

Buy By Brand, or Bye - Bye Brand?

I'm occasionally asked if we sell computers. (We don't.) "Well, what brand do you recommend?" This is more complicated than it might appear. After all, in most industries brands stand for quality, price or features. Don't the same rules apply with PCs?

Most PC manufacturers are assemblers, buying parts from a dozen board makers, four or five hard drive makers, three or four makers of video adapters: you get the idea. Since manufacturers use the same suppliers, what distinguishes one machine from another are features, support and price. Are there quality differences and does quality even matter? (This applies to desktops; servers and laptops are different.)

Another question I hear is, "should we buy from the local company that supports us?" There is a significant advantage to that - when there's a problem one call does it all. There are some disadvantages: you may not be able to get warranty support if the servicer goes out of business or leaves the area. Further, you have no idea if the local company uses quality parts in its desktops. Most "white box" PCs, as they're called, are built by a system manufacturer to specifications and labeled for the reseller. Since resellers don't want warranty hassles, they're motivated towards quality at least equal to major manufacturers. Don't expect lower prices from a local supplier, though; the major players enjoy huge economies of scale.

It makes sense that machines built with quality parts would give less trouble and last longer, and there's anecdotal evidence to support that. The question is whether the extra cost is justified over the life of the machine in your environment. If you decide that it is, can you even find higher quality equipment? Yes. There are niche markets where top-notch performance and quality matter, and specialty manufacturers have arisen to fill them. For example, a client recently acquired a machine from Alienware, as recommended by her software vendor. She probably doesn't know that Alienware started out building machines for PC gamers, who need extremely high performance and stability. They charge premium prices and provide expert technical support. Scratch the cool paint job and high-end video adapter and you have a machine well suited to a business environment.

So, should you buy by brand, or say, "bye-bye brand"? As I say so often, analyze your needs and then buy by features, support and price.

This column by Denis Williamson of MacLamor Computer Consulting aims to help readers maximize the value of information technology. You can reach Denis at 845-357-1877 or denis@maclamor.com. Past columns are available at www.maclamor.com.