

Published in Law Office Computing:

FlashTrax

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SmartDisk has made a name for itself by producing good, reliable portable FireWire and USB hard disk drives in small form packages. Now the company has pushed its envelope a bit and created a very sleek and well-designed video storage display unit named FlashTrax. FlashTrax starts out with a 30 GB hard disk drive as its core. SmartDisk has built the hard disk into a small (5.63" x 3.62" x 1.26") and light (12 oz.) package that houses the hard disk as well as a very decent 3.5" diagonal LCD color TFT display. They have created a basic operating system for it, which allows it to store and utilize (display or play) digital photographs, videos and MP3 audio files.

The FlashTrax draws power through an included 5V AC adapter or a 5V DC adapter. The AC adapter operates on 110-240 inputs, which means that it can work overseas with a plug adapter. The FlashTrax stores power in a rechargeable integrated Lithium-Ion battery. The battery has a relatively short burn time, however. A three hour charge will last less than three hours playing MP3 files and less than two hours showing photos. Additional batteries will be available at some time in the future, but you can't get them now, even at the \$69 price shown on the SmartDisk web site.

The FlashTrax accepts Compact Flash (CF Type I and II) and IBM MicroDrive cards. SmartDisk has promised an adapter (optional purchase) that will allow the FlashTrax to read SD, MMC, Smart Media and Memory Stick flash memory devices). They have a picture of the adapter on their web site (see below) and list it at a price of \$49.99. But you can't get it yet.



The FlashTrax can zoom in and out, pan, scroll and rotate JPEG digital photo files. It can read and display GIF and BMP files, but cannot zoom, pan, scroll or rotate them. The FlashTrax can decode MJPEG video files at up to 320 x 240 x 30 frames per second or 640 x 480 x 10 frames per second.

In addition, the FlashTrax has a video output and compatibility with NTSC and PAL television systems (that means it will work in the US and in Europe). It comes with a remote control unit to control display of the images on the television screen. You can present manual or automatically timed slide shows,

A hidden secret of the FlashTrax is that it can also store standard computer files. That means that, if you want, you can use it for backup of critical data files. It does not have PIM functionality, but, since it does have the ability to read simple text files, a short to do list stored as a text file can be read and displayed by the FlashTrax.

One other feature that might interest some of you is the ability to store and play PowerPoint slide shows. To do that, create your show in PowerPoint and use PowerPoint's built-in ability to export the show as a series of JPEG images in a folder. (To export a PowerPoint slide show as a set of JPG images, select File - Save As and select JPEG File Interchange Format in the "Save As Type" field of the Save As dialogue box). If you copy that folder to FlashTrax, you can view your

PowerPoint slide show on FlashTrax, or on an overhead projector connected to FlashTrax.

SmartDisk built FlashTrax for simple navigation. You move around the FlashTrax file structure using a 5-way navigator button. Additional +/- zoom controls and a mode, function and escape button complete the main panel, which is available on the top of the FlashTrax deck when you have the clamshell screen in the "open" position. The FlashTrax also has external controls for the MP3 Player that you can use with the case closed.

FlashTrax interfaces with computers running on the Windows 98 SE or later platforms and Mac OS 8.6 or later (including OS X (10.1 or later) platforms. The FlashTrax uses a USB interface. It operates on USB 2.0 or with USB 1.1. Mac users note that no FireWire version exists, so you are limited to USB 1.1 speed unless you get a USB 2.0 card for your computer.

The FlashTrax comes with a light cloth "carry case" that closes with a drawstring and a slide lock. SmartDisk has traditionally shipped its hard disk drives with quite nice and fairly protective neoprene cases. I don't know why they shifted to the cloth case for the FlashTrax; but it would be a good idea for them to go back to neoprene. If you get a FlashTrax, it would also be a good idea to get a decent case for it before taking it on the road.

Closing Argument:

SmartDisk's FlashTrax is a palm-sized portable photo and video storage device that also functions as an MP3 Player and as a 30GB external hard disk for a computer. The FlashTrax can read and store digital photos and motion picture AVI (MJPEG.AVI) files and display them on its 3.5" diagonal LCD color display. It can also store MP3 music files and play them through its built-in speaker or to a headset. The unit is well designed, small and portable. Its utility is limited at present, however, by the lack of an available adapter to allow it to accept flash storage devices other than Compact Flash cards or IBM MicroDrive cards.

The Verdict: \$499. For most people, FlashTrax is a fairly pricey toy. But, if you are into digital photography and want to have a simple,

easy way to store and display pictures or do not want to carry your laptop with you on a trip, The FlashTrax looks like a pretty handy gadget to have around. If you don't have a digital camera that uses Compact Flash storage, however, get another camera or wait until the adapter becomes available for other flash storage media, so that it can work with your camera.