

# Gadgets that won't gather dust - Gizmos with payback

Including one that does rather well

Tyler Hamilton  
Nov 20, 2006

*(Copyright (c) 2006 Toronto Star, All Rights Reserved. )*

It felt more like early April than late November last week, but don't let the mild, rainy weather fool you.

There's roughly a month to go until Christmas, and whether you like it or not buying gifts for friends and family will soon be weighing on many minds.

Don't be like me, waiting until the last minute and being forced to buy a gift for the sake of buying one, when what you really want to do is purchase an item that you know someone is going to use and appreciate.

To make life a little easier, below you'll find gift suggestions that follow three themes

The first is convenience for the buyer, because you can purchase all of them online and from Canadian sources, assuming you don't wait until Dec. 15.

The second is technology. Whether we're talking robotics, wireless, or renewable energy, all items are techie to some degree. Finally Rob Cribb picks up this theme too, this week, Cribbnotes on page 5.

The third theme is practical. All of these gifts serve a useful purpose, whether to help someone conserve energy, be more productive, or avoid distressing situations.

Roomba Discovery, \$299,

iRobot Corp. (Burlington, Mass.), [www.irobot.com](http://www.irobot.com)

Sold at [www.canadiantire.com](http://www.canadiantire.com)

Okay, we've all heard by now about this crazy Frisbee-shaped vacuum robot that wiggles its way around a home and sucks up dirt.

"Can't possibly work," you've thought to yourself just before dismissing the concept.

That was me about three weeks ago before being offered a chance to test out iRobot Corp.'s popular Roomba vacuum. Now my wife and I talk about it, strangely, like it's a member of the family.

The fact is Roomba works, assuming you've got reasonable expectations and no shag carpets.

No, it doesn't do stairs, and yes, it does have a problem with corners, but it is perfect for keeping dust bunnies in check and using it to maintain an acceptably dirt- and dust-free floor. Oh, and it's apparently good for picking up pet hair.

It's liberating. If you're about to leave the house for a few hours, drop it where you want to clean up and let it loose.

The Roomba changes direction when its front bumper gently hits walls and furniture, and it uses sensors to methodically clean a room and avoid falling down stairs. You can set up a device called a "virtual wall" that sends out an invisible laser beam that the Roomba won't cross, great if you've got an open-concept home and want to keep the vacuum focused on a certain area.

When it's done cleaning or when the battery is low, it will navigate back to its charging base. We have mostly hardwood floors, making the Hamilton household Roomba-friendly. On the other hand, we have two young children and toys all over the house, meaning a bit of pre-tidying is necessary before we use the Roomba - not so fun.

The battery is surprisingly strong, the brushes durable and the traction excellent. You have to clean the brush frequently, especially if someone in the house has long hair. Dirt has to be emptied after every cleaning.

We used a more expensive version of the product called the Roomba Scheduler, which comes with a remote control that lets you program the vacuum so it automatically cleans on a certain schedule. We never used this feature and probably never would. Best to stick with the cheaper Roomba Discovery, which doesn't have the scheduler function but is still iRobot's most popular version.

Longevity of the unit was a major concern for me. Sure, it works for a few weeks but can something as complex as a robot work for several years? Tough to say. The company has only been selling the Roomba in quantity for three years. That said, it has sold more than two million units, it carries a one-year warranty, parts and replacement brushes are easy to find, and buzz on the Web is that iRobot has excellent customer service.

As good as the Roomba is, however, it's not a replacement for your regular heavy-duty vacuum. It's always best to have a backup, anyway.

FreeCharge Weza, \$273, Freeplay Energy Plc (UK); Info at [www.freeplayenergy.com](http://www.freeplayenergy.com); sold at [www.modernoutpost.com](http://www.modernoutpost.com)

Having a backup is what the FreeCharge Weza is all about. Made by Freeplay Energy of London, the Weza is essentially an energy- storage device that makes the best of any situation.

If you have access to a wall socket, you can plug in the Weza and charge up its 7 amp-hour lead-acid battery for the road. It will power handheld devices, such as GPS trackers, mobile phones and other small devices, through a 12-volt cigarette lighter adapter.

But it can also be used to jumpstart a car's battery, which is quite useful if you find yourself stranded in the middle of nowhere during a winter storm and need a boost. Jumper cables, by the way, are included.

Now here's the kicker If the Weza has lost its charge and you have no access to a wall-socket, a peddle or "treadle" attached to the device can be used to energize the unit via step action, similar to pumping up a pool toy.

Using this feature is a bit awkward and can't be sustained for very long. It's also quite noisy, but it gets you enough juice to jump-start that car or to run emergency devices. Remember the October 2003 blackout?

Another drawback is that it weighs 18 pounds, so it's not the type of thing you want to carry around with you. But as a backup it's ideal for leaving in the trunk for emergency situations, around the home in case the power goes out, or at a campsite.

If you do have to carry it, it comes with a durable bag with plenty of pockets. Freeplay has a two-year warranty.

The PowerCost Monitor, \$150, Blue Line Innovations (St. Johns, Newfoundland);  
[www.blue](http://www.blue)

[lineinnovations.com](http://lineinnovations.com); Sold

at [www.save-electricity.ca](http://www.save-electricity.ca)

On the issue of power use, it's no secret if you live in this province that the government is trying to promote a culture of energy conservation.

Over the next two decades, it's hoping that conservation and better management of when and how we use electricity will reduce peak demand by more than 6,000 megawatts - the equivalent of about nine CANDU 6 nuclear reactors.

The introduction of smart meters, starting in 2007 through to 2010, is expected to encourage homeowners to shift their electricity demand from daytime peak hours to off-peak hours in the night. But most people won't see these new meters for a couple of years.

What Blueline Innovations has created is a simple wireless monitor for inside the home that communicates with your old electromechanical meter on the outside. It tells you how much electricity you're using at any given moment and how much it might be costing you, allowing a homeowner to make more informed decisions on conservation.

I've had a PowerCost Monitor hooked up to my meter for a couple of months now. It was relatively easy to physically install. I experienced a bit of confusion trying to get the monitor to communicate with the outside sensor, but a quick call to the company's customer service line solved that problem.

I noticed after installing the monitor, which has a liquid crystal display, that I was obsessed with looking at it. It's almost like you're forced, as part of the set-up process, to synchronize yourself with the rhythm of your household.

Every time I saw a spike in the kilowatt-hour reading I'd look at my wife and ask something like, "Do you have something in the dryer?" or "Is the dishwasher on heat-dry cycle?" I'd find myself moving from floor to floor looking for unnecessary lights and devices to turn off. The real-time feedback does an effective job of getting a person to think about their energy consumption.

That's the first step to taking action on conservation. Hydro One conducted a 500-home pilot study in 2005, using Blue Line's monitor, and found that participants reduced their energy use by between 7 per cent and 10 per cent. The device could end up paying for itself during its first year of use.

As an added bonus, the monitor displays the outside temperature and also has a clock on it. It's also light and portable, so you can hang it on a wall or stand it upright like a picture frame.

I do have a couple of quibbles. The device doesn't work so well when it's raining hard outside or very windy, perhaps a design flaw, or a sign that I didn't do a good job at connecting the sensor to my meter.

Also, the sensor, if exposed to direct sunlight, will give you a skewed temperature reading. Spectrum reports on technology

issues. Reach Tyler Hamilton at

thamilt @ thestar.ca