(Approx. 1363 words)

Kretchmar’s Korner

Mistakes We Make When Buying a Computer

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March 2019 issue, Gigabyte Gazette

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For many of us, computers have become an integral part of our daily lives. Computers have become almost as important as a car to some of us. Fortunately, computers are pretty easy to acquire. They are no longer a major investment (my first computer system, 20 years ago, cost $3000) but still can be a significant purchase and something we will live with for years.

For the less tech-savvy, buying a computer can be difficult. There is a lot of tech jargon flying around, and all of it is competing to get your money. Because of that, mistakes are easy to make, and they can easily result in your money going to waste. When you’re spending hundreds of dollars, you don’t want to get a machine that’s going to break down in a year, fail to work as expected or cost any more than it ought to. We are going to take a look at a number of computer shopping mistakes so that you can avoid them and get a great computer without spending any more than you have to.

Always Buying Whatever’s Cheapest

If you have very minimal computer demands and hardly browse the Internet, you might be able to get away with only ever getting a cheap computer. Cheap and/or old hardware is going to wear out more quickly and fail to meet the ever-increasing demands of new software. A $200 machine could last you a couple of years, but that time may be filled with headaches as it begins to struggle more and more on its way to the computer graveyard. A $400 computer should last longer, and that time should be less filled with headaches. It is impossible to be entirely sure what you’re going to get for your money, but you’ll probably have a good chance of finding a more reliable, longer-lasting PC if you spend more. You don’t need to buy a $2,000 computer, but just keep an eye out for good deals on brands and models that have proven to have a good lifespan, and you should be safe.

Not Buying Based on Your Needs

If you think a computer seems awesome because you’ve heard media hype about it, it’s the latest thing, or it just looks awesome, you’re probably shopping for a computer incorrectly.

Sure, if you want to prioritize a certain feature such as appearance or power, you can, but most of us should just think about what we need from the computer and buy a machine that will enable us to do the job. If you’re going to just do light Internet browsing, some word processing, and watch a movie here and there, you can probably do without 32GB of RAM, that 8-core CPU, or 12 USB 3.0 ports. Whatever you get with a computer, you pay for, so try not to go for something you know you don’t need.

Not Knowing What You’re Getting with an Operating System

About 10 years ago my nephew camped outside of Best Buy to get a dirt-cheap laptop. The laptop was inexpensive, but it came without a permanent operating system! Fortunately he had a geeky uncle who was able to help him, but not all were so fortunate.

Today you are unlikely to be sold a computer without an operating system (OS). There are plenty of different computer OS out there — Windows, Apple OS X, various flavors of Linux, including the Chrome OS. Each OS functions differently. Most importantly for users, each OS handles software differently (if at all). If you have an old computer running one OS and want to bring software you purchased to a new computer, don’t expect to succeed if you switch operating systems. For example, Skype may have versions working for Mac and Windows, but you won’t be able Skype with your friends and family if you switch over to Chrome OS. Remember the first step in buying a computer: you need to decide what you need to do with a computer and ensure the OS will support it.

Assuming a Feature is Included

Whether you’re shopping for a laptop or a desktop, don’t make any assumptions about the features that are included.

Computers come in all configurations

You should never take anything for granted. If you want a computer with a CD/DVD drive, look and see if there is one, and if you’re shopping on line or in a store, make sure you know with 100% certainty it’s there. Optical drives seem to be slowly going the way of the old floppy drives – away.

Software can usually be downloaded online rather than installed from an optical disk. More and more new computers don’t include an optical drive, especially laptops, since the optical drive on a laptop adds considerably to the bulk of the system. External optical drives are available for $25 - $30 and this is often the solution if an optical drive is required.

Also make sure there are plenty of USB ports, and importantly at least 1 high speed (3.0 or 3.1) USB port.

Some new computers are sold with HDMI video output only.

If you plan to utilize an older monitor with only the old standard 15-pin sub-D input, you are out of luck without a special adapter.

Not Finding a Problem with a Computer While You Can Still Return It.

Just because you’ve spent your money for a new computer already doesn’t mean the buying process is over. You have a time window where you can return the computer if you’re not satisfied. Test everything. See how far the Bluetooth signal reaches. Ensure it can connect to your Wi-Fi network and maintain a connection. Test out all of the drives and ports. Try out headphones and microphones. Install all of the programs you want to use and try them out. Run Prime95 or your most demanding video game for hours. You basically want to make sure that the computer will easily meet your needs. If it’s falling short or not working how you expect, you want to find that out while you can still return it. (Personal story: I once bought a high-end Dell desktop computer that seemed great, but it would not shut down without cutting off the power. I returned it quickly for a replacement. If I hadn’t tested out those features early on, I would have learned the hard way what it felt like to waste $3000.)

Not Shopping Around Enough

You do need to shop around - that is, if you want to get the best deal. Don’t just go into Best Buy and assume your options are limited to those devices at those prices. Shopping at a single retailer (especially a brick-and-mortar shop) will guarantee that you’ll miss out. Every big retailer is going to have some deal going at any given time, so you’ve just got to hunt for the right one, which means checking way more than one place. I suggest you look at Newegg.com, TigerDirect.com, Amazon.com, and BestBuy.com. If you’re brave and knowledgeable you can see what you can find on eBay.com. Check the manufacturers’ websites. Check Costco and other retailers. If you shop around and are patient, you’ll get a good deal on a new computer.

Setup and Warranty

Finally, there’s the matter of setup services and warranties. Choosing to get a warranty is an extra cost, which I do not recommend, but it adds some security. If you’re concerned about physical damage to the computer, an accidental damage warranty isn’t a bad idea. As far as setup services, if you know your way around a computer, or know someone who does and is willing to help, you can likely pass on having a professional set it up — most of what’s done is pretty simple. If everything about computers is like a foreign language to you and no one you know tolerates your technological deficiencies, it may be worth the money to have a pro come set up your new computer and get you up and running.