

CONSUMER'S WORLD: Coping; With Electronic Organizers

By Ivan Berger

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"I'm not reordering inserts for my diary this year," said Roberta Thumim, a New York publicity agent. "I'm buying batteries instead."

She is not alone. Electronic organizers - small computers with electronic-diary software - are on the market across the nation, high on holiday gift lists for those who want everything at hand in purse, pocket or briefcase. The devices are 6 to 8 inches long, 3 to 4 inches wide and 7/8 to 1 1/8 inch thick. They weigh from a half-pound to a pound.

Do you have to be a computer or electronic wizard to use the organizers? No, say the manufacturers and those who use them. Instruction booklets that come with them are written in detailed but straightforward language for the novice. Still, before going electronic with your datebook, it is a good idea to take a hard look at the device and the accompanying instructions and ask to test it. Shop until you find one that meets your needs and that you know you can operate.

The most widely available models are the Sharp Wizard (\$300), Casio's Boss series (\$220 to \$260) and the Psion Organizers (\$180 to \$300). Radio Shack also has two models similar to Casio's Boss series. Atari's new Portfolio computer (\$399.95) also has diary features, though that is not its sole purpose.

Ms. Thumim uses the Wizard, whose built-in calendar, schedule, telephone and address list, calculator and memo pad duplicate most basic paper-diary functions. But it can also tell time around the world, beep when appointment times are near, update information without crossing it out and search for entries. For example, a user could scan only those phone numbers with a given area code or find every name beginning with P. Slide-in cards (about \$120 each) add other functions. The Time Expense Manager, for instance, adds functions like a "Do List" and expense records. Other cards let the Wizard translate eight languages, do spreadsheet and financial calculations and find synonyms.

The Wizard keyboard is in alphabetical order, a blessing for those who cannot type. "If you are a typist, you'll move slowly till you're used to it," Ms. Thumim said, "but the keyboard size precludes real typing, anyway." Unlike its competitors, the Sharp also has a separate number pad for calculations.

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Fran Dym, another New York publicity agent, prefers Casio's SF-8000 Boss computer "because it has a typewriter-like keyboard and a bigger screen." (Casio's SF-7500 and SF-7000 models are similar to the 8000, but have flat membrane keyboards instead of real keys.) The keys are too small for touch typing, but allow fast one-finger use by those who can type. Its display is big - six lines of 32 characters each, compared with eight lines of 16 on the Wizard.

Unlike the Wizard, the Boss cannot take cards, but some users do not want to bother with them. The Casio's built-in functions duplicate most of the Sharp's, with the addition of a section for business card entries, abbreviated displays that show six phone numbers at a time and a calendar that shows two months at once.

The Psion Organizer combines an alphabetical keyboard like the Sharp's with the programmability of a general-purpose computer. It, too, includes a world-time calendar and a schedule diary with alarms; it also takes program packs (\$50 versus Sharp's \$120), which include a translator for European languages, a financial calculator and a technical calculator with built-in formulas.

But the chief virtue is its versatility: "No other organizer," says Bob Katz, a recording engineer, "can be programmed to do things you didn't imagine you'd need until you bought it." He has programmed his to generate a 440-hertz musical "A," perform specialized calculations and find cross streets for New York avenue addresses. For Mr. Katz, this ability outweighs its chunkiness (it is 1 1/8 inches thick, versus 7/8 inch for the Sharp or Casio) and its keyboard.

Atari's Portfolio, though basically a full-fledged computer, is about the same size and shape as the Casio and Sharp, and has some of their features: for example, a calculator, an accounting spreadsheet (optional on the Psion and Sharp), a calendar and a diary with appointment alarms.

The Portfolio is also a word processor, with text manipulation and editing features. The Casio, Sharp and Psion can be used to write short memos but allow only limited editing. A word-processing program can be plugged into the Psion, but its alphabetical keyboard will slow down typists. As a word processor, the Atari has a decent display (8 lines of 40 characters each) but is limited by its small keyboard, large enough only for fast two-finger typing.

All of these small computers accept attachments for swapping files with other computers and copying files onto computer printers. Most pocket models have separate, long-life batteries to protect memories, and some take plug-in memory cards that stay alive when the main batteries go dead. Even so, it is wise to back up important information in some more permanent form - paper or another computer's memory - before batteries run out.

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