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COMMUNITY VOICES: Shopping tips for the technologically unsure

With the holiday season in full swing, many people are in the market for the newest, most cutting edge gifts. Whether shopping for a new phone, mp3 player, tablet, or computer, there are a number of options to explore at various retail locations and at different price points. Some might argue that it's worth looking at products that are perhaps more affordable, such as the Samsung Galaxy or Motorola Xoom. Others would argue that the iPad might still be better because of its technology.

For example, someone on your list may ask for an iPad, but depending on what they plan to use it for, a Kindle Fire, Samsung Galaxy, Motorola Xoom, or a number of other tablet options may be better and more affordable. It's important to conduct some research before stepping into

the store or clicking “add to cart.” You may or may not be able to determine the recipient’s plan for usage, but there are some things to be familiar with:

Understand the different operating systems. Depending on which brand you purchase, your product (specifically smartphones, tablets, and iPods) will come with a different operating system. Apple products have their own and utilize iTunes, many alternatives function on the android system with the Android marketplace, and there are some Blackberry and Windows options as well. There are pros and cons for each, and it may be worthwhile to find out what other technology the person has so it can all be synched. With that thought, for example, Amazon uses a different system than iTunes, so if you already have content on iTunes, look for a product that will support it. Apple products are somewhat agnostic in that they are adaptable. You might buy an iPad with an app on it, but if you have an android phone, for example, and the app is not on the android market, you may be frustrated.

So, if someone already owns an Android smartphone, it may be prudent to purchase a tablet that also runs on the same system so that settings, preferences, and apps can be imported.

Be sure the device is compatible with support technology. Depending on the device, the owner may need to download programs onto an existing computer. For example, a new Apple product may need to be activated and managed by the iTunes account on his or her computer. Does the person already have this? If not, can their computer support it? Older PCs tend to have a difficult time with the large memory usage of iTunes and can become sluggish when it is running.

Be aware of WiFi versus 3G. Many gadgets are currently wifi compatible, meaning they can pick up and use the wireless internet available and at no cost. The issue to consider here is whether or not wifi will always be available to the user. On the other hand, 3 and 4G are available anywhere there is cell phone reception, but come at a cost. Will the user be willing to take on this monthly subscription? It is especially important to decide this before purchasing because while 3G compatible products can also utilize WiFi, gadgets that only have wifi cannot be upgraded should the owner decide they would like it (this is true of iPads, for example). Additionally, some smartphone plans charge by the MB usage, so the user may require a pricier plan if he/she won’t always have access to wireless internet.

The web offers some great resources. There are a number of websites that provide reliable information on the different available options. Three of them are Engadget.com, Cnet.com, and gizmodo.com – all provide product news, ratings, and reviews, as well as holiday shopping guides. There is also gdgt.com, which is like “Facebook/Twitter for gadgets” and can be followed on your smartphone. Checking out these sites can be a great time-saver and provide you with information that a store salesperson might not.

Overall, your best bet is to be as informed as possible before making a purchase. There are plenty of items to choose from. Happy shopping!

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