Legions of Wallstreet PowerBook users craving USB peripherals can now rejoice: USB PC cards are available and affordable. Thanks to Apple finally releasing an updated version of their USB Card Support drivers, Wallstreet owners (and possibly some PowerBook 2400 owners) can choose from any of the numerous Windows-based USB Cards, or some recent Mac-specific ones. One of the latest such offerings is the USB CardBus Adapter, from long-time Mac vendor Macally.

The device comes in two parts: the PC card itself, and a connector cable with two, stacked USB ports. The potential for misplacing the connector cable is certainly there, but leaving the card and cable perpetually connected easily resolves that, albeit with added bulk. Additionally, this two-piece configuration is a different approach from other USB PC cards that are a single, integrated unit. However, those types of cards may block the open PC card slot, so it may just be a matter of personal preference.

Installation is both straightforward and easy. Simply install Apple's USB Card Support 1.3.5, insert the card into either the upper or lower card slot, plug in the devices and their respective drivers, and restart the PowerBook. There's not much else to it in terms of installation or configuration issues -- which is the way USB should be. It should be noted that Apple's drivers don't come with the card; they need to be downloaded from Apple's support site.

After installing everything and rebooting, the card itself appears as a standard PC card icon on the desktop, but sporting the USB symbol and labeled "USB". It takes a few seconds to
mount, but the lag-time isn't significant in most real-world use. It behaves like most other PC cards: it can be ejected by either dragging the USB card icon to the trash or using the "Put Away" method. According to the tiny, somewhat too concise manual, Macally doesn't recommend ejecting the card while the PowerBook is in sleep mode. Once the card has been ejected, Macally specifies waiting 10 seconds before reinserting it.

As for the card's performance and usability, that can be summed-up in two words: it works. The device was tested on a PowerBook G3/300, connected to an Epson Stylus Color 740, an iMac bondi-blue mouse, and a Macally iKey USB keyboard. All devices functioned as they were supposed to, despite repeated hot-swaps with the PowerBook on and in sleep mode. There was one instance where the keyboard power button didn't turn the PowerBook on or off, but restarting via the PowerBook's power button led to no further problems.

Since the card has no method of pulling-in extra power from the ADB port, as a similar card from ADS apparently does, using two high-powered devices (such as two printers), may require a self-powered USB hub. A Targus USB mini-hub was used to test this. The hub and card worked fine together in conjunction with various high and low power devices, with the hub in both self and bus-powered modes, again with repeated hot-swaps.

Macally's USB CardBus Adapter is a welcome addition to many of us still living in the non-USB age. It effectively opens the door, without the need to buy a new PowerBook, to the ever-increasing number of USB peripherals available. Despite the lack of included drivers or ADB power support, and the potential for losing the cable connector, this PC card gets the job done.