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Juicing Your BlackBerrys With Tested Apps

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To read the popular technology press, the ratio of iPhone applications to iPhone owners must rapidly be approaching one-to-one. But what of the poor BlackBerry user? As user-friendly and versatile as the iPhone might be, businesses -- including law firms -- overwhelmingly prefer the BlackBerry. And while not nearly as prominent as their iPhone cousins, there are many useful BlackBerry applications that can make the addictive little device an even more useful part of our lives.

This column discusses some of the most useful applications, each tried and tested and recommended based on personal experience.

The [BlackBerry Web site](#) (click the "Software" tab) displays a small portion of the available applications, but can be a good place to start to get an idea of the range of what is out there.

You'll be prompted to download a program called "BlackBerry App World" that, once installed on your hand-held, provides access to hundreds of different applications, organized by category, such as Entertainment, Games, Maps & Navigation, Productivity & Utilities.

BlackBerry App World can be a bit cumbersome to use. It loads at BlackBerry data-transfer speed, which is not what the typical broadband user is accustomed to, so be prepared for a sometimes-frustrating wait when exploring each category. Each application offers access to reviews and sample screen shots, and many of the paid applications are available for free on a trial basis.

There are a number of user forums that discuss, test and rate BlackBerry applications.

Free applications is the focus of www.blackberryfreeware.com. Also found posted there are brief summaries of application functionality as well as download links.

A forum for Smartphone users that includes a subforum on free applications is found at www.pinstack.com.

CNET provides descriptions of many downloadable BlackBerry applications at law.com/jsp/nylj/PubArticleFriendlyNY.js...

<http://download.cnet.com>. Click on the "mobile" tab and then select "Blackberry" to view the listings.

Having said that, it is not surprising that Google (www.google.com/mobile/blackberry/) has developed what I consider to be a core set of user-friendly, helpful, free BlackBerry applications, and so my review of individual applications will start with those.

Most BlackBerrys come with a place to insert a small "Mini-SD" memory card (mine is under the battery). Many applications will take advantage of the relatively large amounts of storage these cards provide. In other words, get yourself at least a two gigabyte memory card if you want to fully explore your BlackBerry's potential.

You'll also need to know your model name and number, since some applications only work on certain BlackBerry platforms (the new Bold seems to have wreaked havoc with a number of existing applications). Finally, find out what version of the BlackBerry software your unit is running. To do this, click on the "Options" icon on your screen (on mine it's a little wrench icon), then "About," to find your model number and software version.

GOOGLE'S APPLICATIONS

Among Google's suite of BlackBerry-compatible applications is a highly functional Gmail application that downloads a dedicated Gmail icon to your BlackBerry screen; a "[Google Mobile App](#)" that can launch a whole suite of Google services: Reader (for your blog subscriptions); News (current headlines); Calendar; and Docs (good for reviewing drafts while on the run). The most recent version of the Mobile App includes a voice feature, so you can speak your search requests instead of having to type them.

A "Google Synch" application synchronizes your BlackBerry calendar and address book with your Google calendar and address book. "Google Talk" allows you to exchange instant messages with your contacts; while this may not have much use for business, it can make it easier to stay in touch with friends and family members while you are out of the office.

"GOOG-411" is not a downloadable application, but it's very useful and worth a dedicated "hot key" on your phone. GOOG-411 is a free voice-driven directory assistance service available from any phone by dialing 1-800-466-4411 (1-800-GOOG-411). In addition to an automated voice that gives business contact information in response to a spoken query, GOOG-411 also will send the information via text message, and will then connect you via phone directly with the business, all for free.

GOOGLE MAPS

As useful as these Google applications are, the one I find most versatile is Google Maps. This is available via the Google Mobile App, but also as [a separate download with its own icon](#) (which is what I prefer because of its visibility on my handset).

This multifunction application replaces a number of competing single-purpose applications from other developers. It is, of course, a mapping program that will locate addresses and provide point-to-point driving directions. Even more useful, in my experience, is the feature that finds "My Location" based on local cell phone tower signals. When enabled, your map will include a dot surrounded by a wide circle that is supposed to represent your

possible location (using the cell phone tower signals means the plotted location will be approximate).

While the "My Location" dot is relatively accurate, you are at the mercy of the cell phone signals. This may explain why when I recently found myself in a cellular-challenged neighborhood in Port Washington, N.Y., Google Maps placed "My Location" as all the way across Long Island Sound in New Rochelle.

While knowing your "approximate" location may seem to be of limited utility, its real benefit comes when you search near that location. This allows you to virtually check out the neighborhood you find yourself in without having to enter a specific address. For example, if you are in downtown Schenectady for a deposition, you can find a nearby restaurant, movie theater, coffee house or other business.

Google Maps will plot the results on your map, allow you to scroll through them, and get directions using a particular search result as a beginning or end point. You can select between walking, mass transit and driving directions and, where available, you can overlay the driving route with traffic information (red, yellow and green highlights representing slow, medium and fast traffic). If your BlackBerry is phone-enabled, you can click on the phone number provided in the search result to place a call to a particular search result.

At any point on a map, you can also switch to Google's satellite view and, where available, enable "Street View," which can be particularly helpful when you are hunting for a particular building or want to rehearse your way through a tricky intersection.

NON-GOOGLE APPLICATIONS

While Google provides a quick way to boost the feature set of your BlackBerry, it does not cover every possible need -- yet.

The Oanda FX Converter is a simple and light (meaning "quick to download") application that tracks current exchange rates (interbank, credit card and cash rates) for dozens of currencies.

Once launched, your BlackBerry screen displays two boxes, one for each side of the currency transaction. Select the two currencies in question (I put the foreign currency on top and my "home" currency on the bottom), and as you enter a number into the top box, the program instantly provides a converted number in the bottom box.

Music soothes the savage beast and sometimes, on the way home after a particularly cutthroat deposition or negotiation, even the tired attorney. If you want music on your BlackBerry, there are a number of options.

BlackBerry Media Sync (available from the BlackBerry Web site) downloads to your PC and allows you to store music from your iTunes library on your BlackBerry. Because in most cases your BlackBerry storage will be significantly less than what is available on your iPod you will probably have to trim your playlist to fit it on your BlackBerry.

There are a number of different alternatives, each available via the BlackBerry Mobile App. Slacker Radio is a streaming music application that allows you to listen to music grouped by "stations" in some 16 genres, including Alternative (13 stations), Jazz (8 stations) and

Electronic/Dance (11 stations -- who knew?).

It uses your memory card as a buffer and streams incoming music to the card that the Slacker application then plays on demand (the buffering helps reduce downtime caused by the hand-held when it is momentarily out of data-streaming range). While you can't select specific songs from a playlist, you can pick your stations to suit your music tastes, and can even "ban" specific artists from a selected station.

There are other options that stream broadcast radio stations. Clear Channel has developed the "[iheartradio](#)" application to stream radio broadcasts from certain Clear Channel stations to your BlackBerry.

Another neat application is [Nobex Radio Companion](#), which keeps track of the last 10 songs (or commercials) that your selected radio stations have played. When you hear a song that you like and want to remember to add it to your playlist later, you open Radio Companion, check the feed for your selected station, and click on an image listing the song that you have just heard. Radio Companion sends you an e-mail with a link to purchase the song from iTunes and Amazon. In addition, Radio Companion will stream certain selected stations right to your Blackberry (for example, a Chicago favorite of mine, WXRT).

Space does not permit discussion of the hundreds of games available for the BlackBerry, none of which the diligent attorney will resort to unless all the work is done, the time is entered, the self-improvement book is digested and travel delays leave no alternative. Suffice to say that BlackBerry Mobile App lists 282 of them.

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