10 Steps to a Reliable New Computer

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Was a new PC on your holiday wish list? If so, here are 10 steps that will help you keep it as fast, secure and reliable as when you first booted it up:

1 – Up stability by updating. Modern operating systems such as Windows XP and Mac OS X do not remain static between major releases. Instead, their developers continually add improvements in functionality and security as the need arises. To enjoy this free maintenance, all you need is an Internet connection and a little diligence.

Before you do anything on your new PC, download and install every update and security patch available. Under Windows, select Windows Update from the Start menu's All Programs grouping. Under Mac OS X, select Software Update from the Apple-icon menu. In both cases, you can set preferences to download updates automatically. Enable this!

2 – Don't be averse to version control. Unfortunately, the OS updater programs will not always include some vital Internet applications in their routines. You will therefore need to manually update some core Internet programs to avoid potential security flaws. For example, make sure you have the latest versions of Real Networks RealPlayer ([www.real.com)](www.real.com) and Sun Microsystems Java software (http://www.java.com/). Also make sure your major productivity applications, such as Microsoft office (office.microsoft.com), are fully up-to-date.

3 – **Fire up the firewall.** Firewalls allow you to determine which types of Internet connections will be allowed between your PC and the world outside. Without it, network-based viruses and worms (such as Blaster) will attempt to infect your computer when it goes online, even if you don't run an Internet program!

There are numerous firewall programs available on the market. Your new PC should have one already built in, assuming it is running under Windows XP with Microsoft's Service Pack 2 update. You'll know if there is a Security Center control panel applet in the Control Panels folder. Macs also have a built-in firewall, which is accessible through the System Preferences window under the Sharing category. Turn these firewalls on!

4 – Activate your anti-virus. Most new PCs include a pre-installed anti-virus program, such as MacAfee VirusScan (us.mcafee.com) or Norton AntiVirus

(www.symantecstore.com/). These will usually give you 90 days of continuous protection free, then stop updating their vital virus definition files. Don't let your coverage lapse! Note the renewal date and make sure to order the anti-virus update service before the program deactivates. It is worth the cost. If you have a Mac, subscribe to Apple's .Mac service, which gives you MacAfee VirusScan, Internet backup, and a slew of other benefits for about $100 a year.

5 – Move Your Stuff. Sometimes the joy of getting a new PC is eclipsed by the hassle of transferring the stuff from your old PC. Sure, it's easy to copy the My Documents folder, but what about your e-mail messages, address book, and all those important "hidden" files programs like to create?

If you have a Mac, I again recommend a subscription to .Mac. With it, you can backup your old Mac's files over the Internet, and then restore them to your new Mac.

Windows XP offers a new tool, the Files and Settings Transfer Wizard, which will move data files and settings between two computers. It runs on almost any version of Windows, which is great if you're upgrading from a Windows 95 or 98 dinosaur. For step-by-step instructions on how to get started with the wizard, see Sharon Crawford's Files and Settings Transfer Wizard column on the Microsoft Web site.

Neither .Mac nor the Files and Settings Transfer Wizard will transfer a program, which brings us to step 6.

6 – Don't be bold with the old. Ever seen the "blue screen of death?" Well, you're likely to if you start trying to install old programs and hardware drivers on your shiny new PC. There are big differences between Windows XP and, say, Windows 98 – so put those old installation disks aside. Instead, do a little browser work and check for the newest available versions and drivers for the programs and hardware you plan to migrate from your old PC. In some cases, you might even need to buy new hardware. Take heart. That refrigerator-sized printer you paid $3,000 for years ago probably has offspring that sells for $199, before the rebate!

If you have a Mac, you're better off, as Apple provides the "classic" environment to support older applications. Just make sure your old software is compatible with Mac OS 9.

7 – Backup or shut up. Before you do anything important on your new PC, establish a backup routine. Windows XP provides a free built-in backup application. Apple provides a Backup program through its .Mac subscription. The programs can automatically and systematically copy all of your vital data to

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removable media (zip disks, CD-ROM, etc.), external hard disks, or server volumes. If you do not use them, you deserve no sympathy when your hard drive crashes and burns like a fat joke at a Weight Watcher's convention. Set it up and run it now! Here are my instructions for using Microsoft Backup (http://www.ntb-group.com/backup.html). Apple has fine instructions online at the .Mac Website.

8 – Spy vs. spyware. One of the easiest ways to turn your new PC Porsche into an Edsel is to allow it to accumulate a bunch of spyware. Spyware are those tricky little programs some Web sites install in your browser cache to track your surfing and buying habits. (If they actually worked, I assume I would stop getting spam e-mail featuring "breast enlargement.") Besides the invasion of privacy issue, there is a performance penalty to be paid for hosting these browser stowaways. There are many programs that will help you rid yourself of them. You can get the freeware program SpyBot from numerous download sites. For a more powerful and full-featured application, try Spyware Nuker.

9 – Cower from power. We live in Florida. There are lightning strikes here. Lots of them. Unless you want to see your PC turned into a smoldering pile of melted silicon, make sure it is connected to your home's power outlets through a surge protector. Not the dollar store special, mind you, but a true IEEE let-through rated and UL 1449-compliant arrestor. IEEE tests simulate a surge of 6.000 volts, such as from a direct hit by lightning. The *let-through rating* indicates the maximum voltage that will reach your equipment when suppressed by a surge strip; the lower the rating the better. UL's best available rating against devastating surges and spikes is 330V of let through. My favorite surge protector, from American Power Conversion, has a 40V let through rating.

10 – Know thy animal. Finally, you must know the new beast with which you're working. This will ensure that when you see that irresistible software and hardware out there at unbeatable prices, you'll be able to actually use it when you get home. For example, there are few new PCs out there without the raw power needed to run top-of-the-line games like Halo, Half-Life, and Sims 2, but not so many that have the necessary video card. At the very least, make note of your PC's RAM allocation (MB), hard drive size (GB), processor speed (Ghz), video card model (e.g. Nvidia, ATI, etc.), card bus (PCI), and port configuration (LPT, USB, Firewire, etc.) Write it down on a piece of paper and stash it in your wallet.

Follow these steps, and you can look forward to enjoying your new computer's speed and reliability for years to come.