

The Academy of Plumbing 24

When to buy a new Mac

Many people ask me which Mac to buy, and when. I'm often asked whether I know when new Mac models will be released, and what they will consist of. Apple is a famously secretive company. Few outsiders know Apple's product development plans with any accuracy and Apple knows exactly who they are; they've all signed pretty draconian Non-Disclosure Agreements and Apple is also famously litigious. So, no-one is in a position to make accurate public predictions until just a few days before a new model is publicly announced, and by then, so what? This leaves us on our own when it comes to purchasing decisions

TO BUY OR NOT TO BUY: THAT IS THE QUESTION

It's probably best to separate this problem into two parts:

- 1) I'd like to buy a new Mac
- 2) I need to buy a new Mac.

Part One. You've decided to get a new Mac. But when? There's always something better, faster and shinier coming along for the same money. There are also cash flow, tax and financial-year-end considerations. Let's be observant. Corporations are creatures of habit. Their actions are constrained among other things by their competitors' actions, customer buying seasons, price points, consumer fatigue with the existing product line, and production capacity. We can thereby make pretty shrewd predictions of their future actions by looking at their recent history.

- Most Apple products are on a six to nine month refresh cycle

- As a result of market feedback and the uncovering of bugs and design errors, a model's hardware specification tends to get revised during its production life.

A new Mac model is released. Initial examples find their way into customers' hands. Some of those customers trumpet about problems and design faults. After a while, a pattern emerges: either these faults are isolated occurrences, or something deeper is going on. Apple rapidly analyses problem reports and quietly revises the hardware design or specification, leading to "Rev. B" and "Rev. C" products. This process is surprisingly quick; one can reckon that it's been completed after the model has been on sale for six to eight weeks. At that point, that Mac has four to seven months of basically-unaltered production ahead of it before being superseded.

So, the sweet point at which to purchase a new Mac is around two months after that model's initial release. Of course, a lot depends on how drastic the change has been in the hardware design and specification of a new model compared to its immediate predecessor. A simple processor speed-bump requires relatively few design changes, whereas the incorporation of a new type of processor, screen, motherboard, memory or case design can have a more profound impact on a design's performance, reliability, and suitability for purpose. So, be sensible and do your research.

Answering Part Two is easy. You need to buy a new Mac if:

- a) your current Mac is broken and

- b) you have so overloaded your current Mac with new software and increased processing demands that it is running so slowly it's actually costing you money in lost time spent waiting for it to think;
- c) your Mac is more than three years old.

Only you can honestly answer point b) for yourself. However, I'd suggest that anyone still using a G4-based machine to deal with images made on cameras released within the last two years should take a serious look at their current productivity levels.

Point c) is interesting. Only three years? Yes, and here's why: it's only possible to buy extended warranties for Macs for a maximum of three years. Modern corporations have their spreadsheet usage down to a fine art. They know, because Excel has told them, that at the premium levels the market can stand for extended warranties and based upon typical failure rates, they will make a profit on said three-year warranties; whereas they'll make a loss beyond that point. Ergo, the design life of a Macintosh computer is three years.

Actually, this is not as bad as it sounds. Consider the performance of a current MacBook Pro compared to a three-year-old PowerBook, which now has marginal performance as far as we're concerned. Another view is that beyond the three-year point you're getting unintended free usage out of your computer. If you've managed to make it last for six years, you've also avoided having to pay

The Digital Plumber

By Paul Ellis

for several intervening generations of hardware. And, if you have the time to wait around while your elderly computer thinks, you'll still get identical quality image files from it compared to current models. The same simply isn't true of digital cameras.

NOW THEN, WHICH MAC SHOULD I BUY?

That depends upon what you shoot, and how. If you're studio-based, shooting tethered, get a Mac Pro or (with qualifications) an iMac. If you shoot mostly on location, get a fast laptop or again, perhaps, an iMac. If you shoot on location with a DSLR that has 16 megapixels or less, do you really need a desktop Mac as well as your laptop? An external monitor and a couple of fast external disks for your MacBook Pro might be a better buy. Here are a few rules of thumb:

- Desktop or laptop, I've never regretted buying the fastest computer that I could afford. I've found that it stays useful for longer.
- On the other hand, the very fastest models usually only provide a modest performance gain over the next one down, for a substantial price premium. Therefore, the best cost-performance is often to be found in the second-to-top model.
- A desktop Mac, whether Mac Pro or iMac, is always faster than a laptop. You pay in money and performance for portability and miniaturization. This is most apparent in the MacBook Air, which costs as much as a MacBook Pro but is the most modest performer of all of Apple's current laptops.
- The iMac is not to be overlooked; or

rather, it wasn't. It's fast, capable, and relatively portable. Unfortunately, Apple spotted this and appears to have decided that it was eating into low-end Mac Pro sales. What else could explain the decision not only to move the current Aluminium iMac generation to glossy screens, but also to equip it with screens having such a narrow viewing angle that with a grey Desktop background, the screen sports a grad that looks at least a stop darker at the top than the bottom? This is in direct contrast with the previous White iMac, which had a pretty decent screen, all things considered. What was I saying about the sophisticated use of spreadsheets?

A last comment. Remember that desktop Macs are not designed to be moved around much. Don't expect them to stand up to a pounding. Unlike the PC market, which is so diverse that it is possible to buy toughened "military grade" PC hardware, Macs come from a single source. You can't get a "toughened" Mac, at least not easily or cheaply.

CONQUERING TIME MACHINE BLOAT

An addendum to February's column. Time Machine backs up everything it's told to, hourly. If you're in the habit of shooting to a laptop's hard disk, or

dumping the day's shoot directly onto your Mac Pro's Desktop, Time Machine will go right ahead and back that up. You'll quickly find your Time Machine volume bloating alarmingly, stuffed to the gunnels with rejects and shoots that have subsequently been moved to your usual image storage. Here's the cure: make a folder on your Desktop called Shoots, Current Shoots, Today's Work, Not Sorted Yet: you get the drift. Then, open Time Machine's Preference Pane, click on the Options button, click the Plus button and add that folder to the Do Not back Up list. Time Machine will then ignore that folder and its contents. Always dump temporary and unsorted work into that folder and it won't get backed up to unnecessarily bloat your Time Machine volume.



CLEAN AS AN NHS HOSPITAL

Yes, the discussion of anti-virus measures has been postponed to next month, much like the war on MRSA. I'll also look at speeding up your location laptop. Oh, and by the way, this column is two years old this month. I can feel a tantrum coming on...

Those of you still hungry for information can keep up by periodically checking my blog at www.thedigitalplumber.co.uk where you'll also find my contact details.

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