

Christmas wish list from the road

computer notes from the road

by WILMA MELOT

I hope everyone has a peaceful Christmas and wonderful New Year. As my gift to you for the holidays, I'll fill you in on the great new gadgets in this quick holiday gift guide.

The small, powerful laptop craze started in force last year as many companies released three-pound and under laptops with 13.3-inch screens. The greatest example is the MacBook Air. But of late the fad is 7- to 9-inch screens with prices as miniscule as the size.

If the laptops have Windows XP or Linux, they are marketed as e-mail/Web machines, and cater mostly to kids. The Asus Eee machines were the first of these produced and they feature solid state, very small hard drives with a gig of ram. These are extra appealing as you can find one for around \$199.

Dell is selling the Inspiron Mini, with a 9-inch screen, for \$349. The processors are slower than

a new 13-inch laptop, which costs \$100 more, but if you're looking for something light and compact to slip into a purse or backpack that networks anywhere, this is it.

With only 16- to 32-GB hard drives, these minis make up for it with USB, a built-in camera, and a

VGA video out port to hook to a large screen when at home.

Others I saw were the Acer Aspire One laptop, also with solid state drives, which retails for \$299. These are hard to find and are equipped with an 8.9-inch screen, but they easily win best hardware for the best price.

One downside to an Acer is that it includes software you may want to uninstall. However, for the price it's still worth it and it's my pick for the hottest Christmas gift in the computer world this year.

If you decide to buy one, weigh the following three options. First is computer speed, spoken in terms of 1.6 GHz processors.

Second, look at how much ram it has. One gigabyte is as low as you should go.

you see the person you are talking to, even if they're on the other side of the world. E-mail and cell phones are great, but it's nice to see the person as well.

It's even possible to cut and paste from the text part of chats, which might allow reporters to send you a quick set of stats. Although saving Skype chats isn't as easy as saving e-mail text, it's not that difficult. And if you need something quickly and don't want to wait for an e-mail to arrive, it's live and fast.

Some larger companies are using this technology on their Web sites for clients to talk to sales people in real time.

It's not "exactly" free. To video chat you must have a computer that is at least

The Internet runs slow on computers that don't have enough ram.

The third option is the size of the hard drive. Obviously, the larger the size, the more you can store. Now compare these three items with your preferred screen size and you can pick your own winner.

Another thing to remember is that solid state hard drives are great for laptops because they lack moving parts – much like jump drives with rewritable media.

These small computers don't have CD or DVD disk drives, so if you want to install your own software from a CD, you're going to need an external USB CD drive, which costs around \$50.

If you're looking for a great stocking stuffer, jump drives are an amazing buy in terms of usefulness for office or home. You can find an 8-gig for as low as \$20 or a 32-gig for \$50. If you're still working on an older computer, your internal hard drive may be smaller than these little wonders.

Merry Christmas to all and to all a good year.



Newspapers adopting new methods of communication

Several state publishers are using Skype to talk to their children and grandchildren overseas and across the country.

In the past, live chat was something publishers didn't want their workers doing at work, but I've seen some very creative ways of using it to the benefit of the newspaper.

One newspaper company uses Skype to talk to employees in remote offices so they don't have to use their long distance minutes.

Video conferencing (chatting) saves gas and time for many companies that have satellite offices or employees that work from home.

Skype is one of the programs that lets

plugged IN

Gifts for the office

As most of you know, I'm an advocate for the less-than-glamorous battery backup surge protector.

If your Internet hub keeps crashing, this is a real deal for the money. Battery backup surge protectors start at around \$40 and go up from there. Think of this as a Santa gift for the router that brings you all the joy of the Internet.

New keyboards and mice are a wonderful gift for that special someone at the office. The things we use every day are often thought of the least.

If you go home at night with a sore shoulder or back pain from sitting at the desk all day, look at how you're sitting. Are your keyboard and mouse at the correct level? Are your feet flat on the ground when you're typing? If not, how can you improve it? If you don't make changes, no one else is going to.

At many offices, employees are bringing their lunches to work more often. Maybe a little kitchen setup with a microwave, hot plate and refrigerator would be appreciated. A separate place to sit and eat also is nice and gives employees a break from the computer.

How about an office answering machine? Instead of letting your phone ring off the wall, pick up a cheap answering machine and let it catch the calls you can't. You might be missing some good stories and ads if your phone goes unanswered.

E-mail/Internet cell phones seem to be a great gift for anyone you want to keep in touch with at all times – or for yourself if you're the sole proprietor of the newspaper. Some plans run around \$100 a month. The top models are the iPhone, BlackBerry and Palm. Many of these phones also can be used as modems for your laptop when you're on the road.

Another great gift idea is a wireless modem, which lets you get online with your laptop no matter where you are. Take a look at Netgear's models and remember to check your computer specs closely.