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Office 2007 and Vista

The newest, latest, greatest operating system software was released to consumers by Microsoft in March. Long anticipated Vista is Microsoft's latest attempt to out-cool Apple. Office 2007 is their attempt to continue the cycle of upgrades to the newest, most feature rich software available.

In case you haven't heard techies talk about Vista, the word is DON'T DO IT! Vista is bug ridden, slow, incompatible with a lot of hardware, and a lot of software simply will not run on it. It requires such a heavy duty computer to even work, that it is impractical for most users. There are a few cool features in it, but it will be many months before it is stable enough to consider moving to. When the 80-580 section of the maze is open--it may be time to check again.

Dell has symbolically abandoned Vista (for a while, they weren't offering any of their good computers with XP, but that has changed), and Dell now has gone back to offering every computer available with XP pre-installed.

For Office 2007, it depends on why you want to upgrade. If it is cost vs. features, the answer is absolutely not--there are not a lot of new features in 2007. The main change is that Microsoft has removed the old menu system and replaced it with a new, more graphics-based one. It isn't terrible if you are not a "keyboard" type of person (the menus are not bad for mouse-type people). Also, although Outlook 2007 is quite improved from Outlook 2003, there can be severe problems with the new Outlook that can be extremely complex to fix. Really, it is just trading one set of older bugs for another newer set of bugs.

Dollar for dollar, Office 2007 is not worth upgrading to, but if you have a bit of stomach for fixable problems (mainly with Outlook) and you are more of a mouse person than a keyboard person, and you really want to be on the cutting edge, it is not a terrible application. It will be quite a while before Office 2007 gains traction (mainly because Vista is doing so poorly). We suspect that Service Pack 1 for Office 2007 will improve it quite substantially in a few months.

Tip: If you go to 2007, and want the 2003 menus back, you can download the old menu system for ~\$20. Give your Iteon engineer a call to give you directions or do it for you.

In short, Office 2007 and Vista both get the big thumbs down from Iteon.

WiFi Phones

Is this the next greatest thing that kills the whole cell and landline phone industries? Not quite yet.

There are two phones on the market right now, Belkin (~\$150) and NetGear (~\$275). They are both adequate as plain, ordinary phones. There are definitely a few limitations, though. First, you need to have Skype with Skype out minutes, Skype In, and voicemail. These will probably only run you \$50-\$100 a year. That is a lot cheaper than an SBC/AT&T home phone.

Configuration of the phones is difficult at best, the sound isn't great, and like a cell phone, it does require charging (and doesn't have a stand, which makes it easy to misplace). Also, there's no way to get contacts into the phone (remember--this is a 12-key phone--spelling out names takes forever). If you have kids, this really can't be a home-phone-replacement--it has no 911.

If you travel to places that use WEP (not WPA), this could save money on both US and Int'l roaming charges--but at a cafe, these phones are unlikely to work as most cafes use systems require a browser login, even when they are free.

This is definitely a cool niche product, but there is still utility for a small group of people until added functionality (WPA, a mini-browser, contacts download, better sound quality, and a stand for home) are built into the phones.

Buying a Point-And-Shoot Camera

There are a few basic things you want to look for when buying a pocket camera. First, obviously is megapixels. More megapixels mean that you can zoom in from farther (digital zoom), and enlarge more. 5-megapixels is enough for 3x digital zoom and making 8½ x 11prints. Current models go up to 10 megapixels.

The second factor to consider is speed. Slow time to shoot, a long time to turn on, or a near-second lags between pictures (vs. 5 frames/second) are things to avoid.

Package will be the third thing to consider. Size, weight, style, interface, brand, screen, batteries, and lens are all important. While these might not seem like technical considerations to consider when buying, remember that the more likely that that camera is in your pocket, the more great shots you'll get. Also, large screens are really nice for framing shots and immediate viewing (the "me-me-see" with kids), but larger screens also use batteries faster. Lithium ion rechargeable batteries are lighter and tend to last longer between charges than 2 double-A batteries, but require that you carry a charger on vacation. Precise lenses (Carl Zeiss) with good optical zoom (3x or 4x) also make better pictures.

Finally, and perhaps most important to price and quality is sensor area. It is quite simple--if you have a 10 megapixel camera with a sensor that is a small, it will have poorer resolution than 5 megapixels spread over a larger sensor. This is because the larger sensor area allows the receptors to not be so closely bunched together (which means more noise and hence less attractive shots). One of the problems with sensor area is that it is often not quantified in point-and-shoot cameras. Always check reviews for picture quality.

So, there are a lot of features to consider (almost too many). At the same time, there are also a lot of good small cameras on the market right now.

New Faster Processors

In late 2006, Intel introduced a line of processors that went up to ~3.8GHz and had two processors per chip. About 4 months later, they introduced another line that only goes up to 2.8GHz, also with two processors. It took us quite an effort to figure out why a slower chip is faster. Here's how:

First, the new Core Duo chips run cooler and on much less energy. This is great for laptops and datacenter servers, where power consumption is as important as speed. Second, the Core Duo chips have a bigger cache for each processor. This small feature has a big impact on overall performance. Third, the Core Duo also just works better than the old P4 architecture did (which is what the 3.8GHz chips use).

So, what does this mean to a real server, desktop, or laptop? On a server (which can use both processors), the Core Duo will be faster, cooler, and more energy efficient than anything before it. In a desktop, unless you are running an application that can take advantage of the second processor, the fastest Core Duo chips will be just a little faster than the old chips. In laptops, the speed will not be much different, but battery life will be greatly improved, and will run cooler.

Prices on Core Duo chips have fallen. All newer computers are coming with Core Duo chips (beware of anything that doesn't), with quad and 8-way cores (and Xeon dual chip motherboards) now shipping for servers.

Video Cameras

The holy grail of video cameras would be something as small as a point-and-click camera, with a powerful zoom, hi-def, shake stabilization, all the current features available today, and 80GB of internal memory (enough for 30 minutes of HD recording). This doesn't exist yet in a small form factor yet, but the technology is getting very close.

It won't be very long before a smart video camera maker develops a camera that puts 20 little 4GB flash chips right in the camera, which would reduce the size dramatically (no tape, HD, or mini-DVD). Hi-def and shake stabilization now fit on tiny chipsets that could easily be incorporated into a camera the size of a Kit-Kat. We may see a model

that does most of the above by Christmas of this year in the \$1200-\$1500 price range. Over the course of next year (as the prices of flash memory drops), we'll likely see drops in price--probably below \$800 for the 2008 holidays.

Flash Memory, What is Best?

Sony makes the various types of Memory Sticks. USB keys, SD, Mini-SD, Micro-SD, and CompactFlash are the other types out there. The reality is that the multiplier moniker on each (e.g. 120x) will have a much greater impact than the brand of storage you choose. If you are looking for the fastest of the fastest, 40MBytes per second and 300x are the fastest right now, although 120x will be plenty fast for most devices. Beware, though, the speed standards aren't the same across types of storage or even brands.

Do make sure you get a camera or device that is up-to-date. Not doing so can mean not being able to use the bigger and faster types of memory. Current for each type now is:

- Sony Memory Pro-HG
- Compact Flash Type II
- SDHC (SD High Capacity)

All devices should be able to handle 2GB with no problems, but check for 8GB and up capability if you are spending a lot. 2GB is a bargain right now, and don't buy anything less than 1GB.

Prices

Plasma TV. Prices have fallen drastically in recent weeks with the introduction of new 1080p TVs. For anyone except a hardcore videophile, 720p is great, and is now a great value). 50" Plasma's are now cheaper than good 37" tube TVs. Now is the time for the rest of us to buy.

PCs. Because of a combination of Vista tanking the whole PC market and a little time since the introduction of the new Core Duo chips from Intel, prices on PCs are now very wobbly. This means that a little homework can pay huge dividends when buying PCs. Expect this instability to last until July. Now would be a great time to replace old PCs or buy a home PC (for yourself or your kids), and there are also quite a few deals on lower-end laptops. Higher-end laptops are flat price-wise. Dell has been particularly hard-hit by Vista--that is a good place to start looking for bargains.

Servers and Laptops. While the prices are only down a little, the power that you get is incredible. Hard drive prices have dropped in recent months (including modest drops in enterprise quality SCSI 10k and 15k drives). Coupled with drops in Intel Xeon processors, now is a good time to buy servers. Expect prices to start rising around 4th of July, as new technology begins to drive prices up again.

Iteon News

Things are good at Iteon, and business continues to grow. As always, thank you for your business and referrals!