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Hands On: Panasonic Toughbook 34

Tech editor David Strom gives thumbs up to new rugged notebook

By **David Strom**, *VARBusiness*

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Looking for a rugged notebook that can be used on the desktop? If only the Panasonic Toughbook 34 had a better keyboard, I could give it my full recommendation. Still, the 700-MHz Pentium III notebook (it also comes in a 866-MHz model) has a lot going for it. It came with a 20-GB hard disk running Windows 2000 Professional. My model had a built-in Orinoco wireless adapter that was simple to set up and had a good range, thanks to the external antenna that is mounted on the unit's flip-out screen. Each of the external port plugs comes with a rubber dust cover to protect them when not in use, and you have one USB, an 10/100 Ethernet and 56K modem as well as a single PC Card type II slot in a package that weighs less than 4 pounds.

I liked the solid feel of the Toughbook: It delivers on its name. The hard disk is shock-mounted, the entire case is a magnesium alloy, and the screen locks down with a satisfying click to the rest of the unit, which comes with a comfortable carrying handle. There are no floppy or CD drives on the unit, which was a bit of trouble (you could connect external USB drives to the unit), but the smallish 8.4-inch LCD touch screen is a nice addition to the package. If you set up the screen beyond 800 x 600 resolution, it scrolls around the desktop surface, which is annoying -- but 800 x 600 is good enough for most purposes. The small keyboard is more of an issue, and I found myself attaching a USB keyboard when I really needed to enter data. My other concern was power management. I had about three hours with average use, but using the more miserly settings turned off the screen too frequently for my taste.

Panasonic has concentrated on rugged notebooks now and offers a complete line of Toughbooks for VARs. The model 34 is a nice compromise of weight, features and size.

VARs looking to sell into industrial, factory-floor, hospitals and other environmentally challenging field support situations should consider the Toughbook line. Panasonic has made these notebooks to be durable and handle the bumps and scrapes here.

At a Glance:

- Company: Panasonic Computer Solutions
- Contact: (800) 662 3537; www.panasonic.com/computer/notebook/html/01a_s1.htm
- Est. street price: \$2,839.00

- Major distributors: Includes Tech Data, Synnex, GTSI

Toughbook Pros:

- Shock-mounted hard drive, dust covers on all external ports and plugs
- Optional built-in 802.11b wireless adapter and rugged external antenna
- Magnesium case is solid

Toughbook Cons:

- Keyboard much too small for the average typist
- Lack of built-in floppy and CD drives
- Power management features could use improvement

Overall Grade: B-

VARability Scale: ***

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