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Tech Tools

A look at some of the gadgets and technology services that small businesses find especially useful

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As more small businesses find technology indispensable, more technology companies are finding small businesses indispensable.

This is good news for small businesses, as tech providers are increasingly targeting them with a wide array of products. But it's also creating more confusion among small firms, as they face a widening array of buying options.

What's a small business to buy? Based on interviews with small-business owners around the country, here are some of the tech tools and services that many have found particularly helpful.

INDEPENDENT STREET

[Independent Street is a new blog](#) that covers news, trends, tidbits and tools for and about entrepreneurs. The Journal's Gwendolyn Bounds is the lead writer. See this and continuing coverage of small businesses, at WSJ.com/Entrepreneur.

- **HyperOffice**
hyperoffice.com

This company's Web-based software makes it easier for owners, employees, suppliers and business clients to plan projects, share and edit documents, and manage information any time and from any Internet connection. HyperOffice, based in Rockville, Md., allows small businesses to also set up their own intranets and other portals for vendors and customers.

This follows the new trend in computing, whereby all applications are hosted and maintained over the Web, replacing desktop-computing applications and eliminating the need for on-site servers and other hardware.

The cost averages \$6 to \$9 a month per user, with multiple levels of user log-in and administrative rights set by the owner for security. There's a free 30-day trial.

"HyperOffice is the backbone communications tool of our business," says Sean Hackney, co-owner of Roaring Lion Energy Drink LLC. The seller of Red Bull-like beverages to the bar industry has five employees in Sun Valley, Calif., and an additional 36 salespeople scattered all over the country. The Web-based application, installed four years ago, is the company's back-office email solution, document and marketing-data repository, and database for graphic elements, employment forms and contact lists.

For example, if one of Mr. Hackney's employees in Chicago needs the Roaring Lion logo for a promotion, he or she can just access it on the Web, where the file resides.

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"We're a virtual company in that respect," says Mr. Hackney. Roaring Lion's previous Web tool for intra-company communication was Microsoft Corp.'s Hotmail, but the company grew to a point that it wanted to have more flexibility and functionality in dispersing information and communicating with employees. Mr. Hackney now says he typically budgets about \$500 a month on the HyperOffice software for all of his staff.

"It's an easy-to-use, cost-effective platform," he says. "It offers a great deal of functionality."

- **TalkPlus**
talkplus.com

Think about this: one cellphone, multiple numbers. One number is for personal use, the others are for business.

TalkPlus is an independent telecom service that makes the separation between work and personal life easier and clutter-free. You can give out one phone number to friends, a different one to clients, and receive both calls on the same phone. The company owns large blocks of phone numbers in more than 30 countries that it sells to clients.

Lee Mendiola, a psychiatrist who runs a clinic in Ventura, Calif., formerly used a pager to field emergency or hospital calls. Six months ago, he started using TalkPlus instead. It tells him if a call is on his professional or his personal line. Then, if he doesn't want to answer, the call goes to voicemail, where it's converted into a sound file attached to an email that he can retrieve later.

There are two versions of TalkPlus. One is a download application that TalkPlus.com sends as a text message to the cellphone for installation. This application makes recipients of your calls see the number you have chosen. They can call you back on that number as well.

The other version allows you to add numbers that ring on your cellphone. But when you call someone else, your cellphone's original phone number will show on their display.

TalkPlus costs about \$11 per month for two numbers (additional numbers cost \$3.99 each). For calls within the U.S., add 2.7 cents per minute to your carrier bill.

- **Trueview Services**
trueviewservices.com

Trueview Services LLC, a New York-based online monitoring company, lets a business owner see what's going on in the store without being there. Real-time and archived video streams can be accessed by logging on to trueviewservices.com. The videos are saved online for at least two weeks, and can be downloaded for later viewings.

The service starts at \$1,495 for installation of two cameras. Monthly service is \$29.99 for two-week storage and round-the-clock technical support. The cameras can be wireless. The company also is working on making its systems accessible by mobile phone.

For years, Jason Schwartz, president of Creative Cash Flow Solutions Inc., Amityville, N.Y., used a \$5,000 analog-camera system with VHS tape to monitor the goings-on at his 20-employee electronic-payment-processing firm. But two months ago he changed to Trueview for convenience and cost.

"The technology, since it's Web-based, gave us the ability to log on remotely and see real time what's happening in our office," says Mr. Schwartz, who paid \$3,000 for about a dozen Trueview wireless cameras and online remote backup system. "If I'm out of the office or out of the country, I could log on to see who's at their desk, what time everybody came in for work and what time they left, and I could see what people are working on in their computers, in each workstation," he adds.

- **AAA Mobile**
aaa.com/aaamobile

A salesman who is on the road a lot for a company of any size might find a cellphone-based navigation device useful. A few such programs are on the market now from several carriers.

AAA and tech provider Networks in Motion have teamed up to offer just such a Global Positioning System program on phones from Sprint Nextel Corp. and Verizon Wireless. The phones give audible turn-by-turn directions, including to such locations as restaurants, gas stations and hotels. At \$9.99 a month on both Sprint Nextel and Verizon Wireless, it's far less costly than an in-car or personal navigation system.

"I use it for GPS navigation when I have to go to an unfamiliar location," says Lawrence Johnson Sr., a 60-year-old independent sales associate based in New York for Pre-Paid Legal Services Inc.

Networks in Motion, based in Aliso Viejo, Calif., has also developed software used in other GPS-enabled cellphones: the VZ Navigator from Verizon Wireless, Alltel Corp.'s Axxess Mobile Guide, and U.S. Cellular Corp.'s Your Navigator.

- **Virtual Management**
evadirect.com

Phil Immel, a real-estate broker in Laguna Beach, Calif., gets real help from a virtual assistant.

Mr. Immel, who has a staff of 12 at his Prudential California Realty firm, says his peripatetic work life often means that he forgets to follow up on a scheduled call, or that he is delayed in telling his workers which tasks need urgent attention. "I'm always in the field, with clients, driving by properties or looking up listings," Mr. Immel says.

But two years ago, he signed on to Electronic Virtual Assistant, a 24/7 service from Virtual Management Inc., St. George, Utah, that provides customers with U.S.-based assistants for a number of tasks. Among these: help with storing and retrieving data, sending emails, scheduling meetings and reminders, and filling out sales reports.

With EVA, Mr. Immel can have information on recent home sales sent to clients he just met with before he gets back to his office. He calls EVA's voicemail number (a toll-free number with PIN access), where he dictates his instructions. Within minutes, an EVA assistant transcribes the instructions into an email for his office assistant, who then forwards the requested home-sales data to the client. Mr. Immel also can send thank-you notes on the fly and receive reminders to make follow-up phone calls.

Mr. Immel pays \$160 a month for a premium service. He averages two to three calls a day to EVA. And what kind of results is he getting?

"My follow-through is probably three times better than it used to be," he says.

--Mr. Flandez is a staff reporter in The Wall Street Journal's New York bureau.