

Buying advice: PDAs

The personal digital assistant market has changed dramatically since our last round-up. Our *Buying advice* will help you unravel the mysteries and guide you to the best device for you

Palm's decision to withdraw from the PDA (personal digital assistant) market means that if you're after a handheld device, then you're pretty much going to have to settle for a keyboard-less model. There are still some keyboard devices available, but they are few and far between, with scant new releases on the horizon. The first major hurdle you'll have to contend with on a keyboard-less PDA is handwriting recognition.

Handwriting recognition

Unless you're the sort of person that often hears the line 'My, what neat handwriting you've got', most people would happily admit that their scrawl is, at best, just about legible to them – and sometimes even that may be asking too much. The state of our once-beautiful cursive script is further evaded by increased computer use, giving few users much need to

↓ Pocket PC-based devices, such as the HP Jornada range, are ideal for processor-intensive applications such as MP3 software programs



exercise their handwriting skills. If we can't read our own writing half of the time, how can a computer be expected to understand it? Well, the answer is, it isn't – it cheats a bit.

Most of the handwriting recognition systems available will only recognise single characters, not full words, and require you to use a simplified alphabet. For example, the Graffiti system used on the Palm reduces nearly all the letters to a single stroke. To write a letter A you would write an inverted V – which looks a bit like an A without the middle bar. As you can only write single letters and you have to learn a new alphabet, input can be quite slow, especially for new users.

Microsoft's new Pocket PC 2002 offers cursive (joined-up) handwriting recognition, and the results are impressive. For Graffiti lovers, however, there is also a new input method that closely resembles it.

Palm OS or Pocket PC

US Robotics pretty much invented the keyboard-less PDA design when it launched the Pilot 1000 in 1996. After takeovers and name changes (Pilot becoming PalmPilot and later simply Palm) the device is still hugely successful.

Pocket PC emerged from Microsoft in early 2000 in an attempt to right its previously unsuccessful attempts at this market. Windows CE was designed with a short but wide screen in mind and, as a result, performs poorly on a tall narrow one. That gave rise to Pocket PC, designed from the ground up with this form factor in mind. Pocket PC 2002 is the latest version of the operating system, offering a number of enhancements and refinements over its predecessor.

In terms of processing power, you'll find Pocket PC machines require far faster processors than Palm devices. This isn't to say that Palm OS-based PDAs are slower. The operating system is more efficient, so they don't require as much power which is a good thing for battery life.

However, when it comes to processor-intensive applications – such as MP3 or video decoding – Pocket PC machines certainly have the edge.



↑ PDAs with colour screens look stylish and are easy to read, however they will drain battery life considerably

As far as built-in applications go, all the essential programs are covered proficiently by both Pocket PC and Palm. Third-party support is fairly equal, as Palm has a huge presence in the US.

Colour or not?

Whichever form factor and OS you pick, most devices have a colour option available. Compared to a boring black and white display, a colour screen certainly captures the wow factor – and it also improves readability.

The down side, however, is battery life. A colour screen constantly requires a backlight, so it soaks up battery power – it can halve the battery life you'd get without it. Turn the backlight off on a colour device and it's very hard to make out the colours onscreen. In comparison, on a monochrome screen a backlight is only necessary when you're in low-light conditions. It illuminates the screen from behind, allowing you to see images and text clearly.

While a stylish, colour PDA may look good, it's important to consider whether it's worth sparing those extra hours of battery life for what is, after all, a cosmetic matter. Recent advancements in screen and battery technology have made colour displays a more viable option, but you will still get longer battery life out of a monochrome model. ■