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20 Ways to Use Your PDA

If you think your handheld is good for little more than phone numbers, appointments, and games, think again.

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How many of us spent \$100, \$200, or even \$500 on a PDA, and use it as little more than a phone directory and appointment calendar? How many of us have taken advantage of the thousands of free or inexpensive downloadable applications available for PDAs of every stripe? In short, how many of us are simply not getting our money's worth from a purchase that, even at the low end of the scale, involved a nontrivial sum? Based on an informal survey of a couple dozen PDA owners, we'd guess that at least half of you are guilty of PDA underutilization. Perhaps you were an early adopter of the technology, and are still hamstrung by memories of those fussy first-generation keyboard-based models. Those early PDAs might have been technologically interesting, but trying to operate one drove



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more than one user to return to pencil and paper.

Today, by contrast, PDAs offer an astonishing mix of power and ease of use. The trend toward usability began with the introduction of the first Palm OS models, and that format still provides the best combination of accessibility and flexibility. One key to the Palm's success was the inherent utility of its core applications—the date book, contact manager, to-do list, and memo pad. By flattening the learning curve, the OS' developers assured that the platform's early adopters would become disciples and build good word of mouth for the product.

It's likely, though, that another factor is equally responsible for fostering the fast growth of the medium. It was the decision, made early on, to make it simple for software developers to develop for the platform and for users to install new applications. The ever-growing user base increased the incentive to write new software, while the growing list of software kept the user base growing. Eventually, the universe of PDA owners grew sufficiently large to inspire the development of hardware add-ons, the availability of which further increased sales.

A great many of the downloadable applications are intended to do little more than enhance or augment the PDA's basic functions. However, an appreciable number of them take the device into whole new areas of functionality. During the course of our survey, we asked PDA owners what—beyond the basics—they do with their handhelds. We were surprised by the range of responses. Here is a selection of 20 of the most interesting.

Automobile Expense Record Keeping

Even if you're the type who, upon buying a new car, welds the hood shut and hopes for the best, it can make sense to keep track of mileage and expenses. When it comes time to itemize business

expenses, there's no substitute for precision, and that's precisely the sort of thing at which a PDA excels.

It's possible to record various expense items as text notes in the PDA's notepad application, but a more sensible approach is to download and install one of the many task-specific automotive database applications available for the various platforms. These provide point-and-click access to time-and-mileage related expense items as well as maintenance and repair entries.

Expenses can be separated among various taxable and nontaxable classifications, and regular maintenance can be integrated with the PDA's datebook based on a user-defined schedule.

A reporting module takes the raw data and presents it in a form that allows the accountant to disclose all to the IRS, and the mechanic to know what's been done and what might be needed.

Camping Trip Navigation

Heading into the wilderness with nothing but a compass and a topographic map may seem like a good idea during the planning stages of a camping trip, but the reality of such an approach to getting back to nature is likely to be pretty grim.

A better way to enjoy one's surroundings might be the elimination of concerns about getting lost. After all, when the notion of wandering off the trail isn't fraught with peril, the wanderer is free to seek hidden vistas and other pleasures of the great outdoors. Short of hiring a local guide, the best way to keep from getting lost is by snapping a GPS module onto a PDA. The Global Positioning System's network of satellites allows the PDA to provide you-are-here data that, depending on the software package, can be accurate to within 6.5 feet. Most software packages also provide the means to

manage waypoints and to record a traveled route for reuse or the return trek, and to display the receiver's position on a map display.

Cell Phone

If ever two products were born to converge, they are the PDA and cell phone. They're often needed at the same time ("Lunch tomorrow? Let me check my Palm") and they generally share at least some of the same data. The combination is, in short, a natural, and one whose time has come. That being the case, it's surprising that the marriage has been so long in coming and that so few of the devices have hit the market. The high price and large size of the first generation of cell phone/PDAs mitigated their success, but more recent examples of the genre, from Handspring, Motorola, and Samsung, make a compelling case for replacing the two devices with one. Note, too, that it's possible to add GSM cellular capability to Handspring's Visor using the company's VisorPhone Springboard module (free with service activation).

Classroom Notetaker

Taking good longhand notes is an art form that isn't likely to survive too many more generations of students. It's simply too difficult to keep up a good pace and wind up with something that can be deciphered at the end of the day. One alternative is to use a laptop, but that means hauling the thing from class to class and worrying about battery life. A far better and more backpack-friendly solution is to enter the notes directly into a PDA, using one of the several clever keyboard/cradle combinations available.

The most compact device is Think Outside's Stowaway (\$99), marketed by several companies, depending on which PDA is involved. It folds into a package not much larger than the PDA itself. At the other end of the spectrum is the \$29 Happy Hacking Cradle, which serves as an interface between any PS/2 keyboard and a Palm OS PDA.

Delivery Routing and Navigation

Suppose you're a florist who needs to make a couple dozen deliveries a day. Over the course of a year, the difference between the most direct routes between those addresses, and ones chosen at random, could add up to a considerable amount of wasted time and gasoline. The solution is to plug the addresses into a mapping program, let it generate the most efficient route, and then upload the directions to a PDA. Ideally, the PDA would be connected to a GPS antenna, such as DeLorme's EarthMate (\$189) or TravRoute's CoPilot (\$299), in which case the directions would be displayed dynamically, in response to the vehicle's position. It's possible to switch between the text-based instructions and a zoomable map display.

Digital Photography for Web Publishing

The Web provides an unprecedented medium over which to share photographs with friends and colleagues. Before the advent of affordable digital photography, however, taking advantage of this capability could be difficult and cumbersome. Now, by contrast, shooting pictures for a Web site doesn't even require a dedicated digital camera. Snap-on camera modules, such as Handspring's eyemodule2 (\$149), can turn a PDA into a surprisingly effective camera, capable of capturing images with VGA resolution that is ideal for Web use.

The eyemodule2 adds only five-eighths of an inch to the length of the Visor and uses the PDA screen for composition, display, and image management. A Visor Prism (\$299) with 6MB of free memory can store more than 50 VGA color images, or three times as many smaller color images. Palm users can look to Kodak's PalmPix (\$49-\$129), which is available in versions for the m100 and m500 series and for the III and VII (and, with adapter, the V).

Digital Photo Wallet

Photos kept in a leather wallet tend to get damaged after a fairly short time. Those uploaded to a color PDA, on the other hand, stay crisp and new forever. Even on the lowest-resolution PDA displays, the images are surprisingly vivid; when the device is one of the newest high-resolution models, such as Sony's high-end CLIE for the Palm OS or Compaq's iPAQ Pocket PC, the clarity can be stunning. Going digital eliminates the space limitations inherent in the leather-and-paper format, while the various display applications permit digital images to be organized into albums and displayed as slideshows.

Flight Plan Creation

Private pilots don't generally hop into their Cessnas and Pipers and head off, willy nilly, into the wild blue yonder. Rather, they spend considerable time and effort in creating a flight plan that takes into account a bewildering array of variables and states exactly where the aircraft is meant to be at every point during the journey. The amount of painstaking calculation involved in such a project makes it ideal for automation, and that's the function of Navtech Software's flight-planning software. Available for Psion (\$114-\$129) and Pocket PC (\$43-\$123) devices, the software offers a selection of utilities, including a logbook totalizer, flight budgeting, a holding-pattern database, point-of-no-return information, and sunrise/sunset data.

The savvy Palm-using pilot might also want to add Notam Development's Airport Insight (\$24) to the software mix. It covers all publicly used airports in the U.S., providing radio frequency used, runway conditions, navigation aids, instrument landing system data, runway layout diagrams, and a traffic pattern/wind calculator.

Home Inventory for Insurance

You come home from work one day to discover that your home has been broken into and burglars have made off with everything. The insurance adjuster says, "Show me a list of your stuff, and we'll cut a check." In a flash, you pull out your Palm and present a detailed

inventory. A short while later, you sync the Palm with a borrowed computer and print out a copy.

This has been made possible by a Palm-based application that makes it simple to wander around the house and enter the details of possessions of every type. Several such applications are available; one that's been particularly well received is Cougar Software Solutions' Home Inventory 2.0 (\$39). It's highly customizable, and imports and exports data in spreadsheet format.

Investment Tracking

Keeping close track of investments is more gratifying when the market is up, but more critical when the market is down. Either way, a Palm-based tracking application that can sync at the desktop and over the air is a worthwhile adjunct to more conventional reporting methods.

Tinystocks' \$24 Stock Manager (in its 34th version) can categorize holdings into different portfolios, each with its own total. It can display profit, profit percentage, profit per annum, and current value, along with per-stock/per-portfolio costs. Data can be exported to a standard spreadsheet-compatible CSV file for reporting purposes. International investors will be pleased to learn that the program supports exchanges not only in the U.S. and Canada, but throughout Europe, as well as in Australia, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Korea, Kuala Lumpur, New Zealand, Singapore, and Taiwan.

Library Research

As useful as the Internet is as a research tool, some data still exists only in hard copy, and getting it requires a trip to the library. To make the most of those occasions, consider adding a pen-type scanner to your hardware arsenal.

C Technologies' C-Pen 800C (\$200) looks and works like a

highlighter; moving its tip across a line of text doesn't leave a yellow line, but copies that text into the device's memory. Onboard OCR converts the scanned data from graphic to editable text, and an IR port allows the data to be entered into a PDA for further manipulation or porting to a PC. In addition to serving as a conduit, the C-Pen incorporates translation software and performs a host of other useful tricks.

Massager

Late-night TV is full of ads for electronic massage pads, intended to foster muscle relaxation, weight loss, and tighter abs. Fans of such products who own a Handspring Visor can add that capability to their PDAs. The Raynet Personal Massager Springboard module for Handspring Visor PDAs (\$99) comes with a pair of stick-on pads that serve to stimulate and relax the neck or back muscles. The software provides plenty of control over the nature and intensity of the massage. It's just the thing for kicking back after a hard day in the field.

Nap Controller

The scientific community has long documented the real-world benefits of power napping. Key among these is the rapid elimination of fatigue. But, in order for the technique to work, it's important that the napper is kept from entering deep sleep, which produces such negative post-nap symptoms as disorientation, headache, and grogginess. Using napping strategies created by NASA for pilots and astronauts, JETLOG offers the 24X7 PowerNapping Springboard module for Handspring Visor PDAs (\$99). In addition to maximizing the nap itself, the module's program is designed to prevent the nap from interfering with normal sleep patterns.

Personal Music Player

Roughly a quarter of a century ago, Sony created the Walkman. In doing so, it changed the way much of the world listens to music. Since then, playback formats have come and gone, but the notion of

a pocket-sized device sending music through headphones has remained very much the same. However, the device need no longer be devoted solely to that purpose. When workday chores are done, some PDAs can switch into music mode and deliver MP3s and other musical files to the ears of their happy owners. Some do so as part of their native feature complement; others require the use of add-on components.

In the first category are Sony's PEG-N760C CLIÉ (\$399), which incorporates an MP3 player, and current Pocket PCs, which include the Windows Media Player. In the add-on-required category, Visors can be made musical with Innogear's MiniJam Springboard module (\$99), while the Portéson player (\$89) from Palm.com adds MP3 capability to Palm's m100 or m105.

Personal Music-Shopping Assistant

Have you ever heard a song and wanted to know who sings it so you could buy the CD? Of course you have. In fact, it might happen several times a day. You could be walking through a store, listening to the car radio, or sitting on a park bench. You try to remember the tune, but by the time you get around to humming it to the music store staff it comes out "dah dah di dah" and they just laugh at you. Instead, you could keep a voice/sound recording PDA at the ready, so as to capture those fleeting musical moments. Then, you can say "give me the CD that has this song on it."

Portable Phone

Snap Arkon Networks' Parafone module (\$92) into a Visor's Springboard socket, and the PDA is transformed into a 900-MHZ cordless phone that works just like the standalone models, but better. Parafone takes advantage of the Visor's phonebook application for dialing and other functions. The package consists of the Springboard module and a base station/charging unit/docking station, and comes with a headset for hands-free operation.

Presentation Tool

The near ubiquity of Microsoft PowerPoint as a presentation format has almost certainly been responsible for the sale of a good number of laptops. More recently, it's prompted the creation of a group of products that eliminate the need to include a laptop in the presentation process.

MARGI Systems' Presenter to Go (\$199) is available as a Springboard module for the Handspring Visor, as well as in PC Card and CompactFlash Type II versions. It includes software that converts a PowerPoint presentation or other Windows documents into a mobile presentation that's ported to the PDA. The module serves as a link between the PDA and a projector or other display, and a wireless remote control runs the show.

TV Remote Control

There's been a lot of talk over the years about universal remote-control units, but for many of us it doesn't go beyond that. Our coffee tables are littered with remotes for every component, with even the most modest audio/video installation requiring the use of four or five of them—for TV, cable box, VCR, DVD, and receiver—for all but the simplest functions. The best of the high-end standalone universal remotes provide sufficient power and flexibility, but they can cost as much as \$300, which is preposterous in an age where the same amount of money will buy a good 27-inch TV.

A better alternative is to buy Pacific Neo-Tek's OmniRemote Springboard module (\$59). A hardware/software package, it turns the host PDA into the most capable multifunction, user-programmable remote control you're likely to encounter. Palm owners can buy just the software (\$20), but might find themselves hampered by the limited range of the PDA's IR beam. If that's the case, the company sells a snap-on module with an IR beam that is 400 percent more powerful. It's compatible with the Palm III-style HotSync port.

Voice Recorder

How often have you lost an important thought for lack of a way to create a reminder? For years, savvy thinkers have been murmuring into microcassette recorders; today, many have ditched those units in favor of their PDAs. The obvious advantage to this approach is that it reduces the load by one device. Beyond that, and depending on the capabilities of the PDA or PDA add-on in question, it can offer the benefit of providing a more convenient way to organize voice messages. The Targus Total Recall (\$59), for Handspring devices, can be used both as a Springboard module and as a compact standalone unit.

As a module, it's slipped into a small cradle that provides power. When removed from the cradle and placed in the Springboard slot, the buttons are replaced by software controls that are part of an elaborate message-management application. Recorded messages are displayed in a list with a date stamp, and each can be filed under any user-defined category, turned into a to-do item, prioritized, made private, or associated with a text note. A message can be opened for additional recording and can be edited in several other ways. A desktop application allows messages to be sent to the host PC, where they can be attached to e-mail messages and otherwise manipulated.

Woodwork Project Planner

As any do-it-yourselfer knows, despite being one of the few commodities that grows on trees, wood is not cheap. This is especially true if the commodity in question is one of the hardwoods so beloved of cabinetmakers. Because of this, woodworkers often spend considerable time determining exactly how much lumber they need for a given project. Now, this time-consuming and often haphazard job can be handled in the field, using a free Palm application called Wood 1.0. The app streamlines the process of determining the number and placement of the pieces needed for a

woodworking project and displays the output graphically and saves it to the memo pad. n

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