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## Independent data storage market growing rapidly

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The portable storage market has grown tremendously over the past few months. That's good news for those who need to carry around a lot of data but don't like lugging a notebook computer to do it.

The portable storage trend got underway last year with the proliferation of USB flash memory devices -- small, cigarette-lighter sized nonvolatile memory sticks that allowed you to store as much as a gigabyte or two of data and transfer it easily to any computer that had a USB port.

But those devices, dubbed memory sticks or USB keys, were more commonly found in the 256 MB or 512 MB capacities -- better than a floppy drive, without a doubt, but still insufficient for many people. After all, a CD's worth of MP3 files recorded at decent quality today requires more than 256 MB. The larger-capacity, 1 GB memory sticks were too expensive to make them worth the cost. So the search continued.

Recently, technology manufacturers have trotted onto the market a host of tiny storage devices that sport miniature hard drives with multiple-gigabyte capacities. These tiny data guzzlers generally cost less than USB sticks and still, in many cases, fit in the palm of your hand or slip nicely into a shirt pocket.

The hard disk maker Seagate ([www.seagate.com](http://www.seagate.com)) wants to push mass storage into the pockets of the many with its Pocket Hard Drive series of palm-sized, oval storage units. Pocket Hard Drives, now available widely at the retail level, come in sizes of 2.5 and 5 GB, offering significantly more storage than the largest USB stick and costing about half as much, at around US\$160 for the 2.5 GB version.

There's little doubt that Seagate is targeting the dissatisfied users of USB sticks. The Pocket Hard Drives boast durability, housed as they are in a round shell that absorbs shock -- the

primary culprit in portable hard drive failures.

Portability does not take a backseat to convenience with the latest-generation of portable storage units. The Pocket Hard Drive does away with power cords altogether, getting its power directly from the USB port into which it plugs. There's not even a USB cable to worry about: it's attached to the unit, retractable when not in use.

Also, the Audavi Corporation ([www.hardtape.com](http://www.hardtape.com)) has a somewhat novel approach to getting an even larger amount of data in your pocket with its HardTape series of PDA-sized devices. The HardTape may not have the most appealing name to those who remember the teeth-grinding slowness of tape backup systems, but the "tape" part of the product's name is an attempt to communicate the product's ruggedness, not its storage medium. The HardTape is actually a miniature hard drive housed to withstand a major impact.

In the HardTape's case, the blow can be a fall to concrete from 2 feet up. That's still not as rugged as some flash memory-based devices, but those don't offer the capacities that the HardTape does -- up to 80 GB, enough to back up most people's entire computer.

The HardTape comes with its own built-in software for backing up and encrypting data. It weighs a mere 8 ounces, is compatible with both Macintosh and Windows-based systems, and can connect to a computer using a FireWire, USB, or a PCMCIA connection. Currently, HardTapes are fairly difficult to find, but you can order directly from Audavi's Yahoo-based store ([www.store.yahoo.com/hardtape](http://www.store.yahoo.com/hardtape)).

I/O Magic ([www.iomagic.com](http://www.iomagic.com)) has also upped the ante in personal portable storage with its new GigaBank series of portable storage units. Ranging in size from 2.2 GB to 100 GB, these mini drives, like HardTape, offer a "single-touch" data backup capability for those whose primary purpose is to back up a notebook or desktop PC with one of these units.

The 2.2 GB and 4 GB versions of the GigaBank are credit-card sized, while the larger 40, 60, 80, and 100 GB versions are still tiny enough to fit comfortably in your pocket.

Each connects to the PC via a USB port, which also powers the drives, meaning there are no additional power cables to fuss with.

Even the USB cable is "built in" to the drive, sticking out just far enough to make it easy to connect. GigaBank drive prices start at under US\$100. Until now, hard drive makers have lacked creativity in devising products that make the ample storage capacities of their tiniest hard drives accessible.

Finally, that's beginning to change, as these product demonstrate, making the lives of the data-dependent just a little bit easier.

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