

# on the *Cutting Edge*

By Ben Logan

College sophomore Rachel Barrett considers herself to be a typical college student navigating her way through hectic days filled with classes, friends, off-campus activities, studying, and plenty of sleep deprivation.

During the day, when she needs to tune out and relax or get hold of somebody while on the go, Barrett – like many of her fellow students – relies on her portable CD player and the cell phone she borrows from her parents. Over the last several years, these devices have exploded into the mainstream of American culture. Everyone from CEOs to college students to young children are now free to listen to their favorite music

whenever they choose or contact friends and relatives at the push of a button, be they sitting in their living room or zooming down the interstate.

## MP3s

The prolific expansion of sources offering digital music online has become so large that ConsumerReports.org admits it is time-consuming just to keep track of their number. That translates into more buying options for the consumer but an uncertain future for the online music industry as the storm of legal controversies surrounding the file-sharing practices of companies like Napster threatens even further litigation. Should these companies be shut down, the MP3 devices that download those shared music files would become less desirable, says *Consumer Reports*. Purchasing a portable MP3 can already be a headache because the buyer must be sure that his or her computer operating system is compatible with the player he or she wishes to buy. Even then there is no guarantee that the

buyer's PC will recognize the new player once it has been hooked up. The costs for a high-quality portable MP3 player are between \$90 and \$300. The biggest advantage to owning one is its small, handy size.

## Portable CD Players

*Consumer Reports* says that portable CD players present the best choice for most people because of the wide availability of compact discs, the improved design of the players, battery efficiency, and their superb quality of sound. The only drawback is that the headphones included with most models are "mediocre" and should be replaced if the listener wants to reap the full benefits of the player. Portable CD players are also relatively easy to repair, and there are a number of Web sites presenting step-by-step instructions for the most common repairs that almost anyone can fix. The models sold by Sony and Panasonic, priced from \$50 to \$80, each received a solid thumbs up.

## Cell Phones

Cell phones have also become a luxury common among high school and college students, especially those separated from family and friends back home. In the last two years the number of cellular

customers nationwide has skyrocketed by more than 40 percent, to 123 million, according to *Consumer Reports*.

Among the problems young consumers should be aware of are billing hassles, spotty coverage in many areas, and lots of fine print regarding free night and weekend minutes. Also, students and parents interested in purchasing a cell phone for emergencies should be aware that the devices often prove useless in those situations because rescuers cannot quickly identify a 911 caller's location.

Many students like Barrett, however, are not all that concerned with these problems. "My phone is so convenient. It's gotten me out of jams lots of times, and that's why I like it," she said. ☺

## Buying and Using Tech Toys

### Assess your needs

Many electronic devices have extras you won't need. So why pay for them?

### Do your homework

Looks can be deceiving. So can popular opinion. Know exactly what you are buying and all the terms, conditions, and warranties related to your purchase. Also know the product's history; this is where consumer advocate groups come in handy.

### Remember your Priorities

Toys are just that: toys. Do not confuse them as equal substitutes for family, friends, or responsibilities.

### Be Considerate

That good ol' fashioned Golden Rule applies here: Ask yourself, "Would I like it if others listened to loud music and chatted on cell phones while I was trying to talk with them or with somebody else?"

