

By: **David H. Freedman**

A SLEW OF NEW GADGETS CAN HELP YOU COMPETE.

For better or worse, most of us are now hostage to a constant stream of data, images, and conversations beamed at us via cell phone and Wi-Fi networks. To remain tuned in, you probably have a quiver of fancy gadgets, like a smart phone with a slide-out keyboard, Skype or Vonage (NYSE:VG) boxes in your home for making phone calls over the Internet, and a Wi-Fi detector in your hand to let you know which cafés let you fire up the laptop and burrow into the corporate network.

Indeed, it's taken for granted now that in an always-on economy, being connected is key to business success. But if that's the case, if connectivity confers competitive advantage, then what really counts is how connected you are compared with the next guy. In other words, by limiting yourself to standard communications technologies and applications, you're just keeping up. If you want to get ahead, you've got to take your connectedness to the next level. Fortunately, that's doable--thanks to a handful of new, slightly exotic products that haven't yet achieved much awareness.

One way of boosting connectivity is to increase the amount of time the network is available to you. For all the talk of being constantly wired, even your Batman utility belt's worth of gadgets probably leaves you stranded offline from time to time. That's not just an issue when you're entertaining clients on the catamaran or inspecting drainage at a backwoods site. Researchers have found that one-third of all cell phone calls suffer from quality problems. And outside urban areas, Wi-Fi hot spots are the exception, not the rule.

You no longer have to put up with that sort of detachment. For starters, there are now cell phone range extenders, which typically enlist a book-size antenna that can be stuck on a wall or a car roof to snag faint signals. A small box then amplifies and broadcasts the signal to the immediate area so you--and your employees or family--can use a cell phone in a spot that's normally a dead zone.

One example of a range extender: the \$399.99 zBoost, from Atlanta-based Wi-Ex, which rebroadcasts signals across an area of about 2,500 square feet. The company has been shipping extenders since 2005, but it's been gaining more attention for more recent models that are compatible with a wider range of cell phone networks.