Upgrade can be daunting, even for experts

Sheri Radford

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Buying a newer, faster, better home computer is a challenge even when you know what you're looking for.

Recently, I took the $4000 plunge and experienced the supreme joy that comes only once every two to five years for most computer users — I upgraded from my ancient, lumbering Pentium 200 to a new home computer.

It's an amazing machine: PIII 500, 128 megabytes of RAM, 13-gigabyte hard drive, DVD player, CD burner, and a sharp, clear 19-inch monitor.

The CPU tower is the biggest one I have ever seen — it barely fits under the desk —and the monitor, which is almost as big as my television, takes up the majority of the space on top of the desk.

The road to upgrading was long and rocky. The first obstacle in my path was the cost. The system I wanted had a whopping $4000 price tag, which I simply did not have.

I calculated what it would cost to buy the computer on my credit card and determined that the computer would be worthless long before it had been paid off.

So I waited for either a raise, for a dramatic drop in computer prices, or a miracle. After several months, and becoming more and more frustrated every time my Pentium 200 crashed, my husband announced his employer was offering interest-free loans for computer purchases.

A miracle. Albeit, a miracle that we will be paying for in 48 installments over two years, conveniently deducted from my husband's paycheque. But a miracle nonetheless.

The second problem was my fear that "something better" would come along, any day now, and I would be stuck with old, decaying technology due to my impatience.

This anxiety faded a little more each time my computer crashed and I was forced to perform triage on the system. I felt that anything- — even a computer that would be obsolete in six months —would be better .

Finally, I was intimidated by the thought of setting up, configuring, and customizing a new computer.

I have done this countless times for other users, but somehow the idea of setting up my own computer seemed simultaneously thrilling and daunting.

My Pentium 200 was familiar, comfortable, and safe. It behaved erratically, but in a somewhat consistent fashion. A new computer would involve changing, learning, adapting.

I quelled this trepidation by repeating to myself, like a mantra, "it'll build character."

After helping many users select new machines, and after buying a new one myself, I have some advice for those wishing to upgrade.

- First, think carefully before upgrading the individual components in your current computer. I made the mistake putting a new video card, sound card, and chip in my computer last December. It didn't make much difference in performance; instead of behaving like a lethargic 386, it started to behave like a lethargic 486. The money would have been much better spent had it been put towards the new computer.

- Buy the best computer you can afford. The more money you spend now, the longer you can stave off obsolescence. If you try to scrimp and save by buying low-end now, you will soon regret it as low-end quickly becomes bottom-of-the-barrel.

- On the other hand, don't buy the absolute top-of-the-line. New technology is notoriously overrated, overpriced, and buggy. Let someone else be the guinea pig for the new systems.

- Do your homework — read Consumer Reports, ask the advice of any high school computer geeks you know, get price estimates from a variety of sources. Take into account any extra charges that might be tacked on by the retailer for such things as installing extra RAM or swapping a network card for a modem. And figure out what you really need, not what a salesperson wants to sell you.

- Is your current printer okay? Then don't buy a new one. Would you really use a CD burner? If not, then don't pay extra to get one.

- Don't be intimidated by computer salespeople. Their job is to sell you as much stuff as possible, whether you need it or not.

- Be firm. Some salespeople will try to confuse you with techno-babble. Ask them to explain anything you do not understand. Write down their recommendations, then go home and try to decipher what they were actually saying. I do computer support for a living and I don't even understand everything that computer salespeople tell me.

- Above all else, do not think of your new computer as a long-term investment. A house maintains its value and can be used for decades, even centuries. Most cars maintain much of their value over decades. Your new computer, however, will be near worthless in less than five years. It will start to depreciate even before its cardboard box is cracked open.

I always felt a vicarious thrill when setting up a new computer for my users. I breathed in the new computer smell; coveted the bag of disks, manuals, and tiny computer screws; and pretended that I had a computer even half as nice at home. Now I pretend no longer.

I own (or will own — after 47 more easy payments) a computer that is the envy of all my friends. With a 19-inch monitor, I no longer have to scroll both up-and-down and side-to-side to see Web sites.

With ADSL, I can connect to any Web site at speeds I've only dreamed of before.

With a 13 GB hard drive, I can load program after program, and let me husband indulge his passion for collecting MP3s, without worrying about space.

My computer is beautiful, but now that I've owned it for a week, I can already sense its value beginning to plummet.

I feel like I've just driven a new car off the lot. I hope I'm at least in for a fun ride.

Sheri Radford works at the computer help desk of the B.C. Cancer Agency. You can reach her care of
networks@pacpress.southam.ca