

January is a good time to buy a new computer. There are often bargains to be had. So, here are a few tips and observations. Don't take anything I say as gospel. Your priorities and tastes may be different from my own or my typical client. Nevertheless, I hope this guide will at least give some pointers in the right direction.

Netbook Computers

A netbook computer is like a cut-down version of a laptop computer. It usually has a 10 inch screen, small keyboard, no CD/DVD drive, less RAM than a laptop computer (typically 1gb) and a less-powerful processor. It is great for taking around with you and using for applications such as web surfing, email, word processing, and spreadsheets (unless they're humungously large). The battery life tends to be much longer than laptops but you pay for this by having a less powerful processor and only a 10 inch screen. You wouldn't want to try doing complicated Photoshop editing on a 100mb raw image on a netbook, but they're fine for viewing photos and basic editing such as Picasa offers. They can be half the weight or less of a laptop, but you may need to buy an external DVD/CD drive (which you don't generally need to carry around with you). Alternatively, you can usually download new software rather than install it from a disc. You can also share a DVD/CD drive on another computer on your local network.

Assuming, though, that you've decided on a laptop, what do you need to consider?

Operating System

Unless you are buying an Apple Mac then your choice for an operating system is going to be Windows 7. Don't even think about Linux unless you want to start become an "enthusiast". There are several versions of Windows 7. There is a detailed comparison [here](#). Windows Home Premium is almost certainly the one to go for. A later upgrade to a more sophisticated version is possible.

If your decision is to go for an Apple Mac then a lot of the decision-making just disappears as Apple produce a limited range of computers and only one operating system. People with Apple Macs often sing their praises much more than PC owners, but you get locked into the Apple Mac way of doing things and this can bring limitations. Macs are also expensive (though beautifully designed and manufactured).

OK, so the assumption from now on is that you've ruled out netbooks and Macs....

32-bit or 64-bit operating system?

You've decided on your version of Windows (probably Windows 7 Home Premium), but there is another decision to be made. Since the days of Windows XP there have been both 32-bit and 64-bit versions of Windows. The newer 64-bit versions have been quite slow to catch on

but it appears that they are now gathering pace. The main difference is that 64-bit can use more memory (RAM) than 32-bit.

If you are replacing a computer that is running 64-bit Windows then it makes sense to buy 64-bit again. This is because you would not expect to encounter compatibility problems with your peripherals (eg printer) and 64-bit machines can use more memory (RAM) than 32-bit. You can check whether you are currently running 32-bit or 64-bit by following the instructions at <http://support.microsoft.com/kb/827218#WinVista7> (covers all recent versions of Windows).

If you are currently running 32-bit Windows then your peripherals may or may not work with the 64-bit version. Your options are

- specify 32-bit again on your new system
- run the “Windows Upgrade Advisor” on your present system to check for potential problems or
- go for 64-bit and accept that some peripherals may not work

You can download and run Microsoft’s “Upgrade Advisor” from <http://www.microsoft.com/downloads/en/details.aspx?FamilyID=1b544e90-7659-4bd9-9e51-2497c146af15&displaylang=en>

Processor Speeds

Processor speeds are not as important as they used to be as they are all fast enough for normal use. Obviously, a faster processor is better, but as long as the machine doesn’t use the Atom processor (which is optimised for use on netbooks, where the demand for power and battery life are prioritised) then this is not a critical factor. However, if you intend to edit movies, play graphic-intensive games, or do high-end photo editing or desktop publishing (with Photoshop or Quark Xpress, for instance) then it’s better to go for a faster processor if possible.

Memory (RAM)

Do not buy a laptop with less than 2gb RAM. 3gb is better. If you buy 32-bit Windows you won’t get much benefit from having 4gb (compared with 3gb) on account of the way that the memory is used and made available by Windows, but it’s probably not worth worrying about whether there is 3gb or 4gb – just don’t get less than 2gb. If you go for the 64-bit version you can have as much memory as the machine and your pocket will allow. If possible, it’s worth checking out whether the installed memory can be increased at a later date (but remember that the 32-bit version of Windows can’t usefully use more than about 3.25gb).

Hard Drive

The hard drive should be no less than 250gb. If you plan to record and/or store large video files (such as films) then have as large a hard drive as available and affordable (500gb is currently a good size). Hard drives are like wardrobes: they look huge when empty when new, but soon fill up (mainly with stuff that you're not sure whether to keep). It's possible at a later date to upgrade to a larger hard drive but this is not for the faint-hearted and involves having the right knowledge and software. It's also possible to plug in extra external USB hard drives but it may be inconvenient having things like this hanging off the laptop (especially on the move).

USB Ports

Look at the number of USB ports on any machine that interests you and think about how many USB devices you may want to plug into it (external hard drive, mouse, mobile phone (for synchronising or transferring data), digital camera, etc). Some laptops come with as few as 2 USB ports and this can be a pain. Three is obviously a better number and more than that is great if you often find yourself connecting lots of devices.

Keyboard and Screen

The size and type of these is a matter of personal preference. Some people like highly reflective screens and others like them matt, for instance. The bigger the machine, the easier it tends to be to use when it's on a desk but the harder it is to use on your lap or carry around. If you like a large laptop (17 inch screen, for instance) then the machine will probably be more expensive and have a better specification overall (more USB ports, for instance). It is worth trying out the keyboard to see if it suits you. If you like to have lots of windows open at once then the larger the screen the better as larger screens don't just make things bigger, they provide more room to display things. One last point on the subject of screen size is that I myself (at my ripe old age) find using a netbook computer (with a 10 inch screen) a strain after a while on account of the small screen size. It's a fact of life that our eyes are not as good at keeping a sharp focus over long periods of time as we get older and I find a marked difference between viewing a 10 inch screen and a 15 inch screen later in the day. My own personal preference on this is that I find a 15 inch screen (on a laptop) the ideal compromise on screen size. You can always connect a laptop or netbook to a larger external monitor if desired (at this moment I'm using a 20 inch external monitor on my 15 inch laptop).

WiFi

I can't imagine that any laptop is supplied without WiFi these days, but it might make sense to ensure that it is there.

Bluetooth

This a wireless technology for communicating between your laptop and some devices such as mobile phones. A mouse connected by Bluetooth saves a USB port from being used by the mouse. Unless you already use it, you can probably live without it, but having it won't add a great deal to the price.

Camera, Microphone and Speakers

If you use Skype then ensure there is a built-in camera and microphone as Skype is much easier to use with these built in. Most laptop speakers are fine for voice (Skype calls, for instance) but pretty hopeless for listening to music. Ensure that you test the speakers before buying if playing music is important. Alternatively, you can plug in external speakers, but things are now starting to get a bit messy.

Specific Brands

Well, I think "you pays your money and you takes your choice".

- Sony have a reputation for quality but they're more expensive to buy and repair.
- The IBM / Lenovo ThinkPad appears to have a loyal following and it's got a long pedigree.
- Toshiba have been making laptops for probably longer than almost anyone so they should know what they are doing.
- Dell used to be quite boring but they're now much more stylish and available from retail outlets as well as direct from Dell.
- Acer have been doing very well for the last year or so.
- HP laptops always strike me as boring, but I'm not sure why.
- My own personal favourite is Samsung. My main computer is a 15 inch Samsung Q35 laptop that is now in its fifth year and still going perfectly well (although it's true that I've increased the memory and upgraded the hard drive). I've also had a Samsung NC10 netbook since March 2009 and that, too, is an excellent machine for its niche use (carrying around with me on client visits).

Where to Buy

If John Lewis have what you want then they are a good bet as they're "never knowingly undersold" and their service is good. People seem to feel comfortable making scary purchasing decisions at John Lewis. By all means buy from PC World if the price is right for what you want, but I strongly recommend against relying on their technical expertise. I've overheard some toe-curlingly embarrassing whoppers (or, more charitably, mistakes) in branches of PC World. Not only that, but returning something faulty to PC World can have you queuing in their "technical assistance" for 40 minutes (I know, I've been there). Buying online from Dell is usually a safe enough thing to do but I've had clients complaining of their inflexible delivery terms. If you are buying online, then Amazon seem to be the benchmark against which to see if anyone else can do better. If you feel brave enough to do Tottenham

Court Road then you need to be aware that a lot of the shops there do not put prices on their goods. When you ask for a price then you'll probably be given a high price. The only way to do business in most of these shops is to get an idea of what you are prepared to pay beforehand. You can usually do this online, but do remember that buying online tends to be a bit cheaper these days than buying retail so you may not be able to match the online price in the high street. So, when the man in the shop in Tottenham Court Road (and they are mostly men) says £599, wince, take a sharp intake of breath, and point out that you can get it online for £399. He will then ritualistically pick up a calculator, clatter a few keys, and say "I can do it for you for £420" (or thereabouts). My own personal recommendation for shopping on Tottenham Court Road is to buy from Micro Anvika. They have three or four shops on TCR. They've been around for many, many years and their staff are technically knowledgeable. They don't discount prices, but neither do they overcharge. I've often been grateful for their technical assistance and they never quibble if you take something back. To be honest, some of the computer shops on Tottenham Court Road give the impression that they'll take advantage of your lack of knowledge if they can. You never get that impression in Micro Anvika.

Extended warranties

My own opinion is that if a computer is going to go wrong, it will probably do so within the first month. You are covered for the first twelve months with the standard guarantee and Sale of Goods Acts etc. It seems to me that the period from one year old to three years old is the very time that it won't pack up, so I'm not paying an inflated price for an extended warranty to cover this period. Other people don't share my view on this so, once again, you pay your money and you take your choice. One thing that is certain, though, is that many computer salesmen are paid commission on selling extras such as extended warranties, so their disproportionate enthusiasm to sell you one may have more to do with their pocket than your best interests.

Software

You do need to consider what software you will need to buy. If you have been accustomed to Microsoft Office on your current computer then you can transfer the licence to your new computer provided that you bought a retail copy. If your previous copy came "bundled" with your computer when you bought it then you will have what is called an "OEM" licence and this is strictly non-transferable to your new computer. If you don't need Outlook or Access then the Home & Student version of Office 2010 is great value at about £70-£80 and it even comes with licences to install it on three machines. It includes Word, Excel, and PowerPoint.

Other software that you have already may or may not be transferable to your new machine. With some software you just install it again on your new computer and everything is fine. With other software, your licence may be non-transferable or you may be able to transfer it after a phone call to the vendor. A further possible scenario is that your old software will not run on a Windows 7 machine at all. You can either investigate all of these things beforehand

or buy the new machine, do what's possible as far as transfers are concerned, and then plug the gaps.

Security Software

Most new laptops will come pre-installed with 60-90 day trial versions of Norton or McAfee antivirus programs. These will also quite probably include a firewall and anti-malware software. When the trial expires you will then be pestered to buy the full product. My own advice is that these products are overblown, too complicated, and expensive (since you have to renew the £30-£50 subscription every year). By all means go with the installed software if you wish, but there are free alternatives - eg from AVG and Microsoft.

What next?

You could do worse than browse PC Pro's review of laptops at <http://www.pcpro.co.uk/reviews/laptops/>. Also, it's worth browsing a few shops even if it's just to see if you have a preference for particular keyboards, screens and the overall looks of different brands and models.

If you need further, specific, advice about buying a new laptop (or any other type of machine) just [contact me](#). I am, of course, available to help in smoothing the path from your old to your new computer.

Happy hunting!

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