Consider these steps when purchasing a new computer

ARTVILLE

PC 101

BY MARK LUCE

Technological obsolescence happens the minute you open up the box for any new personal computer. By the time you get it out of the box and running, there's another PC coming off the manufacturing line that's bigger, faster and stronger than your machine.

As processor speeds continue to increase, data storage becomes more and more effi-

cient, and Internet access becomes quicker. Since more of our lives are governed by computers, it's important not to have second and third thoughts after dropping a cool grand or two on a "new system." You need to make sure that what you're buying today will still meet your needs in a few years.

For superintendents, computers can help do everything from run irrigation systems,

manage payroll, control operations and create presentations, in addition to the more communicative tasks of e-mailing, memo writing and buying supplies online. As Peter Brooks, CGCS of the Everglades Club in Palm Beach, Fla., says, "I'd be lost without my computer."

Here are a few steps to find the new computer that best suits your needs:

The rebate question

The PC market is filled with deals too good to be true, such as $400 to $700 rebates when you purchase a machine. Read the fine print because most of those rebates are tied to buying three years of Internet service. Do the math, and often you'll find that you aren't saving money. Further, there's the possibility that prices for Internet service providers may drop so they can compete with the coming wave of super-quick broadband connections like DSL or cable modems.

The engine

The processor drives the computer, and Intel is the leader in making these chips. With new computers touting 700 megahertz speeds — undreamed of just a few years ago — one may be tempted to find the highest number available and snag it. But for the type of tasks superintendents do with a computer, anything from 350 MHz to 500 MHz should work. The differences in speeds as one reaches higher MHz levels will not be noticed unless you want to play high-end video games.

The gas tank

Random-access memory, or RAM, is probably the most important thing to understand when buying a computer. Not only will it make the machine faster, but it will allow you to have several applications open at once. One needs at least 64 megabytes of RAM, but it is probably better to have 96 or 128 MB. Make sure you can upgrade the memory on your new computer because larger-sized applications will eat up more RAM in the future.

Storing it all

The hard disk is basically the storage area for your data, including your programs and files. Bigger is better, and 6.4 gigabytes should hold all your stuff. But again, as programs increase in size, they will gobble up more and more of your hard drive, so a 10 GB drive might be a better choice. You can buy external hard drives in all types of varying sizes.

The eyes have it

Unless you like frying your pupils, get at least a 17-inch monitor. In many bundled computers (where you get the tower, printer, monitor in one package), the monitor is only a 15-inch model. The larger monitor will cost more — usually around $325 to $500 — but it will make the work appear larger and save you from eyestrain.

The digital age

More and more, computers are coming with recordable/rewriteable CD-ROM drives. The CD-ROM is quickly replacing the old 3.5-inch floppy discs, and having a rewriteable CD-ROM will make backing up your system a snap. Plus, you can use the drive to listen to music while you work. If that seems a bit much, try adding a Zip drive, which has discs that can store nearly 100 times more than a standard floppy, making it perfect to store high-tech presentations.

Plugging In

Ports, and plenty of them, are necessary to hook up peripherals, such as printers, scanners, extra hard drives and Zip drives. Increasingly, computers are equipped with universal serial bus ports.

Unlike the old ISA or PCI ports, USB devices are plug and play, meaning no restarting the computer to use a different device. Buy a computer that has at least two USB ports. If you are sticking with an older printer, external modem or another peripheral, however, you may have to purchase some rather expensive connectors to use the older peripherals on the new machine.

A couple of other things to note: If you are going to be hooked to other computers, make sure that you get Ethernet connections. A dedicated memory bank, the L2 cache, speeds up the computer. Usually, this will be listed separately from the RAM memory and 512 K should work fine.

Final thoughts

As in all things, the best thing to do is shop around and ask questions. The computer you think you want may not be the one you really need. Assess what you already have, think about your needs for the future and make sure you know going in how much you (or the club) is willing to spend. Ask friends and colleagues how their computers have performed for them.

While it is often best to stick with the tried and true — Dell, Gateway, Compaq — don't be afraid of custom-built machines by local dealers. If you trust the people working there, going this route can save some money. While it's enticing to buy a computer online since there's no sales tax, check the shipping charges.

Remember, the key isn't how many bells and whistles and cool screen savers your computer has; it's how well it does what you need it to do. What you are really looking for is reliability, flexibility and a good deal. ∎

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