

[TECH SUPPORT]



to \$120 per tag, per event, it's pricey.

And while the information-swapping feature seems sexy—icebreaking for geeks!—very few of the attendees here actually take advantage of that. More useful are the personalized agenda and the ability to easily exchange electronic business cards. nTAG emails the cards later, as well as the identity of anyone we've spoken to for more than 45 seconds. Conference organizers, meanwhile, can break down attendance by demographic, or identify the so-called Kevin Bacons who act as the biggest social nexuses.

This ability to see who's around you holds the largest potential—and hurdle—for these tags. When technology consultant Clay Shirky tried nTAG at the Pop!Tech conference, he thought that the "autistic" suggestions of common interests "lacked social subtlety." But then he learned from his tag that a conversational partner had just spoken to the writer Virginia Postrel, someone he desperately wanted to meet. "That had this kind of electric effect," Shirky says. "That is genuinely useful social information that can't be otherwise conveyed."

There are delicate privacy issues with all these devices, of course. Corbin Ball, a meeting-industry technology consultant, says he was shocked when he returned to his hotel with his conference tag (from Shockfish, an nTAG rival) and suddenly could see who was in the rooms around him—others who also had forgotten to turn tags off. "It will completely freak some people out," says Ball.

But in Boston, I've just made a good new contact. "It's a new way of interacting," says Patti. "It kind of invites me to intrude on your space." He holds his tag out to mine, and we each press a button to exchange cards.

ICEBREAKING FOR GEEKS—AND MORE

By Ian Mount

In a crowded hotel conference room, Paul Patti's name tag is talking to me:

Hi, Ian!
—VOIP
—Monty Python

It's telling me that Patti, an instructor for Concord Communications Inc., enjoys Monty Python and has expertise in voice over Internet protocol (something I sorely need).

We're schmoozing electronically at a Concord user's group conference in Boston. The technology that's letting us do so is from a company called nTAG Interactive. It's both ingenious and sort of scary: After the electronic tags are populated with job, interest, and agenda infor-

mation, they use infrared and radio frequencies to note session attendance, exchange electronic business cards, and broadcast interests to conversation partners.

Founded in 2002 by Rick Borovoy and George Eberstadt and based on Borovoy's research at MIT's Media Lab, nTAG is one of several companies that have sprung up to make conferences—notoriously difficult places to meet the right people—more efficient. The idea is to cut to the conversational chase and, in Borovoy's words, free "trapped social capital."

Smart name tags are in their infancy, and they're not perfect. At 6 ounces, including four AAA batteries, the nTAG device is kinda heavy. It communicates only with other badges no farther than 6 feet away. And at rental fees of \$40

[GEAR]

LEISURE ON YOUR LAPTOP

By Brian T. Horowitz

YOUR MOBILE COMPUTER is no longer just for work on the run: Now you can catch up anywhere on that episode of *CSI* you recorded on your notebook's hard drive. Toshiba's new Qosmio laptops (www.qosmio.com) jam a PC, movie theater, digital video recorder (DVR), instant-on TV set, photo gallery, and music player into one sleek machine.

I test-drove the \$2,999 Qosmio G15-AV501, featuring a bright, 17-inch wide-screen display. Its DVR allows you to pause and rewind live television as well as record your favorite shows using the dual-drive 100 GB storage or the DVD Super-Multi burner. Or use the buttons in front of the keyboard to launch TV or movies without booting up. Seasoned multitaskers can surf the Web and crunch spreadsheets with the TV screen's size reduced, or with sound in the background.

The Qosmio's Harman/Kardon surround-sound speakers are impressive for a notebook—the guitars on U2's new song "Vertigo" rang out in all directions. A *Raiders of the Lost Ark* DVD looked terrific on the wide-screen LCD; I forgot I was staring at a laptop screen. And the integrated Intel Pro/Wireless 2200BG network connectivity maximizes the Wi-Fi signal.

The one big downside: My battery lasted for only 1 hour and 38 minutes, not the best for a Pentium M notebook—but not surprising for a laptop offering the wonders of live television.

