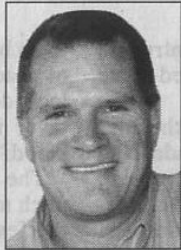


Tips for getting a new computer for school



John Deans

It's most wonderful time of the year! Ever heard that one?

It's time for the kiddos to head back to school. Even my 22-year old Army veteran is heading off to college to study computer networking. From high school on up the majority of these students need laptops.

Almost on a daily basis now I am getting calls from parents of these young skulls of mush about what type of laptop computer to purchase for them. The \$1,000 or so investment is just the first step since the initial setup of the brand spanking new PC is critical for smooth and stable operation for the months and years to come.

Some key points to remember picking out a new laptop and purchasing it are simple. Number one is to make sure you choose a laptop with at least 2 GB of memory.

Since Vista will be the default operating system it will need 2 GB of RAM to run well. Speaking of Vista, try to buy the Vista Business version of the OS rather than the Vista Home. Stay away from Vista Basic since it is way too limited for any type of real work.

Veer away from the real cheap machines like E-Machines and any no-name clones that you have never heard of. Stick with the major brand names like Toshiba, Acer, HP, IBM or Sony — I'm still down on Dell.

Opt for the 15.4-inch screen, a large hard drive of at least 120 GB, an SD media card reader and look to see if it comes with a built-in Web camera at the top of the laptop's monitor.

You may hear and see deals out there for \$499 or even less but try to avoid those bottom end laptops. They come with less than the critical 2 GB of

memory and are configured with Vista Home or even the lame Basic version of Windows. Plan on dropping at least \$800 and don't forget to spend another \$30 on a good laptop carrying case with ample internal padding.

Hold off on the purchase of Microsoft Office and have your college student purchase that at their university book store for as little as \$15. That sure beats the \$350 you would have to fork over for Office Professional 2007 which contains Word, Excel, Outlook, Publisher, PowerPoint, Access and more.

I love working on new computers. There are no legacy problems, virus contamination issues, or spyware slowdowns. The Microsoft Windows operating system is at its purest state with a clean system registry installed on an un-fragmented hard drive. The computer will run the best when it is brand new.

That said, there are several critical things that need to be performed after

you open the box and power the new computer up for the first time. These proactive steps are important and will get the new PC off to a good start.

Plus they will reduce the need of someone like me having to work on it come Christmas break in a reactive mode.

First, give yourself plenty of time during the initial setup of the new computer. Do not start this late at night or just before you need to get some real work done on it.

Be patient to carefully open all the accessory packages and organize the software CDROMs by putting them into a large zip-lock baggie with the name and date purchased written on it with a Sharpie.

Next, plug in the laptop's AC power supply and begin charging the battery while you proceed to let it boot up for the first time. Again, take your time. Some laptops like Acer may have numerous initial boot phases in which it post-configures several layered products and vendor specific drivers.

This could take a while so just sit and watch it until there is no more activity on the screen or the hard drive light.

After all the initial boot configuration steps are completed it will be time for you to clean up some trial-ware junk and get the new laptop ready for prime time! Almost every new laptop will come with a trial version of anti-virus and/or antispyware software pre-installed on it.

The vast majority of the time it will be either Norton or McAfee Internet Security Suites that have a whole range of protections built into a huge bundle.

These pre-installed security packages will include antivirus, antispyware, antispyware, antispyware, antispyware, firewall and phishing protection. Norton and McAfee are generous enough to give you a whole 30 days to use and evaluate their security packages for free, and then they will expire. That's when you find out you have to renew those services for around \$40 to \$50 a year.

The first thing I do with every new laptop I purchase for myself or my clients is uninstall the preinstalled security software. After all that the cumbersome software is removed and if this is for a student or home client, I go to the website Free.Grisoft.com to download the free version 8.0 of AVG Antivirus. The new AVG takes care of both virus and spyware protection and does it much more efficiently and cost effectively (free) than those huge pre-installed packages that come with new laptops.

The next thing to do is go the Internet Explorer, click on Tools—Update Windows, and take every critical Windows update it suggests. There could be dozens of updates to download and install but take the time to do it before you go any further.

Repeat this update process and reboot until there are no remaining Win-

dows updates to perform. This way you know your brand new laptop will then have all the protections to deal with the rough and tumble digital world.

Finally, since your student's school work on that laptop will have significant value that YOU have paid for, I highly recommend purchasing the on-line data backup service from Mozy.com for \$4.95 a month.

This is a very small charge to put on your Visa that will provide unlimited online automatic backups of the data on that new laptop. Trust me, this might save you from having your crying daughter calling later this fall about all her semester's worth of work getting lost due to a stolen laptop.

Bottom line: Get off on the right foot with a new laptop by purchasing smart, setting it up properly and securing the data for those head strong college kids that think they know it all.

One Last Thing: For you Brenham residents, you can dump off your old junk computers and monitors next Saturday, between 8 a.m. and noon at the Brenham Firemen's Training Center. As for us non-city residents that live out in the county, we'll just continue to use ours for target shooting.

Next week's column: Crime Stoppers goes high tech.

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