Your next computer: Laptop, desktop, netbook or tablet?

April 4th, 2010, 8:52 am · 1 Comment · posted by Ed Schwartz, NOCCC

 *Stump the PC Club is a free tech-advice column written by members of the **North Orange County Computer Club**, which has been in existence since 1976. Visit the club's site at noccc.org. And don't forget to stop by the Gadgetress' home for the PC Club, at ocregister.com/link/pcclub, to find out how to ask a question and read past answers.*

QUESTION: I'm thinking of making my next PC a Notebook PC instead of a Desktop. What features should I consider and what are the pros and cons?

PC CLUB: Let's start with some definitions:

Desktop PC –This is actually a misnomer since these types of PCs usually sit on the floor and the case is often referred to as a tower.

Notebook PC – These are often referred to as Laptops since that was their name when portables first arrived on the scene. They were too heavy to be totally portable and sat on your lap – hence the name Laptop.

Netbook PC – These recent arrivals are intended for the "Internet, Email and Word Processing" user. They are extremely portable due to their sub 3-pound weight. They have a relatively slow processor and lack a built-in CD/DVD drive.

Tablet PC –These are characterized by a touch screen and are available as Notebooks and Desktops. They allow you to draw directly on the screen using a stylus or your finger depending on the technology.

Should you buy a Notebook- first of all, the main advantage offered by a Notebook is portability. The second most important advantage is that they require less desk space than desktop PCs. These features alone may be enough to sway you towards a Notebook.

There is also a class of PCs known as Netbooks. These PCs are typically lighter and smaller than the average Notebook but have less capability. They are primarily intended for Internet and e-mail use and will not be discussed here.

After reviewing the unique characteristics of Notebooks below, the choice between Desktop and Notebook PCs should be easier to make.

Runs on batteries – This allows you to operate the PC away from AC power. Battery life typically varies from 3 to 8 hours and is a major consideration for applications such as watching DVDs on an airplane. Setting up the Power Options on a Notebook is quite different than on a Desktop. See the recent article titled "Everything you always wanted to know about Standby, Sleep and Hibernate" at (link: bit.ly/poweroptions) for details. There is an icon on the lower right, in the System Notification area that indicates the remaining time when running on batteries.

Difficult to upgrade – Adding additional ports and hardware can be challenging with Notebooks. Certain features can be added including external CD/DVD drives but this can defeat the portability benefit.

PCMCIA and PC Express slots – These slots allow you to add additional features such as a Phone Card and are quite different from one another. You should research the type of add-ons first to see which type of slot is more important to you. Some Notebooks offer both.

May lack Optical disc drive – Some of the Ultra-lights exclude the CD/DVD drive so consider its importance first.

Built-in mouse – This is a matter of personal preference but modern external mice are getting smaller and often utilize a very small USB receiver that can remain plugged in to the Notebook without significantly increasing the profile. I, personally, prefer an external mouse such as the Logitech VX-Nano wireless mouse. It uses a laser rather than a LED which conserves power and is more precise. It's available at bit.ly/nanomouse.

Smaller screen – This can be important if you do a lot of graphics editing or writing. You can always connect an external monitor when you're at home to overcome this. Also, be aware of highly reflective screens. If you can see your reflection on the screen, it's liable to result in headaches. Docking stations are frequently available allowing you to use an external monitor, keyboard and mouse.

Portability – This can be both an advantage and a disadvantage since theft is more likely with a Notebook. You should use extreme care regarding what you store on your Notebook when traveling. There are locking devices available to make it more difficult, but not impossible, to steal.

More expensive – Feature for feature Notebooks are more expensive due to their small size but the gap is lessening.

Smaller keyboard – You should always attempt to try the keyboard before buying a Notebook. Factors such as the layout, size of the keys and touch can be important. With a Desktop you can always get a new keyboard, especially if you like to drink Pepsi while you type. Some Notebooks have spill-proof keyboards. Some manufacturers employ a full keyboard including a numeric keypad.

Built in wireless – There are several specifications for wireless including Wireless g and the newer Wireless n. If you want to take advantage of the newer n specification you will need a router with this capability also. Most Notebooks have a switch that allows you to turn off the wireless to conserve power.

Built in web cam – This feature, if included, allows you to video conference and create quick videos for Youtube or other online sites.

If you plan to use your Notebook for gaming, working with HD (High Definition) video and graphics editing, you will need more horsepower than if you just plan to surf the Web, write letters and send e-mail. Whatever you do, before making your decision, be sure to read all of the on-line reviews and evaluate the PC in person if possible. *~Ed Schwartz, NOCCC member. View his Web site at www.edwardns.com.*