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- Entertainment
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- Site Map
- Archives



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- [Front -v- Down-Firing Sub?????](#)
- [DTS and DD signs](#)
- [need advice on buying a sub](#)

1 of 6

[\[printer friendly\]](#)

Holiday Gift Guide 2003

An MP3-playing cellphone, a motorized DVD tower, and a sleek-looking home theater system are just some of the goods for giving this season

By Shannon McCarthy

Not so long ago, people used the 12 days after Christmas as an opportunity to continue to give gifts — and from that generosity the well-known carol was born. It’s a tradition well worth reviving, but you might want to make some revisions to the classic selection, since drummers drumming, pipers piping, lords a-leaping, and ladies dancing (let alone maids a-milking) probably won’t be a big hit with the folks on your gift list. Better to give some MP3 players humming, digital cameras shooting, DVD players spinning, and cellphones a-ringing. And since it’s not so bad to get as well, you might want to leave this issue of *Sound & Vision* lying strategically around the house, open to these pages. The 12 gift ideas here, ranging from \$50 to \$700 could inspire a new family tradition.

Boxed Punch

The first thing you notice about the **Philips LX3750W home theater system** (\$600) is its “look.” There’s some seriously sleek mojo working here. Platinum-colored cylindrical cabinets, a mirror-finish control panel, and a bass module that could pass for a handsome hard drive give this system an “audio architecture” vibe. But the Philips doesn’t just look good: it puts out, too. And since the surround speakers are wireless, you’ve got the freedom to position them to get as close as possible to a movie theaterlike surround sound experience. The main unit’s progressive-scan DVD player smoothly handled everything I fed it. The elaborate battle-scene finale of *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* played back in all its grungy beauty, with the dark warrior masses just as detailed as the glint of that golden ring. And the AM/FM tuner, which offers 40 presets, pulled in the full range of my local stations. The 45-key remote control has a quick learning curve but still covers all the bases. And, no surprise, it *looks* really good, too.



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- [New Products - October 2003 < a>](#)
- [More . . .](#)



www.consumer.philips.com, 800-531-0039

Pages 1 [2](#) [3](#) [4](#) [5](#) [6](#) [Next](#)

[\[printer friendly\]](#)

[Back to Top](#)

[Home](#) | [Hot Topics](#) | [Equipment Reports](#) | [Entertainment Guide](#) | [Buying Tips](#) | [Forums](#)
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- [Front -v- Down-Firing Sub?????](#)
- [DTS and DD signs](#)
- [need advice on buying a sub](#)

2 of 6

[\[printer friendly\]](#)

Holiday Gift Guide 2003

continued

I Wanna Hold Your Handheld

Looking to draw a crowd? Pull out this puppy. **Sony's Clié PEG UX50 personal digital assistant** (\$700) is a 6 1/4-ounce wonder, with multimedia chops beyond what some full-size laptops can muster. Its sleek case (with charger cradle below) opens to reveal a backlit micro keyboard that's actually useful for entering things like addresses and short notes, a retractable stylus for optional



touchscreen operation, and a 480 x 320-pixel LCD screen with the sharpest graphics I've seen on a handheld. The Palm OS5 operating system and 104 megabytes of memory let you fire up the Clié's many apps, which can do things like play MP3 files, recognize your handwriting, record your voice, snap decent pics, and even capture a bit of video. The UX50 can "sniff out" nearby hot spots that let you make a Wi-Fi connection to the Web. You can also get online using the Bluetooth option, once you mate it with a Bluetooth-enabled cellphone like the Sony Ericsson P800 reviewed below. It's just as easy to send and receive text, graphics, and audio files from other computers using the HotSync option. Be warned: if you get one of these little creatures on Christmas morn, you'll want to take the rest of the day to get to know it.

www.sonystyle.com, 877-865-7669

Swell Phone

With its phone, PDA, camera, MP3 player, Web browsing, gaming, and video capabilities, the **Sony Ericsson P800 cellphone** (\$650) lets you indulge in a half century of hard-won technical innovation. The phone is topnotch, with clear sound and great extras like personal ring tones, picture



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- [New Products - October 2003 < a>](#)
- [More . . .](#)

phonebook, voice dialing, and access to other functions while on a call. The CommuniCam mode takes photos that you can store, transfer, or send in an e-mail right from the phone. The P800 pulls PDA duty with a full suite of productivity software, and it easily syncs with other devices via either its infrared port, a built-in Bluetooth link, or the supplied SyncStation. I had no trouble marrying the Sony Clié to the P800 via the Bluetooth connection and then sending over some files. Speaking of wireless, the phone easily passed the Net test, getting me online without much fuss. The crisp, generous 1 5/8 x 2 3/8-inch widescreen display is enhanced for things like playing games with 3-D graphics. For operation, you can either use a stylus on the touchscreen or a clever, finger-friendly removable keypad. The P800 is so full of options that it could very well render both your PDA and cellphone obsolete.



www.sonyericsson.com, 800-374-2776

[Back](#) **Pages** [1](#) [2](#) [3](#) [4](#) [5](#) [6](#) [Next](#) [\[printer friendly\]](#)

[Back to Top](#)

[Home](#) | [Hot Topics](#) | [Equipment Reports](#) | [Entertainment Guide](#) | [Buying Tips](#) | [Forums](#)
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- Archives



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- [Front -v- Down-Firing Sub?????](#)
- [DTS and DD signs](#)
- [need advice on buying a sub](#)

3 of 6

[\[printer friendly\]](#)

Holiday Gift Guide 2003

continued

All Together Now

"Ease of use." "Plug and play." "User-friendly." These phrases are tossed about with far too much abandon by the guys who write ad copy for A/V gadgets. But you'd be hard pressed to accuse **Kodak's EasyShare DX4530 digital camera** (\$400) of breach of promise. It matches an easy-to-learn interface with some serious digital firepower: 5-megapixel resolution, 3x optical zoom, 3.3x digital zoom, 32 megabytes of built-in memory, and even 60 minutes of video capture when you use an optional memory card. The interactive software tutorial, exhaustive print manual, and in-camera menus are both simple and thorough. (And the Kodak has that most useful of all digital-camera features — an on-body, dedicated delete button.) Crave instant corroboration of your shutterbug talent? No lines, no waiting, no creepy one-hour photo guy fixating on your family — the **Kodak EasyShare 4000 printer dock** (\$200) offers one-stop charging, transferring, and printing. Pop the camera on the dock, press the print button, and in less than 2 minutes you get vivid 4 x 6-inch thermal-dye-transfer prints that are even laminated for long life. (Kodak offers refill kits, good for 40 prints, for \$25.)



www.kodak.com, 800-235-6325

Vested Interest



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- [New Products - October 2003 < a>](#)
- [More . . .](#)

It just isn't *cool* to look weighed down by your tech tools. But you can cut the conspicuous consumption with the **Scott eVest Version Three.0 Fine-Tex System** (\$200; with fleece liner, \$310). This waterproof jacket could pass for another sporty piece of outerwear, but its inner universe puts the eVest in a niche of its own. I loaded mine with all manner of matter, hi-tech and low: cellphone, PDA, MP3 player, digital camera, extra batteries, sunglasses, keys, water bottle, and emergency rations (okay, a mini bag of Doritos). Even with all that gear in place, the eVest still looked, and felt, good. (The eVest line begins with the \$50 Windshirt and ends with the \$450 Limited Edition Leather.) Zip off the sleeves, and you have a high-capacity vest. The eVest's PAN (Personal Area Network) lets you string wire through the jacket's lining for strangle-free cable management. With more than 40 pockets and 36 zippers, about the only thing the Scott eVest can't hold is the kitchen sink. Maybe.



www.scottevest.com, 866-909-8378

[Back](#) **Pages** [1](#) [2](#) [3](#) [4](#) [5](#) [6](#) [Next](#)

[\[printer friendly\]](#)

[Back to Top](#)

[Home](#) | [Hot Topics](#) | [Equipment Reports](#) | [Entertainment Guide](#) | [Buying Tips](#) | [Forums](#)
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- Site Map
- Archives



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- [Front -v- Down-Firing Sub?????](#)
- [DTS and DD signs](#)
- [need advice on buying a sub](#)

4 of 6

[\[printer friendly\]](#)

Holiday Gift Guide 2003

continued

Harmonic Convergence

So you and the kids spend the usual pre-DVD warmup hunting and gathering remotes, and after carrying your bundle of kindling back to the electronic hearth, you find that you're still missing the stick that turns on the TV. Your brood is a great candidate for the **Harmony SST-659 remote control** (\$199), which combines logical ease with enough power to do the term "universal control" proud. You begin setup by connecting the remote to a computer via the



supplied USB cable and then going to the company's Web site. Since Harmony "ensures support of all infrared-control devices made by any manufacturer" (and it did indeed peg my 11-year-old, second-system Pioneer receiver), just enter the name and model number of your component, and the site does the rest. No more embarrassing remote-control "mating" rituals, and no more *macros*, thanks to the smart Activity buttons. Punch "Watch a Movie," and the Harmony fires up your whole system. The buttons glow a cool blue — essential for darkened rooms — and the LCD screen lights up, too, which is especially helpful since it can show TV listings downloaded from the Web site or MP3 titles. Hit the Help button, and the answers you need show on the display. The Harmony lets you control your gear as a true *system* while curing remote bloat at the same time.

www.harmonyremote.com, 866-291-1505

Rubber Meets the Road

Quality counts in a DVD player, and "portable" shouldn't mean "poor." Sporting a red-and-black rubberized exterior (the tech term for this is "killer"), the **Toshiba SD-P1200 portable DVD player** (\$600)



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- [New Products - October 2003 < a>](#)
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features a bright picture via its 7-inch widescreen LCD, MP3 playback, a JPEG viewer, and 31¼ hours of juice from its rechargeable lithium-ion battery. You won't want to rely on the player's tiny speakers, but the sound really took off when I plugged in a good pair of earbuds (see "S&V Picks," page 160) and chose the enhanced audio mode. Movies like *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* and *The Santa Clause 2* were totally engrossing even in stereo. Solid, but not heavy, the Toshiba is definitely road ready but can just as easily park itself on your shelf for in-home use. S-video and digital audio connections, an AC adapter, and a wafer-thin remote mean you can jack it into your main system, too.



www.tacp.toshiba.com, 800-631-3811

[Back](#) **Pages** [1](#) [2](#) [3](#) 4 [5](#) [6](#) [Next](#) [\[printer friendly\]](#)

[Back to Top](#)

[Home](#) | [Hot Topics](#) | [Equipment Reports](#) | [Entertainment Guide](#) | [Buying Tips](#) | [Forums](#)
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- Hot Forum Topics**
- [Front -v- Down-Firing Sub?????](#)
 - [DTS and DD signs](#)
 - [need advice on buying a sub](#)

5 of 6

[\[printer friendly\]](#)

Holiday Gift Guide 2003

continued

Room with a Viewer

If your friend's digital shots of the majestic Rockies just don't look very, well, *majestic* when you view them on your laptop, and his sunset over the Loire Valley looks more like rush hour in Orange County, you need the **Sandisk Digital Photo Viewer** (\$50). Lightweight and no bigger than a VHS tape, it accepts all popular removable-memory formats (including SD/MMC, Memory Stick, and CompactFlash) and plugs into a TV to read bold and beautiful JPEGs of up to 6 megapixels. The remote control lets you choose the memory format, run slide shows, zoom, rotate, and — for those less than stellar snaps — delete.



www.sandisk.com, 866-726-3475

Lean Machine

For a svelte beauty with full-bodied chutzpah, wrap your paws around **Casio's Exilim EX-S2 digital camera** (\$250). The slim (less than 1 inch thick), light (3-ounce) stainless-steel frame houses a camera with 2-megapixel resolution, 4x digital zoom, 12 megabytes of internal memory, and an SD/MMC memory slot. The 1 5/8-inch color LCD viewscreen is generous for a camera this size, and while the rocker button is understandably small, the onscreen menu options are easy to read and intuitive to use. Another plus is the handy all-in-one cradle that serves as both a USB hub while you're downloading images and as a charger for the camera's lithium-ion battery, which is good for about 390 shots or an hour of continuous use. The resulting prints can be sized up to 8 x 10 inches, and the images have color accuracy and clarity beyond what you'd guess for the megapixels. This skinny mini also shoots 30 seconds of video — watch out, Sundance. (Available only at RadioShack.)



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- [New Products - October 2003 < a >](#)
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www.casio.com or www.radioshack.com, 800-843-7422

Right Before Your Eyes

Taking up a mere square foot of floor space and standing almost 4 feet high, the **Sharper Image DVD Power Tower 80** (\$170) is a clever cure for clutter. Get up to 80 DVDs out of crowded shelves, dusty corners, and free-form floor stacks and into this nifty storage system. Hit the switch and your discs glide past, lit by a bright LED lamp that turns off after rotation ends. The slots hold DVDs securely while the belt runs 360° in either direction, but you can easily remove and replace the boxes. The Tower's power comes from either six D batteries or the supplied AC adapter.

www.sharperimage.com, 800-344-4444



[Back](#) **Pages** [1](#) [2](#) [3](#) [4](#) [5](#) [6](#) [Next](#)

[\[printer friendly\]](#)

[Back to Top](#)

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- Archives



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- [Front -v- Down-Firing Sub?????](#)
- [DTS and DD signs](#)
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6 of 6

[\[printer friendly\]](#)

Holiday Gift Guide 2003

continued

Double Duty

Every clan has its tech freak — the one member who immediately embraces bold technological advances, making way for the new by obliterating the old, sweeping aside all that is obsolete with breathtaking determination. Then there's the rest of the family. The **Samsung DVD-V3650 DVD player/VCR** (\$150) is for them. Chances are you know somebody who has loads of those clunky "VHS tape" things lying around. They might even have a VCR that's struggling along on its last legs. Samsung's slim DVD/VCR combo eliminates the need for two machines, and it's also a great gift for the grandparents who haven't yet — gasp! — come over to the DVD side. The V3650 doesn't just trade on novelty but offers all the functions of separate models, including progressive-scan DVD playback and an Intro Scan VCR feature that handily finds the beginning of each recorded portion of a VHS tape.



www.samsungusa.com, 800-726-7864

Two-Timer

So one alarm clock just isn't cutting it. You wake in a blear and turn your mate's alarm off. Or your dearly beloved smacks the snooze button one too many times, making everybody late. And who wants to begin the day with cheap, tinny, low-fi sound coming from a tacky, low-rent plastic cabinet? The **Tivoli Audio Model Three clock radio** (\$200) and its partner in time, the **Model Three dual-alarm speaker** (\$100), let you strike the right first note. Joined by a 15-foot cable and designed with spare elegance and natural wood (just *smell* it), this set is almost too beautiful to leave tucked in the bedroom. But what's *inside* counts, too: the electronics for both were concocted by the late, great Henry Kloss. Controls are at a minimum. You set the alarms



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- [New Products - October 2003 < a>](#)
- [More . . .](#)

by turning silver thumbwheels, the snooze buttons are perfectly placed, and the smooth moves of the main unit's analog tuning dial are reassuringly firm. The sound is warm, full, and altogether surprising coming from cabinets this small. And you can use the dual-alarm speaker to turn the whole shebang into a stereo system. With outputs for adding a subwoofer or feeding the signal to a receiver, your morning wake-up call can rival last night's living-room concert.



www.tivoliaudio.com, 877-297-9479

[Back](#) **Pages** [1](#) [2](#) [3](#) [4](#) [5](#) [6](#)

[\[printer friendly\]](#)

[Back to Top](#)

[Home](#) | [Hot Topics](#) | [Equipment Reports](#) | [Entertainment Guide](#) | [Buying Tips](#) | [Forums](#)
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