

What Do You Buy?

Adam Shutes

I've got a friend in the lab next door to mine, and since way before Christmas he has been looking to buy a computer. It's March now, and still no joy.

We generally talk about all sorts of things - as friends do - but when he asked me about what computer I'd recommend, you can guess I said 'iMac'. He's got a wife and a kid of about four - neither of them gifted technologists. So there was and still is no less, a perfect machine.

Price? About £999 including VAT (this was December remember). How about Speed? It'll whip a Pentium's bum. Software? The usual games and all that you'll ever need.

Then, to get a balanced view he asked a few PC bozos around the department for their ideas. He came back with some more figures and more confused. All more expensive than the iMac and all a box-shifters paradise.

Now the Pentium III has come out, he started asking me again. What do you think of this machine? Or this one?

Basically, he seems to have settled for a Gateway 2000 machine, but is left with 3 options. The Professional beige box, which has a Penitum III chip in it (you know the one that removes the need for gas central heating, and tracks your every move), the Mutlimedia beige box with a Pentium II in it , and the Family beige box which has a Celeron chip in it (nice to see the word family is being equated with 'rip-off').

What's the difference between all of these? he asked. After having a quick look through the bundles' specs., all it seemed to boil down to was the presence of a printer or

modem or some odd educational software title. All the processor speeds varied from the 300 PII to 400 Celeron to 400 PIII, and this really caused him problems.

How can a 400 Celeron be cheaper than the 300 PII when it's 100 MHz faster?

It's getting tiresome the amounts of times I have to explain what the difference between MHz and speed of your processor is - it's bad enough explaining the difference between 2 Pentiums, try throwing a G3 in there as well.

This weekend, he promises me, the anguish will end, and he'll be the proud owner of a Pentium II beige box. Ready, pumped and primed to break down 1 day after the warranty has run out.

My friend's case, I would bet isn't the worst scenario of buying a computer. Can you imagine going into Dixons as a first time computer buyer (as my friend is) being confronted by a whole host of beige boxes and then mollsted by a PC weenie salesman. I've done it before to get kicks out of embarrassing the salesman (try it, it's fun) but for every comment of his, I had the revealing question or put down. Poor Mr. Jo Average doesn't have this ammunition.

This is where Steve Jobs, Apple and the iMac have shown the way forward. If the average home buyer wants a computer he has a couple of questions to answer:

- 1) Portable or Desktop?
- 2) Colour.

Done.

No futzing around with different chip speeds, different dongles, or different dingles. You're are buying a computer, you would hope to be able to trust the company you are buying it from to give you the best deal around. (This trust between consumer and company has been eroded by Microsoft and their cronies - you can't trust many in the computer market nowadays).

It's such an obvious strategy that I'm surprised that no other company has thought of this before, but such as the computer industry is, every company (Apple has been guilty of this) was so busy putting bigger figures on the box, MHz, dpi, 17 inch, 6ppm, that they all forgot the big picture. They forgot who computers are aimed for. It was Jobs' Apple who had the vision to Think Different, to step back, and figure it out. They really have given the computer back to The Rest of Us.

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