PC Purchasing Tips

Don't forget the software. Any machine you buy will come with some version of Microsoft Windows, but you must purchase the application software you intend to run. Many first-time buyers are surprised that they have to pay extra for software, so be sure to allow for this in your budget. Ideally, Microsoft Office will be bundled with your machine, but if not, look to purchase it through your university bookstore as it offers a substantial educational discount.

Don't skimp on memory. The more memory a system has the better its overall performance. 512MB of RAM is the minimum you should consider in today's environment, but 1GB is better. You should also be sure that your system is able to accommodate additional memory easily and cheaply.

Buy more disk space than you think you need. We purchased our first hard disk as an upgrade to the original PC in 1984. It was a "whopping" 10MB, and our biggest concern was that we would never fill it all. The storage requirements of application programs have increased significantly. Microsoft Office requires several hundred megabytes for a complete installation. A 20GB drive is the minimum you should consider in today's environment.

Let your fingers do the walking. A single issue of a computer magazine contains advertisements from many vendors, making it possible to comparison-shop from multiple mail-order vendors from the convenience of home. You can also shop online and visit a vendor's Web site to obtain the latest information. You can generally get to a vendor by using a Web address of the form, www.company.com.

Look for 30-day price protection. An unconditional 30-day money-back guarantee is an industry standard. Insist on this guarantee and be sure to get it in writing. A reputable vendor will also refund the amount of any price reduction that occurs during the first 30 days, but it is incumbent on you to contact the vendor and request a refund. Don't forget to do so.

Use a credit card. You can double the warranty of any system (up to one additional year) by using a major credit card provided it offers a "buyer's protection" policy. (Check with your credit card company to see whether it has this feature, and if not, you may want to consider getting a different credit card.) The extended warranty is free and it goes into effect automatically when you charge your computer. The use of a credit card also gives you additional leverage if you are dissatisfied with an item.

Don't forget the extras. A modem and/or a network card is an absolute must, but it is not necessarily included in the basic price. The standard PC comes with a simple speaker that is capable of little more than a beep, but true sound requires the installation of a sound card and the availability of speakers. A microphone is required if you want to record your own sound. Any vendor will gladly sell you these components. Just remember to ask.

Don't be frustrated when prices drop. The system you buy today will invariably cost less tomorrow, and further, tomorrow's machine will run circles around today's most powerful system. The IBM/XT, for example, sold for approximately $5,000 and was configured with an 8088 microprocessor, a 10MB hard disk, 128KB of RAM, and monochrome monitor, but it was the best system you could buy in 1983. The point of this example is that you enjoy the machine you buy today without concern for future technology. Indeed, if you wait until prices come down, you will never buy anything, because there will always be something better for less.