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For power supply, I go with iGo

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Columnist

If you feel you're carrying a load of bricks while traveling with today's portable electronics, it's because you are.

When you hit the road for a business trip these days, you most likely have a cell phone, a personal digital assistant and a laptop computer. You might also have a digital camera and music player. That's a lot of space taken up in your briefcase and luggage, and a lot of weight to carry around.

Why can't someone make one power supply that will handle all those gadgets?

Well, someone finally has.

Scottsdale, Ariz.-based Mobility Electronics, the company that does business as iGo.com, has become a leader in marketing universal power supplies. In itself, that's no big deal. Electronic accessory makers have been making such units for years using the same concept of exchangeable plugs to match the wide range of power inputs on electronic devices.

What's new in the iGo line is its products cover all the major product categories for "road warrior" electronics, and its units can charge more than one device at a time. Charge your cell phone and your laptop at the same time; what a concept! You'd think everyone would be doing it, but they don't.

Power bricks, I should tell you, bug me. You buy a neat, compact, lightweight, stylish-looking device, and to recharge it you get an ugly lump of black plastic that's often almost as big and heavy as the device

itself. I have been asking spokespeople why that is. After they get past their initial reaction -- "Why is this nut case asking me that?" -- they have a few explanations.

One is that a power brick isn't quite as simple a device as one might think. Converting U.S. 120 volt or World 220 volt A/C to 3-12 volts of D/C does take a little engineering. Also, designing a brick would take time and delay getting a device to market.

But mostly the answer is money.

In today's cutthroat consumer electronics marketplace, few companies want to run the risk of increasing the price of units with expensively designed power bricks while their competitors save a few bucks with off-the-shelf power supplies. It's not a coincidence that one of the few companies that has power supplies with some esthetic grace is Apple, which makes a fetish out of design and charges more for its products than its competitors.

One of the attractions of iGo's power supplies is they look as if someone actually spent a few minutes thinking about design, rather than making yet another black box. "Juice," for laptops, is a slender, silvery, rounded rectangle encased in clear plastic for protection. The newly introduced "EverywherePower," for PDAs, music players and other such peripherals, is a compact blue and silver unit that, for once, is smaller than the things it powers.

Dealing with another annoyance, iGo ships units with Velcro wraps for cords and nylon zipper bags to hold the cords, exchangeable tips and the power supplies in one tidy bundle. I fail to see why other companies charging hundreds, if not thousands, of dollars for equipment can't be bothered to give customers 50 cents worth of Velcro and a bag that probably costs less than a buck.

Eventually, other electronic accessory companies probably will offer multipurpose power units. But for now, if you want to lighten your load on the road, iGo is the way to go.

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