

True connoisseurs of mobile communication will tell you that notebooks are no longer the device of choice for business on the move – the new light on the horizon of mobile technology is the PDA. Will Head runs through the handheld options with a PDA-seeking *PC Advisor* reader



Reader's choice: personal digital assistants

PDA (personal digital assistant) technology has come on over the past couple of years and now these devices are capable of so much more than simply storing appointments and addresses.

We got a call from Judith Biggs, a *PC Advisor* reader with an ageing Psion Series 3C who wanted to invest in a new PDA. She runs her own import and export antiques business with her husband. "We use our PC for spreadsheets and hotsync our PDAs so we can convert sterling to euros when we're on the move," Judith told us. "Our PDA is invaluable at auction sales for logging details and using in the car when we're travelling from place to place."

Judith has a budget of £500 and is looking for a model that's "handbag friendly". We chose four PDAs that suited her requirements: NEC's Mobile Pro 300E, O2's XDA, Toshiba's Pocket PC e310 and Handspring's Treo 270.

First impressions

The XDA combines a PDA with GPRS (general packet radio service) data for speedy downloading and web browsing. It's a fully featured model with a colour screen and a software bundle that includes

Pocket Word. Judith was quite impressed: "I like the idea of combining two mobile devices so I only have to carry one." However, she wasn't too enamoured with the size and weight.

The next PDA to catch Judith's eye was Toshiba's design-conscious Pocket PC e310: "This is the best looking PDA I've seen. It's slim, extremely light and I like the silver finish." We pointed out the separate power adapter, which means she doesn't

thought the design to be "hideously ugly". However, for Judith, the small keyboard gave it the upper hand: "Using a stylus when you're in a car is a difficult task so the keyboard would make life easier."

What the experts say

The fully featured XDA comes with the Pocket PC Phone Edition operating system and a wealth of software such as Pocket Word and Excel. The 32MB memory is

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Judith Biggs, *PC Advisor* reader

have to carry the cradle around when she's out travelling. However, Judith was disappointed with the screen: "I've had a Handspring Visor before and managed to break the screen so I want better protection. This doesn't have a cover."

Next up was NEC's Mobile Pro, with its two-tone silver and metallic blue case. At just under 150g, the NEC is light but it doesn't have the svelte dimensions of Toshiba's model. Inside it benefits from 64MB of RAM, but in all other respects it's equal to the e310.

Finally, we looked at Handspring's Treo which lacks the hardware spec and feature bundle of the competition but costs less and has the benefit of mobile phone functionality. Judith pointed out there's no cradle for when it's tethered to a PC and

meagre compared to the competition, and it doesn't have a CompactFlash Type II slot so it can't take IBM's Microdrive. GPRS makes downloading data fast but it is expensive. We thought the phone capability would entice Judith but the overall running costs are prohibitive.

A cheaper option is the Pocket PC-based NEC. This PDA doesn't offer mobile phone capability and it lacks CompactFlash as standard, but the software bundle is good and the screen is clear. Judith appreciated the slot on the cradle for charging an extra battery, but overall she didn't like the look or feel of the 300E.

The Palm OS on Handspring's Treo doesn't offer the same functionality as Pocket PC and it only includes a non-upgradable 16MB of RAM. That said, it's

Pros and cons: the contenders measure up

Handspring Treo 270

Pros: great value for money, built-in keyboard
Cons: only 16MB, bad design, lower features
Handspring: 020 7309 0134
Website: www.handspring.co.uk
Price: £254 ex VAT with contract

NEC Mobile Pro 300E

Pros: good memory
Cons: doesn't stand out
NEC: 0870 010 6322
Website: www.nec.co.uk
Price: £329 ex VAT

O2 XDA

Pros: great features and specifications
Cons: expensive to buy and high running costs
O2: 0870 580 0202
Website: www.o2.co.uk/xda
Price: £425 ex VAT with contract

Toshiba Pocket PC e310

Pros: great styling, good software bundle and functionality
Cons: no CompactFlash storage
Toshiba: 01932 828 828
Website: www.toshiba.co.uk
Price: £314 ex VAT



READER'S CHOICE



OUR CHOICE

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cheaper to buy and, like the XDA, has the benefit of combining two mobile devices into one. In terms of data, the Treo has standard dialup access but promises a free GPRS upgrade later in the year.

For sheer looks the Toshiba has it all and there's substance to back up the style. It's a well-priced model and, as with the other Pocket PCs, has a 206MHz StrongArm processor. It could do with more than 32MB of RAM but this is its only failing. The mock leather wallet protects the screen and, although there's no mobile phone, we felt Judith would see this as a luxury extra anyway. Given the combination of its functionality, value for money and her immediate response to the design we thought Judith would opt for the e310.

→ Judith tries out the Handspring Treo's phone capabilities

➤ Will demonstrates handwriting on the Toshiba Pocket PC

The reader's choice

Judith was torn between the Treo and the e310. We pointed out that, though cheaper, the Treo had reduced functionality, slower data download and a less attractive design. However, she wasn't to be persuaded: "I know I don't like the design but the price is great and it has a keyboard. That will be a godsend for travelling because I find the stylus too fiddly in the car. I don't need fantastic specifications because I only need to use the basic features." ■

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