

# AGENT@HOME

## Must-Have Technology

How to fully equip yourself to do business

**M**obility is the name of the game for home-based agents, whose lives entail meeting clients, networking at community and business events, or traveling in order to stay up-to-date on the products they sell.

### STEP 1: GET A LAPTOP

What's the best way to ensure mobility? Buy a laptop. Terri Maldonado, manager of training and development for Uniglobe Travel Center, which has operated a host program for 13 years, advises getting a laptop that's as fast as you can afford and that's comfortable to carry.

What does fast mean? It means a laptop with an Intel dual-core processor running at 2GHz minimum, and faster is better, says Alan Gerstner, president of Travel Doctor Consulting. He says laptops should have 2GB of RAM, a 150GB internal hard drive and built-in WiFi. *PCWorld* rates the Acer Travelmate as one of its best buys. The Travelmate is a 2.26GHz laptop with a 160GB hard drive and long battery life. It weighs 4.6 pounds and costs just under \$1,000.

MacBooks start at just under \$1,000. The new, 13-inch, aluminum MacBook, a 2.4GHz model with a 250GB hard drive, has an illuminated keyboard, weighs 4.5 pounds and is priced at just under \$1,600.

Speed is key, according to Scott Caddow, the president of Legendary World. Memory (amount of RAM) is a little less important for the travel industry. "Pretty much whatever you buy will be enough," Caddow says.

Now's a great time to buy a laptop, with retailers shaving prices or adding free or low-cost add-ons. (Apple for example, will knock off up to \$100 from the price of a printer.) They're also offering bill-me-later and interest-free options.

If you like working on a desktop, you can get that same feel and ergonomic benefit at home by plugging your laptop into a dock and using a monitor. Caddow, whose entire staff works from their home offices, says that most of his employees use 16-inch flat-screen



monitors, which start at less than \$100. At presstime, the electronics website Tiger Direct ([www.tigerdirect.com](http://www.tigerdirect.com)) was offering a 17-inch HP flat-screen monitor for \$79.99, after rebates. Caddow himself uses a 24-inch cinema-display screen so that he can have both his ClientBase program and his email open simultaneously without having to toggle back and forth between the two.

Some agents use not one but two screens when working. That helps you multitask—you can have your customer database open on one screen and your email or web browser open on the other.

### PRINTERS & PERIPHERALS

Another important piece of hardware is a printer. Maldonado recommends an all-in-one printer; these start at about \$125 for an inkjet model. However, think about how much you'll be printing, because if you intend to do a lot, you should consider a laser printer, as toner cartridges are more economical than inkjet cartridges. Laser printers start at as little as \$100 after rebates at Staples; three-in-one laser printers cost several hundred dollars.

Another option is an electronic fax service, such as eFax ([www.eFax.com](http://www.eFax.com)), which starts at \$14 a month and lets

you receive faxes wherever you are. "It saves [faxes] forever," says David Locke, an independent affiliate of America's Vacation Center, who has a laser printer and a color inkjet that he uses as a scanner. His wife, Cindy Jabbour, also an AVC affiliate, has an all-in-one printer that she uses for outbound faxes.

Maldonado says that a good telephone headset is crucial, and she recommends wireless models. "Then you can get up and move away from your desk if you need to get a file, or pace back and forth while you're talking to somebody," she says.

### THE NEW ERA OF PHONES

A cell phone is also mandatory. If you can afford an iPhone or a BlackBerry, great, says Maldonado, but if all you can afford—or want—is a cell phone, at the very least make sure it has an international chip or SIM card, or the ability to accept one. Some mobile providers will rent international SIM cards short-term, allowing your phone to work internationally without breaking the bank—and letting you stay in touch with clients even when you're overseas.

Locke and Jabbour have BlackBerries, Caddow and his staff use iPhones.

The ability to respond to emails

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when on the go is invaluable, says Caddow, who's finding that more clients prefer a quick text message to a voice mail. He now keeps track of such clients in his customer database.

Jabbour and Locke also have two phone lines—one for him, one for her. If they're using their BlackBerries while traveling and are in an area in which they might incur roaming fees, they use Skype, the voice-over-Internet protocol (VoIP) service, on their BlackBerries to avoid those fees. They've also started using Vonage, another VoIP phone service, in their home office. It's a less expensive way to make international phone calls, and it's a backup in case their phone service goes out, as can happen when hurricanes hit South Florida, where their agency is based.

Caddow's agents work from several home offices, but the agency has just one phone number. To unite his agents telephonically, he uses a digital phone service called AccessLine. Customers call a number, and the company routes those calls to different agents—to one agent on a weekday, to another on a Saturday or to another's cell phone. Caddow also finds it great for groups. The company recently booked a cruise featuring radio talk-show host Dr. Laura Schlessinger. Dr. Laura recorded a message thanking people for calling, and those calls were then routed to agents responsible for that cruise.

For easy access to their voice mail no matter where they are—even if they're on a cruise—Jabbour and Locke use MagicJack, a device that plugs into a computer's USB port and turns any computer with Internet access into a phone. Locke likes it because it emails their voice mails to them in a .wav file while they're traveling, and they can forward them to their office phones to the MagicJack number.

The couple also has a small Acer netbook, which is handy when traveling or just running about town. Netbooks can cost as little as \$300 and weigh less than three pounds. The keyboard on a netbook is smaller than on a standard laptop, so Locke and Jabbour have a roll-up keyboard—which can cost as little as \$10 or \$15—to use with it. The netbook works with AVC's web-based technology platform, Agent Power, as well as with other browser-based tools, such as VAX VacationAccess.

That said, Locke finds that they're not using the netbook as much now, because they can use their BlackBerries for email, and can open documents in them as well. You can give your BlackBerry added functionality by using a Bluetooth keyboard with it. Such keyboards as BlackBerry Den's cost less than \$100 and essentially turn a BlackBerry into a laptop.

## HAVE-TO-HAVE VS WANT-TO-HAVE

Another good gadget for professionals on the go is mobile broadband Internet service, now offered by Verizon, Sprint and Alltel. This is EVDO, or Evolution Data Only/Evolution Data Optimized, a 3G mobile broadband technology. With this product, when you're out and about, you don't have to search for a Starbucks or hitch a ride on someone else's wireless network. Simply plug your broadband mobile device into your laptop's USB port, click the appropriate icon and go online as if you were at home. These services cost roughly \$60 a month; there are limits on data, however, usually about 5GB per month. That's a lot of data—an email is three KB, five pages of text is 70KB, and a three-minute song is 2 to 4MB—but you do want to watch your usage; going over the limit is costly.

Maldonado tells her new agents to make a list with two columns. The first is the "have-to-have" column, the second is the "want-to-have." On her want-to-have list, she would put wireless keyboard, wireless mouse and portable printer. The latter is good to have when you're traveling or when you're meeting with clients and want to give them a copy of what you've discussed.

## SOFTWARE, ETC.

When it comes to software, much of what you need is available through your host or consortia or on the web. But one program you must have, whether it's through your host or other affiliate organization, or on your own, is a good database program.

There are many retail travel-specific programs, including TRAMS' ClientBase ([www.trams.com](http://www.trams.com)) and ClientEase by ITAMS (<http://clientease.com>). There are also off-the-shelf CRM programs, such as ACT! ([www.act.com](http://www.act.com)). "You need a good, sound data-

management program where you can keep client records and set up client profiles so you can sort it and do marketing from it," says Maldonado.

The days when you could send one email to your entire database are long gone, she says. Clients have become increasingly sophisticated about what they will or won't open.

Locke says that Jabbour recently sold three cabins on Regent Seven Seas Cruises to a client who had initially called a year ago. The fact that she could see a year's worth of the client's history and their communications helped her make that sale, says Locke.

Maldonado adds that agents should have good accounting software that's separate from whatever their host offers. "Their expense management needs to be separate, because

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their expenses are their business and nobody else's," she says. She has no particular program to recommend, beyond what's familiar to you, and says that your personal accounting software will be good enough.

Finally, back it all up, "All hard drives will fail," says Gerstner, adding, "the question is not if, but when." He recommends a 500GB back-up external drive or an online backup, such as Carbonite ([www.carbonite.com](http://www.carbonite.com)), which offers unlimited storage space. It's available as a one-year (\$54.95), two-year (\$99.95) or three-year (\$129.99) subscription. It may take a day or two for the initial backup, but after that it will back up automatically every hour. @