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Editor's View

To Buy, or Not to Buy

1997 was a very unusual year for me because I didn't buy any computers. I'd bought myself a computer each of the five previous years. Why didn't I buy any in '97? Because I didn't need any.

I bought the machine on my desk in August of '96. It's a Pentium Pro/200 with 64MB of RAM and a 3.2 GB hard drive. The nicest thing I did for myself when I bought it was spring for a 20" monitor – I don't know how I ever lived without one.

I have a rule of thumb about memory when I buy a new machine. I figure out how much I think I need and then buy twice that much. The 64 megs I have now is quite comfortable (and I know 32 wouldn't be), even though I frequently have between five and ten applications open.

As for the hard drive, I really wanted a 4.2 gig drive when I bought the machine, but there was a 12-week wait and I needed it right away. The current drive generally is big enough, though occasionally I have to move stuff around. (I have my drive partitioned into a number of virtual drives.)

The other treat I gave myself with this machine was Iomega's Jaz drive. It's the easiest, fastest backup system I've ever had. I can generally do a full backup in an hour or so. (On the other hand, dealing with Iomega's Tech Support has been a nightmare, though my most recent experience was much better than previous ones.) The Jaz also makes it easy to transfer data between my desk and my notebook.

Until recently, my notebook has been adequate, too. It's a Pentium/90 that I bought about three years ago. Ergonomically, I love it. The display is clear and bright. The keyboard is comfortable - a big issue for me because I'm a touch typist. It has the eraser-head type pointer, which I prefer because I find I can control it without much effort and it doesn't require me to remove my hands from the keyboard.

However, the machine has only 24 MB of RAM and around 800 MB of hard drive. Both are those are starting to feel tight now. The last time I needed to install some new software, I had to uninstall some other things. The machine maxes out at 32 MB of RAM and, to get there, I'd

have to throw out the expansion card I already have. The cost to upgrade both the memory and hard drive on this one doesn't seem worth it just to end up with a P90. So I imagine you'll see me with a new notebook by DevCon.

Looking at the ads for both desktops and notebooks, I'm noticing an interesting phenomenon. For a long time, there's been an informal law of computing, known as Machrone's law (after the columnist who stated it), that the computer you want always costs $5000. That doesn't seem to be true for desktop machines anymore. There are some incredible machines available these days for under $3000, and even the top of the line desktop machines are under $4000.

With my previous desktop machine, after a year and a half, I was drooling over new machines, which seemed much better and more powerful than what I had. After a year and a half this time around, the new machines don't seem that much better than what I already have. They're cheaper, and I do find myself tempted to buy a "crash-and-burn" machine to use for testing less-than-stable software (say, new operating systems), but there's no sense that I'm missing out by sticking with what I already have.

Notebooks, on the other hand, remain expensive. Getting the machine I want and can keep for three years or so, looks like it'll cost between $4000 and $5000. It'll be interesting over the next few years to see if notebook prices start to fall as desktop machines have.