

# Carl's Computer Column

by Carl Kass, Cragsmoor NY

## Question 1: What Computer?

Welcome to *Carl's Computer Column*. The first question most people ask me is "What kind of computer should I get?" In order to answer that question, I must first assess the needs of the person and balance the needs against the budget the person has for the computer.

(Unfortunately, in a short, general interest column, it is impossible for me to give as many details as I would like, or to describe all the devices that are associated with personal computers. I will attempt to go into more detail and discuss more specifics in future columns.)

In general, answering the "What Computer?" question starts by dividing the probable use of the computer into two very broad categories: business use and entertainment. Business use is often text oriented and includes word processing, spreadsheet processing, simple graphics, accounting, communications and Internet access, playing simple computer games, time management, presentations, and specialized business programs. Entertainment use is typically graphics oriented and includes playing advanced computer games, sophisticated graphics processing, music storing and editing, and movie creation and editing. Naturally, these are very broad categories with significant overlap.

Generally, business-oriented personal computers require less disk storage, a less sophisticated video card, a simpler monitor, and business oriented software.


Generally, entertainment oriented personal computers require more disk storage, a more sophisticated video card, a graphics-oriented monitor, and software that is specific to the functions that are to be performed on the computer. Of course, if a business-oriented computer is going to fill a very specific need, such as act as a file server for a company, it may need significant amounts of

very high-speed disk storage.

Next, we look at price. A typical business-oriented computer will cost between \$550 and \$1200 for a desktop and up to \$2000 for a laptop (portable) personal computer, including the operating system, but not including tax, a monitor, or software. A typical entertainment-oriented personal computer will cost between \$1500 and \$3100 for a desktop, including operating system, but not including tax, a monitor, or software.


Along with buying a computer, a person often purchases one or more of the following: an extended warranty, a monitor (the display device), a printer, a scanner, a backup device and associated media, and software. Sometimes one or more of the following is also purchased at the time the computer is purchased: a digital camera, an UPS (Uninterruptible Power Supply), a PDA (Personal Digital Assistant), an advanced mouse, an advanced keyboard, networking equipment, a sound card and speakers, a GPS device, a joystick or other gaming device, Internet access, and a modem. We must budget each item to be purchased based on its sophistication (which determines its cost), determine each item's ultimate utility, whether the item can be purchased at a later date (at which time its cost may be lower or it may become more powerful at the same cost).

Once all this is done, we can look at what computer is to be purchased and how much is to be spent. It is interesting to note that a current low-end personal computer significantly exceeds a high-end personal computer of just one to two years ago in almost every category of computing power. It is also interesting to note that a personal computer purchased five years ago will probably be marginal (at best) when asked to run most of today's current software!

*(Carl Kass has a Master's Degree in Computer Science from Columbia University School of Engineering & Applied Science. For the past 15 years, he has been an independent consultant, satisfying the computing needs of small companies. Carl Kass can be reached at [CarlsColumn@AOL.com](mailto:CarlsColumn@AOL.com).)* 

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