



5 Sure-Fire Tips for Buying a New Computer

by: John Lenaghan

So you're thinking of buying a new computer...

Where do you start? There are so many brands and models of computers available, and it can all be a little overwhelming when you start to look around.

How do you decide what type of computer you need? And perhaps more importantly, how do you decide what the best value is?

I have sold computers professionally for almost 20 years, and there are certain "tricks of the trade" that most computer stores and salespeople use. Knowing these secrets can make your decision easier and will help you buy the right computer for your needs.

1. Buy What You Need, Maybe a Little More

One of the most important things you can do when buying a new computer is make a list of the things that you will be using it for. There are so many different models - with different capabilities - that you can easily buy more, or less, than you really need if you don't.

If this is your first computer, this can be a little tougher. Until you've used a computer, it's hard to know exactly what you might want to do with it beyond the obvious, like connecting to the internet.

Regardless, you should think about some of the things you might want to do. Some possibilities include:

- Connect to the internet
- Play games
- Digital photography
- Digital video
- Type documents
- Accounting
- Design websites
- Programming
- Digital scrapbooking
- Genealogy

Some of these things need more power than others. For example, connecting to the internet really doesn't need a lot of power. Even the most basic computer available will probably work just fine.

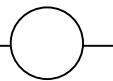
Digital video and many games need a lot more power. If you don't get a fast enough computer with enough memory, you'll be disappointed with the performance.

Knowing what you're going to be using your computer for will help your salesperson, whether they're on the phone, the internet or standing in front of you, recommend the best system for your needs.

As a general rule you're always better off buying more power than you need rather than less, but buying too much can be a waste of money.

2. Warranty Considerations

Computer warranties are one of the most confusing and obscure parts of your purchase. Most manufacturers have cut back on their customer service to the point where poor service has become a



given.

The three most common options are onsite, carry-in or manufacturer's depot service.

Onsite service can be helpful, but think about whether you want to have to be available for a technician to come and diagnose your computer, and possibly have to come back with parts at another time.

Carry in service is a good option, but find out whether the service center is factory authorized for warranty repairs, as well as whether the technicians are all certified.

Shipping your computer to a factory service center can take a long time - sometimes a number of weeks. It also creates risk that your computer will be damaged or even lost in shipping. In some cases, the manufacturer will even replace your computer with another unit and ship it back to you, rather than repairing it. This can result in your losing any information that was on your system and having to reload all your software.

Another aspect of the warranty to find out about is technical support. Find out if the computer manufacturer offers a toll-free phone number and what the quality of service is like.

The better computer salespeople will be honest about this and tell you if a company's service leaves something to be desired. You can also do some research on the internet - most of the computer magazines like PC Magazine and PC World have annual customer service comparisons that rate the larger computer companies.

Always find out how the warranty is handled before making your decision. Even if it doesn't influence your choice, knowing what to expect if something does go wrong will save some nasty surprises down the road.

3. Can You Negotiate the Price Down?

A computer is a relatively large investment - anywhere from a few hundred to a few thousand dollars. Many computer buyers expect that there is a significant amount of "wiggle room" on the price.

The reality is that most computer hardware - the physical pieces like the computer, monitor and printer - is sold at very low profit margins. Often, computer systems are even sold at or below the dealer cost. When you're buying a computer, it never hurts to ask for a better deal, but don't be surprised if you only get a few dollars off, if anything.

Over the close to 20 years I've sold computers, I watched the profit margins go from over 40% to less than 5%. It's almost embarrassing to offer a \$20 discount on a \$2500 computer system, but that could mean the difference between making and losing money on the sale.

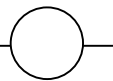
What you can do to get the best price is to do some comparison shopping. Most computer stores offer price-matching guarantees, so if you find your computer for less at another store, most dealers will match or beat that price, even if it means they lose money.

4. How Do Computer Stores Make Any Money?

You might be wondering how these computer stores make any money if they're selling computer for so little profit.

Their money is made on add-on items. The highest profit areas in most computer stores are cables and "consumable" products such as printer ink and paper.

Printer ink is a huge money-maker for most computer stores (even more so for the printer manufacturers). Why is this? Once you've bought a printer, you're going to have to replace your ink



at some point, and continue to replace it as it runs out.

Most chain computer stores and office supply stores that carry a large selection of ink cartridges make more from ink than they do from the computers themselves.

Cables also have huge markups. A cable that costs the store \$2-3 will often sell for \$20-30. That's ten times their cost!

If you're buying a new computer, you will likely need to buy some cables. Some items - printers, for example - don't often include the cables needed to hook them up.

Many printers also come with "starter" ink cartridges that are only half-full. You might also want to pick up some extra ink cartridges.

This is where you should be able to negotiate a better price. Don't expect the salesperson to throw them in for nothing, but they should be willing to offer you a better price. After all, if you're happy with their service, you'll probably continue to buy your ink, paper and other products from that store in the future.

5. What Software is Included?

The last secret of buying a new computer has to do with the software that is included. Most new computer systems include quite a few programs and sometimes the value of the software can be quite high.

Something to watch out for when looking at the included software is "trial versions" or "limited editions".

Many programs that are preloaded are either crippled versions that don't have all the features of the full program, or trial versions that will only run for a certain amount of time before they expire.

Computer are often sold with trial versions of the following types of software:

- antivirus
- firewall
- MS Office or other office suites
- Accounting - both business and personal

The computer manufacturers generally don't make it easy to tell whether the software on their systems are trial versions or limited versions. This is a question that you should specifically ask if you can't find the answer in their promotional information.

If you're buying a new computer with trial versions of the software, keep in mind that you will need to pay to continue using it after the trial period is over. This is an added cost that you need to consider as part of your overall budget.

These five "secrets" of buying a new computer are fairly common sense, but they are not always made clear up front. Knowing what to ask will help you in two ways. First, you can be sure you are getting the right computer for your needs.

Second, if the salesperson or company that you're dealing with explains these things to you without being asked, you'll know you're dealing with someone who is honest and upfront.

Knowing you can trust the people you're dealing with is an invaluable feature of your new computer system.



About the author:

John Lenaghan offers easy-to-understand advice at the Computer Help Squad website. Sign up for our newsletter and receive your free report "5 Critical Steps to Protecting Your Computer on the Internet" at <http://www.computer-help-squad.com/5steps>



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