

Tips, Tricks and Advice from your local “IT Guru”

This month I want to talk to you about Christmas. I can hardly believe it's that time again! It seems only a few weeks ago I was looking forward to the coming year, trying to decide what the big trends in technology were going to be. Now, here we are once more at the beginning of December and it's time to think what the gadget lover in your life would like under the tree.

This year has definitely been the year of the tablet. More and more, people are asking me if they should get a tablet and, if so, then what sort to get. Well, I'm sure it will come as no surprise that at the top of a very short list would be the iPad. Now that the iPad Mini is available at a starting price of £269, I can see no reason to consider anything else. The Mini is the perfect compromise between size and usability: it's big enough to get things done, still able to be put in the pocket, and light enough to use as an eBook reader for extended periods of time. This is something that I definitely struggled with on the original iPad. For those of you that think that I'm a little bit too hung up on the iPad, the trouble is that the competition is just not as good. One of the main contenders is Microsoft's Surface, which has just launched to much fanfare. It shows a lot of promise, and by next year I'm fairly certain that this will be a much more viable option, but at the moment there just isn't the same level of support and applications that Apple has to offer. The other option is to look into a tablet that's based on the Android operating system, which includes the Google Nexus, the Samsung Galaxy Tab, and the Samsung Galaxy Note. These have plenty of applications available, but most are simply larger versions of phone applications instead of being tailor-made for the tablet itself. This means that they don't scale up very well on the larger screens, and when coupled with a rather confusing interface and the ability to tinker with every single aspect of the system... it becomes a tad frustrating, and allows for a greater ability to get into trouble. I should also likely mention that you can find many tablets at a much lower price range, usually around the £100 mark. I know these look like a bargain, but the ones that I've tried have all been a big disappointment, with poor build quality and dreadful screens.

So, what if a tablet just isn't for you? How about a nice new Windows 8 computer? A lot of people aren't keen on running Windows 8 on a non-touch screen, as it's somewhat clunky, so you could even treat yourself or a loved one to a touch-based laptop or desktop which takes advantage of the new interface. Once you have spent any time using Windows with touch, it's very hard to go back to a mouse: flicking left and right and poking at icons feels like you are living in the future. Very “Minority Report”! The tile interface, with its novel way of presenting current information, provides a quick way to keep up with what's going on and, once you have mastered a few gestures, is very easy to use.

If you're interested in other types of gadgets, then there are a couple of options that I'd consider. If you have either an iPhone or an iPad, then an Apple TV is something I would recommend. Still described by Apple as their “hobby,” it is a tiny black box that you plug into your TV that allows you to connect to Apple services online and to your iDevices in the home. Imagine being able to take anything you are doing on your iPad or iPhone and show it full screen on your 50” TV! My final suggestion for the year, however, has got to be the Kindle eReader. Prices start at £69 for the basic version, so there has never been a cheaper and easier way to get into reading on electronic devices. Better yet, the price of books is now down to the same as paper copies, with a lot being even cheaper. Even the most basic Kindle can store hundreds of books and the battery lasts for weeks on a single charge. So, if you know an avid bookworm, then this makes for an absolutely brilliant present.

If you have any questions or anything you would like me to cover in this column, email me at look@4-11consultants.co.uk

David runs 4-11 Consultants, a local company specialising in home and small business computer problems and can be contacted on 01206736161