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How to Shop for a Home Computer
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Issued March 1984
2 pages

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How To Shop for a Home Computer

Extension Bulletin E-1764, March 1984 (new)

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COOPERATIVE EXTENSION SERVICE • MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

Purchasing a home computer can be a trying experience. The tremendous variety of models and prices, the unfamiliar jargon used to describe microcomputers, and the shrill hype of the advertisements can discourage even the most savvy shopper.

This fact sheet can help you plan your purchase. It suggests questions you can ask yourself before you buy a personal computer, and it offers some pointers on evaluating computer dealers.

How Much Should You Know About Microcomputers Before You Buy?

You should have at least a partial understanding of microcomputer technology before you invest in a personal computer system. These powerful tools are designed to be used in highly individual ways. The more you know about how they work and what they can do, the easier it will be to match a system to your needs.

Familiarize yourself with the inevitable jargon. Awareness of RAM and ROM, bits and bytes, floppy disks and ports will help you as you compare different brands of computers and evaluate the unique features of each. If you wish to buy accessories such as a printer or telephone modem, you should learn the strengths and weaknesses of particular devices and know how well they work with specific computers.

Consider your own requirements carefully. A computer's features may appear neither obvious nor important to you as a prospective buyer. Yet an inappropriate machine could present unexpected limitations after the sale. The memory space might not be sufficiently expandable; the keyboard or the display might be inadequate; the software you want might not be available for that computer.

A wealth of information about microcomputers is now readily available. Trade magazines and books feature descriptions of typical home computers and tips on how to buy and use them effectively. Computer user groups, adult education and community college courses, and acquaintances who own computers are excellent resources.

What Do You Plan To Do With Your Computer?

Before you decide on the hardware, identify your needs and those of all potential users in your family. Typical home computer applications include word processing, arcade-type games, educational programs, data base management, financial recordkeeping, and telecommunications.

To help you determine which models you should consider, try to project what you will do with your computer in a year's time. If you expect to play video games, for example, you will need a computer with color graphic capabilities. If word processing is your need, then high-quality text display is important. In general, evaluate capabilities rather than specific machines.

How Much Do You Wish To Spend for the Computer?

Balance your needs against your budget. Microcomputer prices range from under \$100 to over \$5,000. Machines under \$300 have limited capabilities, but may be suitable as starter computers. More powerful systems with extra software and a disk drive or printer will cost from \$1,000 to \$4,500. System prices vary greatly from computer to computer. There is no "best machine" for everyone.

What Other Expenses Are There?

You will need to budget for software in addition to the cost of the basic hardware. It can be expensive. Word processors can cost as much as \$500—data base programs up to \$700. Bargains are available to the careful shopper. Some computers come equipped with "bundled" software at no extra cost. Dealers sometimes include extra software when you buy a computer system. User groups and magazines can be a source of inexpensive programs that can perform many common functions. Investigate all available resources before you buy.

Anticipate additional expenses that accompany a home computer purchase. You will need blank storage disks or cassette tapes and a small TV set or video monitor. A desk, chair, and lamp are also part of the typical home computer workspace. Budget for a magazine subscription, a few books, and a class or two to help you get started. Set aside some money for such last-minute surprises as a printer cable or power filter. And be sure to budget some time to become familiar with your computer and to learn how to use it effectively.

What Other Factors May Influence Your Purchase?

Besides the availability of particular software, other factors may determine which computer is best for you. These include estimated data storage requirements, planned future enhancements such as additional memory, suitability of a particular computer dealer, and available financing.

Compatibility with other systems is important to many computer users. If you have a hobbyist friend or business associate who already owns a computer, there are advantages to owning a similar machine. You can share information, swap data files, and help each other use your machines to best advantage.

What Kind of Computer Dealer Should You Select?

Shopping for a machine is only part of the process. Most people need a dealer who can support them both before and after the sale. More important than the specific hardware and software you choose is the specialist who can set up a working system for you. That person will help you specify the components and choose the software. He or she will also guarantee the computer and service it, if necessary.

The number of dealers entering the computer market continues to increase as the price of computer hardware drops. Presently there are some 2,500 retail computer stores coast to coast. In addition, department stores, appliance outlets, catalog stores, and even toy shops and drug stores now sell computers.

Mass merchandisers may sell popular computers at attractive prices, but generally can provide little or no in-depth expertise. Office equipment dealers who stock computers understand payroll and accounting software, but may lack the skill to tailor a home computer system to your unique personal applications. Mail order houses have low prices, but often offer no service after the sale.

A local retail microcomputer dealer who specializes in such machines and stocks several brands is probably your best bet. That dealer can provide not only expertise but also repair facilities, software support, training, and a wide selection of books and accessories. A dealer who understands your preferences can be invaluable in helping you select hardware and software that meet your needs.

Generally microcomputer dealers charge the retail price for computer systems or offer only a modest discount, so their prices may be higher than those of their "discount" competitors. However, after the sale, when you have further questions or technical problems, you will have the added benefit of an area merchant who provides the solutions and repair service you require.

Which Store Should Be Your Dealer?

On your first visit to a local computer store talk with the store manager and ask which salesperson can best serve you. Evaluate the store itself as well as the equipment it sells. Here are some suggested questions to ask your salesperson:

- How long has the store been in business?
- What services does it offer?
- Does the store carry software as well as hardware?
- How extensive is the product line?
- Does the staff have special expertise in a particular area (home use, small business, games, etc.)?
- Are training sessions available? How expensive, how extensive, and how frequent are they?
- Have other customers been satisfied with sales and service?
- What is the dealer's reputation with members of local computer user groups?

The salesperson's responses will give you a measure of his or her expertise and ability to help you choose a system. Ask the salesperson to let you work with one of the computers—alone. Ask for a suitable program (perhaps a word processor or typing tutor) that can demonstrate the machine's capabilities. Smart computer store operators realize part of their job is educating the public and letting them try out the equipment.

How Will the Dealer Support the System After the Sale?

The more you know about the dealer's policies, the easier it will be to make your buying decisions. Before you buy, obtain answers to the following questions:

- Does the store have a repair facility? If not, who can service your computer?
- What is the policy on repairs?
- How long do repairs generally take?
- Does the shop generally repair circuit boards or swap them for new ones?
- Is a variety of replacement components available from stock?
- If not, where is the nearest supplier and how quickly will the parts arrive?
- Is a computer like yours available for loan while your system is in the shop?
- Will a technician make service calls at extra cost?
- How soon after purchase should you expect delivery?
- What are the payment terms?
- What kind of warranty does the computer manufacturer provide?
- Does the dealer offer an additional guarantee?
- Will the dealer bench-test your new machine before you take possession?
- What kinds of problems can you expect to have with your computer?
- Does the store buy back equipment or make trades? Under what circumstances?
- Will the dealer accept telephone inquiries from new users curious or confused about some aspect of their system?

How Will You Know When You Are Ready To Buy?

Once you have evaluated your needs and learned the major differences between popular computers, you are well on your way to making an intelligent choice. If you have drawn up a budget that includes hardware, software, supplies, and education; if you have found a reliable computer dealer and established a relationship; and if you feel comfortable with the idea of buying a personal computer—then it's time to invest in a personal computer system.

Armed with a basic understanding of microcomputers, a knowledge of your own requirements, and a dealer who can help you after the sale, you will be well prepared to start using this powerful personal appliance.

For more information on home computers, contact your local Cooperative Extension Service.

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Issued in furtherance of cooperative extension work in agriculture and home economics, acts of May 8, and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Gordon E. Guyer, Director, Cooperative Extension Service, Michigan State University, E. Lansing, MI 48824.

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