

Computer Tech Talk Shopping for a Computer

By Dennis Henson

Why do you want a computer? Don't go out and buy a new personal computer (PC) just because somebody told you that you should. Get a PC because you need one to do something useful. Take the time to review the last "Computer Tech Talk" article in the *Cumberland County News* and jot down a prioritized list of what you want to accomplish. Are you interested in educational software for small children? Do you run a small office at home? Do you want to casually browse the internet? Are you a serious "gamer" – one who plays the latest computer based video games? Does your PC need to be a portable notebook (laptop) computer or is a fixed installation good? Once you make a prioritized list and decide what kind of user you will be -- go PC shopping.

How much does a new PC cost? In March 2006, a new entry level brand name PC costs around \$400 delivered to your door. A maxed-out PC capable of running the most demanding video games can cost over \$3500, without the cost of the games! Yes, modern video games demand more from a PC, than word processing or internet browsing – much more. But the entry level computers of today are very capable. In fact, if Detroit had made improvements in automobiles over the last 20 years at the same rate as computer improvements, your next new car would travel at 40 times the speed of sound and cost around \$600.

Where do you purchase a PC? There are several choices.

Locally. If you want one-on-one, personal service then a local computer store may be for you. Local stores need to be price competitive with the big guys to stay in business, especially when you consider the value of personal service you expect. Most local stores create what's referred to as "clones" or "beige boxes". These PCs are put together from separately purchased parts: system board, case and power supply, RAM, hard drive, video card, modem/NIC, optical drive(s),

keyboard, mouse and monitor. word processing "office suite" Reputable stores use brand that can handle document name components, power creation, create spreadsheets, supplies listed by Underwriters provide sophisticated email, Laboratories (UL) and stand prepare presentations, create behind their product with a one databases, and design year carry-in warranty. professional brochures may be

Regionally. Electronics superstores stock a variety of brand name PCs at competitive prices. You can look and test

before you buy. The sales staff is often well trained. Most have on-site carry-in technical support for repair and upgrades.

On-line (or by phone) Purchases direct from the major manufacturers are popular. Gateway pioneered this form of PC purchase in the 1980's. Dell is the current volume leader for direct PC purchase. Use the on-line approach only if you are comfortable with some minimal level of troubleshooting and tech support over the telephone. Many times a phone call is all that is required to resolve new user issues. Tech support may be transferred to a foreign country.

Used. One of the best ways to enter the computer age is to get a used PC from someone who has upgraded theirs. The useful life of a new PC is around 5 years (before full obsolescence) and many people upgrade more frequently. You aren't likely to get any warranty, nor the latest features, but a used PC may be just the ticket to get started. Make sure the used machine has the minimum capability you need. Many old computers are just plain obsolete.

What comes for free? Some new computer users think that a computer comes with all the software needed. *Wrong!* Pre-installed software that comes with your hardware purchase is limited. You may only get the operating system (the software that make the electronics interact with you), an internet browser to allow you to find things "graphically" on the internet, a time-limited virus protection program, and sometimes a low-end word processing program.

What costs extra? Anti-virus software is sold by annual subscription (after the trial period) and you must keep the subscription current to be best protected from computer virus threats. Forty dollars is about the cost of world class yearly virus protection. A full

professional brochures may be what you need. A full office suite can cost about \$400. Bill Gates didn't get rich by giving it away.

Physical Protection. You should protect your new PC purchase from harmful power surges. At the very least install a surge suppressing power strip between your PC and the AC outlet. A battery-backed surge protection device called an uninterruptible power supply (UPS) provides a better level of protection. This device has a sealed lead-acid gel-cell battery constantly charged, waiting to take over when the power company voltage gets too low or too high. The PC keeps right on working for short outages until power is restored or until you turn off the computer manually.

Note. If your AC outlet is older without the third (ground) wire, a surge suppressor or UPS can provide no surge protection. Consider having an electrician install a new three-wire circuit for the computer.

Software Protection. A future article of "Computer Tech Talk" will discuss spyware and virus protection in detail. For now, just be sure you have good anti-virus software (with an up-to-date subscription) installed on your computer to keep your PC functioning properly. There are over 100,000 malicious viruses out there right now, many waiting to turn your new PC purchase into a boat anchor (at least temporarily).

Questions and comments about this article may be emailed to:
hcs@mchsi.com