

Top-Rated Computer Cases: Focusing on Functionality

Wheeled • Nonwheeled • Convertible • Backpack

The conventional briefcase-style computer case is being supplanted by smaller, thinner computer bags. These include backpacks and messenger-style bags that have pockets for tablet computers, cellphones and chargers as well as notebook computers.

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Eagle Creek

Look around office lobbies and airport gates, and you'll see that when it comes to computer cases, almost anything goes—from backpacks to messenger-style bags to sleeves. What you won't see as much anymore is the conventional briefcase-style computer case. According to Travel Goods Association, sales of business briefcases and computer bags slid 4.7 percent in 2014.

Mark Davis of Eagle Creek, which manufactures computer bags, tells Consumers Digest that he attributes the growing use of backpacks and messenger-style bags that have computer compartments to the comfort of carry and ease of use. He also believes that the general work environment is more casual, "which allows for these types of bags."

As a result, more than ever before you can find backpacks and unstructured bags, such as messenger- and tote-style models, that have [notebook](#)- and [tablet-computer](#) compartments.

Unstructured computer bags might not have enough interior structure for them to stand upright when you set them down. However, that doesn't mean that they provide less protection for your electronics, because these bags use padded pockets and, in some cases, removable sleeves to protect your gear. Based on our hands-on evaluation, we also found that computer bags that have less structure are contoured to fit our body better than do conventional computer bags.

In computer backpacks we found more designs than ever before that incorporate ergonomic features, such as padded straps and cushy handles.

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Although major manufacturers still provide computer bags that fit a notebook computer that has a 17-inch screen, we found fewer choices and styles that are available among those models than exist for bags that hold notebook computers that are 15.4 inches or smaller.

In fact, only 15 percent of computer backpacks and 10 percent of wheeled and nonwheeled computer bags today can hold a 17-inch notebook computer, according to our research.

LIGHTEN THE LOAD. As notebook computers get smaller, thinner and lighter, so do the computer cases that are designed to carry them. You now can find notebook-computer cases that are 7 ounces to 1.5 pounds lighter, depending on the size and style. Leather computer cases, for example, are 1–2 inches slimmer on average, which translates into 7–8 fewer ounces of weight on your shoulder.

Low Weight, High Performance

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Today's computer cases also are lighter because they're constructed of materials that are more lightweight than the 1260-denier ballistic nylon of which nonleather bags generally were made. Lightweight performance materials, such as ripstop nylon and waffle-weave nylon, now are found in structured bags that cost at least \$120. These materials have been used in [luggage](#) for years, and, based on their track record, we believe that they'll prove to be just as sturdy in computer cases and backpacks as are their heavier counterparts.

Of course, when it comes to a lightweight option to carry your notebook computer, you can't beat a simple sleeve. Sleeves now are almost ubiquitous. In 2011, we found 600 sleeves on the market. Today, that number is above 5,000. Almost all computer-case manufacturers, as well as luggage, electronic and handbag manufacturers, sell sleeves for both notebook computers and tablet computers at prices that range from \$20 to \$228. You generally can get a tablet sleeve that has handles, straps and slots to hold credit cards for \$30–\$60.

On the other end of the weight scale, four-wheel spinners now are available in wheeled computer cases that start at \$180. Instead of flush-mounted wheels, as is the case on two-wheel spinners, the wheels that are on four-wheel spinners typically mount onto the underside of the computer case. This type of mounting raises the height of the case, yet it keeps the bag from tipping forward when it's loaded fully. More important, you can pull or push models that have four-wheel spinners on the long or short side of the bag, which makes them easy to maneuver in tight spaces or down the aisle of a plane. (You'll want to consider, however, that a wheeled computer case might not fit on a regional jet that has little overhead bin space.)

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COME AND GO. Although four-wheel spinners can make travel easier, manufacturers and retailers that we interviewed tell us that checkpoint-friendly computer cases and backpacks might become a thing of the past. Checkpoint-friendly bags are designed to meet federal guidelines that allow you to leave your notebook computer in the bag during airport-security scanning, because the bags open, lie flat and present an unobstructed view.

The shift to smaller notebook computers and tablets enables these devices to be left in a carrying case, whether it's a computer case or carry-on luggage. According to Transportation Security Administration (TSA), an electronic item that's smaller than 12 inches by 14 inches doesn't have to be removed from its bag or case. (A notebook computer that's 12 inches by 14 inches or larger can be used to hide more things inside of it, and it makes it more difficult to see the rest of the contents of your bag, TSA says.)



ON THE GO. Convertible notebook-computer cases can double as backpacks—and some even can hold a change of clothes.

Tom Bihn

John V. Smith of manufacturer Travelon notes that a Travelon bag was featured in the first TSA video on the checkpoint feature, but since then, the feature faded "like the Ford Edsel." He says Travelon discontinued its line of checkpoint-friendly bags and says retailers tell him that other manufacturers aren't putting the feature into their new styles.

Retailer Jerry Kallman, who is the president of Airline International Luggage, which sells travel goods, agrees that the checkpoint-friendly feature peaked. If that feature is lacking in a computer case that otherwise has all of the features and functions that a consumer wants, Kallman found that it doesn't prevent the consumer from buying the bag.

We found that about 38 percent fewer manufacturers sell checkpoint-friendly computer cases and backpacks than did in 2011. Others say they'll continue to offer checkpoint-friendly bags in one or two styles as long as some demand remains.

A feature in computer cases that gained ground is a pocket that can block radio frequency identification (RFID) devices from electronically capturing personal information that's embedded in credit, debit and identification cards. RFID-blocking pockets, which typically are located in the interior of a bag, are found in about 21 percent of today's computer cases and backpacks, starting at \$90. Based on our survey of 43 manufacturers, we expect more bags that have RFID-blocking pockets to be on the market within the next 2 years.

IN THE BAG. In 2011, we predicted that computer cases soon would see more pockets that could hold a tablet, and that proved to be the case. Ninety percent of the notebook-computer cases

and backpacks that we evaluated in all price ranges not only have easy-access pockets for tablets, but they also now have dedicated pockets for chargers and cellphones.

Based on our interviews with industry experts, we expect the shift to continue to backpacks and less structured bags for carrying electronics. It's more difficult to predict just what devices that those computer bags will be designed to handle, however.

According to a 2014 report from Gartner research group, sales of tablets were expected to overtake sales of notebook computers and home computers in 2015. However, the same report also found that tablet sales were slowing. Sales of smartphones are expected to increase.

What all of this means for the future of computer cases isn't clear. However, the industry experts whom we interviewed say they expect slimmer bags that have dedicated pockets to continue to show up in office lobbies and airports.

Freelance writer Christina Dyer is the former publisher of Travelware magazine and has been writing about briefcases and luggage for 17 years.