

Several small
computer/communicators
and a little tax help

tools of the trade



The AlphaSmart Dana

Treo 300



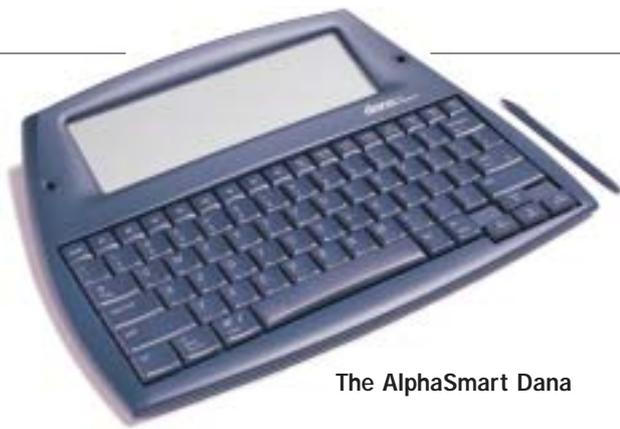
BlackBerry 6510™



TaxACT Online



ItsDeductible



The AlphaSmart Dana

Palms and Berries

AlphaSmart, Inc. has been producing its keyboard-sized computer for almost 10 years, and it has survived well in one of the toughest labs imaginable, schoolrooms across the country. The company recently released the Dana, based on the Palm OS. With a full-sized keyboard, it's comfortable to work on, and, at two pounds encased in sturdy polycarbonate, it's eminently portable. An inex-

pensive alternative to conventional laptops, a Dana can run the 10,000+ Palm applications with superior battery life—it has a built-in, rechargeable battery pack, an AC adapter, and can run on 3 AA batteries. Input is by USB cable, infrared beaming, or writing onscreen with a stylus. The standard Palm applications are included—Address Book, Date Book, To-Do List, and Memo Pad along with QuickOffice, which integrates with Microsoft Word and Excel; PrintBoy utility for direct printing to IR and USB printers; and AlphaWord, a full-featured word processor with spell-checker and thesaurus. www.alphasmart.com

The Treo 300 from Handspring™ is called a communicator because it combines a PCS phone, organizer, e-mail, and Web in a pocket-sized device that weighs about six ounces. With activation from Sprint, you can read, reply to, and delete your e-mail from anywhere. Treo 300 has the Blazer™ Web browser for

full-color surfing. The rechargeable lithium ion battery provides up to two and a half hours of talk time and 150 hours of standby time. The Treo runs on the Palm OS 3.5.2H that includes Phone Book, Instant Lookup, Date Book Plus, SMS Messaging (receive only), To-Do List, Memo Pad, Advanced Calculator, CityTime world clock, Expense software, and desktop synchronization. With 18 MB memory, you can load other programs from the vast library of Palm applications.

www.handspring.com

The BlackBerry 6510™ from Nextel provides “always-on” immediate access to your business e-mail anywhere on the Nextel National Network. The e-mail function is compatible with Microsoft Outlook and Lotus Notes,

and it's ISP/POP3 capable. PDA functions are also built into the BlackBerry with synchronization back to your computer with e-mail, address book, calendar, and tasks. It operates on Nextel's all-digital voice network, and, like any cell phone, it can be used with or without a hands-free device. A Direct Connect™ long-range walkie-talkie feature is available within the Nextel local calling area, and Web browsing is available. Company-specific or third-party Java applications run on the BlackBerry, giving you remote access to corporate databases.

www.nextel.com

Tax Help

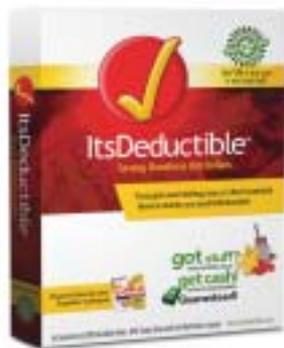
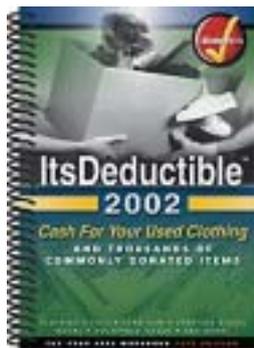
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Treo 300



BlackBerry 6510™



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The Great Idea Evolves

Michael Castelluccio, Editor

■ LAST MONTH in Tech Forum, we considered what makes an invention revolutionary. Truly innovative ideas are rare. What passes for innovation is usually iteration—just another version of some same old thing.

The computer, on the other hand, was a truly great idea, an innovation, a machine that could process a flow of mathematical instructions by simply managing on and off switches. It learned to read English when someone assigned numerical values to letters. We can try to measure how much this great idea has changed us, but we probably won't get the necessary perspective for years.

As for the invention itself, today we find ourselves in a mainly iterative cycle. The new computers and applications for computing are mostly genetic branchings of the original species. Or to use another, less-sophisticated analogy, we're creating all kinds of new sandwiches from the same old loaf of bread.

The Apps Deli

The sandwich is such a great idea it seems it's been around forever. Actually, it was invented in the 18th Century by an Englishman so obsessed with gambling that he refused to leave the card table for hours on end and had his meals brought to him between slices of bread. The roots of the computer are equally vague but, curiously, also tied to necessity. Punch cards came from the weaving industry, and the need for a calculation machine, partly at least, from agents trying to crack codes.

For both of these great advances, computers and sandwiches, types are classified by size and what is stuffed into them. Computers can be mainframes or tiny, embedded circuits. Sandwiches range from heroes sold by the foot to small, packaged peanut butter crackers. What you put in a sandwich can satisfy anyone from a vegetarian to a triple-bacon-burger carnivore. And we have done the same thing to the computer. That is, we've tried to cram every possible function (knowledge, planning, entertainment, communication) into it, slicing and then packing all kinds of combinations between its covers. It's no wonder some

continued on next page

software resembles head cheese when you look at the coding inside.

The sandwich meme works for the big picture as well as the smaller subdivisions. We'll look at one type of computer—the Palm PDA—and some of the variations it has encouraged.

So What Would You Like on That?

The Palm operating system first appeared in small computers about the size of a pack of cards. Very portable, the first Palms included basic calendar, addresses, to-do list, and the ability to write and import memos and e-mail. They were an immediate success and soon became as popular as burgers. The very name, Palm, has taken on a generic meaning beyond the brand, like Kleenex.

It wasn't very long before the

sandwich chefs latched on to the Palm and began writing apps for the new OS. All kinds of new capacities as well as sizes and shapes began to appear. Today, the Palm computer can be much bigger or much smaller than the original, and there are literally tens of thousands of new apps that can be stuffed between their covers.

Let's look at the extremes first. Among the largest Palms, there's the hero-sized Dana (see page 52), which began life as the AlphaSmart, a Macintosh-compatible with only a 16-page memory. In June 2002, the Palm-based version was released. This version has the largest Palm keyboard and a full-width screen that is 7 1/2 X 2 1/4 inches. You can download by USB connection to your PC, beam Palm data and programs, or write on the screen with a stylus. It's a half-step in the direction of laptops, but at two pounds is much easier to carry around. Bigger than a PDA and smaller than a laptop, it sits on its own shelf.

The cracker-size Palm also has a unique place—on your wrist. The watch manufacturer Fossil Tech has created a wrist PDA running the Palm 4.1 OS that strongly resembles the Dick Tracy wrist communicator of comic lore. The face of this Palm watch shows the icons of the basic four utilities and is a touch-screen with a stylus built into the wristband. Four buttons on the sides of the face let you navigate, and there is even an infrared port for beaming and receiving at the top of the screen. (www.fossil.com/tech/)

Just as ham and cheese were destined to rest between the same slices of bread, the standard PDA functions and cell-phone services were bound to meet in the Palm. The Handspring Treo is just one of a num-

ber of versions of this natural pocketable combo (see page 52).

The variations of the Palm format, like specialty sandwiches, can be exotic. The iQue 3600, for instance, includes GPS technology (Global Positioning System) combined with a mapping function so you can display on its high-resolution screen a map of where you are. It lets you know what's in the area with voice-guided commands. (www.garmin.com/products/iQue3600/)

The Dagwood

One of the most famous American sandwiches was originated in the funny papers by Dagwood Bumstead. The ingredients changed because the sandwich contained whatever was available in the refrigerator. Not surprisingly, there's a similar inclination in American technology to pile on the functions in software and hardware devices. It's the equivalent of our compulsion to have everything bigger. Many think the more it does the better.

It's not hard to find the Dagwood syndrome in PDA devices, even though they are small enough to fit in your hand. Take the latest of the Sony Cliés. The NZ-90 is a PDA, voice recorder, MP3 audio player, MPEG-4 video recorder with playback, two-megapixel still digital camera, and AV remote control. It also has built-in Bluetooth and a wireless communication slot. Music, movies, photos, personal recorder, throw in tens of thousands of applications written for the Palm OS, and you can easily carry it in a shirt pocket. Now that's one packed high-tech sandwich.

Computer manufacturers will continue to bake the same loaves, and software people will keep slicing and spamifying their products until the next great thing (innovation) comes along and catches their attention. ■