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Q&A: Shopping for a new computer

2 local experts give views on latest gadgets

BY SARAH BRADSHAW • POUGHKEEPSIE JOURNAL • AUGUST 24, 2008

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Dinosaur. Old Clunker. Vintage. If these terms describe your family computer, it's time to cut the umbilical cord, especially if you have children headed back to school.



Craig Roberts, right, and Matt Chernay of Duality Inc. peruse the selection of PCs at Staples in Poughkeepsie. (Amelia Holowaty Krales/For the Poughkeepsie)

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This year, parents will spend \$152 on household electronics, up from \$129 last year, the National Retail Federation's Back to School Consumer Intentions survey found. It's the only back-to-school spending category showing significant increases this year.

Parents are expected to spend their economic stimulus rebate checks on high-tech school tools, the retail federation said. But before they pull their credit cards out, there are a few computer-buying basics they should know.

The owners of Duality Inc., a Fishkill-based information technology consulting company, have offered to share their expertise. Established in April 2005 by Craig Roberts and Matthew Chernay, the company specializes in network design, installation and maintenance as well as software implementation and Web design. They work with local governments, businesses and individuals throughout the mid-Hudson Valley.

"Each day, we provide government, business and home users with guidance and advice on their technology choices," said Chernay, a graduate of Indiana University with a business degree in operations management.

Roberts and Chernay recently answered some basic questions designed to be a guide for parents going back-to-school computer shopping this year.

I'm shopping for a new family computer. What brand, model and style do you suggest?

Apple makes great computers, if you're interested in owning a Mac, and both Dell & Hewlett-Packard offer good computers at competitive pricing. However, the fact remains the latest Windows operating system, Vista, still has compatibility and stability issues. Most companies are pushing to sell Vista personal computers, but some are now offering a great alternative. Dell offers PCs with Windows XP pre-installed, along with a Vista installation disc, so you may upgrade to Vista if you choose to. Considering the current state of Windows Vista, this is a great option for consumers to consider.

What kinds of basics should I know before I talk to a store salesperson?

You should put some thought into what the computer will mainly be used for. Make sure the computer has at least 2 gigabytes of RAM (memory). Don't be afraid to ask a lot of questions and make sure you understand the warranty options and terms. If there is specific software you'd like to purchase, make sure it's compatible with the operating system. Most stores sell only Windows-based computers, but Macs can be purchased

from Apple and Best Buy stores.

What are current prices for new computers?

Typically, most users can purchase a good desktop for approximately \$500 and a good laptop can be purchased for around \$1,000.

What are the pros and cons of a laptop versus a desktop? If it's a family computer used by many, should that influence which type I buy?

The main advantages to having a laptop are compact size and portability. Laptops are an ideal choice for students, since they carry easily. The disadvantage to the compact size of a laptop is the ease of which it can be dropped, damaged or stolen. Laptops also tend to be more expensive. Certain components of laptops cannot be upgraded (like video or sound cards). The more users there are, the more storage space you may need, especially if each family member has his or her own music and picture library. Desktops generally offer higher capacity hard drives for increased storage space.

How useful is the computer warranty?

We recommend to all our clients to purchase extended warranties, as components in your computer can malfunction on any given day. Most manufacturers and retail stores offer extended warranties, but by default, offer a one-year warranty. By purchasing an extended warranty, you can easily save several hundred dollars that may potentially be spent to hire a computer repair company if your computer experiences hardware issues.

When is the best time to buy a computer (for the best deals)?

There are usually good back-to-school sales right before the school year begins. Other than that, it's tough to predict when computer deals will be available. Sometimes there are good deals for different holidays, and other times new technology becomes available and stores offer sales to help clean out their current stock.

Should I buy a computer online or at a store?

Purchasing a computer online offers more options (customization) than purchasing at a retail store. Retail stores offer "factory configured" systems that are not as flexible at the point of sale. Retail stores usually keep their products in stock, so you can take a computer home the same day it's purchased, in most cases. If you know what to look for, you can also find some good deals at some stores.

Are there risks associated with a used or refurbished computer?

A refurbished computer may have new components installed in it, such as a new hard drive or power supply. Other components, however, may be from the original build of the computer, which slightly increases the chances of malfunction. In other cases, refurbished computers are not really refurbished, but new computers. In these cases, companies may have an overstock of a certain model or simply do not want to sell a certain model, so they transfer the products to another vendor who sells them as "refurbished."

What are pros and cons of a Mac computer?

One of the biggest advantages to owning a Mac is the extreme lack of virus and spyware infection. The latest Mac operating system, OS X, is both highly secure and stable. OS X even allows users to install and run Windows XP or Vista on a Mac. There are also some disadvantages to running a Mac. Many applications simply will not run on Mac computers. Such applications are usually specialized business applications, though, and wouldn't really be used by or available to home users and students anyway. Macs may also seem a little pricier. This may be attributed to the high quality components they're comprised of and the software and features that are included in them.

What are pros and cons of a PC operating with Windows?

Windows-based computers are the most widely used. As a result, there are a wider variety of programs available. Perhaps the most notable disadvantage of Windows computers is the threat of viruses and malware (malicious software). Also, the latest operating system released by Microsoft, Windows Vista, has been a great disappointment to Windows users due to its lack of stability.

What features are the best investments? What features can I downgrade or keep basic?

If you're investing in a computer and plan on maximizing its lifetime, there are a few things to consider. The CPU (central processing unit), or microprocessor, determines the overall speed at which the computer executes programs. However, unless you're using the computer for serious gaming or video editing, you can settle for a slightly lower processor speed. You should purchase a computer with at least 2 gigabytes of RAM to help the processor execute program instructions more efficiently. If you're purchasing a laptop, you can increase its performance by requesting a 7200 RPM hard drive.

What programs should I ask to be installed?

Never assume software, such as an office suite or an antivirus program, is included with a new computer. If you're buying a PC, make sure you have antivirus software. Office suites, such as Microsoft Office, may or may not be included. You can go to www.openoffice.org and download an office suite for free. This could save you a couple hundred dollars.

What is the difference between processing chips? AMD versus Intel, for example?

There are many technical differences between these two processors. These differences may be a little too technical for the purpose of this article. Something worth noting, though, is Intel has been around longer than AMD, so you can expect to pay less for an AMD-based computer.

What is RAM?

RAM is an acronym for random access memory. It's the component of the computer that stores data that is currently in use by the operating system and other applications. The CPU (Central Processing Unit) can access data stored in RAM much faster than it can access data directly from a hard drive. Therefore, RAM allows computers to process data more efficiently, which in turn greatly improves the performance of the computer.

Do I really need that much hard drive space?

In most cases, you won't need more than 80 gigabytes of hard drive capacity. However, with the growth of multimedia devices such as iPods and digital cameras, the need for additional hard drive capacity may vary. Media files, such as pictures, videos and music usually take up the most storage space.

If I can't afford a new computer, what are my other options?

If you can't afford a new computer, consider looking into upgrading your existing computer. The easiest way to improve the performance of your computer is to add additional memory. You should be aware that, based on your make and model, the type and maximum amount of RAM that can be installed may vary.

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