Buying a Home Computer: Finding the Best Fit for You

Before you start shopping for a home computer, you need to ask yourself these simple questions:
- What do I want to be able to do with the computer?
- How much money do I have to purchase a computer?
- What type of software will I need?
- How much money do I have to spend on software?
- Who will work on my computer if something happens to it?
- Do I need a desktop, laptop, or netbook?

Desktop, Laptop, or Netbook: Which Is Best for You?

Choosing a computer is based on what you can afford and what you need the computer to do.

Desktop computers are also known as towers, boxes, and CPUs (central processing units). Desktop computers are a great choice if you do not need to take the computer with you. Desktops are generally cheaper, more durable, faster, and much easier to repair than laptops are. They are also better able to handle multiple software programs at the same time (for example, Word and PowerPoint). Simply stated, you get more computer for your dollar with a desktop.

The laptop's claim to fame is its portability. Being able to take your computer with you wherever you go is a big advantage. Laptops are catching up to desktops when it comes to speed and processing. They are generally more expensive than desktops. However, laptops can pick up wireless networks wherever you are to ensure a constant connection to email and the Internet. Laptops are more fragile and harder to repair than desktops. The battery life can range from two to eight hours, depending on the laptop. Laptops are also able to handle multiple programs at a time but are generally slower than desktops.

A netbook is a very small, light computer. It is usually either ten inches or seven inches across. Think of it as a "laptop light." Its small size and weight make it easy to carry. A netbook is great for checking email and surfing the Internet. It can also run programs such as Word and Excel but has trouble running two or more programs at the same time. Netbooks are not good for users who do a lot with video and graphics. Netbooks do not come with CD-ROMs.

What to Consider When Purchasing a Computer

These are the five most critical areas to look at when purchasing a computer:
- The size of the hard drive (500 GB to 1 TB)
- The amount of memory (3 GB to 8 GB)
- The CD-ROM or DVD-ROM (most computers do not come with floppy drives anymore)
- The software (such as the operating system, antivirus protection, etc.)
- The warranty or support included with purchase

Most computers on the market today come with at least a 500 GB (gigabyte) hard drive. A 500 GB hard drive is fine for the everyday user. The next size up is 1,000 GB, also known as 1 TB (terabyte).

Choice Checklist

Desktop
- ❑ Stationary
- ❑ Cheaper
- ❑ Faster
- ❑ Harder to steal
- ❑ Durable
- ❑ Easier to upgrade parts
- ❑ More comfortable to use
- ❑ Can run multiple programs quickly

Laptop
- ❑ Portable
- ❑ Can provide constant connectivity through wireless networks
- ❑ More expensive
- ❑ Easier to steal
- ❑ More difficult to upgrade
- ❑ Easily damaged
- ❑ Can be used where electricity is unavailable
- ❑ Battery life can vary
- ❑ Can run multiple programs but more slowly than a desktop

Netbook
- ❑ Small
- ❑ Light
- ❑ Can run only one program at a time
- ❑ No CD-ROM drive

Many manufacturers market their computers as 1,000 GB rather than 1 TB because 1,000 GB sounds larger to most consumers.

Manufacturers will try to save money or reduce the cost of the computer by decreasing the amount of memory. Memory, or RAM (random access memory), affects how fast your computer retrieves and processes information. More RAM equals a faster computer.

Understanding Bits and Bytes

A bit is the smallest unit of data a computer can process. It is represented by either a 0 or a 1. It takes 8 bits to equal 1 byte. A byte is equal to a letter in the alphabet or a number. So, for every letter in this article, 8 bits correspond to it. If you have 1,024 bytes, you have 1 kilobyte.

A kilobyte (KB) of data is equal to a page of typed text. A megabyte (MB) is equal to 1,024 KB, or about the amount of text in a small book. One gigabyte (GB) is equal to 1,024 megabytes (MB).

A GB is equal to 250 books. So if you had 6 GB of memory, or RAM, you would have enough memory to store 1,500 copies of the novel *Pride and Prejudice* on your computer.

A terabyte (TB) is equal to 1,024 GB, which is enough memory to store a library full of books in your computer.

Special Circumstances

If you plan to use a lot of graphics, video, or games on your computer, you need to consider buying a computer with a good video card. A mid- to high-end graphics card generally costs an additional $100 to $500. It is not the standard video card that comes with the computer. Most users do not need a special video card. Usually the video card that comes with the computer is enough.

If you plan to do a lot of work on your computer, be sure to buy a large hard drive and as much memory as you can afford. Usually, you can upgrade your hard drive and memory when purchasing a computer.

Monitors

Monitors are measured diagonally from corner to corner of the screen. Monitor prices have dropped dramatically in recent years. Most people purchase liquid crystal display (LCD) monitors. LCD monitors are lighter and thinner than the older CRT monitors. If you have trouble seeing the monitor screen, purchase a 19-inch or larger LCD monitor.

Find Great Deals

Before purchasing electronic equipment, be sure to check out the manufacturer's website and social networking accounts, such as Facebook and Twitter. Many manufacturers post discounts and coupons online. You may be able to get an extra 10–15 percent off the cost of the purchase.

Software: What It's All About

When you purchase a computer from the manufacturer, it should come with an operating system. The operating system provides a graphical interface so that users can communicate with the computer and the installed programs. The current operating system is Windows 7.

Most users will also purchase a copy of Microsoft Office. Personal or home editions of Microsoft Office include Word, PowerPoint, and Excel. They cost about $175. The professional versions include those programs plus Publisher and Access. Professional editions cost about $250. Microsoft Office is also available for $97 for students, but the student version does not include Publisher or Outlook.

If you do not wish to purchase Microsoft Office, you can download a free program called Open Office, also known as Libre Office. Open Office is similar to Microsoft and comes with a word processor, spreadsheet program, and presentation software that are compatible with Microsoft Office. You can download Open Office from *www.openoffice.org*.

In addition to your operating system and your office system, you will need an antivirus program. Both Norton (also known as Symantec) and McAfee sell an antivirus program for around $40. No computer should be on the Internet without antivirus protection. A free antivirus program called AVG Antivirus can be downloaded from *www.avg.com*.

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