

At trade show, tech toys to make you feel inadequate

By Elizabeth Weise
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Reporter's Notebook

LAS VEGAS — Wander around the acres of endless showrooms at Comdex, the world's largest computer show, and you come away with the feeling that your computer is too thick, your screen too small, your cellular phone too clunky and your palm-top computer hopelessly overweight.

Your wallet might be better off without some of these fancy new toys on display — they don't come cheap — but oh, some of these gadgets are so very cool.

Take the **Toshiba Portege 3010CT Ultraportable** (\$1,999). Vanishingly slender, this laptop weighs in at 2.9 pounds and is only 3/4-inch thick. It comes in this year's hottest casing material, magnesium alloy, twice as strong and half as thick as a standard plastic casing.

Toshiba has another winner in the "extremely clever" category — its **Equium 100** series

of desktop computers (\$1,999 and \$2,466). An adjustable 15-inch flat panel screen also swivels 90 degrees between portrait and landscape mode, so you can view things regular or longways — a great help when dealing with spreadsheets. For more information, visit www.toshiba.com.

Also in the very cool category are the similar **Clio** (from Vadem) and Sharp **Mobilon TriPad PV-6000** (both are \$999). These three-way devices become either a touch-screen slate, an easel for presentations or a standard notebook PC. Bridging hand-held computers and laptops, they run Microsoft's Windows CE, the "Windows lite" program, which can process almost everything a typical Windows computer can.

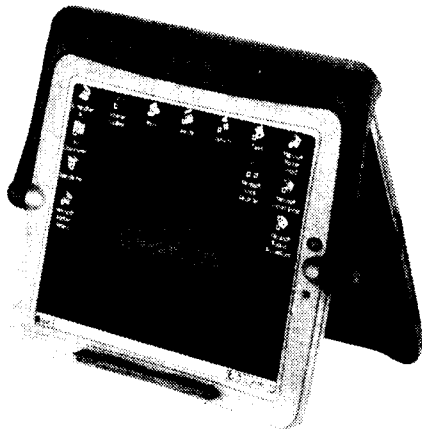
At 3 pounds and an inch thick, they have an "instant on" feature, eliminating frustrating boot-up time. Both run for 12

hours on batteries. For more information, go to www.sharp.com or www.vadem.com.

Sharp also is showing what at first glance seems an odd product, the **TelMail TM-20** (\$150), a pencil case-sized e-mail device. With e-mail available from laptops, pagers and even cellular phones these days, pocket e-mail seems unnecessary.

But it might have its advantages. Use its tiny keyboard to type a message and simply hit Done, close the case and then flip open the small speaker on the back. Dial PocketMail's 800 number, hold the speaker next to the phone's mouthpiece and hit Send. At \$9.95 a month it's an easy way to deal with the problem of needing to log in to send and receive e-mail.

Other gadgets seem less useful. At the Comdex show, which ends Friday, one booth featured two men in loud zoot suits doing a burlesque routine about the wonder of writing an e-mail message on a palmtop computer and then zap it to a



Sharp Electronics

Cool tool: Sharp's Mobilon TriPad runs Windows CE, works like a laptop, easel or slate.

pager via infrared ports.

After walking the show floor, Xerox chief scientist John Seely Brown wondered whether companies were merely trying to show off. "Is this technology bringing any sanity to us?" he asked. "I see mostly a focus on widgets, not the fundamental technology that makes devices truly useful."

Some did find useful gadgets. Hawaiian Airlines captain Jim Lockridge was among a group of pilots staring in awe at a trade paperback-sized PC prototype from **Ragan Designs**

Inc. The demonstration showed how the device could use CD-ROMs containing all the flight chart data a crew needs.

Ever noticed how pilots wander airports lugging big leather sample cases along with their garment bags? "That's the 30 pounds of charts and maps we have to carry," Lockridge says. "Pilots get back problems from carrying all that paper. This would be wonderful to use instead."

The prototype uses Cell Computing's CardPC micro-motherboard to cram all of a PC's in-

sides into a palm-sized unit. For more information, go to www.cellcomputing.com.

And in the slightly-odd but purely-for-fun vein is a software program that may not only help police, but also entertain fans of *America's Most Wanted*. It's called **Faces — The Ultimate Composite** (InterQuest, \$49.95, CD for Windows and Macintosh), and it turns any PC owner into a police sketch artist.

Faces lets users choose different noses, mouths, ears, eyebrows and hair — more than 6,000 features in all — to build

a face. It's oddly addictive, a sort of artistic solitaire. Users create and morph faces by simply clicking, then stretch or shrink them to fit the face.

InterQuest, a Canadian company, has donated more than 50,000 copies of *Faces* to police departments across North America. It scored an early success last month when the program was used to create the composite that helped capture a man known as the South Florida rapist. A free version of the *Faces* software is available at www.facesinterquest.com.



Above, Vadem; below, Toshiba

Slenderized: Vadem's Clio, above, works like the TriPad; Toshiba's ultralight Portege laptop, below, packs power in durable magnesium alloy.