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Automatically Organized: the brave new world of hand-held schedulers

“If someone walks up to me in the supermarket and wants to make an appointment, I can do it right there. This little thing is so organized, it’s a miracle.”

When Gracie Wyatt-Welker, owner of Nail Illusions in New Bern, North Carolina, talks about her Palm Pilot, you’d think that the gadget was the greatest thing to happen to the beauty business since the invention of acrylic nails.

And maybe it is.

If you find yourself buried under stacks of appointment books, address books, supply books and more, purchasing your own Palm Pilot might be just the answer for clearing your workplace of clutter. And Palms are only one of many models offered in the brave new world of electronic organizers.

Frequently called PDA’s (personal digital assistants), the latest line of hand-held schedulers offer models that can play music, provide Internet access, and record voice messages through a built-in microphone.

The main question to ask yourself is, ‘How much do I really need?’ Even the most basic models hold up to 6,000 addresses and track 5 years of appointments, while higher-end models can handle many times that amount.

So before you run out to buy the hottest new gadget, sit down and decide how you’ll be using it - and how much you want to spend. With so many brands and models competing for your attention, many are offering far more features than you really need, or need to pay for.

“Research must be done,” confirms Debbie Doerrlamm, webmaster at beautytech.com and Nails’ Internet Correspondent. “The choices have become very complicated, so you’ve got to be really sure of what you want.”

After all, she notes, “this is no paper appointment book investment. These items can cost from \$200 to \$600 and more. When you spend that kind of money, you don’t want to be disappointed or find out that it won’t do what you want.”

Besides choosing between models with more or less memory, you’ll also have to decide if you want access to your email, access to the Internet, and any other extra features. Also, be sure to check that the system you select will ‘sync’ with your desktop computer - meaning that the data will transfer smoothly back and forth between the two. If your desktop is less than four years old it should be no problem, but stay on the safe side and ask anyway.

Advantages of using hand-helds over the good old pencil-and-paper method include an

impressive combination of convenience and efficiency. Small enough to slip it into your purse or pocket, PDAs clearly beat hauling around a bulky appointment book, and addresses can be retrieved with the touch of a button. "All I have to do is type in a letter," says Maisie Dunbar of M&M Nails in Silver Spring, Maryland, "and a list of names starting with that letter automatically pops up."

Accuracy is another plus. When done electronically, scheduling standing appointments is virtually error-free. Notes Wyatt-Welker: "I just put them in, hit a button to repeat weekly or biweekly and BOOM, they're in there until the year 2034. No mistakes!"

One word of warning: do regular back-ups. As Dunbar discovered, these gadgets don't like to be dropped. Although hers fell no farther than a couple of feet - from her hands to the countertop - all of her information was lost in the crash.

"I learned that lesson the hard way," she says. "I kept saying I'd do a back-up tomorrow, I'd do it tomorrow. But tomorrow never came until I lost all my data. Since then, I've done back-ups every day."

Consider adding software that might make your life even easier. While most PDA's can handle all of the basic organizing tasks, Darlene Sammons of Changes Hair Design in Chattanooga, Tennessee, wanted to print out mailing labels for her salon's newsletter. She found the solution with a time management program called Time & Chaos, a 'try before you buy' software program that can be downloaded off the Internet from www.isbister.com.

One of her favorite uses for the PDA, says Sammons, is being able to organize information on each of her clients and print out a sheet showing all of their appointments. By giving them copies to take home, she says, "They can let me know well in advance if they need to change an appointment. I don't like finding those things out the day before."

With or without any added software, PDA's have gotten rave reviews from beauty techs across the board. Besides their usefulness at the salon, the hand-helds cross over to help out with personal business as well. Alarms with varying tones can be set as reminders of lunch dates, doctor's appointments, or any of the endless assortment of daily To-Do's.

So whatever else the digital age may bring, one thing seems clear. Whether you want to remember your daughter's soccer game or you suddenly need to schedule an appointment in the middle of the frozen foods section, PDAs are setting the standard for the future.

As Wyatt-Welker puts it: "I can't imagine what I ever did without my Palm. Everyone who knows me calls it 'Gracie's Bible'."