SOHO: small office/home office

Plan B or Plan U – Upgrade or Start Over?

by Jules Older

Usually, I go with Plan B – get rid of the thing that I once loved but now hate, and start fresh.

There comes a time. There comes a time in the lives of computer owners when they must face the vexing question, Whether 'tis nobler to suffer the kinks and narrows of the old computer or to bite the bullet and buy a new one.

Usually, I go with Plan B – get rid of the thing that I once loved but now hate, and start fresh. This time – well, for a start, how did I know that "this time" had come around again?

That sure and certain knowledge was triggered by the realization that the computers I bought five years ago were running out of memory. Both of them, the Mac G3 and G3 PowerBook, were working with near perfect reliability, though the PowerBook was noticeably on the s-l-o-w side. Every time I gave it a command, it seemed to ponder the decision at length.

Worse, all that memory I lavished on them back in the day turned out to be insufficient for *this* day. They were so close to full that when the message on the screen said, "Do you want to upgrade to the latest OS, QuickTime, iChat, whatever?" the next message inevitably sighed, "Insufficient memory."

So, time to chuck 'em and buy bigger, faster, brighter, newer. Or, maybe not. The G5 equivalent of my aging G3 costs $2,500. The G4 PowerBook goes for $2,000. Hmmm… $4,500 plus taxes, plus shipping, plus getting used to new machines. Let's look into Plan U – U for upgrade.

That's what I went for, and I decided to go at it full-bore. It started, of course, with added memory. I went for the maximum each machine would take, and I got the memory chips from Kensington, a long-established, widely respected name in the memory business. (In this entire major upgrade, I stuck with established brands. This wasn't the time to play with something new and untried.) Total cost: $300. www.kensington.com

Next, I added new and bigger hard drives. I went for internal hard drives, each many times bigger than the originals, in both computers, then added a wicked big *external* hard drive for backup. I ordered both the internal G3 drive and the external drive from Seagate, a leading manufacturer. www.seagate.com. The internal costs $70; the external goes for $250. For the laptop, I bought a Toshiba 30 GB hard drive for $280. www.toshiba.com

The operating systems I was running were somewhat dated, so I upgraded to Apple's latest at the time, Panther. Cost? $130.(Panther's since been eclipsed by Tiger.) www.apple.com

I wanted a DVD in my home computer and a Wi-Fi card in the laptop. The DVD is a fast 8x number from Plextor that reads and writes. Cost: $150. www.plextor.com

Why the Wi-Fi? Because nearly every hotel room I stayed in this year, including New Hampshire and Idaho, advertised free wireless Internet connection. I didn't mind falling behind, say, New York, but Idaho pushed me over the edge.

I got the fastest one I could find was made by Asante. It was on sale for a bargain $80. www.asante.com

I collected the gear, then prepared to install. Here, I faced a choice. Most of the upgrades could be installed by a reasonably intelligent home-user. But my

SOHO page 58

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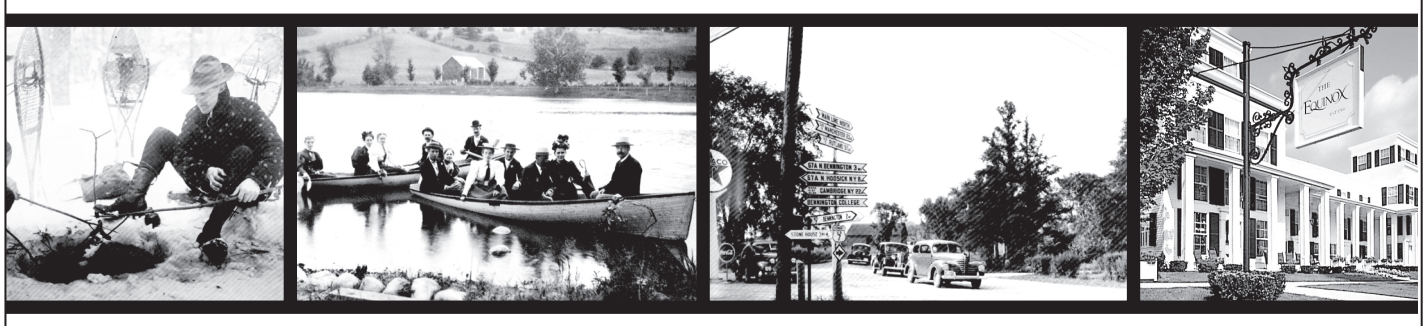

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Soho from 34

compu-IQ falls considerably short of reasonably intelligent. What's more, I break into a sweat whenever I see an open computer, its motherboards and umbilical cords exposed to daylight and prying eyes.

I felt dizzy at the thought.

So I decided to go with a pro, justifying my decision with a little math. I figured it would take me two weeks of misery to complete the upgrades. It would take a pro two hours.

I carefully packed the computers in the car and drove them to Ormsby's in Barre. 800 649-8977

Why Ormsby's? Because they'd recently hired John Lockwood as their new Apple guy, and John's been the only one allowed to perform surgery on my computers since he was too young to vote.

While John did the installation, I had lunch, got a haircut, did some banking and read a few chapters of *Lamb* in the Barre library. When I returned, the work was complete. The cost of professional installation? $255.

Total cost of upgrading two computers, including labor? $1,515. That's compared to more than $4,500 if I'd bought new.

I did install one thing myself. The Seagate external drive was plug-'n–play, so I plugged 'n ran into a problem. My computer didn't recognize its presence, and the thin instruction booklet offered no hints as to why.

I called Seagate's support line, which, miracle of miracles, answered on the second ring. In 15 minutes we (they) had the problem solved. But it was 15 minutes that shouldn't have been needed.

Once solved, the drive, which now serves as the best backup I've ever seen, worked smoothly and silently. What's more, I can back everything up amazingly swiftly with the push of a button. If I've been out of town, it even reminds me, "You haven't backed up your data in 10 days. Would you like to now?" Talk about improvement – I'm backing up my data twice a day, not once a week!

I ran into other minor glitches with the other items. A lot of my data had been somehow converted to "Read Only." The computer no longer recognized my password. Stuff like that. A call to John at Ormsby's swiftly cleared it all up.

And I feel like I have two new computers. The PowerBook gained an incredible amount of speed. The home computer no longer rejects upgrades. I can use Wi-Fi on the road. I can download upgrades and store digital pictures without running out of space. I can burn my own CDs and DVDs. And backing up data has never been so fast and easy.

Plus, Panther is Apple's best operating system yet. It's not only more stable than earlier versions, it comes with a bag of cool tricks. My faves? Hit F-9, and you see everything that's open on the desktop. Hit F-11 and everything on the desktop disappears. Hit it again, they all return.

Oh, and I enjoy the great satisfaction of having $2,985 in the bank.

Does your computer deserve a break today, or is it better consigned to the scrapheap of history? *Or*, – Plan C – should you simply keep working at your aging computer as it is?

I put these questions to Ed Ferris, Lab Manager at Microsoft, and the most compu-savvy guy I know.

Here's what Ed says: "If the machine does the job for you, there's no need to upgrade – just keep using it. If you need to upgrade or maybe buy new, that choice depends on what you're going to do with the machine. If you deal mostly in word processing and Internet roving, upgrading is fine. If you're working in PhotoShop or video editing – things that use a lot of horsepower – it's usually better to buy new."

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Talk about improvement – I'm backing up my data twice a day, not once a week!

Jules Older's newest adult book is BACKROAD & OFFROAD BIKING; his latest for kids is PIG.

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