

Bargains and options abound for PC buyers

August 20 2013, by Brier Dudley

There is a silver lining in the struggles of the PC industry. Bargains abound if you're buying a computer for a student heading to school this fall, or if you're finally upgrading that creaky old Windows XP machine.

Buyers also have more options. Backed into the corner by tablets, PC makers are fighting back with a variety of new designs and technologies available on even lower-priced models.

Touch-screen systems that work particularly well with Microsoft's Windows 8 operating-system can be found under \$500 while thin and light "Ultrabook" models can be found in the \$600 range.

Touch screens are being pushed heavily by Microsoft and Intel, but there are other new technologies that have significantly improved the performance of PCs over the past year.

"We've got a bunch of nice [innovations](#) that are happening on the PC hardware side, but touch has become the red herring and the thing that people keep talking about," said Bob O'Donnell, vice president at research firm IDC.

Battery life has leapt ahead on the latest models, with some running more than eight hours on a charge, and a good PC should now start up in well under a minute.

Faster ports and speedier Wi-Fi are also improving the experience of moving photos and files on and off a PC, with or without wires.

Yet while PCs are improving, demand and prices have fallen. The average price of laptops - the most popular kind of PC - has fallen 4 percent over the past year, to \$642, O'Donnell said.

That's despite the efforts of Intel and PC makers to bring their machines upmarket with premium designs that emulate the style of Apple's MacBook line.

People just aren't buying as many PCs anymore. Instead of upgrading every few years, they're getting by with older PCs and buying new phones and web tablets.

Still, there are millions of students who need a new computer this fall.

Also shopping for PCs soon will be the tens of millions of people who have been making do with older Windows XP machines. They are under pressure to upgrade now that Microsoft is phasing out support of that circa 2001 operating system. It will stop providing security updates for XP in 2014.

Fortunately for them, the PC industry is over a barrel, offering deals and trying to move some pretty nice merchandise.

Here's my general advice if you're shopping for a new [laptop](#):

You can still buy laptops with Windows 7, but Windows 8 is the new standard. Some people dislike the tiled interface and new controls in Windows 8 while others find them fresh, modern and easy to use.

Some concerns about Windows 8 are likely to fade this fall when Microsoft rolls out a free update - Windows 8.1 - which gives people more ways to tweak and customize the system.

Don't fret about the pending 8.1 update. I've installed it on several machines and it's a breeze, as long as your PC is up to date when you start the process.

Apple also is preparing an update to its OS X operating system, dubbed Mavericks, which is coming this fall - if you're planning to lasso a new Mac.

Laptops running Google's Chrome [operating system](#) are available for \$200 to \$300, which is remarkably cheap for a decent laptop.

The trade-off is that these Chromebooks are "closed gardens" managed by Google and bound to its online services. They have minimal storage because they're designed largely to access files and programs on Google's network. I don't think the price is low enough to justify this unsettling loss of autonomy.

They can be hard to find on store shelves but PC makers are offering fun "convertibles" that switch from laptops to tablets. Some have detachable displays that can be used like an iPad. Others have displays that slide or rotate down over the keyboard. I've seen nice hybrids in the \$500 to \$700 range, but some have smaller storage capacity and lower-powered processors, meaning they're fine for general usage but not heavy-duty video games.

Having a [touch screen](#) isn't absolutely necessary but it's nice to have on a Windows 8 laptop. It's handy to reach out and tap and swipe the on-screen "buttons."

Intel's new "Haswell" processors have dramatically improved [battery life](#) on laptops, but they're not cheap or widespread yet. Apple began using Haswell processors on its svelte MacBook Air in June, but hasn't yet added them to its full-sized MacBook Pro models.

Windows PCs with Haswell processors may cost \$800 or more. Air models with a 13-inch display start at about \$1,100.

Haswell PCs may run eight or more hours on a charge. That's important for business users and air travelers, but not critical if the PC will be mostly used near power outlets at home or school.

The trick to spotting Haswell processors - if they're not being trumpeted by the PC maker - is in the series of four digits in the processor's name. A series that starts with "4" is fourth-generation, or Haswell. For instance, an Intel i7 4600 is fourth-generation while an i7 3520 is a third-generation processor.

Still, average users shouldn't get hung up on processor specs. They'll be happy with most modern processors. My family PC has a first-generation, budget Intel i3 processor and my work PC has a second-generation i5 and both work fine handling photos, Netflix and casual games.

I would avoid lower-end processors with brands such as Celeron and Pentium.

This is a label cooked up by Intel for PCs that are thin, light and fast enough to meet certain specifications. It's a handy reference point if you're looking for a premium laptop that starts up quickly and has the latest hardware, but it's not essential to have the brand.

Ultrabooks, the Air and some other laptops use solid-state memory - like a camera memory card - to replace or supplement the traditional spinning hard drive. An SSD drive enables a PC to wake up in a few seconds and may be more durable. It's a very nice but expensive option. The drives have limited capacity but people are increasingly storing their files online.

If you're buying a PC for a student, Microsoft Office is a good addition, but don't overspend on the software. Students get phenomenal discounts on Office through schools or Microsoft. The company is now offering, for instance, a four-year student license to the full Office suite for \$79.

Look for a laptop with at least one USB 3.0 port. USB 3.0 passes data through far faster than USB 2.0 ports - up to 10 times faster, according to the USB trade group. The plug design didn't change so you don't have to worry about buying new cables.

There's a new, faster flavor of Wi-Fi available now called 802.11ac. It's a nice addition, but it's not essential or widely used yet. The current standard is 802.11n. If you need to upgrade later, you can plug an 802.11ac adapter into your USB 3.0 port.

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