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From the August 2007 Issue

Valuable business technologies are often overlooked as expensive “toys” when they first debut, only to grow to become indispensable in later years. The telephone was one such technology — Alexander Graham Bell could not believe any individual or business person would want to own one. The Internet, a goofy military/academic experiment, is another such technology.

And then there is GPS navigation.

Once perceived as an expensive toy for geeks, GPS systems are becoming a critical way for business executives to navigate to client locations, business meetings and other events. GPS is a satellite navigation system developed by the U.S. Department of Defense for navigation, surveying and map-making. The first experimental satellite was launched in 1978, and the system today has more than two dozen satellites in medium orbits around the globe. In the past few years, civilian GPS receivers have become the rage, and are used extensively by accountants and others who do a lot of work on the road.

There are three basic types of systems from which to choose:

- **A navigation system built into a vehicle.** Marketed by a number of electronics companies, these in-dash systems are typically mated to each specific vehicle model (or at the least, the size of the opening in the dash) and may also include radio receivers, satellite radio receivers and the capability to play DVDs. Prices vary from \$900 to \$3,500, depending on the model and whether the unit is factory-installed. Screen size varies from 5-inch to 8-inch.

- **Stand-alone units.** These are typically less costly, in

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...of the systems work well, but each has its own quirks. For example, must use a GPS receiver to feed information into some type of computing and display device. The cell phone/PDA units can draw a lot of power, creating issues for already under-powered phones. And none of the navigation maps are perfect. In testing dozens of units, we found map software that would gleefully command the driver through the middle of a house or into a corn field. Still, these are massively valuable units. From finding the nearest office supply store to navigating across the country, they perform well.

For those interested in buying a unit, here are five tips to consider:

- **The price is not the price.** Stores tend to carry the units at full retail price, which can be double what you can buy the unit for online. The catch is that those buying online and having a problem may find their only recourse is to return the unit, a major inconvenience for an in-dash unit that is self-installed. A happy medium is to buy from a discount electronics chain nearby.
- **It's the software.** Some manufacturers low-ball the price of the unit, but then charge an arm and a leg for annual updates to the maps and software. Since streets and developments change often, updates on at least an annual basis are critical. Factor the cost of the annual updates into the purchase decision. Also, be wary of data that is on a DVD that must be in the unit at all times. Since the bouncing of an automobile can scratch the DVD, and replacement of the disk can run hundreds of dollars, this setup (popular with in-dash units) is less than optimal.
- **Single-task or multi-task?** The in-dash units often do more than just navigation. But switching from maps to radio to DVD player can be difficult or dangerous. At the same time, some units, as a safety measure, don't allow some functions to work until you pull over and park, which can be a real inconvenience. Cell phone navigation units interrupt the maps

when a phone call goes in or out. Stand-alone units may be the best solution,

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and navigation system can be very valuable to our client. Make sure there is a way to lock the system down so that it is less visible to thieves. N

Dave's

Internet Site of the Month

Crutchfield — If you are considering a GPS
www.crutchfield.com navigation unit, Crutchfield is a
first-rate
discount electronic shop online.
More importantly, their guides,
background
information and telephone support
programs are first rate. I treasure
them
over other online electronics sites
just for the service.

Technology

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