

## From the TechnoManor

I whacked my Inbox and bats flew out. So, I guess I'll be talking to myself this week!

Are you looking to buy a computer this Christmas? The deals are looking good, aren't they? But they're all so confusing and you don't know what to buy?

Let me see if I can help.

### That First Choice

Should you buy a Windows or a MacOS PC? If you already have a computer, or if you have one at work, I recommend sticking with the type you are familiar with.

If you are buying your very first computer, then either is suitable. Both Windows and MacOS computers are very mature. They are both equally easy and hard to use.

Do not be swayed by claims that one operating system is less secure than the other. Both Windows and MacOS are insecure. All computer software has bugs and is inherently insecure. Having been a software engineer in my career, I know. It is not humanly possible to write bug-free code.

The difference between the number of bugs and security holes found for Windows and the MacOS has to do with the number of computers in use. There are far more Windows computers than MacOS computers in use. If I were a virus-writer (which I'm not), I would develop my infection for the largest target: a Windows computer.

In any event, pick the type of computer that you are familiar with, have friends who can support you when you get stuck, and that fits your budget.

### What's Most Important

After budget, the next most important factors are the ones seldom considered. They are human factors. Use these questions to help you decide:

- How does the computer monitor look? Can you read it? Is it clear? Do the colors look realistic.
- How does the keyboard feel? Is it comfortable to use?
- If you're buying a laptop, how does it feel to carry? Is it heavy? Is it awkwardly-shaped?

- Look at the components: do they appear cheaply-made? Do they look “cheesy?” Do they appear to be solid?
- Push the buttons, close the lids, open the CD/DVD drive trays: do these things all work the way you expect? Do they feel good to the touch?

If a salesman won't let you do these things, go to a different salesman or store. This will be your computer (or gift to someone), after all.

### The TechnoBabble

Now you should consider the yucky technobabble details. Here we go:

- CPU (or processor): This is the “brain” of the computer. It can be made by Intel or AMD. In my opinion, this is the least-important technical detail. Unless you are real geeky (worse than me), don't worry about it. They're all equally usable.
- RAM or Memory: This is where programs live when they're running. You should have at least 1 Gigabyte (abbreviated 1 GB) for Windows XP computers. You should have at least 2 Gigabytes (2 GB) for Windows Vista. You should have 1 to 2 Gigabytes for MacOS X. If you can buy more, do so! Do not skimp on RAM. Do not believe the salesmen if they tell you a computer will run with less (less means 256, 512, or 768 Megabytes). Yes, technically that's true, but the computer will be slow and you will be disappointed.
- Hard Drive: Whatever is installed in your computer is sufficient. They are too big anyway. One caveat: if you plan to record lots of music or movies, then you will want a large hard drive. Think more than 200 Gigabytes.
- CD/DVD drive: You will want at least a CD-ROM drive, preferably a DVD-ROM drive. You will use this to install software, watch movies, and listen to music. You may want the drive to be a *burner*, too. That is, to be able to write (or burn) CDs or even DVDs. The burner capability will raise the price. However, it can be useful if you want to share your music or back up computer files.
- USB ports: These are little rectangular holes in the side of your computer begging for a stick of chewing gum. USB stands for *universal serial bus*. You can plug extra stuff into your computer like mice, hard drives, cameras, printers, scanners, and so on. Most computers come with these. You want at least two. The more, the better.
- Modem: No, you don't want one of these. Some computers still come equipped with them. They are a little outlet on the computer where you can plug a telephone line. They allow you to dial-up an Internet

connection, or to send and receive a fax. Dial-up Internet services are disappearing. The fax capabilities are more complicated than a dedicated fax machine. If you can avoid having a modem, do so.

- Networking: This is different from a modem! There are two kinds of networking here: wired (also called Ethernet) and wireless (also called Wi-Fi). Almost all computers come with wired networking. Most laptops come with both. If you have cable, DSL, or Verizon's FIOS service at home or work, use the networking connection required for those services. For some background, check out my article in *The Link* from July 31, 2008. You need a networking connection to access the Internet.

### Important Extras

- External Hard Drive: This is a hard drive that you typically plug into a USB port. It's useful for backing up important files from your computer. You should be able to get a reasonable one for less than \$100.00. If you don't have one already, buy one!
- Batteries: If you're buying a laptop, consider buying an extra battery. Most laptops do not run on a battery as long as the manufacturer claims. A second one can come in handy (it has for me). While you're at it, you might want a second AC adapter, too.
- Surge protector: If you're buying a desktop computer, you want a surge protector. It's a box that plugs into your wall outlet. You plug your computer into it. If there's a power spike (such as a lightning strike), this can protect your computer equipment from damage. Note that most power strips are not surge protectors!

I prefer to have an Uninterruptible Power Supply (or *UPS*). This is a combination battery and surge protector. If there's a power spike, or if the power goes out, your computer is protected. Modest ones can be had for \$50.00. They're invaluable if you're finishing an important document...and the power goes out.

- Extended Warranties: If this computer is for you, and it's critical, you may want to consider buying an extended warranty. I talk about these in my column in the October 23, 2008 issue of *The Link*.
- Anti-virus and security software: You need it for all computers. Most new computers will come with a 3-month trial copy. You have to pay for a subscription after the trial ends. The easiest thing to do is to pay for a subscription at that point. For other thoughts, see my October 2<sup>nd</sup> column.

- Microsoft Office: If you plan to do a lot of writing, PowerPoint presentations, or spreadsheet work, you will want to buy Microsoft Office. Some computers come with a trial copy as a teaser. Bite the bullet and buy an official copy. The current version is Office 2007. There are sometimes cheaper “Student and Teacher Editions” which will do the trick. Some computers may also come with a free copy of Microsoft Works, this is not the same as Microsoft Office or Microsoft Word. Works is a simpler, all-in-one productivity program. It may be enough to do what you need. However, it can be more bother than it’s worth.

I think that about covers the bases for a new computer. If you want some additional reading to gird yourself before plunging into the stores, I suggest reading the “Personal Technology” columns by Walt Mossberg in *The Wall Street Journal* ([www.wsj.com](http://www.wsj.com)). Walt writes about technology from a layman’s point of view. Twice a year he devotes his column to a new computer buyer’s guide.

If you still have questions about buying a new computer, what I’ve written above, or interpreting what a salesman told you, drop me a line at:

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As for me, I see visions of a Dell Mini 9 netbook, dancing in my head.

Dave Gillen