



Buying a Laptop (04/2007)

As you may well know, sales of laptops now outnumber sales of desktop computers, though in \$ value this happened back in 2003. Hard facts on the subject are difficult to come by as it is a very competitive and fast moving , though it is clear that the trend towards Laptops has not faltered, and their sales now lead the market, though by how much is a little less clear! The main explanation for the rapid increase in Laptop sales is that they can now be as powerful as desktops, the price differential between the two has diminished greatly, they are more practical in terms of portability (though many never actually move!), and many people just prefer them.

In my opinion, unless you wish to take your computer with you when you travel, wish to be able to use it in different rooms around the house using a wireless connection, or would just prefer a Laptop, then I suggest you buy a desktop as you get more computer for your money. You typically get a much larger screen, better sound with surround speakers, a full size keyboard, more USB ports, card readers, etc. However, if you want a Laptop (whatever the reason), here's what to look for:

- Budget: the general consensus in computers is to buy the best you can afford. I personally think that is a little daft, your better off buying what you want, or setting yourself a budget, seeing what you can get for the money, if you want more then spend more and if you want less then spend less. Very roughly today, €500 will get you a bottom of the range laptop, €1,000 will get you a rather nice good value laptop, and if you want the bells whistles then you are up in the €2,000 range.

- Screen Size: this will typically decide your budget range for you and the size of the laptop itself. The standard screen size is 15 or 14 inch, and typically found throughout the budget range. The larger size is a 17 inch screen wish kicks in from around €800-900, while the smallest sizes which are to be found on the lightest and most portable computers are from €1,100-1,200. Please, these prices are just a rough guide, you will find prices that are both lower and considerably higher.....

- Size and Weight: Very closely linked to screen size! A 17 inch laptop is bulky and generally heavy (+/- 4 kg), while the 15 inch models are a little smaller (obviously) and more portable at +/- 3 kg, and the 12 inch models are considerably more portable with weights down around the 2 kg mark. As soon as you start looking for the lightest of laptops, the price starts taking off with, for instance, a Sony laptop weighing in at 1.2 kg and an 11 inch screen but priced at €2,200.

- Battery Life: less important if it is going to sit on a desk at home 99% of the time, but if you wish to use it for long periods on flights or on the train for instance, then battery life will be crucial. The worst last for up to 1 hour, while some of the best will

go for 6 hours+ on light use. The longer the battery life usually implies the higher the price.

- Processor: Go for the fastest you can get (dual core today), and avoid those that were designed for desktop PCs, as they will run hotter, you get more fan noise and the battery life will be shorter.

- Graphics: as the screen is part of the laptop then the graphics will always be sufficient for the screen. However if you wish to play games or watch DVDs then better quality graphics are worthwhile. The best option is to go for dedicated (i.e. they have their own memory and do not use the system memory) ATI or NVIDIA graphics

- System Memory (Ram): I would go for 1 Gig minimum, but 2 Gigs would be better.

- Operating System: Windows Vista Home Premium for the adventurous or Windows XP for those who prefer to play safe. If you need business networking, then go for the business editions.

- Hard Drive size: not really so important today on a laptop. Almost all laptops come with at least 60 gigabyte drives, with some pushing 150 gigabytes and even others with multiple hard drives. Laptop storage is more expensive than desktop storage, so if you want lots of storage, buy an external hard drive to go with it (500 gigs for under €100 today), and don't let the hard drive size influence too much your choice of laptop – plus if you are going to back up your computer properly you'll want an external drive anyway.

- Brand: if you have a favourite brand, go for that one, if you are unsure then stick to the leading brands (Sony, Dell, HP, Acer, Packard Bell, Lenovo (previously IBM)...Apple). If you are living in France and wish to have an English keyboard and operating system, then your choice is limited to Dell and Sony (both will supply and deliver reliably) or you may be able to get a custom built one from your local IT store.

Unfortunately there is a wide choice of laptops available today with hundreds of different models, and quite a few different criteria to consider. If you are really unsure what to buy, spend a little more, play safe and go for the better one, as laptops are very limited in terms of upgrading....

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