

Giving Power to the People

Power: We need it. We're crazy for it—or, more precisely, our gadgets need it, and we're crazy for it when our gadgets don't have it.

At the 2007 International Consumer Electronics show in Las Vegas, several companies are showing off products that help us through those moments of need. [Medis Technologies](#) points to its Medis 24/7 Power Pack. It's actually a fuel cell -- an electro-chemical device that converts chemical energy into electrical energy. This is the first fuel cell in history to receive the underwriter's laboratory (UL) listing for this use. The 24/7 Power Pack is small, lightweight and environmentally friendly. It's about the size of a PDA and when the fuel cell is used up—they last about three months—all that's left is water and a small plastic container. You can find it in major retailers starting in March 2007.

[Voxred International](#) is hocking its new TC² line of emergency power packs for cell phones, PDAs and digital cameras. The small TC² allows you to use standard alkaline batteries to power gadgets when the internal battery has died. According to Voxred, the TC² can provide two days of battery power for a cell phone; and one and half days of power for a PDA. But what truly qualifies this as a gadgety gadget—the TC² doubles as a flashlight. Two small bright-white LED lights are located on both ends of the adapter. You can find the TC² online at www.turbocellcharge.com starting in March 2007 and in retail stores shortly afterward.

Power Wranglers

[Freeplay Energy](#) has its own handle on emergency power—literally. Freeplay has a line of flashlights, lanterns and other devices that can be powered by turning a built-in hand crank. The internal motor is so efficient that, for example, cranking the handle for a minute creates enough power to drive a very bright LED light for more than an hour. The Freeplay Indigo Lantern, which garnered an honorable mention in the CES design and engineering awards, has the hand crank but can also draw power from its solar panel or by plugging in its AC adapter. The Indigo LED Lantern is available at Target and REI, as well as through online retailers.

Finally, one other power gadget here that deserves mention: The Flexity [PowerSquid](#) surge protector. It's a common problem: Almost every gadget and peripheral requires a power adapter. And a typical power strip often can only accommodate three of these bulky adapters, paring the strip's six inputs down to three. The PowerSquid, which recently won a very prestigious industrial design award, solves this problem. Look at the picture; nothing more need be said. You can find the PowerSquid online, as well as in retail stores such as Home Depot.

Tech Empowerment

Geeks understand that gadgets make life easier, more convenient. But at CES, we've uncovered gadgets that can make a real difference in people's basic quality of life. Consider the Clear Harmony, Sound Clarity and Able Ear products from [Able Planet](#). Clear Harmony and Sound Clarity are two sets of noise-cancelling headphones that are designed for people with mild to moderate hearing loss. These headphones screen out the background noise and use technology to boost certain audio frequencies, making it possible for these people to hear levels of detail and clarity that they'd otherwise miss. They're terrific headsets to use when watching TV and DVDs or listening to audio books, MP3s and the like.

Able Ear is a tiny gadget that sits behind the ear. It's for people with moderate to profound hearing loss. Using patented technologies, the Able Ear enhances sound quality and speech clarity as much as eight times that of normal hearing.

Finally, for the person who wants to be connected to friends and relatives via e-mail but who doesn't want to bother with a PC, [Presto Services](#) has the solution. The Presto Service and HP Printing Mailbox is a small, smart printer designed in partnership with Hewlett-Packard. Every few hours, the mailbox dials into the Presto Services mail server, where e-mail addressed to, say, your grandparents has been collecting. The mailbox downloads the messages and prints them in an attractive format. (It handles attached photos effortlessly, too.) To make it easy for your grandparents to reply to a message, the letter includes the sender's phone number at the top, which is what Presto's research indicates these non-techy types want in order to respond.

The Presto Service is one that you would manage with your grandparents. You can help them set up their e-mail address and create a list of acceptable senders and their phone numbers. (Presto's is a white-list-based service, which means your grandparents will only receive e-mail from people whom they've specified.) You can help your grandparents pick the templates to use for e-mail messages and also request additional items, such as newsletters, crossword puzzles and sudoku puzzles, be delivered to their mailbox on a regular basis.

The Presto Service and HP Printing Mailbox is available at www.presto.com and online retailers.

Mark Mitchell lives in West Chester, Penn. He's been writing about technology for more than 20 years.