

Notebook computer buying guide for lawyers

Here is the lowdown on how to get a great notebook for less than $600.

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In the past few months I have had six colleagues, friends and relatives ask me for advice on buying a notebook computer. Since buying notebooks is apparently in the air, I thought it would be a good idea to provide this plaintiff lawyer's buying guide, especially since the technology and prices have dramatically changed over the past few years. Moreover, I'd rather say "read my article" rather than repeating myself ten times over.

Some background

When it comes to important technology purchases, it is a good idea to tell you a little bit about my qualifications, especially when I am advising lawyers to part with hundreds of dollars on a computer purchase.

I have owned notebooks since the days they were called and considered "laptops." Because the machines weighed 20 pounds or more, we derided the beasts as more accurately being "luggables." The computers in those days were 200 times less powerful than even the smartphones of today! Consider, for example, that computers back in those days used 5.25 floppies that stored 360 K of data. My current Blackberry cell or smart phone has a 4 GB MicroSD chip for storage and a 64 MB on-board processor.

Over the years, I have owned about 200 notebook computers. I have stripped them down to the circuit boards and repaired them so that they worked again. I have owned all the big boy brand names: Compaq, AT&T, Samsung, Sony Vaio, Dell Inspiron, HP, Toshiba, Fujitsu and Panasonic.

As to prices, in my black hole of a basement I have a Samsung notebook purchased in 1995 for $3,500 (that's $4,700 in 2009 dollars.) In 2005 I saw the same notebook for sale on eBay. The seller advertised "a great beginner computer for the kids." At $45 for "BuyItNow" there were no takers.

Bottom line first

•***Technology*:** In 2009, there is great news on purchasing a notebook computer. As with all things electronic, notebook technology has significantly advanced while prices have dramatically dropped. For $550 (see below) you can get an excellent quality notebook computer that contains technology 100 times better than the Samsung I bought in 1995 ($600 in 2009 would have been $441 in 1995!) As a small example of the technology then and now: the 1995 $4,700 Samsung came with a 10 MB hard disk; my 2008 $600 notebook has a 250 GB hard disk!



Kaypro — a luggable

•***Notebooks for lawyers*:** After years of using computers in a litigation law practice accept this as gospel: lawyers do NOT need the latest and most advanced notebook for law office use. This is because "medium" configured notebook computers work very well in the law office environment (more on this later.) I would go so far as to say that you will be wasting your money and the technology if you buy an advanced, higher priced notebook for use in a law office.

•***Pricing*:** Prices have plummeted in 2009 to where paying $600 to $700 will get you a superb notebook that is great for law office use. At the end of this article I will provide you with a personal recommendation on where you can buy a superb notebook computer for $550! It is a Lenovo (IBM) *Ideapad Y510*. It is the same

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notebook as the two I purchased in January 2008, so my recommendation comes with a year of testing.

The only time you might consider a higher priced notebook, say in the $1,200 to $2,000 range, is if you need a subnotebook that will be used on the road (subnotebooks – usually computers weighing from two to four pounds – cost significantly more because compact technology is always priced higher.)

Now on to my tips and details.

Dispelling myths and outdated notions

Before going notebook shopping, you need to rid your mind of outdated concepts.

• ***Name brand*:** Do you have a favorite computer brand, one that you trust? While that is not a bad thing, my recommendation is NOT to get caught up on buying a computer based on brand name alone. This piece of advice is based on my personal experience.

Over the past few years, I have attempted to repair various lawyers' notebooks that went on the fritz (they approach me with looks of expectation and hope in their eyes). Alas, most of the times I have had to tell them their notebooks need a proper burial. The names of the dearly departed: Toshiba, Dell, Sony, Gateway and HP (Compaq). This tells you that brand name alone does NOT assure a trouble-free notebook.

• ***Speed and tech*:** For law office use, you do NOT need the fastest, most advanced notebook computer. Those are reserved for video producers and gamers. Are you planning to play video games at the office? Perhaps you work for Pixar Animation Studios on the side. If you only practice law, then you do NOT need a notebook computer with the fastest processors (video or CPU), nor do you need the latest in technology.

• ***Net speed*:** A misconception that people have is that the faster and more expensive a computer is, the faster you will be able to surf the Internet. Actually, net speed depends on the speed of your DSL or broadband connection and is not significantly contingent on what is inside the notebook computer. Even inexpensive computers come with great video cards and sufficient RAM to process or compute any page you might visit, such as to watch a YouTube video.

• ***Netbooks*:** These low-priced devices are again starting to show up in office supply and computer stores at attractive prices of around $350. These devices look like notebooks but are NOT full-blown computers. They are meant to connect to the Internet and not much more than that.

While price makes them tempting, netbooks are NOT designed to take the place of full-featured notebook computers. At $350, you don't get much, at least not compared to a notebook computer. Netbooks have extremely small displays (hard to see words in a Word document, for example), limited features and significantly less processing power. This results in an inability to run some resource-intensive programs and operating systems (e.g., Windows Vista.)

• ***Free programs*:** Remember when a notebook computer used to come loaded with full versions of otherwise expensive software? For example, my old Sony Vaio notebooks came with MS Word, MS Office, QuickBooks, Adobe Photoshop and other useful programs. Those days are long gone.

Nowadays, low-end notebooks come with "lite" or trial versions of utilities and multi-media programs such as anti-virus or MP3 creation software. Don't expect the $600 to $1,000 computers to come with full versions of otherwise expensive programs.

• ***Don't junk the old notebook*:** If you are retiring your old notebook set it up as a "net only" computer on your office desk top. (See my earlier article in the Dec. 08 issue of Plaintiff Magazine entitled *Protect yourself from hackers, crackers and thieves*).

What to look for in a law office notebook

• ***Components*:** Regardless of the brand of computer in which you are interested, keep in mind that when building notebook computers, all manufacturers use the same components from a limited number of suppliers. For example, many computer brands use Sharp or NEC displays. Sony sells batteries to a number of its competitors. Panasonic manufactures DVD-RW drives and sells them to manufacturers worldwide.

The point is that while you may think that a particular brand computer is better than another is, the odds are that internally the two notebooks contain parts obtained from the same component manufacturers.

• ***Hard disk*:** Pay attention to this. For the same price, one retailer will include a 160 GB hard disk and another will include a 250 GB disk. Also, keep in mind that standard hard disk sizes, even on inexpensive notebooks, are 160 GB to 250 GB.

• ***Memory*:** RAM (Random Access Memory) is so inexpensive nowadays there is no reason for a computer to come with less than 2 GB of RAM installed. Moreover, if your new notebook comes with Windows Vista, it absolutely needs 2 GB of RAM to run efficiently. I have used computers with Vista and 1 GB of RAM. They operate extremely slowly. So pass on notebooks with less than 2 GB of RAM.

• ***USB ports*:** All notebooks now come with USB 2.0 ports. Some notebooks come with two USB ports. Three ports are great; four are ideal. Get a notebook with at least three USB ports, and you can avoid having to use an external USB hub.

• ***External monitor port*:** As a cost-cutting measure, some manufacturers leave out an external monitor port. This port is a male plug that accepts a monitor cable. The cable connects your notebook to an

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external monitor or projector. If you intend to use your notebook at trial for jury presentations, you need the external monitor port. Make sure the notebook comes with one. Even the $600 notebooks should have it.

• ***Vista vs. XP*:** If you have a choice of operating systems between Vista and XP, go with XP. Vista simply costs too much in time and money to upgrade your existing programs and hardware.

If Vista is the only operating system (OS) that the notebook seller offers, make sure it is Vista Home *Premium*. Do not buy a notebook if it comes with Windows Home *Basic*. That's like flying business class, but getting the coach meal, served on a distinctive plastic tray. There are plenty of good deals out there that include Vista Home Premium. For law office use you do NOT need Vista *Business* or *Ultimate*.

• ***Warranty and support*:** Avoid warranties that are less than one year. Ask about the warranty because some are a measly 90 days!

Be sure to investigate on the Internet to find out the good and bad about manufacturer support and determine how long you get FREE support. Some manufacturers give you free telephone support for the length of the warranty. Others may limit support to 30 to 90 days from date of purchase.

• ***Opinions and reviews*:** The Internet provides a wealth of information on product reviews. In addition, there are many forums and blogs where users provide opinions about the brand you are interested in. With the Net there is no excuse for not researching a product before buying.

Some things to avoid

• ***Battery*:** Don't get caught up on battery use. Generally, no matter what claims the manufacturers make, I might be lucky to get two hours battery use on a notebook. I disregard claims that I might get six hours use, for example.

Warning: Computer manufacturers are as bad as automakers when advertising battery life. It is so bad that no one takes estimated use on batteries seriously and most users cut the published numbers in half. In any event, most people rarely are away from an AC power source so battery life is usually not an issue.

• ***Weight*:** Although losing weight may have been on your New Year's resolution list, for purposes of buying a notebook, don't get caught up on weight, e.g., by considering the purchase of a super light computer. I say this because notebooks in the two to four pound range are expensive and defeat the point of my article: getting a great notebook for $600 or less.

Keep in mind that notebooks in the $500 to $1,000 range are going to weigh a standard six to eight pounds. If you do a lot of air travel and making your "flying weight" as light as possible is paramount, then weight will have to be a factor in your buying decision. But be prepared to pay for low weight as a feature.

• ***Full retail*:** You can negotiate price with many sellers, so NEVER pay the advertised price without first asking for a discount! Some salespeople have discount authority to a certain level. If you want a deeper discount, they put you through to a manager who might then give you the requested discount. Remember, all they can say is no, so always ask.

Notebook recommendation [Lenovo Ideapad Y510]:

If you want to avoid the spending the time looking for a notebook to purchase, I highly recommend you consider the Lenovo Ideapad Y510. Who the heck is Lenovo?

Lenovo is the fourth largest computer manufacturer in the world. In 2005, Lenovo completed acquisition of IBM Personal Computing. Lenovo still sells the IBM ThinkPad line of notebooks. But in late 2007 they came out with a consumer-oriented line called Ideapad. Because Lenovo wants to introduce their new line to consumers, the company is selling top quality notebooks for far less than what they are worth.



Lenovo Ideapad Y510

I consider the Y510 a "secret deal" because many people are unaware of it. This notebook is one of my better computer purchases that I have made over the years. It meets all the requirements I mention in this article; it looks extremely high tech and after having used it for a year now I can say it is also a solid machine. I have a colleague who also bought one at the same time I did and that machine, too, has operated without incident. [Editor's note: I have purchased this notebook and it is the best computer I have ever used. I take it with me everywhere, and it has never given me any problems.]

The best part about the Lenovo Ideapad Y510 is that you can buy it online directly from www.TigerDirect.com for only $549! You can search elsewhere on the Net for a better price, but Tiger Direct had the best price that I could find. Even on eBay, the Y510 costs more than what Tiger Direct is selling it for.

Out-of-context bonus tip

Next month I will be talking about whether or not you should "upgrade" to Windows Vista. (Without giving away the content of the article, the answer is absolutely not. IMHO Vista is a flop, problematic and will cost you thousands to upgrade.) Continue to use Windows XP until Windows 7 comes out. (Yes, that's right, Windows 7 will be replacing Vista. Windows 7 is in beta testing. In fact, in

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January 2009, more than four million people, including yours truly, downloaded Windows 7 Beta 1. Don't bother trying to get a copy of Windows 7. By the time you read this, Microsoft will have a "coming soon" on the download site, instead of the ability to download the beta version of the Windows 7 Beta 1 operating system.)

Conclusion

There are as many notebook computers out there as the day is long, as the saying goes. Of all my tips, the one I suggest you follow the most is the "commandment" that you do NOT need to get the fastest and most advanced computer for law office use.

You can save loads of cash and time by simply getting one of those Lenovo Y510 computers. I think you will be very pleased with it. And an added benefit is that should you take the Lenovo to deposition, defense counsel will think you paid a bucket load of cash for the fancy looking computer you are using. That makes this notebook a bargain at twice the price.

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