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Low-end hardware for Internet surfers

James Turner

One of the traps technology writers tend to fall into is to focus only on the newest and neatest toys.

Numerous columns extol the virtues of the latest high-speed processors, breathlessly talking about computers built around them that are "only" $2,000.

For a lot of people looking to get on the Internet, however, the question is not how much computer they can get for their money, but how little money they need to spend to buy a minimal setup that's Web-ready.

So, in the spirit of Scrooge McDuck, here are your absolute low-ball options.

To begin, you need to define your specifications. Although you can still find processors based on the slow Intel 486 model (especially in laptops), they're a little underpowered for Web cruising. So restrict yourself to systems that use newer processors. Anything with either an Intel Pentium or AMD 586 processor will do, as long as they're 100 megahertz or faster.

As for an operating system, you'll probably run Windows95 or 98, so get at least 32 MB of RAM. (Less than that and things get pretty slow.) Normally, I'd advocate a fast video card with lots of memory in it, but if the Web is all you care about, just take whatever comes with the computer. (But no playing Riven or other complex games for you on these boxes.)

In this case, a 15-inch monitor will do. To avoid frustration, try for at least a 56K modem for the Internet connection.

Turning to trusty pricewatch.com, you can find lots of systems that meet these requirements. But with new desktops, you won't find processors any slower than an Intel Celeron 366 (366 megahertz). Complete systems sell for as little as $400, including shipping.

Be aware that "complete" doesn't include the monitor, so you can expect to pay another $80 to $100 plus shipping ($20 to $30) for a 15-inch monitor. These new systems come with 1-to-2-year warranties.

If you want to spend less than $500, seek out a refurbished Pentium system at your local computer store. Not only are they likely to be a better bargain, but you'll also save on the shipping, and have somewhere local to go if it breaks down. The downside: Warranties usually last only 30 to 90 days.

Surprisingly, laptops can serve a low-end alternative to desktops. You can find refurbished laptops that meet the above requirements for about $300, and because the monitor is integrated into the unit, that's all you'll pay. Thirty-day warranties are typical, although some factory-refurbs may have as much as a year's coverage.

One caveat: Going for the low end is pretty much a dead-end as far as upgrades go. You'll need to replace your motherboard, processor, and memory, at the very least, if you ever want to step up. And there are no options at all if you pick a laptop.

James Turner is a computer consultant and avid Web user.

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