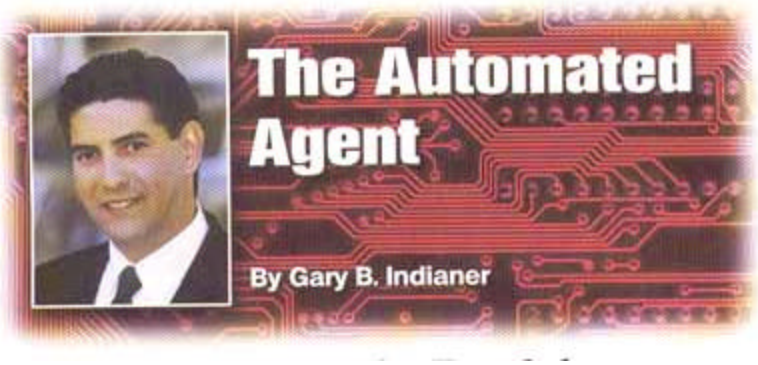

Laptops 101

AFTER HAVING discussed desktop computers in last month's article, taking a look at laptop computers this month was a logical choice. Much as I discussed in that article, there are items for which to look and items to avoid when purchasing a laptop. With prices ranging from just under $1,000 to well over $3,000, picking the right model can be a confusing, frustrating experience. While shopping for a laptop, keep in mind that as with its cousin the desktop computer, there are different grades and models from which to choose. Because of their compact design, laptops should be considered a family in their own right. What might apply to a desktop computer will not necessarily apply to a laptop. With that said, let's take a peek into the world of portable computing.

TFT does not mean tit-for-tat

An important item to consider in a laptop computer is the screen. Since the producer will be viewing and sharing the information displayed on it with others, the quality of the screen is of utmost importance. The terms to avoid here are "dual scan," "HPA," "high performance addressing:' "color bright:' "DSTN," or other similar wording. These terms refer to screens that use old technology and usually are found in laptops priced under $1,500. Video performance on these units is horrible at best. Don't worry about memorizing those terms, though. The only term the producer will want to memorize is "TFF" (thin-film-transistor), also known as an "active matrix" screen. This is the screen of choice for anyone seriously considering a laptop. Simply put, these screens are brighter and have much better video response and crispness to them. Screen sizes range from 12.1" to 15". The agent carefully should consider the screen size versus the additional weight factors involved. An eight-pound laptop can feel surprisingly heavy while it is carried through the airport.

A good test to determine the quality of a laptop's display is to move the cursor briskly across the screen. On poorer quality units the cursor will disappear or “ghost.”' The faster the user can move the mouse cursor and still see it, the better the screen's quality.

Warrantyville, USA

I have checked, and there is no town named Warrantyville in the United States. That does not mean, however, it shouldn't be at the top of the producer's list in the pursuit of a laptop. Just by its design, a laptop is more prone to damage than its desktop relative. It is after all portable and the producer at some point unintentionally will bang, drop, or abuse it in some fashion or another. Combine that with the fact that every component inside is

proprietary to that model, and it is a recipe for expensive repairs.

A good warranty should be the next item for which to look. Better models will have three-year warranties; some even will include 24-hour replacement service. The producer should look for this. There is nothing more frustrating than having the laptop sit in the warranty repair department for three months. Lower end models usually have a one year mail-in warranty, which can be upgraded to three years for a fee. The laptop purchaser should take this upgrade. He or she should avoid any model where a warranty upgrade is not available and by all means should avoid buying an extended warranty from anyone but the manufacturer. Second-tier warranty companies do not have easy access to the proprietary parts used in laptops, no matter what the salesman says.

Charge the battery

Ideally, the agent should settle for nothing less than a "lithium ion" (Li-Ion) battery. Li-Ion batteries are the best available and should last up to three years or more in service. Anything less and the agent should expect to shell out at least $100 for a replacement nickel metal hydride battery (NimH) within 18 months. Battery warranties are all limited to a year or less no matter which model the producer chooses. Therefore, it is prudent to follow the charging directions included with the laptop. Improperly charging the battery, especially the first few times it is used, greatly will reduce the battery's life span.

Brand names

It may be easy for a producer to be lured into purchasing a laptop with a brand name he does not recognize. Price and features can make a unit attractive to the uneducated computer shopper. The producer should do himself a favor and stick with names he knows. Dell, Compaq, and my own favorite, IBM, all make good laptops. By sticking to brand names, the producer will avoid such problems as obtaining parts or service, or getting that annoying "I'm sorry, the number you dialed is no longer in service" message.

Integrated components

When faced with the challenges of designing faster, lighter laptops, manufacturers do not have the luxury of offering consumers a wide variety of options. Outside of offering different hard drive sizes, memory upgrades, CD/DVD-ROM improvements, and a few other components, there is not much room for extras. This makes choosing a good model at the outset important. In the world of portable computers, you get what you get because that's the way that model was designed. On a laptop, the producer should look for built-in components such as a modem and LAN card. He should avoid the cards that slide into the little PCMCIA slots. Look for real, true RJ-11 and RJ-45 connections. I say this because the dongles to which the user connects those cards always break at the most inopportune times. If worse comes to worst, and purchasing a PCMCIA card is unavoidable, the laptop purchaser should order a spare dongle as well. He will thank me later.

Cleared for landing

Docking accessories should be considered if the producer plans to use the laptop in the office as well as on the road. These greatly will ease plugging and unplugging such peripherals as an external keyboard, mouse, monitor, and printer. An additional purchase for which to plan is a high-quality briefcase or laptop case, preferably with good padding to protect the computer investment. The better cases have lots of pockets and storage compartments for papers, folders, and supplies but still are fairly light.

Performance

The least important considerations when purchasing a portable computer are the system specs. There are tradeoffs in selecting a laptop over a traditional computer. When put head to head, the laptop computer always will lose out to a desktop computer with equal specifications. The main reason for this is that, because of size, weight, power consumption, and heat constraints, high performance components usually are not used in laptops. Performance is secondary. The agent also will find that laptops usually run nine to 12 months behind their desktop relatives in technology and processing power. As an example, at the writing of this article, the top end in the desktop arena is 1.5ghz, whereas the top end laptops are at 850mhz.

Where to buy

The best place to purchase a laptop is online, either directly from the manufacturer or from a reputable reseller such as www.cdw.com or www.pcconnection.com. Price and selection usually are much better than at a local office supply or electronics store. The purchaser should consider a good balance between such important features as the screen, warranty, and battery versus performance. Selecting the correct laptop computer from the outset will make for a more enjoyable and productive experience.