

bout two months ago, it began to happen again.

I was plugging away at my Mac. With almost delicious ease, I was manipulating graphics, crafting witty prose, cruising the World Wide Web, and piloting my ship through Maelstrom with the precision of a ballerina. It was absolute nirvana; I was an Apple commercial personified.

But with the creeping certainty of death itself, things began to change. Where before I would watch the initialization process in Photoshop with the avid eagerness of a 10-year-old with his nose pressed against the toy store window, I was now getting to the point where I could catch a few Zs while filters and fonts marched across the screen. And if I wanted to actually do some work—say, apply a filter—I was in for a wait about as much fun as a lineup at the Ministry of Transport.

My previously trusty '040 was beginning to show signs of aging in other spots, too. Netscape Navigator was starting to act chunky, I had graduated from Maelstrom to Marathon II (with foreseeable shortcomings), and the system was starting to eat more processor time than I could afford to feed it.

The warning signs were there; I had seen them before. It was time to buy my fourth Macintosh.

he Scene: A small conference room at the local YMCA. The year is 2003. A small support group has gathered. Most are quiet, shy and a little embarrassed. The group leader motions a young man to stand up and speak.

“Uh, hello. My name is Aaron, and I have owned 12 Macintoshes.”

The group, used to hearing scary stories, cannot help but gasp. The group leader merely flinches. “That’s OK, Aaron,” he says soothingly. “Why don’t you tell us what you’ve learned?”

“I’ve learned that the computer industry is the most grotesque example of capitalist exploitation, deliberately holding back technology until the market is glutted with the old stuff. That’s when they pounce. That’s when they bring out the next best thing! I had to have it, they told me it would make my life so much easier...yes...they whispered it to me in a dream. Yes, I’ve learned to hate technology. We have to destroy it before it gets you, like it got me! We have to stop them before it’s too late! Yes, this watch...it’s evil! That light switch...must destroy... Hey, what’s that wire coming out of your shirt?”

The group leader has to restrain the raving lunatic when he tries to get at his unfortunate neighbor’s pacemaker.

Avoiding Computer Repeat Customer Pitfalls

OK, let’s assume you’re out to buy a new Mac. Whether you’re a first-time buyer or, like me, a repeat customer, there are some guidelines to follow in order to save your sanity, not to mention your pocket book.

The first question I used to ask anyone who was looking at buying a computer was, “what are you going to use it for?” The first-time buyer would usually say a word processor, and maybe a spreadsheet or accounting. Nowadays, accessibility to the Internet is also a priority. For all that, you could have settled for a Performa 580CD, the most rock-bottom model Apple has to offer. With that trusty '040 ticking along inside, you’d have the power to do enough word processing and spreadsheeting to satisfy the demands of the modest home user.

One thing I learned, however, is that the modest home user is a very small minority.

The truth is, life with your Mac is not a static bubble, where you turn it on, type out a letter, print it and turn the Mac off. I once thought that way, when I bought that first Mac Classic. Fueled by Motorola’s almighty 68000 chip running at 8 MHz, with a whopping 2MB of RAM, I was going places!

I had naively planned that the Classic was to serve only one purpose: to work on my essays for school. And in that capacity, it served admirably. But then I found myself discovering a whole new world. After quitting Microsoft Word 5.0 (I had upgraded to 4MB of RAM), I’d find myself tarrying, tinkering with drawing programs, playing sounds and putting around on local BBSs.

Before long, I found myself falling victim to a malaise I would come to know only too well. I had fallen in love with the Macintosh, and I wanted to get as much out of it as I could. The

Classic, cool as it was, was insufficient for my needs. And it was black and white to boot. Ick!

The lesson, if you're in this situation? The same as you should learn with most anything: plan before you buy. Fortunately, planning with a Mac isn't as tough as it sounds.

Don't figure on just the minimum requirements for a computer. Heck, even a Wintel deathtrap could do word processing (but, granted, not with the same finesse and elegance as a Mac). Eventually, you will likely want to go further.

Consider not only the possibility of using newer versions of software you already have, but also the likelihood of expanding interests with your computer. There's nothing more shackling than finding out (as I did) that QuickTime editing is stupidly fun and incredibly easy...only to discover that your computer isn't up to the task.

I'm not saying you're going to fall in love with video editing, but the demands of new technology, like the Internet, speech recognition, or a truly multitasking Operating System, may have you doing your own rendition of Mr. Scott ("she cannae take any more, Cap'n!").

For starters, you might consider forgetting anything that doesn't have "Power Macintosh" written on the case. Although Apple still offers a 68040 processor computer for just a few shillings, the 68K generation is dead: long live RISC! The latest software is being written for Power Macs, leaving the slower, older generation behind. You may want to keep your old Mac, but Apple's benevolent transition period is going to leave you behind very soon; you will be stuck with the same old software.

I'm sure a few of you were a little bit awed by that news flash. I don't mean to insult your intelligence with what may be a redundant statement, but it does lead into the next swing, which is anything but redundant.

You might think it's important to match your Mac with the kind of work you need it for, but even a casual examination of the market will reveal that most any Mac sold today is powerful enough to satisfy the "real" modest home user (This column is aimed at people who are spending their own money on their computer, not the ones interested in getting high-end business machines company budgets take the hit for). The "real" modest home user is a species of Mac user who does work with a business application, but hangs around after the work is done (or during, if you are like me) to have fun (read QuickTime, speech stuff, games galore).

The "real" modest home user is someone who may well feel tempted to spend more money on a new computer than he or she has to.

The Power Macs on the market now, from the low-end Performa 5200CD to the top-of-the-midrange 7500s, are mighty machines. Although the performance factor with these Macs is directly proportional to which model you buy (i.e. how much money you spend), it's important to remember that all these computers can haul some multimedia butt.

The most unsettling aspect about buying a new computer is the fear of it being out of date. More than any other consumer market in the world, the computer industry is the most alive, bristling with change. You buy the latest thing today, and it seems passe in six months.

That's enough to make you dizzy, and a little frustrated.

Before you find yourself on a bell tower with a high-powered rifle, try to put the market in perspective. Accept as an inevitable fact that you cannot own the latest machine.

Imagine yourself standing by a railroad track, watching a train come out of a tunnel. Each car on the train seems to be bigger and better than the one before, but you can only wait so long: you've got places to go and things to do. You've got to catch one of these cars, and you can't hang around forever. Whoa, there goes the Power Mac 7100.... Zip! there went the Performa 6200CD. Where do you catch the train?

ou might feel tempted to get on that train anywhere, but you should do it with the best ticket possible; figure out the most you can possibly afford to spend on your computer...then spend it. The initial investment is the most critical; afterwards, you can only add so much RAM, or stack up so many hard drives.

Case in point: at one point in my search for the ideal Mac, I was juggling a used Power Mac 7100/80 and a new Power Mac 7200/90. Because the former had a Level 2 cache, it was actually faster than the second generation machine. It was also cheaper. The trouble, of course, came in comparing other features, namely, the fact that the 7100 is built on the NuBus architecture, while the 7200 is PCI-savvy. PCI slots will come in real handy when I want to get that inexpensive TV tuner/video capture card (to name at least one PCI option for the unwashed/non-graphics oriented masses), so the 7100 has nothing to offer me. Besides, if I pick up an L2 cache card (\$200 US), I'll blow the pants off that 7100 anyway.

But let's say you're about as interested in PCI as my dog (who, although he is quite conversant when it comes to programming artificial intelligence, has no time for what he terms namby-pamby graphics toys). You like the speed of the Power Mac, but you don't foresee any incursions into the graphics, networking, or high-powered games market. You have a handle on a nice-looking 6100 or 7100, you've played around on it and you're satisfied. The price looks good, but do you buy it?

Although your opinion may differ, my advice is to say no. My first reaction is to always buy a new computer. You should get a Mac you know is coming from good hands; a used machine may be hiding pitfalls only a seasoned Mac buyer can spot (and only with thorough testing). The 7100, powerful as it is, also lacks the audio/video capabilities and ready upgrade path already available for the 7200. Throw in a classy internal chassis for idiot-proof access, and you've got a computer, which for a few dollars (or pounds, francs, deutsche marks , etc.) more, will last you several more years than the 7100.

That leads us into the second consideration when buying a Mac: Will it be upgradeable, and if not, does it even matter to me? In the past year, Apple concentrated a lot of pressure on the Performa market. There are millions of Power PC 603 chips out there, chugging along at 75 or 100 MHz; slower than the 601s in the mainline Power Macs.

With the 604 chip being parked in every 7600 coming off the lot, and the 620 looming on the horizon, it may appear that things are looking unfavorable for the lowly Performas. But they're not, really.

How much more power do you need to crunch an essay or report? How big a chip do you need to run a QuickTime movie, sort a database, lay out a page, or draw a picture? You can do it all now, provided you've legally paid for the software.

But you can do it faster six months from now, when the newest Macs come out. At least, that's what the Apple commercials tell us. Cupertino may well be the heart of the next dark empire (beside Redmond, Wash., of course), filling our eager minds with visions of better speed, better features and a better "coolness" quotient. And it's all too true.

But the newest Macs don't make the older ones obsolete. Far from it; even the Performa 580CD can still chug along with the most popular applications, albeit in 68K form.

At my place of employment, workers shun the high-powered computers for their beloved "Elsie," a hard-working, faithful LC 475. She does the same stuff the ringers do, but with a little extra magic, because she's the little computer that could. She's been there for two years, and she's still going strong.

I know people who stand by their Mac IIs, and even those who think the Classic form factor is the highest principle of the aesthetic. I can sympathize there, since I turned that form into a MacQuarium (thanks to Andy Ihnatko), which may not be the best use for the 68000 chip (although Copland and Gershwin, fish-brained as they are, can certainly compete with that one).

Obviously, there is a line to consider. The first color Macintoshes may well be the bottom of the pile, but the vast majority of you out there will want something more recent. But a Power Macintosh with the 150 MHz 604 chip, costing several thousand dollars, is not necessarily the computer for you.

The Macintosh is a wondrous, versatile machine. The good folks at Apple made them to last, not just through spilled coffee, high-endurance all-nighters and frayed nerves, but through repeated and unstoppable incarnations of the next insanely great thing. Just look at the transition to Power Macintosh for evidence: the most humane, benevolent revolution to ever take place, for sure.

With the new 604-powered Macs coming out, your 6200 is not going to explode. It will still be the same kick-butt piece of hardware it was when you bought it.

In the meantime, when you're buying your new Macintosh, exercise a little judgment tempered with a dash of realism. You're getting on a train that doesn't stop. Ask questions, explore your budget, and research your options to find the computer that makes you feel the best about your purchase.

If you do that, you can avoid running into that crazy guy in the YMCA conference room.

One can hope he'll take his own advice.

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