

What Computer to Buy?

It is one of the toughest purchasing questions for us whether we are buying a computer for the home or work outside of the home.

Investment decisions about computer technology have become so complex that, individuals or small companies are increasingly turning to others already in the field for guidance.

It used to be that an individual or a small committee of a company would buy a typewriter and only have to decide on features like “auto-correcting” lift-off tape or the color. But with today’s computer technology, there are many things we’ve got to keep in mind in our purchasing research. Options are almost countless.

This article will decidedly take some shortcuts. Instead of documenting corporate purchasing patterns of buying hardware and software, some straight talk seems in order. I’d recommend, however, that since this is straight abbreviated opinion, take this article to someone whom you feel is further along than you in computer technology and ask their opinion. I’m guessing that she or he will agree with most of it. From both sources, you should well on your way to purchasing a computer with some confidence. Here are some of general rules of thumb that may save some time and money and get you going.

Rule of Thumb 1

Make a shopping list structured like a spread sheet grid to gather your purchasing research. This will enable you to carefully compare exactly what you’re getting when you’re reading a newspaper ad or when you’re at a computer store kicking the tires. (*Yea, I know, computers don’t have tires . . . yet.*) Having a list of the major components of a computer system cuts down on a lot of stress when you’re talking with a gum-chewing sales person in a T-shirt who rattles off computer jargon. (*Remember how Scotty or Jody LaForge in Star Trek raved about “warp coil phase modulators?”*) With this shopping list, you’ll be able to comfortably stop the sales pitch in mid-sentence and say “Now what does 56KB FAX Modem mean, anyway?”



This list will also serve as a focal point when your or a small group from work discusses the results of your research. (And by the way, if there is an item named here and you don’t know what it is, ask your friend who is going to critique this article. She’ll tell you.)

To set up your shopping/research sheet, in the left column (going from the top left down to bottom left), list the following components: ① Processor Type & Speed, ② RAM, Hard Drive Size, ③ CD ROM or DVD speed, ④ Monitor Type and Size, ⑤ Modem Speed, ⑥ Printer and ⑦ Other Peripherals (such as a scanner, surge protector, etc.), and ⑧ Software.

Across the top of your list (on the first line of the chart from left to right), list the vendor names. This grid will allow you to fill in the prices in the intersecting cells of the chart. Your shopping/research list could look like this, only larger so you could use it more easily:

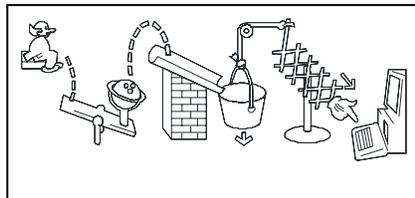
Components	Dell	HP	Lenovo	Gateway
Processor Speed				
RAM				
HD Size				
CD or DVD Read Write				
# of USB or Firewire ports				
Monitor Type/Size				
Printer, Peripherals, Surge Protectors				



Rule of Thumb 2

Buy brand names! Avoid “deals” that somebody’s uncle “can put together in their basement for a mere fraction of the price.” The hundreds of dollars they claim you’ll save may result in thousands of dollars worth of lost time and inability to use or upgrade your computers, software or printers stoppages for agonizing lengths of time and untold hit points on that great cardiovascular health scale accumulating toward the big squeeze.

There are many good-hearted hackers who absolutely love to tinker and time means nothing to them. They’ll spend hours and weeks, swapping out computer parts from people’s automobile trunks, garage sales and trade shows attended by people you’ll never meet again in your lifetime. They’ll order pieces of this and that from mail order catalogues – all for the sake of a “great deal.”



The problem is that once you or your organization commit to becoming dependent on one of these good-hearted tinkerers, you’re doomed to never getting your computer working correctly in time for the next deadline – at least it will feel like “never.” Not far down the road, you or your hacker friend will be on the phone trying to find out why one part wasn’t compatible with another or why one feature stopped working when another was installed.

Computer technology is now too complex to let casual friends put the pieces together. The way the complex memory and hardware devices need to be integrated – you want that installed either from the factory or the computer retail store.

Brand names to consider are Dell, Hewlett Packard, Lenovo/IBM or Gateway. These companies have been in the business for a long time and the computer field is too competitive for them to make mistakes for long. These companies sell more than anyone else and now IBM has sold off its computer division to a Chinese company. Just like Ulysses, in Greek mythology, strapped himself to the mast of the ship to avoid the lure of the Sirens, avoid products from Packard Bell. (At a private staff meeting in CompUSA (when it was Computer

City), one year, the GM once warned employees not to purchase Packard Bell products for themselves because of their higher incidences of failure.)

If you don’t order directly from Dell and feel you must purchase a computer at a retail store, use the stores that have the largest purchasing power offer the lowest prices on brand named computes. Try CompUSA. Try Buy.com on the internet.



Rule of Thumb 3

Purchase enough technology that you’ll be equipped for five years. The “latest” computer hardware and software changes every minute. Whenever you make your purchase, on the next day there will be a big headlined ad in the paper for a faster and smaller computer that can hold more information and has more features for less money that you paid. The

very next day! But if you keep waiting for tomorrow’s “latest,” you’ll never make the purchase. Be prepared to live with whatever you buy. “Live in the present moment” as we’re finally learning in order to avoid stress. You can get what you need for several years to come.

Here are some specific recommendations that should take you into the future. Be warned, however, that if you stick this article in a file cabinet and come back to it in six months, what is recommended now would be inappropriate. And if you stop to think about that sentence, you should be following **the unwritten Rule of Thumb 3a** which is: Set your budget, get the best you can afford, and then buy about \$500 more than you established as your limit. (I know, it doesn’t sound rational.)

In a nutshell, for 2005, (and no later), shop for this minimum configuration (but get more if you can afford it): at least a Pentium IV processor with at least a 2+ GHz speed, 1 GB *or more* of RAM; 50 – 100 gigs of hard drive *or more*; at least a 19 inch monitor with 128+ MB (*or more*) video graphics card, a 56kb internal modem (for FAXing); Get a cable modem (or DSL) for your work on the internet and if you do, definitely get a wireless router which will serve as a firewall in addition to your XP Service

Pack II Operating System firewall, a Read/Write DVD ROM and a Hewlett Packard® Printer.

HP printers are, and always have been, the industry standard. Nothing ever goes wrong with them and everyone else makes their printers emulate what they do. There are always software drivers that speak the HP printer language. No cheaper selling printer is worth the difference in having an HP.

If your budget can allow, try to get a laser printer. Color inkjet printers are nice but for the most professional looking printing, there is nothing like 1200-1600 dots per inch resolution – especially when it comes to making enough copies for everyone when you haven't got time to photocopy the output on a photocopier.



Rule of Thumb 4

Purchase the best software. Microsoft Corporation has put over a million hours of development time on its *Office* Suite of business software (*Office Professional*). Their word processor, spread sheet and database programs are the business standard around the world. Most book stores sell hundreds of books on these programs. They are the most used, taught and known programs in our society. For the sake of support, ease of use, features and quality, *Microsoft Office* is your most cost-effective choice. Those of us who have taught all three suites of computer software unflinchingly recommend that there is no other way to go.

The standard *Microsoft Office* suite comes with *Word* (for word processing), *Excel* (for financial spread sheets) and *PowerPoint* (for graphics presentations). *Microsoft Office Professional* comes with those three programs plus the program *Access* for maintaining databases. Buy *Microsoft Office Professional* for \$100 more in order to get *Access* if you want to use and learn database software. Databases are the backbone of the business world for keeping track of clients, employees, products, inventory and sales.

Lastly, buy Symantec: *Norton SystemWorks* to guarantee virus protection and for managing your hard drives. If you do FAXing, consider purchasing *WinFax Pro* for easily using your FAX modem for sending and receiving FAXes right from your computer.



Rule of Thumb 5

Keep your software clean. By “clean” I'm talking about *never* installing software on your computer that you haven't legally bought. If you make it a hard-and-fast policy that you will *never* use copies of other people's software, it will save you a lot of time in avoiding problems from wrong versions and background code conflicts. Most importantly, you want to come to see that your use of a company's software is a partnership between you and their technology research and maintenance team. When you log on to Microsoft's corporate web site, for instance, on any day and at any hour, you can get the latest version of your software and any fixes for or improvements to the software tools you use every day. We are now living in a time when we can, almost instantly, get the very best to produce our best. If you don't have legally registered software, you're out of the loop and stuck with dishonest software. You're missing out on being able to work with the highest quality technology available. Using the best saves you time. Also, keep your software up to date and have your computer regularly set to get the latest fixes and security patches from *Windows Update* as well as *Office Update*.



Rule of Thumb 6

If you are purchasing computer technology for the business in which you work, plan to spend about half as much money on staff training on the software as you spend on the hardware and software. And don't send them to class until you already have the software working properly on the computer. To effectively learn the software, you've got to be using it on the job. (To do otherwise would be like taking a cooking class when you don't have a kitchen.)

Finally, subscribe to computer magazines relevant to the software you use most often. Read the “Link” articles every week in the *Buffalo News*.

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This article was originally written in *Microsoft Word*, running on a Pentium IV computer, importing a digital picture taken by a Kodak 210 Zoom digital camera. This article was enhanced with vector graphics from the graphics library of Presentation Graphics Philip is a computer instructor in Buffalo and a freelance author.

