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## 'Tis the Season... for High-Tech

By Al Gordon

We're making a list, checking it twice, of high-tech gifts, we think are quite nice.

Apple's iPod remains one of the most coveted tech gifts. However, this year, you should also consider an alternative music player: the HP iPod. Hewlett-Packard, which announced its marketing deal with Apple months ago, finally started shipping products in the fall. Other than the fact that the packaging has HP graphics and the player has both HP and Apple logos, the "H-Pod" is identical, made in same factories and shipped with the same software and accessories.

So why look at the HP version? It's being sold through retail channels that discount the price and thus costs \$20-\$30 less than its Apple counterpart, and it has a longer standard warranty. Pay more for an Apple package or pay less with HP packaging? You decide.

One of the special beauties of the iPod in gift-giving is that there are scores of accessories for it, in all price ranges.

For example, \$40 buys you a ballistic nylon carrying case from Waterfield Designs (sold only directly from the company at [www.sfbags.com](http://www.sfbags.com)), which has the added advantage of being designed so that all of the latest generation iPods will fit. For other gift needs, Waterfield

Designs makes a full range of sensibly-priced, high-quality computer and accessory bags that will please the discriminating techie.

Portable speakers are another gift possibility. Altec Lansing makes the inMotion system for iPods and other portables, which does a great job of producing room-filling sound from a unit the size of a large paperback book. The top-of-the line inMotion IM3 is priced at \$180. But the original inMotion is still available from retailers and costs around \$105. I also am fond of Altec Lansing's new XT1 laptop speaker system. It's a pair of flat, narrow speakers that plug into your laptop's USB port and make a perfect accessory for users who play music or DVDs on their notebooks. Price is about \$130.

One more category in the realm of sound: You can liven up a friend or relative's listening experience with a good set of headphones to replace the mediocre ones that come with all players. One of my favorites is the \$130 Etymotic Research ER6i Isolator Earphones; these are sound-blocking plugs you insert in your ear so you can tune out the noise of the rest of the world. They are the perfect match for a good portable music player.

Another approach to sound-blocking is Bose's Quiet Comfort 2 headphones (\$300), a conventional "ear muff" type with electronic circuitry to mask external sound. Or if you don't care about sound isolation, Sennheiser makes a wide range of headphones to fit your audiophile and budget needs. Take a look at (in decreasing order of price) the HD-595, HD-555, and HD-497.

Tivoli Audio's PAL is a battery powered AM-FM radio (\$130) with an exceptionally accurate tuner and robust sound that makes it an excellent accompaniment for outdoor gatherings. It's been out for a couple of years, but classifies as a "new" product because of iPod color-schemed

"iPAL" variant introduced this year.

In the popular digital camera category, I have a shopping tip rather than a product suggestion: in the last couple of months prices have dropped sharply, so some online comparison shopping can produce good savings. And if people on your list already are into digital photography or video, treat them to good software for editing their projects. Adobe has released its Photoshop Elements 3.0 photo editor (Windows and Mac) and Premiere Elements video editor (Windows only).

One of the cooler under-\$50 gifts is SanDisk's new Photo Album, which lets you take a memory card out of your digital camera and play a slideshow of your pictures on your TV. The device also doubles as a card reader when hooked up to your computer. Another neat SanDisk product is the 512 MB Cruzer Titanium (\$60), a portable pack-of-gum-sized memory device with trendy looks and helpful data-synchronization software.

Mice and keyboards may not necessarily be the most sentimental gifts of all time, but computer users will thank you if you find them comfortable ones. Two I like are Microsoft's new Wireless Notebook Optical Mouse (\$33) and the Wireless Optical Desktop Comfort Edition (\$65).

Finally, Apple has come up with the Swiss Army Knife of networking: its innovative AirPort Express (\$120). A white rounded rectangle just a little larger than a deck of cards, it can be used to add a wireless access point to a network, to extend the range of an existing Apple AirPort Extreme wireless network, to network a printer, or (using Apple's iTunes music software) to wirelessly stream music from your computer to your stereo system. There's an optional \$40 Apple AirPort Express Stereo Connection Kit with Monster Cables to make the stereo setup a snap. All-in-all a very clever idea.

Happy holidays!

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