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Best iPod accessories of 2006

By [Tom Rose](#)/ [Bostonherald.com](#)

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With iPod accessory companies announcing their newest products at Macworld, now's a great chance to take one last look back at the top products from last year.

While Apple celebrated the iPod's fifth anniversary with three new players in 2006, companies providing gadgets and gizmos for the world's favorite digital music player made advancements in both quality and ingenuity.

Last year saw the weekly unveiling of a new case and the bi-weekly announcement of new iPod-enabled speaker system. However, tucked in between releases of the latest alarm clock/radios and FM transmitters came such monumental achievements as portable iPod video screen, iPod locks, iPod karaoke and the world's first iPod toilet paper dispenser.

Here at Herald Interactive, a small portion of the thousands of new iPod accessories arrived for testing. There were many products we did not lay our hands on — even when we supplemented our product arrivals with occasional trips to the Apple Store and other local electronics emporiums. However, judging by ratings from popular iPod sites and magazines, we believe we did try out the best of 2006.

BEST IPOD

The revamping of the iPod nano brought larger capacities and a wider color selection. The new shuffle is smaller and cooler than its predecessor is. However, the clear winner is the [80 GB iPod video](#). Capable of handling 100 hours of video and playing games, it's the top of the line.

TOP IPOD SPEAKERS

Altec Lansing's IM7 and Bose's SoundDock give way to two speaker systems. (Note to the good people at Bose in Framingham: It's time for an update to SoundDock.)

The best speaker of the year is [Audioengine 5](#). More than 50 new speakers were put to the test this year, but there wasn't the need for a 'listening-off' to pick the winner. These matching bookshelf speakers, the first product offered by Audioengine — blew away all rivals in terms of audio excellence.

Realizing that not all consumers are interested in stationary speakers, here are the winners in the subcategories of iPod-enabled speakers:

Nano travel speakers — JLab's [Mini Blaster](#) puts out a surprisingly large sound given the fact that it's not that much bigger than the nano. They are available in black and white for both generations of the nano.

Compact speakers — If anyone is surprised to see Logitech listed along with Apple and Bose when it comes to best-selling speakers, they need to look no further than [AudioStation](#) to find superb design and sound. With a digital FM tuner and touch-screen controls, this compact system — released in October — is sure to help Logitech maintain its status at the top.

SPORTS ACCESSORY

The collaboration between Nike and Apple paid off with a great accessory for iPod nano owners. The [Nike+](#) system allows athletes to train as they listen to tunes while their nano keeps track of their workout. Nike also delivered a host of sneakers and running clothes — all a great fit for the nano.

CASES

It's hard to pick a winner in this category. Some of the hundreds of new cases introduced in 2006 gave consumers great looks but were lacking in protection while others will keep your iPod safe, but add bulk. Cases that have impressed us during the year include offerings from Morphe, Orbino, Griffin, Belkin, Chums, Core and Pacific Rim.



TOP SPEAKERS OF 2006:
Audioengine 5.

Does any case shine above the others? To pick this year's winner we've opted to go with one case that offers something that no other case does: true waterproof protection.

It's fascinating that while many companies make excellent iPod cases, only one makes a case that will protect an iPod if dropped into a stream or puddle of slush. That company is Otter Box. Their see-through cases feature easy-to-use locking clasps that turn it into an airtight chamber.

I've tested [Otter Box cases](#) for iPod videos and the first generation nano. Both times I put cotton balls instead of the iPod inside when I first submerged the case in the bathtub. This time — without thinking about it — I slipped the second-generation nano in and down it went to the bottom of the tub. Now that's confidence in a product.

EARPHONES

Want to listen to the most amazing earphones ever hooked up to an iPod? Get ready to shell out \$500 if you do. While Shure's [E500PTH earbuds](#) offer incredibly detailed sound, it's debatable whether they are twice as good as those in the \$250 range.

They feature a 'Push to Hear' control device that allows users to hear outside noises, if they so desire.

MICROPHONES

It nearly took the entire year, but Belkin and XtremeMac — two solid competitors that offer an array of iPod accessories — finally introduced microphones that let 5G owners capitalize on the higher quality recording capabilities.

While Belkin's TuneTalk Stereo allows users to record while charging the iPod via a USB cable, XtremeMac's [MicroMemo](#) has the added function of a speaker that allows users to hear what they just recorded. There are two versions of the product made to fit either the 5G video iPod or the 2nd generation nano.

IPOD LOCKS

East Longmeadow's Secure-It Inc. debuted a series of iPod locks it calls [The Pod Safe](#). While there's not a lot of competition in the category, the devices hit the stores at the same time that reports of iPod thefts in schools and colleges swept the local media.

The Pod Safe is easy to use — owners can change the four-digit code at their whim — and will keep an iPod safely tethered to a purse or backpack. The iPod can be used while in the lock, which features a high-impact plastic case and a vinyl coated galvanized steel cable.

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