



Today's Bargain, Tomorrow's Headache

The price of computer hardware continues to fall. More power, more functions, more features for less money than ever before. Why not pop over to the nearest electronics or office supply store and buy that great bargain?

Not so fast. While the latest screaming deal gracing the cover of last weekend's sale circular may be fine for home use, it is not always the wisest business investment. Many small business owners are unaware that there exist two distinct categories of personal computers (PCs): Consumer-class and

business-class. While a business-class computer may cost more initially, the savings realized in ease of installation and ongoing support costs, and the longevity gained by purchasing more durable hardware will clearly make up for the initial outlay.

Let's discuss some of the differences:

- Consumer-class PCs are susceptible to the marketing whims of the manufacturer. Typically a consumer-class PC will feature the latest and greatest technology at the lowest possible price. This can be a volatile combination. A business needs hardware that is stable, consistent, and has been thoroughly tested and proven in a business environment.
- Same-model consumer-class PCs, even within the same order, may have different branded components installed as a function of cost reduction. Business-class PCs are standardized, using the same components from one machine to the next. When machines are configured alike, the knowledge required, tools, and support costs can be reduced. This means paying your personnel or an outside consultant less money to support a standardized system.
- You get what you pay for. Higher quality components cost more and last longer. Business applications, especially in a networked environment, tax computer systems to a far greater degree than do home-user applications. Business computers are on and used for extended periods. Many low cost consumer-based components will simply not keep up. This translates into lockups, errors, corrupted data, and irritating, intermittent problems that are difficult to reproduce and fix. The many hours of lost productivity and frustration quickly consume any initial savings.
- Businesses have greater upgrade requirements. Consumer-based machines are often more difficult to successfully upgrade. Manufacturers are less willing to invest in developing upgraded drivers (software components that allow the operating system to talk to the network, sound cards, chipsets, CD and DVD drives, etc.) for consumer-based, loss-leader PCs that have a very limited lifespan. It is expected

that the more durable business-class machines must be more backward compatible and it is there that the manufacturers focus their development time and energy.

- Because they are usually purchased individually to be run independently, consumer-class systems are generally sold with consumer-based operating systems that will not integrate well into a true server-based network such as Microsoft Server 2003.
- Business-class computers are typically designed for ease of exchanging components. The case and internal design allow for quickly replacing motherboards, power supplies, and other components so system administrator repair times are reduced. Consumer-class computers are often subject to the latest fashion in case design, bowing to the sleek and stylish and often inaccessible at the expense of functionality.
- Business-class computers are typically sold with a three-year warranty. Consumer-based systems carry a one-year warranty. That alone should telegraph much about the manufacturers' intentions and what your expectations should be.

Your time and personal resources are precious. You have a business to run. You do not have time to be distracted by inadequate, troublesome, high-maintenance equipment; equipment that is supposed to help, not hinder your mission. Do not too quickly sacrifice your business or your sanity to the cheapest tools available. While it may seem prudent to buy the least expensive computer, the aggravation, loss of productivity, and support costs will likely be far greater than the initial savings. When a business grows to the point of requiring greater technology, it would be far better served by investing in business-class equipment.

Please contact Julie Lough at 616-776-0400 for further information.