

Personal Tech

Just because a fancy gadget is new doesn't mean you need it to make your life complete

BY STEWART SCHLEY

LIKE A LOT OF YOU, we're gadget freaks. Toss us a solar-powered, Bluetooth-speaking MP3 player that doubles as a decent margarita blender and we'll be in techno-bliss for weeks.

Still, there's a wide line these days between stuff that fulfills your lust for cool, life-enriching gadgetry, and gizmos that are just plain useless. Or close to it.

And with most of us being more persnickety than ever about how we spend our money, it pays to put objects to the Pause Get Real Test: If something doesn't make your life easier, more joyous, less complicated or less expensive, we're dumping it in the techno trash.

That said, here's our view of some recent entries onto the consumer electronics landscape – and whether they're keepers or losers.



WHAT YOU NEED:

- An iPhone, iPod, iPod Touch or iPod Nano
- A pair of Nike+ shoes
- The Sport Kit
- Discipline



Nike+ iPod Sport Kit

Couch potatoes, beware: You have to be a runner (or a gym rat) to get any value here. But if you are, there's a fair chance you'll be captivated by this inexpensive and accurate method to track just how far you've gone.

What to do: Buy a pair of Nike+ shoes with a built-in pocket, slip the sensor inside and connect it to your iPod nano or iPod touch with the supplied wireless receiver. The Sport Kit tracks your mileage with impressive accuracy, and Nike's companion website syncs with your iPod, downloads your data, and offers nifty tricks like storing records from all your runs. During your run, you can listen to some motivational feedback or just crank up the tunes from your iPod. (By the way, iPod nanos start at \$149. And yes, you're the only person left in the world who doesn't have one.)

VERDICT: Just do it. \$29. (iPod and shoes not included.)

Whirlpool GD5VVAXT Refrigerator

Years ago, and to much snickering, LG Electronics trotted out an Internet-connected refrigerator designed to solve one of the world's more vexing problems: how to e-mail friends while swigging orange juice.

Seriously, the 26-cubic-foot LG "Digital Internet Refrigerator" came complete with an Ethernet port and a built-in digital camera, the better for sending those zany photos of you rooting around for the lettuce. "It can also be used for watching TV, listening to music and e-mailing messages to friends," crowed an LGE press release from 2001. You could also "be informed when to change the refrigerator's filter" and "learn cooking methods for products stored inside." Ahh, digital bliss.

We mention that only as a point of contrast to a newer and more utilitarian combination of the Internet and the fridge. Whirlpool's idea is to couple a side-by-side refrigerator with a removable tablet-screen unit that can display digital photos, accommodate an iPod or work like a laptop computer. The idea generally is to take all of the detritus that normally adorns the family refrigerator – schedules, photos, sticky notes and the like – and house them in a sleek vessel that will remind baby boomers of something out of the Jetson household. Packaged along with it is Cozi, a software application and companion Web service that lets owners keep up-to-date shopping lists they can zing to their mobile phones in the form of text messages.

A breakthrough? Looks like it. We think Whirlpool has a noble idea here for tidying up the magnet-mottled front side of many a household refrigerator,

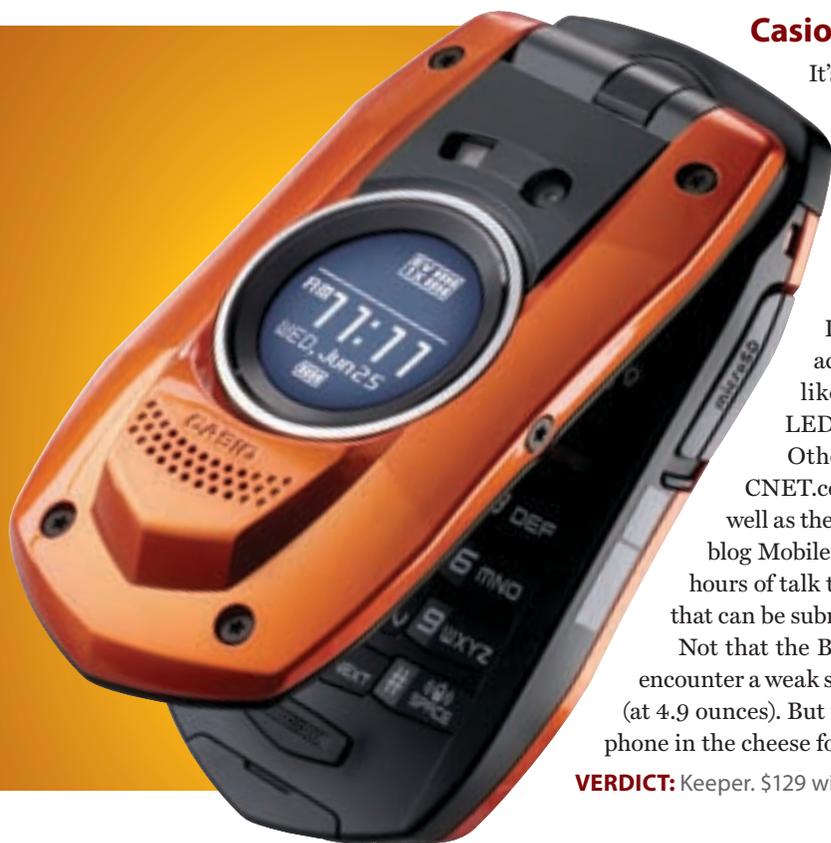


It may look like a cold, faceless box meant to do away with human graces, but, really, it's a refrigerator

to be sure. And it's fun to watch digital-photo slide shows while you wait for minced ice cubes from your EZ-Touch dispenser to drop into your glass.

Still, the old-school analog approach of pasting a note to young Johnny about his homework works perfectly well for most families. And we're not keen on the idea of multiple modules that have to be swapped out depending on which application – a message center, an iPod player or a Web tablet – you want most.

VERDICT: Replace the old refrigerator with a satisfactory successor that's not wired for the new digital era – and save the extra \$900 or so for something really cool. \$2,049.



Casio G'zOne Boulder Mobile Phone

It's the Chuck Norris of mobile phones: It can take a punch, survive an accidental plunge into the lake (or bathtub), and keep on keepin' on even if you throw it across the room after your broker tells you that your 401(k) account has lost one-third of its value. Again.

The G'zOne Boulder is built to military specs for surviving the elements, but you also get a bunch of modern creature comforts tucked beneath the rugged surface. Like a 1.3 megapixel camera, Bluetooth networking, Internet access, an MP3 player and access to V Cast Music. We especially like the added touches of a built-in digital compass and an LED flashlight.

Other reviews we've seen have been generally favorable, too.

CNET.com liked the interior screen's brightness and legibility, as well as the Boulder's durability. The hard-to-please folks at the gadget blog Mobile Burn praised the Boulder's battery life — it's rated at 3.56 hours of talk time — and admitted that "it's tough to argue with a phone that can be submerged in water and still make and receive phone calls."

Not that the Boulder is perfect: You'll sacrifice some fashion flourishes, encounter a weak speaker phone and have to carry around a little extra weight (at 4.9 ounces). But if you're an outdoorsy type, or just prone to dropping your phone in the cheese fondue pot, it's well worth considering.

VERDICT: Keeper. \$129 with a two-year service agreement.

iRobot Looj 150 Gutter-Cleaning Robot

The newest cousin to the popular do-it-yourself Roomba vacuum sweeper is a battery-powered “robot” that relieves the overtaxed homeowner of that most arduous of autumn rituals: cleaning the gutters. Too good to be true? Maybe. One caustic customer, fatigued from having to re-right the device after it kept tipping over, wrote on an online message board that “it felt like I was assisting a wounded turtle.” But there’s equal admiration for the device from users who watched in admiration as the Looj capably burrowed its way through leaves and debris, slinging them aside with its front-end auger. The upshot seems to be that if your gutters are full of wet, thick buildup, the Looj probably won’t save you from an afternoon of loathsome labor. But if you just want a little help getting rid of leaves and dry needles, this determined little boll weevil is your best friend. Look, robots are going to take over the world someday anyway. They might as well start in the gutter.

VERDICT: Not quite. \$199.



TOO LITTLE The Chumby is a great, feature-rich idea in a package that – surprisingly – is too small

Chumby Interactive Media Appliance

The idea behind this cute twist on the radio of yore is clever enough: Rather than use your PC to gather news headlines, weather reports or Internet radio stations, you plug your Chumby into your wireless Internet network and let it do the work instead. You can program in a variety of “widgets” that let you track your favorite news blogs and websites, keep tabs on the weather, listen to podcasts, and play card games, all from a desktop device barely bigger than a Rubik’s cube. To us, though, that’s the downfall. The Chumby’s tiny screen means you have to get up close and personal to read an e-mail or to check a score, an annoyance that can quickly become tiresome. We like the concept of interactive media players just fine, and freeing Internet content from the prison of the PC is a great idea. But we’re looking for more heft and presence than this bite-sized accomplice delivers, so we’ll keep our eyes open for a better mousetrap.

VERDICT: Not so much. \$179.



Logitech Harmony 1000 Advanced Universal Remote Control

The off-the-shelf retail price for this do-it-all, flat-screen remote control is so 2006 that we’re inclined to dislike it right off the bat, along with \$5 lattes and Hummer H3s. Besides that, what in the name of channel-surfing is so extraordinary that the remote currently resting on your coffee table won’t do the job just fine? Especially when it’s there for your device-controlling pleasure as part of your Mediacom cable service in the first place?

TOO MUCH The Logitech Harmony 1000 Advanced Universal Remote Control is as complex as its name — too many features that require too much effort for too little payoff

OK, so we’re venting. But still, remember the Get Real test? The entire line of tablet-style remotes seems needlessly showy, and despite the best efforts of Logitech and a handful of other manufacturers, they’re still unduly complicated to program. We’ll give Logitech points for trying by setting up a nifty online questionnaire that you fill out to render the proper software code downloads. But it still seems like a lot of work to go through for the simple pleasure of watching TV. Then there’s the conundrum of dealing with multiple devices. The Harmony 1000 tries to solve the puzzle by using layers of screens, each of which corresponds to a different device, like your TV set or DVD player. But getting to the right screen layer itself demands pushing more buttons, and to tell you the truth, we’re getting exhausted just thinking about it. Besides, the game’s about to start, and our faithful and familiar remote is already in hand.

VERDICT: At \$379, a “no” vote all the way. ■■

Stewart Schley is a writer and editor based in Denver, Colo.

[Mediacom DVR lets you record your shows while you play with your gadgets. Learn more on page 36.](#)