Brainstorm: Holiday Wish List

With the holidays approaching, what product or technology is on your wish list?

Kevin Tretter, Microchip, www.microchip.com **[1]**

I am continually amazed at how quickly technology continues to advance, especially in the area of personal computing. As the holiday season approaches, I am particularly interested in the latest netbooks. My wife tends to check her email and chat with her friends on various online social networks while sitting in front of the television. She has been using my old laptop, which is now over eight years old. It's big, heavy, hot, loud and notoriously unreliable. The new netbooks seem to address all of these concerns, offering a small, lightweight machine that can access the Internet (and they come in pink, which is a plus for my wife).

Another intriguing advantage of these small computers is the option to use solid-state memory, as opposed to a more traditional magnetic hard drive. Over the years I have had several laptops, and it seems that inevitably the hard drive will fail at some point. The idea of having a mobile computer with no moving parts is extremely attractive to me, both from a reliability standpoint and in terms of noise. I swear I can hear my old laptop's hard drive spinning up from across the room! Although using solid-state memory is considerably more expensive, especially for a basic machine that is used simply to access the Internet, it's worth the extra money in my opinion; but only if it avoids a big headache down the road.

John Jovalusky, Qspeed Semiconductor, www.qspeed.com [2]

As I contemplated what product or technology would be at the top of my wish-list this year, nothing immediately sprung to mind. So, I put the question on a back burner, since there was plenty of time to think about, before this piece was due. When that “perfect” technology first caught my attention, I instantly recognized “it.” However, what surprised me the most was where I rediscovered “it.”

I occasionally listen to a talk show that features guest speakers whose views usually differ from mine. That evening’s speaker was Stewart Brand–the founder of The Whole Earth Catalog–and the author of “Whole Earth Discipline: an Ecopragmatist’s Manifesto.” Brand’s talk didn’t really get my attention until he addressed the subject of sustainable energy sources. As it turns out, Brand has become an advocate of nuclear power and he provided substantial data to support his position. He ended that part of his talk with a brief description of the numerous nuclear power projects that are currently under development.

So, although I don’t expect to see a micro-nuclear reactor under my Christmas tree this year, I have hinted to my wife that I would love to see a copy of Brand’s book in my stocking, instead of the usual lump of (dirty) coal I always get. Happy Holidays everyone!

David Sorensen, Gigle Networks, www.giglenetworks.com [3]

The Holiday season – cooler weather, longer lines at the stores and a time when retailers offer ridiculous price reductions on their inventory. In a way, retailers and consumer electronics (CE) companies share similar Holiday traditions – busy planning to meet the demands of the crowd and standing in long lines. For the CE industry, one Holiday tradition can be identified by a three-letter acronym --- CES.

Although technically it's after the defined Holiday season, CES is where I get to see if I can put a "check" on my technology wish list. Let's call it the bucket list for tech-geeks. This year I am dusting off my list to see if an oldie, but goodie wish comes true at CES 2010 – will "plug n' play" actually be a reality? Or at least the frustration to functionality ratio moves closer to 1. Will consumers be able to open the box of the coolest CE device and not have to turn to page 158 of the user guide to learn what the green button does when the alt key is held down? Perhaps they will see a simple note that reads "push this to activate the product---no, really... that is all you have to do. No batteries required, no IT department required, and no need to search YouTube for a series of video tutorials.
That's my wish and one I am anxiously waiting to see if it comes true this Holiday season. After all, consumers are finding that devices should not be more difficult to use than they are to return.

Steve Feldman, 3M, www.3m.com [4]

'Tis almost the season of giving and I'm not ashamed to say that every year, it's me first! The rationale to assuage my guilt for such self-indulgence is (1) I feel a personal obligation to help boost the economy and (2) it's a chance to test form, fit, and function before making the same or similar gift selection for relative or friend. And because our economy is in such dire straits right now, I started the process for 2009 in September.

Here's a sampling of what I've found during my buying spree: Let's start with digital cameras that have interchangeable lenses. They all have autofocus and it has become notoriously common across brands to find lenses that "front focus" or "back focus". That means picture sharpness could be short of your expectations if you happen to make an unlucky purchase. Some of the most popular brands and models now have a fine focus correction you can apply through the camera's menu selections. For the optics expert who happens to have an Air Force resolution test chart in his back pocket, and is also adept at programming PLCs, this isn't very hard to do. But how about designing a camera that really knows where the lens is focusing and adjusts itself for each lens? Now how hard is that? And on that subject, would someone PLEASE provide photo editing software that is intuitive to the uninitiated.

Another item I have trepidations about giving in its present form is one of those GPS navigation systems you see suction-cupped to more and more car windshields. Personally, I have not found one yet that needs to be stuck to the windshield for "a clear view of the sky" to get satellite reception as the manuals state. Mounting a GPS on the windshield not only results in that annoying power cord dangling down but worse, its high visibility invites a brick through your car's side window. For me, the preferable alternative is to mount the device on the dash

or center console but there's usually no space for the large diameter suction cup down there (and it probably wouldn't stick to the plastic for long, anyway). There were all kinds of cool mounting brackets and bases for cell phones when they were too big to tote and thus left in the vehicle. I'd like to see those designs replicated for GPS devices and while I'm wishing, how about a standard mount across all brands? I'd also like to see all the manufacturers combine their separate map and routing databases into one so the continuous process of updating and correcting errors benefits everyone equally, regardless of brand they own. That way, when son or daughter heads home after the holidays with their new gift, they won't hear, "Recalculating, Recalculating, Recalculating ...." quite so often.

John Edmond, Cree, www.cree.com [5]

Recently Cree demonstrated an A-19 LED light bulb with the highest lumen output and efficacy reported in the industry. As on many occasions, I began to think about the day when homes all over the world will be using an LED bulb as the standard option for lighting. If I could wish for any technological development this holiday, I would put an LED A-19 lightbulb at the top of my list. One that can replace a 60 Watt incandescent or a 20 Watt hazardous CFL and is available for any homeowner to purchase at a local store. Sure, engineers around the world are working on this right now. But I'm impatient and I'd like it now. And while they're at it? I'd also like one with three levels, just like a typical 3-way bulb. I know...LEDs are directional and lightbulbs are inherently

omni-directional. And I know it's a challenge to manage the thermals. And yes, I need around 800-900 lumens, a CRI over 90 and color temperature around 2700. That's why a little holiday magic can't hurt to speed things along. But in all seriousness, an LED bulb with 800 lumens and consuming no more than 8W would be a great foundation for reinventing the consumer experience with energy-efficient lighting. So if I don't get it this year, there's always next...

John Jacobs, DisplaySearch, www.displaysearch.com [6]

This year, my holiday wish list includes Apple's new 27" iMac. While the company's industrial design motif has changed little from previous generations, they have upscaled with the display—putting their largest, highest resolution display into an iMac. The 27", LED backlit, 16:9 aspect ratio display has a 2560x1440 resolution, that some might argue, could be considered "Quad HD." The display is 320 cd/m2 and uses In Plane Switching (IPS) liquid crystal technology to provide wide (178 degrees) viewing angles without the off-axis color shift typical of most desktop monitors. With that the large amount of display real estate and excellent color reproduction, my wife will have more than enough space to edit photos of our children without having to wonder if what she is seeing on the display will show up in the color prints she orders.

For consumers who aren't looking to spend $2,000+ , or you don't require high-end graphics processing, a quad core CPU and a terabyte or two of storage, there are a lot of other All-in-Ones (AIOs), or LCD PCs, that have entered the market in recent months. Many of these "budget" AIOs have taken the netbook concept to the desktop market and have built all-in-ones around Intel's Atom processor. A lot of these new AIOs will feature touch screen interfaces as well. Prices for these

systems are in the $500 range.

Despite these options, I'm a portable computing guy and since this is a wish list, I have to put Alienware's M15x notebook PC at the top of my list. The machine can be equipped with a quad core CPU, 15.6" 1920x1080 LED backlight display, a read/write blu-ray drive, solid-state storage, discrete graphics, and a ton of memory. Fully equipped, the price soars above $4,000. But hey, it's a "wish list," right?

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