

Phil Battrick, Managing Director of SITM offers a few pointers to help you choose the right PC.

If you're thinking of buying a PC here are a few things to think about before parting with your hard-earned cash...

What do you need the PC to do? This might sound a bit obvious, but give it some thought. If you want the system for browsing the internet and sending the odd email, you'll be looking at a different specification to a system for editing all that video sat on the hard disk of your camcorder, or organising all those digital photographs. PCs are now capable of performing so many tasks that there may be things you could do that you haven't even thought of, so speak to friends/neighbours/relatives and find out what they use their systems for. Here are a few ideas :-

- Browsing the internet – obvious one, but there really is something out there for everyone. Social networking sites are a great way to keep in touch with distant friends and relatives if that's your thing, and shopping online is a great way to save money on just about everything (it's also secure as long as you follow some basic principles).
- Free phone calls to friends and relatives – you can download and install a free piece of software called Skype, and then make free voice or even video calls to anyone who also has Skype installed. You'll need a set of speakers and a microphone or webcam to make it work, but these items are relatively inexpensive, and you pay no call charges for calls to anywhere in the world.
- Listen to music on your PC for free – there are many services such as Spotify, which allow you to search for an artist or group, and then play their music free of charge. You'll have to listen to a brief advertisement every now and again, but it's a great way to discover new artists. I use it as a mechanism to "try before you buy".
- Book holidays with your own itinerary. Research the places you'd like to visit, read reviews from other visitors, and choose the things you really want to make your holiday special.
- Find study aids for your children (or yourself!). There are plentiful resources on the internet to help with every subject you can think of.
- Design your own garden – there is software available where you can put in your garden details, and based on the type of soil, direction it faces etc. will recommend plants for each area, and generate a 3D picture of what it will look like.

When you look at a PC, you'll be bombarded with acronyms, abbreviations, and numbers, all of which are supposed to help you compare performance, but which tend to just confuse... It used to be the case that you either looked at a PC (with Microsoft Windows) or a Mac (with Mac OS), but that's no longer the case as Linux is now a viable alternative as an Operating System. However, for the sake of simplicity, I'm only going to consider PCs running Microsoft Windows as an Operating System.

The reason for this is not that this combination is better than the others, but that it's simply more prevalent, and if you have problems down the track you'll have no problem finding someone to help you.

So where to start...?

The processor – otherwise known as the Central Processing Unit (CPU) or microprocessor is the brain of the PC. It's the main chip inside the box that handles and manages all the data, performing millions of calculations per second. There are 2 main manufacturers; Intel and AMD, and each of these manufacturers has several different types of processor, some with dual or quad processors, with different speed ratings, so already we have 4 sets of variables to contend with when trying to compare performance.

However, in general, the following apply:-

The higher the clock speed (measured in GHz) the better

A processor that's described as Dual-core will be better than single core

A processor that's described as Quad-core will be better than Dual-core

Memory – this is a simple case of more is better. Measured these days in Gigabytes (abbreviated to Gigs), you will need at least 2 Gigabytes of memory, 4 is better, 8 will be the most you need unless you're processing digital audio or video, manipulating high resolution digital images, or running high-end CAD software.

Operating System – will almost certainly be Windows 7 (don't get talked in to buying Windows Vista or XP under any circumstances!) and there are several versions. For home use, get either the Home or Home Premium version.

Hard disk – this is where all your files are stored, and the amount of storage is measured, like memory, in Gigabytes. How much space you'll need depends on what you plan to use the PC for. If you have thousands of CDs you want to copy to the PC, or you take thousands of digital photos, you'll need more space than if all you want to do is work on spreadsheets and text documents. Most new systems will come with a minimum of 160 Gigabytes of hard disk space, but if you have a choice, 320 Gigabytes or more are commonplace, and should be more than adequate. Once you start getting information stored on the hard disk you should think about backing it up, either online (many suppliers are available) or to an external USB hard disk.

Monitor – as you'll spend all the time you're using the PC looking at this, it pays to get something decent. 17" is probably the smallest you'll want (space permitting), but most systems currently will come with a 19", probably widescreen. If you can look at the monitor before buying and see how good the quality of the image is that's a good thing. Everyone's eyes are different...

Keyboard/mouse – again, if you're able to try these out for comfort before you buy, do it. Keyboards and mice come in all sorts of designs, and some are more ergonomically sound than others. If you don't want cables all over your desk then go wireless (just remember that you'll need batteries for the keyboard and mouse).

Software – the first one to buy is an Antivirus program. After that it gets tricky... There will be a software package to do just about everything you can think of, but the more you install, the more work your PC has to do every time it starts up, and the slower it will run. In general, I would only install software you actually use, and make sure you have purchased legitimate versions. Illegally downloaded software is one of the quickest ways to get your nice new PC infected with viruses. That said, there are many pieces of software that you can legitimately download, and if you don't like the Microsoft products, there are compatible suites available online; try either Open office, or Ability Office.