

What to Get.....?

Gift ideas for brain injury survivors

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The holidays are coming. A birthday rolls around every year, not to mention Mother's Day, Father's Day, Valentine's Day and various anniversaries. It occurred to me that friends and family looking for the perfect gift for those who were blessed and lucky enough to survive a brain injury might be able to use a few "professional" tips. What kind of a present might really make a difference in a brain injury survivor's life?

Given the fact that I'm a speech-language pathologist and teach Memory Strategies, Study Skills and Advocacy through the Community College District, you can probably guess I'm not going to answer the above question with "a tie." Let's consider the "high tech" possibilities first. Small **voice memo recorders** are the auditory version of self-stick notes and are an easy-to-use, hand-held gadget to record messages to oneself throughout the day, such as "call Mom when I get home" or "take the steak out to defrost." Their recording time varies from 30 seconds to several minutes and they're small enough to be carried in a purse, backpack or even in a pocket. It's best to get one with adequate recording time, buttons large enough for the person's motor skills, good recording quality and a light or some signal to let the person know there's a message(s) waiting. Prices range from as low as \$15 to about \$200; there are plenty of versions in the \$30-90 range. Voice memo recorders are especially ideal for people who are unable to write legibly due to aphasia or motor problems and who have a hard time consistently using their Day Planner. They're also great to "capture" thoughts that pop up at the moments when we can't write-these can then be listened to later and transferred to a planner or to a To Do list. By the way, many of my students (who are still waiting for this perfect gift) use their **telephone answering machine** in the same way. If they have something really important that they're worried they're going to forget, they call home and leave themselves a message! (and write it in their planner...and put it on a Post-It on their bathroom mirror and...)

Electronic spell checkers rank high on the list, as well. These, again, can range in price from \$15 to \$150 or more, depending on the features. A good spell checker can be purchased for \$20-\$60. Words can be typed in as they sound (or as the person thinks they are spelled) and the device will "search" for the correct spelling. Many inexpensive versions also provide a thesaurus (synonyms) feature and include word games, which are excellent for practicing word retrieval skills and enhancing vocabulary levels. Almost all survivors complain that spelling is more difficult for them post-injury and a spell checker is an essential tool for anyone going to school or having to do a lot of writing. It has clear advantages over a traditional dictionary, in that the device can find the correct spelling when the word is typed in more or less phonetically. You'd be looking a *long time* for the word "sikologee" in a paper dictionary since it requires accuracy at least on the first 2-3 letters! Some types even have a voice feature to pronounce the word, which can aid recognition. I do not recommend spell checkers for people with severe aphasia who have difficulty writing at the word level. The machine will not be able to find the correct word if it is significantly misspelled and often times, a person with severe aphasia will not be able to recognize the word they wanted from the choices the checker provides.

The big ticket item would be **electronic planners or organizers**, into which information can be entered via a keyboard or by using a stylus and actually writing on the screen. Electronic organizers can run from \$50-\$500 and can store your daily calendar and phone numbers. Additional features often include a calculator, spell checker, a "memo pad", among others. There's a simple version of the Palm Pilot out now for about \$150.

Although some people swear by these fancier devices, there are many advantages to an old-fashioned **paper-pencil day planner**, especially for beginners. A calendar or paper day planner doesn't have a long list of instructions to decipher or complicated sequences of buttons to push. It may be easier to read than a small display screen and can show you your week *in context*, rather than just one day or one item at a time. People are also more likely to want your Palm Pilot than your Day Runner planner notebook, so there's less to worry about if you leave it somewhere (or get it wet!). Generally, I recommend a planner that is at least 5 ½ x 8 inches big, has *preprinted* dated pages and an address section and shows a *week at a time* when opened. Monthly calendars with a grid of small boxes do not

have enough space to record details of appointments and lists. "Day"-at-a-glance type calendars may be optimal for people with severe memory problems since they provide adequate writing space for the person to write daily, detailed journal-like entries. Ring-bound (versus spiral bound) planners allow the person to take out irrelevant sections and add in pages, handouts and notices. An innovative present for someone who already owns a planner would be, of all things, a **(cook)book stand!** By consistently putting one's planner, for example, *open to the correct date*, on a stand in the middle of the kitchen table when returning home is a fantastic visual reminder to constantly check it (and write in it!). Finally, a large **master family calendar** for the refrigerator is always a good investment, too.

Other affordable devices include watches, timers, alarm clocks, calculators, and regular tape recorders. Frequently after a brain injury, people notice that their "internal clock" is off and that they often lose track of time and end up late or feeling rushed. A **good watch**, showing time and day/date, is essential. Many inexpensive brands now come with alarm settings and displays to program in phone numbers and even appointments. An alarm feature can help survivors learn to take their medications independently or serve as a reminder to check one's Day Planner twice a day. For many people, it's hard to remember to look at their watch, particularly if they get involved in a project or are trying to do two things at one (like filling out some forms while waiting for the water to boil or while running a load of wash). Simple **"kitchen" timers** can be found in most stores and despite their name, can be put in *every* room. They can be set and they ring loudly enough for the people to be cued onto the next task ("I'll set the timer for 30 minutes because then I have to stop what I'm doing and get ready for my doctor's appointment."). **Alarm clocks** now come with extra large numbers displays and/or voice. Due to the difficulties with self-monitoring that people with brain injury often experience, a **calculator** with large buttons and a paper tape printout (or voice) works well in helping them catch entry errors and see their work. This can be a valuable device in allowing someone to resume handling his or her own finances and checkbook. **Tape recorders** can be useful for people returning to school if they have a *counter feature*. Most of us do not have the discipline to listen to an entire 1-3 hour lecture again at night, after every class, no matter how fascinating it was! However, while taking notes or listening in class, you can jot down the place on the tape counter where you "space out" or get lost or have questions and can simply fast-forward to that portion of the tape later to get clarification.

Nothing can beat simplicity and common sense, though. A lifetime supply of **self-stick notes**, such as Post-Its, is a very thoughtful gift to buy in bulk. Stock up on various sizes and colors (although dark colors tend to obscure the writing) and help the person strategically place them around the house, the car, near the phone, in their planner, etc. **Automatic shut-off appliances** (irons, coffee brewers, etc.) can be lifesavers. **Pillboxes** are promote independence and range from simple to more elaborate models equipped with reminder alarms, built-in water compartments and straws and multiple day/time divisions. An **extra-large key chain** (some even come with a beeper-finder) can make life a lot easier, as can a **gift membership to AAA** for roadside emergencies, etc. How about a **car emergency kit**, a **new Thomas Brothers map book**, a **Medic Alert bracelet or necklace** (telephone: 1-800-432-5378) or **prepaid bus passes**? Educational and/or therapeutic gifts also include things like **relaxation tapes** if the person has trouble sleeping (a common problem after B.I.), **membership to a pool or a gym** or an **exercise video**, or one of several good **books about brain injury**. A book that most of my students find very interesting and inspiring is *Over My Head* by Claudia Osborn. It can be ordered through a bookstore or on the Internet via *amazon.com*.

Most of the gifts described in this article can be found in electronic stores such as, The Good Guys and Radio Shack or in office supply stores, including Office Depot and Staples or even in the appropriate department of stores such as, Best Buy, The Sharper Image, Target, Longs, Savon or K-Mart. I can also highly recommend the *Yes, I Can* store in Escondido (1356 West Valley Parkway; Suite J (760) 739-7900), which carries a multitude of disability-related products. *Happy shopping!!*