Buying advice: mono laser printers

You've taken time out and perused our Monochrome laser printer chart, so what next? Well, if you're serious about investing in this must-have peripheral, whether it's for home or the office, don't leave the house without our indispensable buyer's guide

If you are in the market for a new monochrome laser printer, take a look at our in-depth Buying advice before you part with your cash. After testing all the latest models for our updated Top 10 chart, we've completed this summary of all the points to look for when purchasing a monochrome laser printer. This will help you ensure that you make the very best purchasing choice.

Speed

All printers boast a claimed print speed provided by the manufacturer, which is quoted in pages per minute, or ppm. However, a quick glance at our Top 10 Monochrome laser printer chart reveals that these speeds do not always accurately reflect the real-world performance of the printer.

Printer manufacturers tend to test the speed of the device at its 'optimum' setting, which usually translates into endlessly churning out a simple print job at the lowest resolution possible. This doesn't accurately represent what you use your printer for, so don't be misled by very high speed claims when choosing between models.

Quality

While quality is harder to deduce from a specifications sheet, the best indicator you have is the print resolution. This is measured in dots per inch, or dpi, and tells you how many dots of toner the printer can squeeze into a square inch. The more dots it can print, the finer and more detailed the printout should be.

The only resolution you should pay attention to is the true hardware resolution, rather than the software enhanced figure. Look for a model with a minimum true resolution of 600x600dpi. Many newer models go up to 1,200x1,200dpi but, although a higher resolution should equate to more detail, there are plenty of 600dpi models that still generate excellent results.

The best advice we can give, if it's at all possible, is to test the printer before you buy. Look for such defects as streaking or uneven toner spread as this can affect pages even at a high resolution.

Price

Expect to pay between £200 and £500 for a monochrome laser printer and, if you go for a more expensive model, make sure the extras on offer are useful – for example, a home user with light printing needs shouldn't pay extra for large input and output trays or more built-in memory.

Running costs

The purchase price of your printer is only the start of the costs associated with running it. The consumables, or toner, can cost you dearly in the long run. Make sure you find out the cost of replacement toner cartridges and how long they last. This information may reveal that a printer which is cheap to buy is not such a great bargain in the long haul.

This is especially true if you do a high volume of printing, as the costs can really add up. To work out the cost per page, simply divide the price of a toner cartridge by the number of pages it will print. On average, this is approximately 1p per page, so any significantly higher figures should be avoided. Try and buy cartridges that last for a long time, as you don't want the nuisance of changing them frequently.

You will also have to replace the printer's laser printer drum. This needs to be replaced less frequently, but expensive replacements (£100-plus) can add hidden costs.

Memory

The more memory a printer has, the faster it can work its way through print jobs. Most devices come with 4MB to 16MB preinstalled, and most can be upgraded if required. If you are likely to want more memory in the future, ensure that the printer can actually be upgraded.

USB or parallel?

Unless you have an extremely old PC that only has a parallel port connection, there's no reason not to look for a USB laser printer. Speeds are faster and, for Windows XP users at least, the installation routine will be far more efficient. Most printers come with both USB and parallel but, if you have to make a choice, USB would be a good bet for the future. ■

← Our Best buy mono laser printer, the Oki OkiPage 14ex, offers cheap running costs