

Toys for the Holiday

Business is a serious business.. especially in tough economic times.

This time of the year, though, we all deserve some toys. Something outside the realm of analyzed and cost-justified business expenses - just to make things a little more fun.

Funny thing about toys, though. They can often inspire out of the box thinking and pay back unintended dividends. Now is the time of year to take a little risk and buy some toys that might inspire creative problem-solving down the road. Here are some suggestions.

Desktop Extensions:

Yes, I'm a devoted handheld advocate. One they became synchronizable with the computer (meaning frequent backups of important data) and therefore immune to the 'I dropped it in the toilet and lost my calendar' syndrome, they changed from cool toys to indispensable business tools. Fortunately, they're still toy-like enough to give as gifts to your best staff. Hopefully, they won't realize that it's just a way to keep them working and responding to emails while they're away from the office. Palm handhelds and compatibles are inexpensive enough to be gifted and have extraordinary battery life (as well as a wealth of free games).

Pagers are a dying technology - taken over by cell-phones and IM devices like Blackberrys. For those who travel, a cell phone/handheld combination would be appropriate. By the time you read this, Kyocera will have released it's 7135 palm-powered phone, which has received interesting reviews.

There is also a Blackberry-like phone/IM/Browser/email hiptop device by T-Mobile (www.t-mobile.com) which might be an appropriate entry level solution for those who need to stay in touch.

Presentation Enhancements:

Wireless Networking (WiFi) is inexpensive enough to place near conference rooms, and is much easier to use for laptop-based presentations than a network cable. You may find that a cheap base station and a few WiFi PC cards makes training sessions and information sharing a more common event in your office.

In the same vein, if you don't yet have a portable projector for presentations (or if your current projector is an older, low resolution model), now's a good time to get one. Most offices have already discarded the traditional slide show in favor of computer-based presentations. Once you have one it becomes so popular for presentations that you'll find you need a second.

Imaging:

Color inkjet plotters are slow for production plots, but overlay two different versions of the same CAD file in two different colors and the changes are immediately evident. This makes it an invaluable production tool. On top of that, of course, it's handy for presentation boards. These devices are inexpensive, but be sure to purchase it with enough memory for the large image files you'll be printing from time to time.

Digital cameras are useful as long as it's easy to grab the images for your reports. If you don't already have one, get a camera that saves the images to floppy or CD - so it's easy to use the camera's images at any computer - and easy to drop the media into your project file. An easy to use camera will get used, but one that requires installing software, using a specially outfitted computer, or makes you crawl to the back of the computer to plug in a special cable will be avoided. Of course, if all your desktop computers have USB connections easily accessible on the front, a USB connected camera will do fine.

Remote Access:

Some people love it when they can check project status from home during long weekends and vacations - and everyone appreciates being able to avoid an unnecessary detour to the office to pick up a forgotten document or email when driving to a site meeting. If staff with Cable or DSL internet connectivity at home can't do this yet, save them some time, mileage and ulcers by making remote access available to them.

Web Server:

If you don't already have an Intranet , take an old underpowered computer, a copy of Linux and one of the free Wiki packages available, and let each user group or committee use it to record their minutes, notes, procedures - whatever. If you have a more powerful computer to use, you can do it with Windows Server for more money.

Consider this low-cost web server the training wheels for real project extranets.

Once people start using it, they will begin to see opportunities to use this type of technology for in-house project collaboration, and ultimately for project extranets. Of course, you'll want to dispense with the training wheels and implement more serious hardware, software or security by then.

Toys inspire discovery, invention and creativity - and business thrives on creativity. So buy some toys!

What past office toys have paid off for you? E-mail me at mhogan@id-8.com to let me know.

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