; Street: \$30.

Buddy cams

Unlike some of the other Logitech products, the BuddyCam 2-pack didn't perform well in my testing. These web cams come as a pair, so you can share one with someone you know and see and hear one another while you chat with popular instant messaging software.

In addition to a camera, they contain a built-in microphone. They connect and are powered via your computer's USB port. Software installation is quick and painless and includes video E-mail, a web album creator and video broadcasting features. The key feature – being able to chat with someone live while seeing one another –



Logitech cordless controller for Playstation 2

Buddy Cam needs a technical upgrade

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worked poorly or only partly. Despite the packaging claims that you can get by with a 28.8K modem, a broadband connection allows the best response times.

Chatting with a friend with dialup Internet access resulted in such spotty, jumpy communications that I had to phone to say I was hanging up. Another friend with a broadband connection could not see me at all, though he could hear me. The web cams capture a grainy video or still image up to 640 x 480 resolution, which is small by many standards but sufficient for a quick video to share online.

Grade: C. MSRP: \$79.99; Street: \$70.

The idea of a quick-to-use, cordless vacuum for sudden messes is a good one. However, the Shark Cordless Intelligent 3-Speed Sweeper falls short of the mark. The machine sets up in about 5 minutes, requiring a screwdriver to remove and then replace one screw for assembly. After charging for more than the recommended initial 20 hours, I went to work.

The Shark is easy to operate. One foot button switches it on; another allows you to toggle between Floor, Carpets or Turbo settings. On our linoleum kitchen floor, the Shark picked up dust bunnies easily, but the machine felt miserably weak.

My suspicions were confirmed when I got to the carpet. I tried the carpet setting. The Shark picked up larger debris without too much difficulty, but

within five minutes it began making a chattering noise that my daughter said sounded like flatulence. Then the vacuum froze, jammed with animal hair knotted tightly around the rollers.

After 10 minutes of carpet use (at some point I also switched to Turbo), the Shark's energy was spent and all its lights began flashing. It was jammed again. I gave it a few more tries, with the same result. It might be OK for a quick cleanup on a hard floor, but otherwise, I can't recommend this vacuum as anything but a complete waste of money.

Grade F. Street price \$20.

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Stephen A. Ide is systems editor at The Patriot Ledger.