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PDA Update

By Maggie Geoffroy

Have you bought a personal digital assistant (PDA) yet? Like everything else electronic, the PDA market is changing constantly. That's why it's more important than ever to figure out what you want to do with a handheld device (track appointments, order materials, etc.) before you plunk down your money. After you've done that, compare PDA models for features, cost, and functionality. Here's a look at some PDA basics and options to get you started.

Operating Systems

Like larger computers, handheld devices run on platforms or operating systems (OS). Unlike their bigger brothers, PDAs run on platforms made specifically for them. Palm OS and Pocket PC, the two platforms used by most of today's PDAs, offer different advantages to their respective users.

A low price tag is often the most appealing thing about a Palm PDA. You can purchase a Palm or Handspring brand PDA for under \$200. Features such as wireless connectivity, a color display, and additional software raise the price tag, but even with add-ons these devices are still reasonably priced.

Sony, HandEra, and IBM are some of the PDA devices that use Palm OS. Scheduled to release soon is Nokia's phone/PDA combo. Samsung and Kyocera currently offer a cellular phone/Palm PDA hybrid.

The Pocket PC platform tends to draw lots of fanfare. A larger system, this one comes with 16 and sometimes 32 MB of RAM. Palm has 8 MB. Pocket PC is made by Microsoft, so it has a Windows feel to it. Most Pocket PC devices come standard with Pocket Word and Pocket Excel. Compared to Pocket PC's clarity and color, a standard Palm device resembles an Etch A Sketch.

Compaq, Toshiba, Hewlett Packard, and Casio are some of the manufacturers that offer Pocket PC handhelds. Although you may find a Pocket PC device in the \$300 range, most cost \$400 to \$600.

The Pocket PC system's advanced functionality and power tend to appeal to corporations and educational institutions. Individual users typically purchase Palm handhelds because they fulfill everyday needs and the price is right.

PDA Software

PDAs come with standard applications such as calculators, address books, and date books. Many come with software you can use to create custom forms for PDA tasks. For example, if you know how to create an Excel template, you can create your own templates for use on your handheld. However, plan on buying additional software to make the most of your investment.

Programs such as Bachmann Software's PrintBoy allow you to beam a document to a printer. MapQuest offers a free PDA version of its road atlas application. If you have a wireless device, you can use ThinAirApps' ThinAir Server to send e-mail and check current sport scores on ESPN.

Software vendors are developing applications specifically for builders. You can get programs for your PDA that schedule, estimate, interface with CAD, and do punch lists. Construction-specific PDA programs are also available from vendors that provide accounting and project management software.

Many programs are free or are available in trial versions. You can download applications from sites such as www.cnet.com, www.pdastreet.com, and www.tucows.com.

Maggie Geoffroy is vice president and director of sales and marketing for CDCI, an Atlanta-based software developer that makes products for the construction industry. She is a member of NAHB's Business Management & Information Technology Committee.

For more information about using PDAs, read Connecting With Palm OS Devices, available through BuilderBooks.com. Call 800-223-2665 or log onto www.builderbooks.com to order. The book is \$28.80 for NAHB members, \$36 for non-members.

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