

Wireless PDAs Hit Their Stride

New apps allow you to book airline tickets, get instant directions, or even find the nearest Starbucks.

by Sheryl Huggins

Web exclusive

During the early hours of the cliffhanger that was the 2000 presidential election, Franklin Madison was anxious to know the latest results. Tied up in a venture capital "boot camp" given by his nonprofit employer, [Industrial & Technology Assistance Corp.](#), he didn't have time to turn on [CNN](#), listen to news radio or even pick up a newspaper. "I'm a news junkie," admits New York-based Madison, who is ITAC's technology program director.

To satisfy his fix, Madison reached into his pocket for his [Handspring](#) Visor handheld PC. Tricked out with a [Minstrel S](#) wireless modem from Novatel Wireless, and wireless connection service from [Yadayada](#), the device allowed him to immediately and unobtrusively access up-to-the-minute election news from many major media outlets via the portal [NewsJunkie 2.0](#).

Madison is one of a growing number of wireless personal digital assistant (PDA) users who have discovered that you can use these gadgets to do far more than just check and send E-mail. Four percent of U.S. adults use or have someone in their household who uses a wireless PDA, according to market researcher [Taylor Nelson Sofres Intersearch](#) in Horsham, Pa. The PDAs either have wireless modem attachments (such as the Minstrel or Handspring VisorPhone) or have the wireless modem built in (as with the [Palm](#) VII/VIIx).

Although nearly 70% of wireless PDA owners use them for e-mail, a third also use them for research, a quarter use them to check news and about one-fifth use them to shop, book travel arrangements, and check stock quotes. Simply by downloading the right wireless applications—many of them freeware—they're using their PDAs to execute a host of tasks while they're on the go, such as pulling up directions to the next meeting, booking flight reservations, trading stocks, and finding the nearest ATM or [Starbucks](#).

"There's nothing better than being able to use it when you're away from your laptop," says Jose Ivey, who is chief technology officer for [Doublespace](#), a media incubator in New York. For a while, he used a pdQ [Smartphone](#) combination cell phone and computer when he was on the road to book restaurant reservations, buy movie tickets, and even conduct telnet sessions to administer his company's computer servers remotely. Disappointed with the short battery life and bulkiness of the Smartphone, he has since switched to a color Handspring Prism and is looking for a cost-effective modem to go with it.

Wireless PDAs often come loaded with some wireless application software, such as Palm VII/VIIx's Web Clippings from providers such as [ABC](#) News (headline news), [UPS](#) (package tracker), and [MapQuest](#) (maps and directions). However, if you really want to get the goodies, you can download and hotsync hundreds of third-party applications at [Palm.net](#) for the Palm VII/VIIx and [PalmGear](#) for the Visor. Both Palm OS and Pocket PC users can get dozens of wireless applications such as [Biztravel](#) (travel reservations) and [Nextbus Transit Information](#) (bus and train schedules) through the popular [Avantgo](#) portal. Unlike many

applications that you must hotsync on a non-wireless PDA, the wireless applications are very small—often taking up just 1k on your PDA.

But no matter how many handy applications are loaded onto wireless PDAs, they're still limited by shaky service on limited networks. "They've got those cool apps out there, but they've got to do something about the network," says Lena West, president of xynoMedia, a business development firm in Yonkers, N.Y. She complains of frequent service drops on her Palm VII, especially when she's trying to check her e-mail in an airport. "It's a great tool," she adds, "but would I want to 100% rely on it yet? No." [Palm.net's](#) connection service offers coverage in more than 260 metropolitan areas in the U.S., mostly on either coast, while [Omnisky](#) service is available in at least 118 cities.

Nevertheless, plenty of converts are willing to wait out the growing pains. Personal business coach [Ramon Williamson](#) in Leesburg, Va., is truly one of the faithful; he's so hooked on using his wireless Handspring Visor he actually plans to launch a Website with tips for getting the most out of it. These are some of his favorite applications for business travel: [RoveNet](#) This service enables you to send faxes, order flowers, schedule limo transportation, get ski reports and more. Some services require a fee.

[Worldmate](#) Convert currencies, measurements and U.S./U.K./European clothing sizes in real time. Also includes cool clock features, with an alarm and the all-important snooze option! \$19.95.

[Stock Manager](#) This stock portfolio manager is packed with cool features plus a handy desktop tool that allows you to check the latest stock prices. Shareware.

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