

Not an easy time to pick a computer

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If you're shopping for a computer now, it may feel like purgatory.

Early reviews of Windows 7 are glowing, but Microsoft's new [operating system](#) won't be available for at least three months.

Meanwhile, most computers on store shelves have [Windows Vista](#), which had a bad reputation even before Windows 7 started making it look like day-old bread.

Buying a Mac is no longer an easy solution. Apple's also entering the homestretch on a new operating system that's set to come out later this year, presumably with new [hardware](#) as well.

This situation is especially tough during the "dads and grads" season when millions of people usually buy computers for Father's Day or

graduation gifts.

Microsoft is putting them in a quandary by releasing nearly complete test versions of Windows 7 that should give pause to anyone considering a new PC.

Vista has improved since its debut in early 2007 and it's working for 180 million people.

But Windows 7 performs and looks better. It's as if Vista went on summer vacation, lost its awkwardness and pimples, and came back elegant and poised.

So what are [computer](#) buyers supposed to do?

Here are a few options and tips that may help.

1. Wait for upgrade coupons.

To keep computers moving off the shelves, Microsoft and PC makers are likely to offer coupons for free and discounted upgrades to Windows 7.

They haven't said when this will happen, but it might be around August, in time for back-to-school sales.

Upgrade coupons were announced three months before Vista went on sale. Windows 7 is supposed to be on sale during the holiday season, so that suggests coupons in early fall.

Upgrade coupons won't necessarily be free, though. Some PC makers gave coupons with a 50 percent discount on Vista, and there were charges for shipping and handling discs.

2. Go ahead and run Windows 7.

If you're comfortable with the process, you can start running Windows 7 today. Many enthusiasts are doing this on their home machines.

A near-final "release candidate" version of the software is available free from Microsoft, but you'll have to buy a full version after it expires in June 2010.

Prices aren't out yet, but it will probably cost around \$200 for a new consumer version or less for an upgrade from Vista.

You can even install Windows 7 on a partition on a big hard drive, so you can decide at startup whether to run it or Vista.

But this is complicated and potentially risky. Be sure you've saved your files and proceed with caution. Windows 7 is still test software and Microsoft advises people not to run it on a primary or essential PC.

3. Don't sweat it. Buy a computer when you need one.

You'll probably be fine with Vista if you buy a current, reasonably powerful system. You can upgrade to Windows 7 later.

Vista, with its "service pack 1" upgrade installed, is now a "very solid product," said Christopher Flores, Windows marketing director.

"I'll be the first to admit that we had Vista hiccups out of the gate -- drivers weren't ready, certain things weren't working," he said. "With Vista SP1, Vista performs really, really well -- extraordinarily well."

So why bother with Windows 7?

Flores said the new software is "faster, more responsive, much easier to use, more refined, more reliable."

If you buy a Vista computer now, thinking you may upgrade to Windows 7, you won't need a top-dollar system. Microsoft's line is that systems that can handle Vista can handle Windows 7.

The release candidate requires at least a 1 gigahertz processor and 1 gigabyte of RAM for the 32-bit version or 2 gigabytes for the 64-bit. It also needs a graphics processor that supports DirectX 9.

To be safe, I'd get a system with a discrete graphics processor, which is best for premium versions of Vista.

You can also check a PC's preparedness by downloading and running the "Windows 7 Upgrade Advisor" tool from Microsoft.com.

4. Wait for Windows 7.

This is basically the advice big companies are getting.

Last week, Microsoft Windows Senior Vice President Bill Veghte said companies gearing up for Vista should "switch over" and start testing the Windows 7 release candidate.

Consulting firm Gartner said the same thing in a May 13 report, advising companies that haven't started upgrading to Vista to skip it altogether. Even if it means delaying desktop upgrades by six months, it's worth the wait, the firm said.

Companies in the midst of upgrading to Vista should continue but plan to switch to Windows 7 in late 2010 or early 2011, it said.

"The Vista ship has pretty much sailed," said Stephen Kleynhans, co-author of the report. "If you're not on it already you might as well wait for the next one, which is [Windows 7](#), because it's just right around the corner."

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