A “Packable” Travel Briefcase

The topics of this column include the successful end to a very long search for a lightweight travel briefcase that can be easily packed in checked luggage, and some important notes for anyone considering purchasing a video doorbell.

A “PACKABLE” TRAVEL BRIEFCASE

When I travel, my standard carry-on luggage item is a wheeled leather briefcase that is similar to the case used by most airline pilots. It contains my notebook computer, accessories, other electronic gear, file folders, and all the items that I don’t want to put into my checked luggage. When I arrive at my destination, that same briefcase becomes a rolling briefcase/mobile office that accompanies me to meetings where I need to use my computer for long periods of time.

However, I often attend technical conferences where I’m moving around a lot and such a large briefcase isn’t appropriate. I still need to carry my computer, its power supply, a mouse, a few files, the conference program guide, and several other items. I have a very nice, stylish, soft leather briefcase I’ve been using for that. It collapses almost completely flat for packing into the front zipper pocket of my checked suitcase, and it expands enough to hold all that I need at a conference. Unfortunately, because it is leather, it is somewhat heavy. I also have to put my computer into it inside the padded sleeve case I use in the rolling briefcase, which makes the leather briefcase bulky (and even heavier).

I’ve been looking for a better solution for a “travel conference briefcase” for several years. I’ve tried out more than a half-dozen possibilities, all without success. I finally found a good solution.

The briefcase is made by Kroser, and is identified as a “15.6-in laptop bag.” The manufacturer’s model number is TAM-2802F-Black-Grey; it is available on Amazon.com at https://www.amazon.com/KROSER-Briefcase-Messenger-Repellent-Men-Charcoal/dp/B01MZ956T1/ref=sr_1_3?keywords=KROSER+Laptop+Bag+15.6+inch+Briefcase+Laptop+Messenger+Bag&qid=1563574875&s=gateway&sr=8-3. The dimensions are 16.5 in (41.9 cm) × 11.5 in (29.2 cm) × 4 in (10.2 cm). However, 4 in (10.2 cm) is the thickness when the bag is filled. The important point is that when empty, it flattens to less than about 1.8 in (4.6 cm); slim enough to fit in the front of a checked suitcase, for example.

The briefcase is made of a very-tightly-woven synthetic canvas. It looks stylish, and it is advertised to be water repellent. The briefcase has two full-size zipped pockets, plus a smaller zipped pocket on the front. The back full-size pocket unzips all the way around (with two zippers), so the case will lay flat when completely opened. This pocket contains a padded compartment for a notebook computer (I thus don’t have to use an additional padded sleeve when putting my computer in the briefcase). The manufacturer advertises that most notebook computers with a screen size up to 15.6 in (39.6 cm) will fit in the padded compartment. Because the case will lay flat with the computer surrounded only by the padded compartment, the case is considered “Transportation Security Administration (TSA) friendly;” it isn’t necessary to remove the computer from the case when having the case X-rayed by the TSA. There is enough room in this pocket for accessories, a couple of files, or a writing tablet, in addition to a notebook computer.

The second full-size pocket also has two zippers, but they only go about halfway down the sides of the pocket. This second pocket is good for files and a conference program guide. It also has a padded compartment for an electronic tablet.

The front zipped pocket has only one zipper that opens across the top. It has a radio-frequency identification-protected place for credit cards, pens, and a cell phone. It also is large enough to hold a computer power supply, mouse, and some other small items.

The hardware on the Kroser briefcase is very well made. There are two
rings for mounting a shoulder strap, which is provided. There is also a fabric strip across the back of the case that can be used for carrying the briefcase over the rolling handles of a wheeled suitcase. I think that this briefcase is a particularly good value, because it is currently available for approximately $US25.

Kroser makes several similar models of this briefcase in different sizes, fitting notebook computers with various screen sizes, and with slightly different pocket arrangements. I’ve now traveled with and used this briefcase at several conferences, and I've been quite pleased with it.

**SOME NOTES ON VIDEO (AND PARTICULARLY RING) DOORBELLS**

Video doorbells have become extremely popular in the United States as well as in many other countries. These typically combine two basic functions: a doorbell and a video camera. They are triggered by detecting motion within a certain field of view. Once triggered, they can sound an alarm and start recording. At that point, you can optionally have a conversation with (or, perhaps, shout at and scare away) a person that triggered the doorbell. As a doorbell, when rung, they allow real-time observation of the person ringing the doorbell and provide an audio link for talking with the person. Most video doorbells also have the option to store recorded video.

In most applications, you want the video doorbell to be triggered by a person coming within some portion of the field of view, and to not be triggered by moving objects (e.g., passing cars) or animals. It turns out that there are very significant differences in the ability to control what triggers these doorbells among various models and brands. These differences are often not well explained in the sales literature and other documentation, and they make the difference between a useful device and one that is mostly a nuisance. I’ll use one of the most popular brands as an example for explaining this, but my comments apply to most video-doorbell brands.

Ring video doorbells (https://ring.com/) are probably the most popular brand of video doorbell in the United States. There currently are four different models advertised on the company’s website: Video Doorbell, Video Doorbell 2, Video Doorbell Pro, and Video Doorbell Elite. The Doorbell and Doorbell 2 models are powered by batteries or are hardwired, the Doorbell Pro uses hardwired power only, and the Doorbell Elite uses power over Ethernet. What may not be apparent is that in addition to the various power sources, these models have important differences in motion-detection abilities.

The Doorbell and Doorbell 2 have what is described as “adjustable motion detection.” The Doorbell Pro and Doorbell Elite have “custom motion zones.” These in fact are entirely different motion-detection systems, as documented in a somewhat obscure support article on Ring’s website: https://support.ring.com/hc/en-us/articles/115005914666-Standard-and-Advanced-Motion-Detection-Systems-Used-in-Ring-Devices.

Adjustable motion detection (also called “standard motion detection”) uses passive infrared sensors. In practice, this means that the sensitivity of the motion-detection sensors can be approximately set to be triggered by motion in preset zones within the field of view of the sensor. The field of view is divided into three areas. This should result in a significant reduction in the false alarm rate.

After installing the Doorbell 2, I discovered that I knew two people who have Doorbell Pro models installed in geometries similar to mine. They reported no false alarms due to passing cars (because of the ability to define the street as an “exclusion zone” in the field of view of the camera). They also reported significantly reduced times for accessing the live video and audio from the doorbells on their cell phones compared to what I have experienced with my Doorbell 2.

When I researched and purchased the Doorbell 2, I was led to believe that the only significant difference between it and the Doorbell Pro model was that the Doorbell Pro required hardwired power. Obviously, that was incorrect. If you’re considering installing a video doorbell, I strongly suggest you carefully investigate the motion-sensing systems of the various models you are looking at. The type of motion-sensing system and its features can definitely make the difference between a device that is useful and one that is simply a nuisance.