

HOME	SEARCH Go to Advanced Search/Archive	GO TO MEMBER CENTER	LOG OUT
HELP	<input type="text"/>	Past 30 Days	

Welcome, [hblanchard](#)

This page is print-ready, and this article will remain available for 90 days. [Instructions for Saving](#) | [About this Service](#) | [Purchase History](#)

October 15, 2003, Wednesday

BUSINESS/FINANCIAL DESK

Seductive Electronic Gadgets Are Soon Forgotten

By KATIE HAFNER (NYT) 1728 words

Adam Lipson cannot decide which of the many gadgets he bought in the last couple of years proved most useless.

Perhaps it was the microscope that hooked up to his computer. Then again, maybe Mr. Lipson, 42, would choose the universal remote control that came with a manual as thick as a Russian novel. But that would be shortchanging the Webcam -- a video camera that transfers images over the Internet -- that he used once, stashed in a closet and finally threw away.

Mr. Lipson, who runs a computer security consulting company in Pearl River, N.Y., is but one of many shoppers who have bought electronic devices lately that end up stuffed into a bottom drawer, on the high shelf of a closet, or in the back of a garage. The lucky ones manage to unload them to somebody else through eBay, which is full of offers these days for "barely used" products or items still "new in box," a term that has become so common it is often shortened to "NIB."

Gadgets bought and barely used are the technology world's equivalent of exercise equipment. Often purchased in a well-intentioned bout of self-improvement, they are opened, used once or twice, then abandoned. Sometimes they never make it out of the box.

On eBay -- originally established as an online flea market for selling used goods -- a recent search for "like new" consumer electronics products yielded 30,000 items. While the company does not keep records allowing comparisons with earlier periods, it has detected a significant increase in such offerings.

"We definitely have seen an increase in the number of new items on the site," said Jamie Patricio, an eBay spokeswoman.

People acquire these things -- hand-held personal digital assistants, flatbed scanners, compact disc copiers and a host of other objects -- because they promise to make life more efficient, more fun, or, some confess, simply because they appear to help them keep up with what their "wired" friends and neighbors have.

But many such products are simply too complicated for their own good. And all too often, the buyers find that they cannot really change their lives just by acquiring something new and different.

"There's always the concept that a product we buy will make the connection between who we are and who we'd like to be," said Paco Underhill, author of "Why We Buy" (Simon & Schuster, 2000) and the forthcoming "The Call of the Mall" (Simon & Schuster, January 2004).

Jonathan Chatham, 23, a mortgage broker in San Antonio, may have carried that point to an extreme. Before a trip to Russia with a church group, he spent \$3,000 on a video camera with the idea of making a documentary about "The New Russians," as he describes it, and thereby start himself on a new career as a filmmaker. But no one seemed

particularly interested in providing financial backing for his project.

"I thought all I had to do was buy the camera and everyone would be throwing these opportunities at me," he said.

Like other serial acquirers, Mr. Chatham is surprisingly introspective. "There's the theoretical life you live and the actual life you live," he said. He was hoping the camera would bridge the gap between theory and reality.

Mr. Chatham blames himself, but only in part. He also blames advertisers for persuading him of the transformative powers of the latest gear.

"The way it's advertised is that if I just buy it," he said, "all these other things will fall into place in my life."

Mr. Underhill, a consultant who studies shopping habits, agreed that gadget makers depend, in part, on exploiting such impossible dreams. "Part of the problem with the consumer electronics industry," he said, "is that they're in the constant act of reinventing stuff because they're trying to sell us new stuff every season."

Gender, of course, plays a role. In many cases, Mr. Underhill said, the consumer electronics industry aims its gadgets directly at men who cannot resist the lure of buttons and screens. Yet there is no shortage of women who succumb as well.

Veronica Vichit-Vadakan, 29, a freelance film editor in Portland, Ore., is all too familiar with the problem of buying things she does not use. Her digital camera sits, as if glued in place, on a bookshelf in her bedroom. And Ms. Vichit-Vadakan's CD burner, which was supposed to allow her to make copies of music she loves for her friends, is the embodiment of a promise gone awry.

"I was hoping to get organized about backing up my files and burning CD's for friends and making copies of CD's and making copies of my software, which they say you're supposed to do," she said. "But nope, I never did any of that."

It's not all her fault. She never did get the CD burner to work on her computer. Weeks, then months passed, and she finally boxed it back up to get it off her desk. Now she is trying to sell it on Craig's List, a Web site built around classified advertisements, but so far there are no takers.

"I guess CD burners have gotten a lot faster," she said. "No one wants this one."

Consumer electronics devices often make the rounds among friends before ending up gathering dust. Mr. Lipson gave his \$300 universal remote to a friend, Jeff Kimmelman. Although both men are engineers, neither of them could figure out how to use it.

When Mr. Lipson visited Mr. Kimmelman at his home in Stow, Mass., a year or so later, he spotted the device, still in the box, in the corner of a closet. "He tried to give it back to me," Mr. Lipson said, "but I wouldn't take it."

Mr. Kimmelman did the same thing with a Global Positioning System receiver he bought a couple of years ago. He used it once, to mark property lines around his house, then shoved it in a drawer. When Mr. Kimmelman told a friend, Rachel Amado, about it, she insisted he send it to her, which he did gladly.

Ms. Amado, a jewelry designer in Los Angeles who has a tendency to become lost while hiking, thought the G.P.S. receiver would help. And for the month that she used it, it did.

"I was fascinated by it," she said. "It was completely accurate. It knew where I was in the middle of nowhere. I was never going to get lost again. I was telling everybody I knew that they should buy one."

But then she stopped using it. "Every time I go on a hike I think I should take it with me and I always forget," she said.

The same thing happened with the cordless keyboard she bought. And the cordless mouse. The CD burner, too. A flat-screen monitor for her computer. "Maybe I'm just an easy sell," Ms. Amado said.

Gadgets acquired as gifts can be especially problematic. Ms. Vichit-Vadakan not only weighs her purse down with an idle Palm organizer but makes sure the battery stays charged because it was a present from her boyfriend. Carrying it around with her helps allay any guilt she might feel for never using it.

For her birthday a few years ago, Ann Kirschner, an educational consultant and long-distance runner in New York, was given an exercise gadget that was supposed to help her prepare for a coming marathon.

Hooked to her belt, she was told, it would monitor her running. The gadget could then be connected to a computer and, via an Internet connection, it would offer customized training advice.

"It sounded wonderful but the setup was byzantine," Ms. Kirschner said, emphasizing that this was a charitable description of the problems she had getting it to work. A few months passed and, feeling guilty for not using something given to her as a gift, she went to the company's Web site for further instruction.

But she was too late. The company that made the product had apparently fallen on hard times, perhaps deservedly so. "Not only did the hardware go away," she said. "The whole company went away."

Ms. Kirschner, 52, has developed a theory, which she said applied not only to herself but to most anyone buying gadgets. "If the setup is hard and you're not sure why you need it, chances are it will head to the graveyard," she said. "If you really need it, by dogged determination you'll make that thing work."

Julie Marcuse, 57, a psychoanalyst in Manhattan, has the advantage of knowing how to apply cogent psychological analysis to a behavior pattern she knows all too well.

Not long after buying a Webcam that eventually ended up back in its box, Dr. Marcuse bought a scanner. That, too, was a bust. The scanner software created a series of conflicts with other software on her computer. She gave it away.

"I just wanted it out of my house," she said.

"I think we're usually pursuing a fantasy of empowerment when we buy these things," Dr. Marcuse said.

Asked why people have trouble learning to be more wary, Dr. Marcuse referred to "an endearing optimism" on the part of consumers. "Hope springs eternal, you know."

Eternal hope could well be what Mr. Chatham suffers from. Having momentarily forgotten about his expensive misadventure with the video camera, Mr. Chatham waxed enthusiastic on the latest gadget to catch his eye. "Apple has this awesome new Webcam coming out," he said. "It's really nice. Totally awesome."

CAPTIONS: Photos: Veronica Vichit-Vadakan, above, and Adam Lipson, left, with some of the electronic gadgets they have bought but never used. Many such devices end up stuffed into a bottom drawer, on the high shelf of a closet, or in the back of a garage -- or offered for sale online through eBay. (Photo by Alan S. Weiner for The New York Times); (Photo by Rebecca Cooney for The New York Times)(pg. C2)

Copyright 2003 The New York Times Company