

# Healthy computer can save time, money



John Deans

How is business lately? That is the question I have been asking my clients over the past several weeks to get a feel of the financial health of our area.

With a customer pool covering numerous and different industries like oil, medical, automotive, construction, real estate and law enforcement, I have observed an overall downwards trend in business activity with the exception of law enforcement.

Seeing even gloomier news and events on the horizon such as the possible nationalization of major banks coupled with trillion-dollar bailouts, we all need to start conserving our cash and resources.

Computers are critical to our everyday lives, and along with that necessity comes the overhead cost of purchasing and maintaining these digital work horses. My first article for this column almost five years ago was titled "When To Retire Your Computer."

Odds are the computer you were on back then has been replaced. Some though have not and now may not be a good time financially to purchase a new one.

Today let's talk about how to stretch your tech dollars to help get your business or family through these tight money times.

One good thing about new computers is that they have gotten even cheaper with both desktops and laptops starting at under \$500. However, I recommend shying away from those lowly equipped ones and sticking with at least the mid-range priced

computers due to memory concerns.

The key is to know when it is more economical to scrap the computer that is giving you a hard time and buy a new one. That threshold is lower in a business environment since the computer's efficiency can have an effect on your productivity.

In other words, if your computer is too slow it most likely is costing the company more money than the computer's replacement cost.

If lost time, new parts, or consulting time costs are adding up to over \$500 in a year for an older desktop or laptop then it is time to dump it.

Here are some time-to-dump rules for old computers:

- Dump your old computer if:
  - It is still running Windows NT, ME, 98 or 2000.
  - It can only support 256 MB of RAM memory.
  - The hard drive is only 10 GB or less.
  - The CPU is less than 1 GH speed or less than an Intel P4 processor.

• Any computer more than 5 years old that crashes or hangs more than once a week.

If your current computer has none of the problems above then odds are it can be utilized for at least another couple more years.

So, what can we do to prolong the computers we are keeping? Let's start with desktops by opening them up and blowing all those dust bunnies out with a can of compressed air.

Focus on thoroughly cleaning the fan and heat sink on the CPU which will be the only large exposed fan mounted on the largest computer chip of the motherboard. Cleaning that heat sink good will definitely prolong the life of your computer.

If you do not already have one, spend the \$50 and buy a battery backup UPS from Computer Helpers or Wal-mart to feed consistent clean power to the desktop which will extend the electronic components inside. Avoid using dirty CDROMs in any computer since it may taint or damage the optical reading head of the DVD/CD drive.

Tidy your laptops by keeping them closed when you are not using them so dust, dirt, and spilled stuff does not get on the keyboard and then possibly into the enclosure. Be careful with the AC adapter cord and transformer since so many laptops have been dropped due to snagged cords on door knobs while walking with a computer under the arm.

You will want to also keep your software clean. All computers are near perfect when they are first purchased with the operating system and the limited number of installed applications working just right.

As time goes on more software is installed, infections from malware invade, software conflicts and incompatibilities set in, and before long the computer is running like junk.

First and foremost, make sure the antivirus software is the latest version with the newest virus definition updates. My favorite antivirus is still AVG 8.0 that is free for the home ([free.grisoft.com](http://free.grisoft.com)) and only \$15 per PC per year in packs of five for the office ([www.grisoft.com](http://www.grisoft.com)).

Since AVG 8.0 does both jobs of anti-virus and anti-spyware it can keep the majority of the bad stuff off your workstations and help extend your computer budget.

You can help keep the digital devils away from your computer by not inviting them in to start with. Stay away from or immediately uninstall any instance of music sharing and downloading software like Limewire, Kazaa or Bearshare. These are just lawsuits waiting to happen.

Parents, I am serious about this! If any of your home computers, including your kids' PCs, have any of the above mentioned software installed, take it off immediately.

I have read about and heard of too many cases when the mom or dad have gotten hit with a \$150,000 lawsuit from the Recording Industry Association of America because little Jimmy or sweet Janie was downloading copyrighted music to their bedroom computer.

Some other things you can do to prolong your computer service is to keep the hard drive in a low stress environment. This can be done by making sure the free space is at least 20 percent and do not fill it up over 90 percent since both performance degradation and possible corruption can occur.

Also run the disk defragmenter every quarter under guarded conditions like with UPS power and no activity during the operation.

Another way to keep your computer running longer is to let it keep running continuously. The tree huggers fight me on this one, but they can go climb a tree since I have seen that leaving a computer running day and

night with clean power makes them last longer.

Without the daily cooling off and heating up which induces contraction and expansion of the electronic components, I have seen computers last for over a decade numerous times under those conditions in my 28 years of experience.

Bottom line: Stretch those computer dollars, hunker down, and get ready for an eventful year.

Next week's column: Monitoring your computer environments.

*John Deans of DeansConsulting.com is a Brenham area computer networking consultant who can be reached at 289-2233 or [John@DeansConsulting.com](mailto:John@DeansConsulting.com) for questions and comments.*