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Jonathan Takiff: Some tech to-dos for the new prez

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DEAR MR. OBAMA: We're all banking on you to act fast and wisely to put the United States back on the right course. No other president has "gotten" the importance of technology in the grand economic and social scheme of things. So, as a tech-scene watcher and writer, I humbly hope you'll read these suggestions on your BlackBerry and put them at the top of your "to do" list.

DON'T BLOW THE DIGITAL TRANSITION: To avoid a potentially nasty first fight with Republican legislators (especially likely in the Senate), the Obama team shouldn't try to postpone the Feb. 17 cutoff date for analog TV broadcasts for more than a few weeks.

The first-alert and private communications concerns that will take over the analog spectrum are already chafing at the bit. And TV stations want to shut off their old, expensive-to-operate transmitters.

But what about that logjam of 2-million-plus requests for refund cards, intended to help over-the-air TV viewers pay for digital converter boxes? The new administration should push through accounting changes so those rebate cards can be issued immediately and sent by first-class mail.

According to the research firm Digital Tech Consulting, there's a more than ample supply of DTV boxes, like 9 million, ready and waiting.

NET NEUTRALITY WITH RESPONSIBILITY: We agree with the new prez that Internet service providers shouldn't play favorites with content providers or penalize heavy users.

But as EU nations already are doing, U.S. ISPs must be given the right to monitor and put the kibosh on illegal file-sharing of music, TV and movies. Our piracy-challenged entertainment industry is far too important to the gross national product to be blindly sacrificed for the principle

of 'Net "freedom."

BUILDING THE HYDROGEN HIGHWAY: While he later dropped the ball, George W. Bush was right on one thing: Hybrid vehicles are a stopgap measure; hydrogen-fuel-cell-powered cars are the real key to energy independence.

To realize this dream, America must first create a national network of refueling stations. Petroleum companies (already producing hydrogen to process gasoline) should be convinced to rise to this occasion with all the persuasive abilities in the government's arsenal.

COMPUTER LITERACY FOR ALL: Sending low-cost computers to students in Third-World nations is a wonderful idea, but shouldn't we make America's youth computer-literate first?

Every school desk in America should be outfitted with a sturdy laptop (ideally built in the U.S. and laden with domestic parts). And for knowledge-cravers young and old(er), government-funded computer labs/libraries could be installed quickly in vacant stores. How 'bout all those soon-to-be-shuttered (but well-wired) Circuit City outlets?

PUMP UP R&D, FACTORY PRODUCTION: U.S. companies have a great history of inventing technology that's well-used and loved - from electric-powered cars to wind turbines, digital cameras and audio/video discs, plasma TVs and, recently, ultrathin, bright and rollable OLED (organic light emitting diode) displays.

The latter may soon be used, I'm hoping, to store electronic newspapers and magazines. But in all these instances, we've proven ourselves an impatient and shortsighted nation. When stymied in the labs or running short on private and federal funding, we often give away our hard-won knowledge via licensing arrangements with foreign producers. They then take things the last five yards and earn the touchdown.

Truth is, if a gizmo's created here, it can and should be built here, too.

It's in the nation's financial and security interests to keep research and development going, to make sure high-tech companies small and large (like Motorola and Kodak) don't fail. And don't give excuses about our labor costs being too high. A robot assembler doesn't eat more in the U.S. than it does in the Far East.

TAX THE INTERNET MERCHANTS: I know this idea will be unpopular with many. As an online shopper, it'll hurt me, too. But the truth is, Internet merchants have grown far beyond the start-up phase and no longer need the special breaks the federal government (and most states) still give them.

Operating without a retail presence already puts onliners at a price-setting advantage versus bricks-and-mortar stores. Plus the net discounters are saving customers another 5 to 8 percent in uncollected sales tax. No wonder retail chains (often unacknowledged "showrooms" for the online sellers' products) are going out of business left and right.

Just a 2 or 3 percent federal tax on Internet commerce, with the proceeds earmarked for tech-minded projects, could help reset the balance.

BROADBAND FOR ALL: Based on bills floating around the U.S. House and Senate, it looks as if \$6 billion to \$8 billion in stimulus funds will be doled out to improve America's broadband service networks. That's a start, and it is hoped Obama's team will spend the money wisely.

Getting the 'Net to disenfranchised rural customers should be the first priority - most economically accomplished with high-speed wireless (WiMax) and satellite distribution methods.

Even in the cities, we need to radically upgrade broadband service for consumers without charging them an arm and two legs. Our cable- and phone-line-fed broadband technology lags far behind other countries' in data speed and robustness. *

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