



2009 Netbook Buying Guide

Great deals abound this holiday season for netbooks. Check out the features and benefits before you buy.



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So let's talk about the 2009 must-have electronic device: the netbook computer. This article will provide everything you need to know to make an informed purchase, whether buying a netbook for yourself or giving a few as gifts.

What's a netbook computer?

A relative recently asked for some tips on buying a netbook computer. During our conversation he asked, "Aren't netbooks really just small notebook computers?" About 18 months ago my answer would have been "no" because back then netbooks were extremely limited devices in terms of specifications, configuration and functionality.



Fast forward to 2009. Netbooks can now accurately be described as extremely small notebook computers. Today's netbooks come equipped with so many goodies that a few years ago such machines would have cost \$2000 or more (as compared to today's netbook street prices that range from \$250 to \$450).

In 2007, a netbook was true to its heritage and part of its new name. A netbook was a device limited to connecting to the Net, checking e-mails, downloading files and performing rudimentary computer functions such as word processing. But today, a \$350 netbook computer can function similarly in many ways to a notebook computer.

In 2009, you might ask if there is a standard spec or "default configuration" for a netbook? Yes. Today if a computer manufacturer hopes to sell netbooks, it has to make sure that the netbook is in fact a mini computer

that includes: Windows XP; a hard drive; at least 1GB of RAM, upgradeable to 2GB; a network connection; a 10" TFT display; Bluetooth and WiFi; Web camera; small form factor; compact and light weight; and include one of the faster netbook processors.

Why a netbook?

First things first, understand that a netbook should not function as a replacement for a notebook computer; it lacks certain elements that a notebook has, for example, a super fast processor. Nevertheless, netbooks are great at performing most any task a lawyer would require from a computer.

Why get a netbook computer? Here's a quick list of reasons why you should consider the purchase:

- **Law Office functions:** Netbooks can perform most law office tasks. Word processing, database management, research, case file management, time keeping, surfing the Net, and even jury presentations can all be performed on a netbook. And as more and more clients are using netbooks to conduct video conferencing with lawyers, netbooks with built-in Webcams perform this function perfectly.
- **Portability:** This is perhaps the main reason to get a netbook. Typically weighing under three pounds, the netbook is easily toted in a briefcase, backpack or stowed in luggage. The netbook has a small footprint that looks right at home placed on an airline meal tray.

First computer: Netbooks are low priced but complex/sophisticated devices. This makes the netbook a great first computer for family members;

Student use: The biggest market for netbooks is the college and university campus. Many students now have netbooks instead of notebooks, unless they simply can't afford either device. Look around a college class, and you see netbooks on desktops rather than notepaper;

Don't Be A Loser: Unless you want to be branded a hat-in-hand loser by peers, friends, loved ones, judges, opposing counsel and colleagues, you need to get a fancy-pants netbook immediately, if not sooner (OK, I made up this reason, I just wanted to see if you are paying attention).



Some history

Netbooks today got their conceptual beginnings back in the 1990s when manufacturers sold electronic devices whose functions were limited to browsing the Net, checking e-mails and downloading files that one might find during a browsing session.

In the beginning the devices were defined as “Internet appliances” or “Net terminals.” Some looked like answering machines with a color or monochrome display. Others were designed to sit on top of a TV, and it would use the television screen as a computer monitor of sorts.

Consumers knew that a “Net appliance” meant the device was extremely limited in terms of what one could do with it. The trade-off on using a limited device was that even Grandma could operate a Net appliance when, for example, she needed to keep up with her online dating prospects.

The netbook’s predecessors were a huge flop. Many models came and went, usually within months of a product’s debut. To be sure, do you know anyone who used one of those Internet appliances? I don’t. I can’t recall going over to someone’s house and seeing an Internet appliance in operation. Everyone had an “unlimited,” so to speak, desktop or notebook computer. While cool in concept, the Net appliance was a bust (interestingly no matter the manufacturer or how big the name behind the product).

Fast forward to late 2007-early 2008 when computer maker ASUS (roughly pronounced “aces”) gambled by resurrecting the concept of the Internet appliance, except this time around, in my opinion, ASUS did five things that caused netbook computer sales to take off in 2008, and in 2009 to become the hottest selling computer device.

What ASUS did right: Coined or marketed the name “netbook PC”; made the netbook look, feel and operate like a full-sized notebook computer – no more answering machines with a monitor at-

tached to it; made the netbook capable of performing popular or common computer functions rather than limiting the device to performing mostly as an Internet-only appliance; made the netbook capable of running Microsoft XP Home Premium (consumers understood MS XP and how to use it); and religiously kept the price point from \$300 to \$350 (the tanking economy helped propel interest in netbooks. Once consumers looked over netbooks and realized, “Hey, this is actually a super, low-priced, small notebook computer,” the hook was set and deal sealed).

In late 2008 ASUS’s competitors and desktop/notebook manufacturers witnessed ASUS’s netbook success. With tanking sales of flagship units, everyone in the business saw netbooks as their savior. So now in 2009 we have all computer manufacturers rushing to market with one to five netbooks for your consideration. Frankly put, the netbook has saved many a computer manufacturer’s butt. On most manufacturer balance sheets netbook sales have compensated for losses in other computer categories.

Buying Tips – What to avoid

Netbooks have become so similar in terms of features, configuration and functionality that all you really need to do is be careful not to accidentally buy an old machine with outdated specs. Before the holiday season, low price was a good way to detect the outdated junk. Back then (meaning a month ago, LOL) the easiest way to get into trouble was to buy on price alone. If you bought a netbook simply because it was a super low price, there was a good chance you would end up buying an outdated, lousy netbook.

With holiday price cuts, you have to be even more careful since low price no longer indicates a machine is outdated.

Super Bonus Tip: If you receive a netbook for Christmas, compare its specs with those I describe in here. If yours is not what you want, exchange the netbook for a model that pleases you.

OK, let’s talk specifications and configuration:

- **Outdated unit:** There are still lots of mid-2008 netbooks being sold online at outlet sites and even mainstream retailers. Be careful. These netbooks look similar to later models, and the prices are temptingly low (sometimes \$250). One example is the ASUS netbooks that first went on sale. The units with an SSD and Linux (see below) externally look exactly the same as the company’s newer units that contain a hard disk and Windows XP.

Why am I bad-mouthing last year’s netbook? The “fossil” is horrible for law office/lawyer use, mainly because they are extremely limited (the netbook, not the lawyer). Consider that these old netbooks have a solid state disk drive (SSD) and not a hard disk. While a solid state disk drive might sound cool, those drives are NOT the same as current SSD’s coming to market. Nope, those SSD’s are more like giant flash drives 4GB to 16GB in size. Trouble is, that’s all the space you get; you can’t upgrade the drive. Compare that with a 2009 netbook that costs \$300, that come with 160GB hard disks. (4GB versus 160GB, is there a debatable issue here?)

Other limitations: the first ASUS models also came with less RAM, typically 512MB. And units came with a Linux operating system instead of Windows XP. (With only 4GB to 16GB of “hard disk” space to fool with, Linux was used to save space taken up by the netbook’s operating system.)

Since we lawyers love proof and proving intent/conduct to support an argument, consider this. On seeing that consumers wanted netbooks, but not the limited machines it was selling, ASUS immediately stopped making its “SSD/Linux” netbooks and ramped up manufacture of netbooks containing a hard disk, 1GB RAM and Windows XP.

Buying Tips – What to look for

Like any electronic device for lawyers I submit that there are things you need



on a netbook and features/specs you don't need. Fortunately this always translates into saving money because a law office does not need the latest and greatest in technology.

There are so many netbook configurations and styles nowadays, it is impossible to discuss in detail the full range of features, components and specs that you might consider when making a purchase. However, there has now evolved a "typical configuration" for netbooks, meaning that all netbooks should have the following:

- **Size and Design:** All netbooks now look like mini notebooks. They come in different colors, but flat black is the most common. Netbooks are typically about one-inch thick and about the size of an 8.5" x 11" piece of paper. Netbooks weigh about 2.7 to 3 pounds.

- **Screen:** Because netbooks have a small form factor, the displays range in size from about 9 inches to 11 inches. Nowadays, however, most netbooks' displays are 10 inch. *IMHO 10" has become the typical and accepted display size.

Warning: Small 9-inch displays with high resolution graphics (say 1280 x 800) are difficult to view what is on the screen, unless you have great eyesight. So keep that in mind. The screens look fantastic, but if you wear glasses and even then have difficulty focusing on small graphics, netbooks with a 9-inch display should be avoided.

- **Keyboard:** Netbooks are smaller than notebooks so you have to make do with a smaller keyboard. But most netbooks with a 10-inch display have enough space to include an OK keyboard. Typically netbook keyboards are described as 3/4 or 75 percent of the size of full-size keyboards. Simply make sure you can type on the model you are considering.

Try out a netbook by typing for a few days. If you don't like the feel of the keyboard, return the netbook for a refund or exchange.

Touchpad: Also try out the touchpad (mouse). If you don't like how it feels, return the netbook.

- **Battery:** Netbooks typically have 3-cell batteries. That might give you a couple hours use with aggressive power saving settings. If you want to use the netbook on a plane or in a classroom, plan on buying a 6-, 9- or 12-cell extended battery.

- **Processor:** There's talk all over the Net about processors, which is the fastest, which is better, etc. I find that for law office or college use, the processor does not make all that much difference.

That said, most netbooks have either 1.6-GHz or 1.66-GHz Intel Atom CPUs. For a while HP was using VIA processors. IMHO all of these are plenty fast for law office use.

- **RAM:** All newer netbooks (late 2008-2009) come with 1GB of RAM. Most can be upgraded to 2GB (and no more). One GB of RAM runs Windows XP Home Premium fine. But if you intend to run Windows 7, plan on upgrading to 2GB RAM (for about \$50).

- **Operating system:** Windows XP Home is the "default" operating system on netbooks nowadays. IMHO if a netbook comes with Linux I would pass on buying that machine and move on to consideration of another model/manufacturer who offers XP on the netbook.

Update: Last week I purchased Windows 7 Home Premium upgrade for \$29. I just installed the OS on my Lenovo S10 netbook that has the "default configuration" I mention herein, including 1GB of RAM. The netbook runs nicely.

And what I said previously in Plaintiff magazine about Windows 7 has proven accurate. Without going into detail take my word for it, Win 7 is like getting a 40 percent contingent fee on a \$5 million personal injury settlement. Vista is like receiving a statutorily limited 13 percent attorney fee realized from a \$10,000 workers' comp case that you have been working on for two years.

- **Hard Drive/SSD:** I mentioned that you should avoid any netbook with a solid state disk drive. This usually means the netbook, even if it's at a bargain price, is extremely outdated. There's a reason

these units are \$250 or less, no one wants them.

Generally, most netbooks come with a 120GB to 160GB hard disk. This is plenty of space on which to install all your law office software and case files. Older drives are slower than newer disks. Check the specs and see if the hard disk speed is at least 5,400 RPM. Slower drives, such as 4,200 RPM may slow down your netbook.

- **DVD-RW or ROM:** I am not aware of any netbook that comes with an internal (built-in) DVD drive. If one was included this would compromise the small form factor that is a characteristic of the netbook. If you need an optical drive, external USB-powered DVD drives can be had for less than \$50 on the Net. (eBay is a good source.)

- **WiFi - Wireless:** When at the airport, Starbuck's, college campus and now even the courthouse, connecting to a wireless network requires your netbook to have a WiFi receiver/transmitter. Fortunately, all netbooks come with built-in WiFi. It is so common it is not a noteworthy feature nowadays; it's simply expected and assumed that a netbook has WiFi.

- **Bluetooth:** This is not as common a feature as WiFi, but many netbooks nowadays come with Bluetooth. Bluetooth is a low power radio transmitter that allows you to operate certain equipment connected wirelessly to your netbook. Bluetooth can be used to connect to a printer, mouse, keyboard, or cell phone. The device operating on Bluetooth has to be placed 10 feet or less from the netbook.

- **USB 2.0 ports:** Netbooks contain at least two, but companies like ASUS give you three.

- **VGA port:** Most netbooks include a 15 pin VGA monitor port. This is simply an old-style monitor port. This is handy when you want to connect the netbook to an external video projector or screen to give presentations, access the Net and project the browser onto a screen, etc.

- **Webcam (.3 MP standard):** Some netbooks have a Webcam; some don't. These



are handy if you like to make Skype video calls, for example. All Webcams are low resolution. This is so the processor can handle the video and also so you don't waste bandwidth with your calls.

- **SD/MMC Card Reader:** This takes the place of the floppy drive of the old days. While this is not really a deal breaker if a netbook does not have an SD card reader, it's handy if one is built into the machine. Newer netbooks will have an SD card reader.

- **Warranty:** Obviously duration is important. While most manufacturers warrant netbooks for one year (what appears to be the new default warranty period on any electronic device), consider buying a netbook at Costco. That store increases the warranty period for an additional year (so you get a two-year warranty) and they also have a 90-day full refund return policy. (That's how it is with LCD TVs, so I assume it would be the same for computers. But check on this before making your buying decision.)

- **Complaints and reviews:** Before buying, I'd check the Net to see what actual users have to say about the netbook model you are considering. Good sources are on Amazon.com – on the pages where a product is listed for sale there are reviews. Reviews are detailed and often well written; epinions.com – a very good site that has user opinions (they don't sell stuff on epinions); and Google – in the search field enter something like *Dell [netbook model number] complaint* and see what comes up.

Bonus Tip: No matter the product, there is always going to be someone, somewhere who has had a negative experience.

For example, while you may think that American built cars get lots of complaints, you can search for complaints about a Toyota 4Runner and there will be some really bad sounding experiences people have had with that SUV, despite the fact that the 4Runner is one of the finest SUVs out there. If you find complaints on a netbook you are considering, search around to make sure the complaints are consistent. That would tell you the netbook model is one to avoid.

A word about price

Because of the poor economy and the upcoming holidays, pricing needs this separate section to emphasize what I am about to say. Warning: This is my opinion.

I predict that prices for netbooks, with the above configuration, will be dirt cheap this holiday season. I suspect that in December you will see unheard-of prices and sales at Best Buy, Office Depot, Staples and online stores.

I predict that you will be able to get a great netbook for \$200 to \$300. I would search around on the Net for the best deal.

If you are adventurous, you can look on your local craigslist for deals. I purchased a mint condition Lenovo S10, in the box, with 2GB of RAM, 160GB hard disk and the goodies described above, all for only \$220!

So hold out for the best deal. I would NOT pay more than \$300 for a super nice netbook this holiday season.

I also would NOT under any circumstances pay more than \$400 for a netbook. I say this because at \$400+ the

netbook ventures into netbook pricing. Remember, one of the traits or "features" of netbooks is the low price one pays for this "mini PC computer." If considering paying \$400 for a netbook, one can spend a little more and get a nicely equipped notebook computer.

For example, about two months ago I helped a friend shop at Office Depot for a notebook computer. After an instant \$100 and \$50 mail-in rebates, she ended up paying \$450 for an HP G60-440US notebook with the following configuration: 320GB hard disk; 3GB RAM; Vista Home Premium; 16" High-Def Widescreen display; 8X dual layer DVD-RW drive; and all the standard features, such as a built-in card reader, Bluetooth, WiFi and network WLAN. With specs like these, for \$450, why spend \$400 for a netbook?

Conclusion

The time is right to get a netbook. But do me a favor. Promise to hold out, to resist, and to not fall prey to some sucker deal out there.

Compare local and online ads with what I have listed in this article. When you see that a netbook has all the features and specs I list, and is for sale at \$300 or less, snap it up immediately, if not sooner.

***IMHO: Webspeak for In My Honest Opinion**

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