PARTS LIST

General Advice

Always buy brand name components.   Brand name components usually offer superior quality, often have excellent documentation and most important of all, have solid technical support.   Saving money by purchasing no-name components will, in many cases, lead to problems.   You might have trouble finding a new software driver, the component might not be fully compatible and worst of all, you might get those mysterious lock-ups and system hangs after installing your new component.

It is also highly recommended you research the component you are going to buy by reading reviews of new products. Most of the major PC magazines routine review and rate thousands of products each year. This is your best bet to make an informed decision.   You can even find many of these reviews online for free! www.pcmagazine.com   is a good place to get started.

Modems

To save money and space we recommend purchasing an internal 56K modem. Modems are offered with a variety of bells and whistles like built-in speakerphones and voice mail systems but unless you are seriously considering using these extra features, forget about them.   Modems that offer all of these extra features are sometimes a nightmare to deal with because they cause conflicts with your sound card and other components in your PC.   The main things to remember when you are buying a new modem are: always buy a name brand and always get the fastest modem available.   USR Robotics makes an excellent line of 56K modems and is a good choice; their modems are solid and have excellent documentation and technical support.   Tip: check to see what type of slots you have available inside your PC before you make your purchase.

Sound Cards

Sound cards come in both plain-vanilla varieties and full-blown feature packed versions.   You just have to decide what you want to be able to do with your card. For compatibility's sake, Sound Blaster is the industry standard.   Sound Blaster and its many varieties are made by Creative Labs.   These cards have excellent documentation, often come with some nice software options and the company offers good technical support.   In today's PC you want to get at least a basic Sound Blaster AWE32 type card. This offers good quality digital audio as well as wave-table enhanced midi sounds for nice instruments.   When it comes to sound cards, research is the key. New cards are coming out all the time and if you're a gamer, you will probably want one with some nice 3D effects, etc.   Tip: check to see what type of slots you have available inside your PC before you make your purchase.

Network Cards

When choosing a network card, as we suggest for all of our components, pick a brand name.   3COM makes some of the best cards, but also some of the most expensive.   Netgear makes some nice middle-priced cards and companies like D-Link make low-cost but reliable models.   The next thing to decide on is speed.   A 10Mbps card is plenty for home use. It is more than enough for playing network games, sharing files and sharing Internet connections.   A 10/100 card runs at both 10Mbps and 100Mbps. These cards are very fast and if you routinely transfer extremely large files back and forth, you will love their performance.   If you have high-speed Internet access through DSL or cable, you might want to get a 10/100 card to make the most out of your connection.   Tip: check to see what type of slots you have available inside your PC before you make your purchase.

Video Cards

Choosing a video card is a big job. There are many to choose from, all claiming they are the best.   You will also have decide if you want extras like TV-output, built-in TV Tuners and integrated video capture devices.   To pick the card that is right for you, you will need to do a little research.   First of all, determine what type of card you can install. If you have an AGP slot on your motherboard, you should definitely get an AGP card; if your motherboard supports different speeds of AGP cards, get a card that can run as fast as your motherboard can handle. Otherwise get a PCI.   If you don't have any PCI slots, you might want to consider upgrading your motherboard and processor; any newer card is going to be bottlenecked otherwise.   Next, determine what type of acceleration you want.   These days, it just makes sense to get both 2D and 3D acceleration on your card.   2D refers to desktop graphics, etc. while 3D refers to 3D application/design software and games. Probably about 75% of games will benefit from 3D acceleration so it makes sense to get a card that is good in this department.   When choosing your 2D/3D accelerated card, to get the best card for you, you must look at the 3D chipset. The chipset is important because it determines how the software you want to run (the game or application) interacts with the card; it also determines the speed of the card.   Almost all cards from major manufactures use one of 4 or 5 popular chipsets; the trick is to get the one that is best for you.   Sometimes the fastest chipset is not always the most widely supported.   We recommended looking at reviews and benchmarks in major PC magazines before you make a purchase.   Also, if you have a favorite game you want to play on it, ask the publisher what card they recommend. Often times, this is great advice.   A good choice for a chipset at the time of this writing is the RivaTNT2 Ultra. This chipset is very fast, and can be found on a variety of both PCI and AGP boards from many top manufacturers such as Diamond Multimedia.

Where to Buy

The best deals are usually at computer shows/swaps and online.   Because of the extreme competition in both environments, you are likely to get very good prices.   The downside to computer shows/swaps are that many times you are offered only OEM products. OEM products usually come without the retail box, sometimes only have a sparse manual and rarely have any extras like special software.   Unless you are a seasoned pro, we recommend only purchasing retail-packaged components.   Computer shows/swaps are definitely worth a look.

Online shopping is becoming more and more popular when looking to get good deal.   The added benefit of saving on your local sales tax often defrays the shipping costs and you are getting a nice discount in the process.   Just make sure you double-check the exact model number and other details so you're ordering the right product.

Retail Stores, depending on their size and whether you catch them during a sale or not can also be a good place to buy. The huge benefit here is the return policy. If you run into problems, you can just drive back to the store and exchange your component.   For convenience, this is the way to go.