

'Living In a Tech World' Column

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Making Sense of Computer Descriptions (Supplement)

My March 15 & 22 Columns dealt with deciphering the 'descriptions' you get when you are looking for a new computer. Space did not allow me to provide you with information on how to determine which of the parts was the most important to you based on how you use or plan to use the computer. This was the made up description we have been referring to.

Desktop PC - Intel Pentium Dual-Core E5200 2.5GHz 64bit (processor), 6 GB DDR2 SDRAM (RAM), NVIDIA GeForce 9500 GS 512 (video card), SATA 500GB 7200 (Hard Drive) DVDRW-LS (Optical Drive), 10/100/1000 (LAN Connection), Vista Home Premium 64-bit SP1 (Operating System)

Here are some rough guidelines.

Basic: If your primary computer use is e-mail, web surfing, and using standard office programs like word processing, accounting, basically text programs then you want to look at these components

Most any computer will work for you. The real issue is value for money. Dual core processor is the most you would need and a single core will work fine, 1-2 GB of Ram, video and audio should be built into motherboard and a 32bit operating system XP or Vista. You should expect to pay: \$350 - \$400 and \$500+ for package with monitor

Multimedia: If you using your computer to view video, edit photos, listen to or edit music you will need to step up your power a bit.

Look for a dual – core processor, at least 2GB of RAM. 3 GB would give you more room to grow. If it does not come with more than 2 GB ask about the number of RAM slots in the motherboard and how big a memory stick each will allow. Make sure you have an upgrade path, RAM is cheap. As to the Video Card you are not overtaxing an integrated video chip but if you are planning on editing video you will want to have a separate video card. Hard Drive space will be the most important thing to look for; At least 500 GB but consider larger and it should also be a 7200rpm drive. Keep in mind, however, that you will be able to add an external drive of 1000GB (1 Terabyte) for \$150 or less. An

external drive connects through your USB port, looks like a regular drive to your computer and, I think, is a better option for long term storage of important files, irreplaceable photos, songs, and video. Being external you can easily take it with you or lock it up in a vault when it is not in use. Most computers also have at least one space for an additional internal hard drive which would be a little less expensive if you can install it yourself but more expensive if you have to pay someone to put it in. You'll want a good DVD optical and an XP Professional or Vista Home Premium or Business OS. Your cost should be \$450 - \$600 plus a monitor and you can easily spend \$1000 with upgrades.

If you are looking for an **entertainment center computer** you will want to look for the same as a multimedia with these additions or replacements.

You will want a built in TV tuner with a personal video recorder capability. You will need a separate video card with at least 512 MB of memory on it. You should choose a video card with a DVI and HDMI connection to a TV or monitor for your tuner card. If quality sound is important, you might want to consider a 7.1 channel separate audio card for your system. Also pay attention to your LAN connection, look for a 1000 MB LAN card or a "Draft N" wireless card built in. This will allow you to keep large files like movies moving from your Internet connection or other computer to your entertainment center. You might want to also look into a upgraded speaker system to match your audio capability As to OS, get Vista Premium or Ultimate because that has the software that used to be called Media Center in Windows XP that will make your computer look and act more like a DVR or Cable box than a computer. Expect to pay at least \$700 for this system and \$1200 will get you a powerful, versatile box.

If you are looking for a **Gaming System** you probably don't need my advice because Gamers know as much as I do about what they need. But if you are shopping for a Gamer rather than being one yourself ...

you want to look for the 64 bit Quad Core Processer, the system with most RAM in it or the ability to add some to bring you up to at least 6GB. You want a Video Card with at least 512 MB of RAM built in and a separate audio card and speaker system. In a hard drive you want a 7200 rpm drive. With a system like this also pay attention to the cooling system and power supply, all of these components build up heat and suck power. At this level you also want a 64bit Vista operating system. You are building on the requirements of the multimedia or entertainment unit with these specs so take a look at those as well. Some may not apply but most will. Expect to pay \$1300 - \$1800 for this system.

If you are considering a "build your own" system or having someone build a 'white box' system only do so if your objective is to pick (or have someone pick) the very best components . Do not

expect to save money. Those days are pretty much over. Computers have become such a commodity that you can't build one for less than you can buy one. But building from scratch does allow you to get a system with no weak components.

Of course, if you have a Tech Guy contract it includes consulting on choosing a computer or just 'remodeling' the one you have, give me a call.

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