



January 25, 2012

50 NEW TECH TOOLS YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT

By Victor Hernandez

You may have dozens of apps on your phone and scores of websites bookmarked on your laptop, but that doesn't mean you have all the latest tech tools at your fingertips.

New mobile apps, services, social networks and other digital tools pop up so frequently that keeping up with them is a nearly impossible task. Just when you think you're up to date, something newer and hipper comes along.

But before you wave the white flag, let us help. Once again we have sorted through hundreds of new and emerging tech tools to bring you 50 of the most buzzworthy ones. (Last year's list can be found here.)

These apps and services can help you do everything from shooting better smartphone photos to cataloging your bottle-cap collection to finding the best pad Thai in your city. Not all of them are brand new, but we've probably listed some you haven't heard of. We hope you find them useful.

Which of your favorite new tech tools did we leave out? Let us know in the comments.

360 Panorama (99 cents): Want to enhance your smartphone landscape photos? Android users interested in capturing and sharing 360-degree panoramic photos should check out this app, the first true panoramic-photo app for the Android Market.

Alfred (free): It's a discovery tool for your palate! Alfred starts off with your location and asks you a few simple questions about restaurants you like to frequent. Then the magic happens and the eatery recommendations start flowing. Judging by my early experiences, this iOS app is uncannily at gauging your tastes.

App.bg (free): This Web tool allows users to easily pull up nearby Instagrams, Foursquare tips and tweets using a Google Map. It offers a somewhat crude yet effective layout, available on desktop and mobile platforms. (No mobile app yet, unfortunately.)

Autostitcher (\$1.99): Another interesting piece of software for producing panoramic images on your iPhone. Does a very nice job with its stitching feature for a near seamless quality image and easy sharing with friends.

Can I Park Here (\$1.99) Fewer things in life are more confusing than trying to decipher the parking signs around New York City. This new iPhone app allows users to photograph the parking sign for the area in question, then find out if they can park there and for how long. The app even has a timer that starts when the user parks and lets them know how much time they have left in that spot.

CardMunch (free): This mobile app for iOS from LinkedIn converts paper business cards into digital contacts. A new 3.0 update also offers LinkedIn integration for connecting with just one click. A must-have for conference-goers and business trippers.

Catch (freemium; basic version is free but you'll pay for advanced features): The productivity-app space is fast becoming crowded. Catch is one of the newer kids on the block and it too promises to help users manage the information overload. Freebie accounts let users upload 70MB of new content (text, Web clips, photos, voice memos) per month to a cloud service. Everything else will cost you. Available for iOS and Android, along with plug-ins for the more popular Web browsers.

Clinggle (free): This location-based social net comes with a twist: It doesn't focus the user experience on the public stream. Instead, users share multimedia messages for a specific user or group of users when they check in at a certain location. Those messages can grow into full-length conversations. Think text messaging, but with video and audio, and triggered through GPS. Don't know if it will catch on, but it's a very creative application.

Cuttings.me (free): This is a great tool for storing and showcasing your online portfolio. Cuttings.me allows you to upload PDF files or add links of your work in an easy format that also proves quite simple to share.

Evernote Food (free): From the company that brought us the popular productivity tool comes a mini-version of Evernote aimed at storing, preserving and sharing our memorable food adventures. Available for iOS; just be careful not to spill sauce on your iPhone.

Facebook Timeline Apps (free): Facebook recently announced more than 60 partners who provide apps for its new Timeline feature, in such themes as entertainment, fitness, food, giving, music, news, shopping and travel. Timeline's integration, in a nutshell, posts your activity from these other websites and services on your Facebook page. Whether it provides added value or just more clutter to your feeds is up to you.

Find My Friends (free): Think the Find My iPhone app, but for people. Find My Friends allows iPhone or iPad users to easily locate others via their Apple IDs and iCloud -- totally contingent, of course, upon a close family member or friend agreeing to be tracked. Don't accept requests from anyone you don't want to know your whereabouts 24/7.

Fondu (free): Described as Foursquare for foodies, Fondu is a community for sharing bite-sized reviews about places to eat and drink. Users log in/sign up with Facebook before having a palatable digital space to opine about their meals.

Flipboard (free): The world's first social magazine app has been turning heads (and thumbs) for a few years now. What is new is that this popular e-zine reader for iPad is now available on the iPhone as well. The same great look and feel of Flipboard isn't sacrificed one bit on the smaller screen.

Flud News (free): One of the newer players in the ever-growing social news reader space is Flud. The app is designed to be your own collection of articles and news, all in a perfect magazine-like interface. Open the app, create your custom profile and start "Fluding." This iOS app places heavy emphasis on the social influence of the fellow Fluders in your inner circle.

Frametastic (free): There are many mobile apps for framing multiple camera-phone pics, but Frametastic is one of the few free and extensive ones. It features lots of fun options to fool around with, plus easy exporting to Instagram or your other social networks.

Friend or Follow (freemium): Another nifty tool for displaying who's following you on social media that you aren't following in turn (and vice versa). It also gives you the option of doing something about it.

Google Currents (free): A 'zine-like reader for mobile devices, Google's new application for Android, iPads and iPhones lets you explore online magazines and other content with the swipe of a finger.

GramFeed (free): Instagram has put all of its eggs in the mobile basket. But some Instagram fanatics want to see images on something larger than a smartphone screen. GramFeed is the closest thing I've seen to a Google search experience for those gorgeous filtered Instagram pics.

Hipmunk (free): In a sea of travel apps, Hipmunk stands out for its fun, interactive and deal-scoring features. Available for iOS and Android devices, it lets users overlay heat maps on destinations to determine neighborhoods with food, nightlife and shopping that best fit their criteria. Brand new to the app is a hotel search feature.

Instagram (free): Heralded by iTunes as 2011 App of the Year, Instagram (IG) looks to expand its horizons in 2012 beyond the iPhone platform to Windows 7 and Android systems. With 16 million users in a little over a year, and only a handful of employees, IG is proving to be the little social-photo engine that could.

Kyoo (free): This Web service aggregates all the buzz around a specific topic from some of the most popular social mediums. Kyoo collects data from Twitter, Facebook, Flickr, YouTube, Google News, Google Blog Search and social bookmarking sites such as Delicious, Digg and Reddit. The interface and video channels are particularly impressive.

LogMeIn (freemium): This service provides anytime, anywhere remote access to your PC or Mac via your iPhone or iPad. A pay version (\$39.99 annual subscription) offers HD video access, file manager, cloud integration and 24/7 support.

Mikshk (freemium): This nifty Web-curation tool allows users to easily sort through the tsunami of images and videos online via shakes. Users can also share and follow the shakes of others. It boasts lots of browser plug-in options, and even the ability to host photos that users post to Twitter.

Muuter (free): Imagine being able to remove certain friends, topics or hashtags (#winning, anyone?) temporarily from your Twitter feed. Well now you can, with Muuter. A timer feature is awesome for eliminating "noise" from your feed just when you think you've reached your breaking point.

My Secret Folder (99 cents): The majority of my digital life is like an open book. But all of us have something to hide: For example, my Jonas Brothers uploads are off-limits to the world. My Secret Folder acts as a private, passcode-enabled app that stores pics, movies, notes, contacts and other things you don't want people to stumble upon. Best part is, if someone opens the iPhone or iPad app and enters the wrong passcode, the app will snap a picture of the culprit, tag a location to the incident and keep it on file for when you return.

Pinterest (free): Described as a virtual pinboard, Pinterest lets you organize and share your passions in a visual way like no other. It's currently still in an invite-only stage, so you'll need a friend to help get you in -- or you can sign up for the waiting list, which usually takes just a few days. It's highly addictive, so be warned.

Road Ninja (free): Never travel the interstate alone again. Road Ninja has your back. This mobile app does a solid job of alerting you to food, gas, lodging and other essential roadway necessities by way of upcoming highway off-ramps. Users also have the ability to set up preferences of your favorite chain restaurants so you'll never miss the comfort food you love even when away from home. For now only available on iOS.

Room 77 (free): Tired of playing hotel room roulette, and having to guess what kind of view, if any, awaits you upstairs? Room 77 shows you the best and worst room views via Google maps, blueprints and user content to make the most of your next hotel stay.

Slice (free): Attention online shoppers! This digital tool may be your new BFF. Similar to what Mint offers for your personal finances and TripIt for your travel plans, Slice is a simple way to organize your purchases and simultaneously track orders from multiple vendors.

SlowShutter (99 cents): This camera app for iOS lets you fool around with light, blurring images on purpose. It comes with a Live Preview feature, which is helpful because a lot of figuring out what works well using this app is trial and error. I especially enjoy using SlowShutter to experiment with light trails on my phone.

Snapseed (\$4.99): This pro-level photo editing software will set you back a few bucks but if you're serious about your images and don't want to settle for the many freebies out there, this is definitely the way to go. It performs particularly well on the iPad.

Springpad (free): Another useful productivity tool for curating your personal notes and tasks. One part virtual notebook, one part personal assistant, Springpad helps you remember stuff today so you can make better decisions tomorrow.

Spool (free): This app allows users to save articles and videos for later. No biggie, right? Here's where it impresses: Spool will access this content later, even if you're offline. Now you can catch up on kooky cat videos when you're out of network.

Swackett (free): Sweater, jacket or coat? (Get it?) This neat little weather app for iOS gives you simplified outdoor wear recommendations so you can hurry up and be on the go. For those interested in more than wardrobe advice, it also provides detailed weather updates via AccuWeather service.

Thumb (free): There's nothing scientific about this mobile app, but that doesn't prevent it from proving highly addictive. It's crowdsourcing made supersimple: Vote thumbs up or down. Thumb offers a good balance of news-ish questions along with some fun escapes.

Total Recall (\$7.99): This powerful call recorder app for Android allows users to automatically or manually record phone calls. It also works nicely for recording short voice notes, reminders, lectures, meetings, etc.

TourWrist (free): This is an interesting host for your panoramic images. Upload your 360s to this tool for a highly effective rendering treatment that allows your panos to pop and sizzle in a truly remarkable way.

Tweepi (freemium): Ever feel like your Twitter account could use a tune-up? Tweepi may be just what the doctor ordered. It promises to help make sense of your Twitter account through easy-to-use features for cleaning up followers, lists and activity streams.

Tweetbot (\$2.99): This is my newest favorite full-featured iPhone Twitter client: a Twitter mobile app with an attitude. There are plenty of decent Twitter apps for iPhone, including the official version, but none seem to bundle the best of the best features (multiple timelines, smart gestures, native push notifications, customizable navigation) with Tweetbot's polished feel. Worth a few bucks if you take your mobile tweetin' seriously.

Tweetsheet (free): This very cool Web tool from Vizily pulls together an instant infographic of your personal Twitter universe: retweet info, geographic impact, best followers, a word cloud of your tweets and more.

TwitWipe (free): Ever wish there was a reset button on life? Now there is for Twitter. TwitWipe deletes all your tweets in one fell swoop. Why would anyone want to do this? Well, maybe you need to clean out an account before handing it over to someone else. Or maybe you've just realized how crappy your tweets are.

Unroll.me (free): This service allows users to unsubscribe from unwanted e-mails in bulk. Unroll.me, which is currently in private beta, promises to not store your e-mail address and password. It's compatible with the major e-mail services in the United States.

Voxer (freemium): Created by a former communications specialist with the U.S. Army, Voxer is a walkie-talkie app for smartphones. It allows users to send instant audio, text and photo messages to friends (individual or groups). Messages stream live as you talk, and your friends can join live or access later. Available for iOS and Android.

Zite (free): Similar to the aforementioned Flipboard, Zite has been around for a while but only recently made its debut on the small screen (iPhone). This news reader goes beyond manual customization and leverages smart technology to intuitively fill up your feeds with content reliably relevant to your interests. (Full disclosure: CNN purchased Zite.com in 2011.)

ZocDoc (free): Think Open Table for physicians. Discover and research medical professionals in your area, then book your in-patient visit online. It even offers syncing for your Google or Microsoft Outlook calendars, with text reminder options. ZocDoc is currently only available in 12 markets but should expand as it catches on further.

ZoomSphere (free): Imagine a Billboard Top 100 for social nets instead of songs. ZoomSphere provides especially detailed stats for major social networks like Facebook, Twitter, Google Plus and LinkedIn -- great for keeping up with surging brands and social-media megastars.