

DR. MAC

Accessories help make free calls even better

By BOB LEVITUS
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Back in May I told you about Skype, an Internet telephone service that lets you make unlimited free computer-to-computer phone calls. All you need are a PC (Mac, Windows, or Linux), a microphone and some speakers or headphones.

While that setup works fine, I've been testing a pair of USB devices that make using Skype even better. The first is ClearOne's Chat 50, a USB speakerphone. The second is Keyspan's Cordless VoIP Phone, a cordless handset for Skype.

The ClearOne Chat 50 is a little black box about 4 inches square and 2 inches deep that contains both a microphone and a speaker. Because it is a "full duplex" device, you don't hear any speaker echo, and the voice won't cut in and out whenever you both speak at the same time.

Almost everyone I talk to says it sounds pretty good for a speakerphone. So I use the Chat 50 most of the time for Skype calls, especially when I'm working with a client and want to keep both hands free.

The Chat 50 works as promised, and I recommend it highly if you prefer speakerphones over headsets or handsets, assuming you can afford it. Which brings me to my only complaint about the Chat 50 — \$179 seems like a lot to pay for what is essentially a USB speakerphone. On the other hand, it works well and is more convenient to use than a headset or microphone and speakers.

Keyspan's Cordless VoIP Phone solves a different issue I have with Skype, which is that all of my other devices — microphone and speakers, headset, and even the Chat 50 — keep me tethered to my computer. The Keyspan device resolves that dilemma nicely. It consists of two parts: A little USB dongle you plug into an available USB port and a handset that looks just like a traditional cordless telephone.

The dongle is actually a wireless transmitter and receiver, so you can use the handset up to 100 feet away from your Mac or PC. It works with Windows, too.

With this little gem I can make or receive Skype calls from the kitchen, bedroom, den or back deck. And it supports caller ID.

It works great and makes using Skype even better.

The only shortcoming is that it lacks a headset jack so it can't be used hands-free.

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