Buying a New Computer
by Roger Bergstein
Stuart Computer Service
October 31, 2012

Be wary when looking at the ads and/or buying a computer at a big box store, the salesman will tell you whatever you want to hear to make the sale. The salesman will then continue with the upsell, telling you how much you need an antivirus and the latest version, MS Office, etc. As far as antivirus goes, there are several high quality free products available for download. And your older version of MS Office will run fine on your new computer.

So what should you be looking for when buying a new computer?

First, determine what type of unit you want a laptop, tower, or all-in-one.

Laptops have the advantage of portability; conversely the parts are specialized, the repairs are more frequent and more expensive. When shopping for a laptop, first decide on the screen size you want, and whether you want an integrated numeric keypad . But the larger screen and/or keypad will compromise weight and portability, so make sure the unit is the size and weight you are comfortable with. Then make sure you have a nice fast CPU. They all have enough memory and disk to do the job.

All in ones have the aesthetic advantage of no wires and no chassis. Conversely, since the parts are hidden behind the screen, the parts are smaller than those in a tower, so like a laptop, these units are more expensive to repair. They offer touch screens for those that want to move their arms off the desk up to the screen often, and then clean off the fingerprints (can you guess that I am not a fan of touch screens?)

Traditional towers are the most economical and the easiest to repair if something goes wrong. Parts are standardized and easy to obtain.

For all laptops, all in ones, and towers, the CPU (central processing unit) is the heart of the computer. CPU speed is like automotive horsepower, but without the penalty of poor gas mileage. CPUs are described by manufacturer and model. Manufacturers are either Intel or AMD. Current Intel models are i3, i5, i7, and the older but updated Pentium; AMD models are A4, A6, A8, C,E, and FX. Further, there is a descriptive number following the model, for example Intel Core i3 2330 or AMD A6 3600. In order to determine the horsepower of the CPU, you need to know the manufacturer, model, and descriptive number. You can then look it up at cpubenchmark.net. Example: a big box store recently advertised a laptop with an AMD E450 CPU; this CPU is slower than all but one of the used laptops I have for sale

Memory is important, especially with programs like Outlook or Quickbooks; most of the units marketed today have at least 4GB, which should be fine.

Similarly, most of the units marketed today have hard disks which are so big you couldn't possibly fill them up.

Windows 8 was released last Friday. Traditional Windows users may find the Windows 8 user interface to be confusing. Some Windows 7 computers are still available either locally or over the internet.

By now you have seen the Windows 8 ads all over TV. You have probably seen ads for tablets as well. Use caution when buying a Windows 8 tablet, the entry level version of Windows 8 is Metro only, no traditional desktop interface. This means that an entry level Windows 8 tablet will not run programs designed for the Windows desktop.