

It's all Geek to Me!!

Buying a new computer



I have been helping a lot of people with older computers that have had problems recently and have often recommended that they buy new computers. There are so many choices that I thought this would be a good time to talk about buying a new computer.

The most important thing to understand is that you don't have to spend \$2,000 to buy a new computer every time. There are many good buys that are under \$1,000 and I have seen some PCs for under \$500.

When working with a customer, I try to understand what their needs are over the next few years. Do they have kids (or kids at heart) that play 3D games? Do they use it just for typing letters or surfing the net and the occasional e-mail? Do they like to have the latest and greatest for bragging rights?

A typical system is good for 3-5 years. There are many reasons for this, such as Microsoft limiting or dropping support for the version of Windows, equipment wears out over time, and newer software requires more muscle. When looking at a new computer here are a few things to consider.

A computer's processor (brain) is measured by how fast it goes. Older PCs were measured in Megahertz (MHz), newer PCs in Gigahertz (GHz). The larger the number, the faster the computer. There are also multiple manufacturers for the processors, Intel and AMD. Intel processors are given a name and number to like Pentium 4. AMD does too, like Athlon 64. If your needs are minimal, you can save a few dollars by buying an Intel Celeron processor. It's similar to a Pentium 4 but has a little less muscle to it.

The next thing to consider is the RAM (Random Access Memory) or temporary storage. This is typically measured in MegaBytes (MB) and again, the more the merrier. PCs will usually come with between 128 MB – 512 MB installed and can be upgraded if you wish into the Gigabytes (GB). I usually recommend 256 MB as a minimum.

Another type of memory is Video Memory. This is the amount of memory that is available for use in controlling the images that are sent to the monitor for you to view. This is where the understanding of what you want to do comes into play. If you are into playing 3D games, you want to have more, if your not then less will do fine. PCs will come with between 32 MB – 128 MB. A 64 MB video card is a good balance unless you really want to play the newer games, in that case you want 128MB.

Another area where needs comes into play is the permanent storage (Hard Disks, CD & DVD drive). The more things you do the more space you need. Saving those digital photos, and downloading music files take up more space and you want to plan ahead. Storage space is measured in Gigabytes (GB). A typical hard disk is between 20 GB – 120 GB. I usually recommend a 40 – 80 GB hard drive for the average user.

As CDs & DVDs revolutionized the music & movie industries so to have they affected the computer industry. CDs can store large amounts of data in a small space, DVDs store even more. Typically I recommend a 48x CD/RW and a 16X DVD drive. This lets you run some of the newer games that are out on DVD (like Unreal Tournament 2004) and lets you burn CDs for music and backups. It's a good balance for most people. If you feel you need to burn DVDs, you can buy the DVD/RW drives.

As far as brand names go, I like to recommend Dell desktops. They have a great service plan that will come to your site and replace parts for you and it's reasonably priced. The systems are also priced well. If you want a killer game system, it's hard to beat Alienware. Their systems are hard to beat for those avid gamers but it's expensive (over \$1,500).

If you need a portable solution, I like Toshiba, Sony, Dell and IBM. I have owned machines from each of these companies and I like them all for their reliability and performance.

If you have questions about computers that could be answered in this column, please send an e-mail to contact@cbtechserv.com.

Steve Cote is the owner of Copper Beech Technology Services, located in Salem, NH. Steve has been involved in the computer industry since 1982. Started in March 2003, Copper Beech Technology provides onsite computer support services to residential and business customers in the Merrimack Valley and surrounding communities. These services include PC installation, repairs, upgrades, network installations, virus detection/removal as well as web and e-mail hosting services. You can contact Copper Beech Technology by e-mail at contact@cbtechserv.com. Appointments can also be scheduled by calling 603-490-0691.