The Federal Lawyer In Cyberia

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Up and Running on the Cheap

You have decided to set up a small practice on the side, or you've decided to convert a nook into a home office at your own expense. Where do you turn for hardware and software on a barebones budget? Your alternatives may be better than you thought.

Hardware on the Cheap

I have always been partial to the refurbished products available through the Dell Computers™ Web site. I suppose that is because I have scored bargains from that site in the past and because I have had success in pursuing at least one hair-raising warranty claim when a refurbished laptop computer's screen mysteriously fractured.

Dell calls its online offerings the Dell Outlet,™ which can be found at www.dell.com/outlet. The products available include not only computers but also printers and items from the entire Dell catalog. Some items on the list have been returned from other customers unopened; others were sent back because of minor flaws discovered upon receipt. Dell Outlet will tell you which items fall into each category.

If you are serious, and if you have enough lead time, you can sign up for two interesting Dell Outlet services. First, you can subscribe to an e-mail system that automatically notifies you of special offers. Second, you can join Dell Outlet's "twitter." (A twitter is a coined term for a process that for a while was largely confined to "social networking" on computers and cell phones.)

A company that has capitalized—quite literally—on the process and on the potency of the sharing impulse is Twitter™, based in San Francisco. (If you want more information on twittering, go to the Twitter Web site, at www.twitter.com.) Basically, Twitter's technology lets individuals and companies broadcast short text messages and images to the phones and computers of those who give them permission to do so. In the case of Dell's twitter, potential customers can view changes to the inventory in the Dell Outlet in real time on their cell phones or computers, making it easier for them to pounce on bargains that precisely meet their particular needs. One of the best things about Dell Outlet is that all items sold there come with original factory warranties.

There are, of course, many alternatives to the Dell Outlet. One is a nifty online source called Insight™ (www.insight.com). The site says they "want to sell you the products you need at the price you want." The folks at Insight allow users to create their own "Price Watch Alerts" that trigger e-mails when an item the user is considering drops to a price the user is willing to pay. Only certain items are available through Insight's site. However, Insight makes it easy to find the products you are looking for. You can browse by product category with the menu bar on the left side of the page. If you already know the name or part number of a product, you can use their use their "Speed Search" option. However, if you are window shopping or are just not quite sure of what you're looking for, you can use their "Advanced Search" option to narrow down your choices. Once you've found an item you want, click the "Price Watch" icon next to the item's description. The next page will prompt you to insert your "Price Watch" title, price, and quantity. Then, just click the "Submit Your Price Watch" icon. An e-mail notification will be sent out to you by the folks at Insight as soon as the item reaches your desired price.

If you want to do your own looking, try a bargain comparison site, like www.BizRate.com™, www.DealTime.com™, www.MySimon.com™, www.NexTag.com™, or www.PriceGrabber.com™. Web sites like Yahoo™ and America Online™ have similar technology in their own internal shopping areas.

Comparison sites can be a convenience. (The system sure beats driving from store to store!) With just a few clicks, you can search dozens of online sources in order to find the lowest price for a particular item. But, consider the source. Many such sites have significant shortcomings. Some of the less reliable comparison shopping sites don't disclose vital information that could sway your purchase decision—including such questions as: What is the return policy? Is shipping included? Will you be charged sales tax? How will the goods be shipped? Also, some sites neglect to say exactly how many online merchants they have searched for your target item, leaving you with no way to ensure that the prices quoted on their site are truly the lowest in Cyberia.

Many comparison shopping sites do not automatically list the lowest prices at the top of the results page, though if they don't, you can usually adjust to see the displayed merchants in the order of price. However, you should also realize that, particularly in Cyberia, low price is not the be-all and end-all.
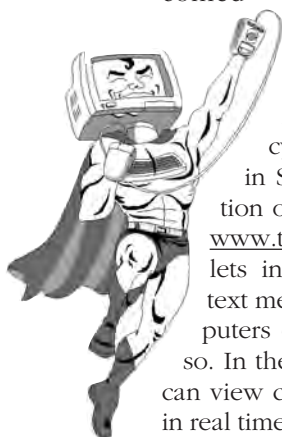
Integrity and customer service should be considered as well. Comparison sites generally offer help in this department. They have asked prior users to provide feedback on their shopping experiences—good or bad. On some Web sites, the reviews are suspect: A merchant can be labeled a problem on one site and be given good marks on another. The best advice is to compare the results you achieve in searching on two or three comparison sites. In other words, compare the comparers.

Yet another approach is to head straight to eBay™ (www.ebay.com), which has gazillions of computer-related hardware choices available. Many of them are used items or items for which no warranty is available; however, so let the buyer beware.

If you've been disappointed on eBay by being outbid by others, look for sites (including eBay itself) that run so-called Dutch auctions, in which the seller is offering multiple identical items for sale. Unlike regular eBay auctions, Dutch auctions can have many winners. When you bid for an item on Dutch auctions, you specify both the number of items in which you're interested and the price you're willing to pay for each item. Winning bidders pay a price equal to the lowest winning bid. Winning bids are selected chronologically in order of bid price per item. (For example, a bid for five printers at $180 per unit is ranked above a bid for 10 printers at $170 each.) If two bids have the same price per item, the earlier bid is given priority. If the sale closes and your bid price is successful, but the quantity available at that point is less than you had indicated in your bid, you are free to decline to complete the purchase altogether. Thus, online Dutch Auctions can allow you to furnish an office on the cheap—even when you're seeking to buy quantities of particular items.

Software on the Cheap

There are bargains to be had in the way of software too, and the sources are myriad. For example, one can buy Microsoft™ word-processing software in Cyberia. Often the price will be a bit below what one would pay when buying the same product in a so-called brick and mortar establishment. WordPerfect™ represents a cheaper alternative that merits consideration, especially in light of the fact that files can be saved in WordPerfect format or in Microsoft Word™ format. Thus, for example, clients receiving files from you as attachments to e-mails would not know that you had produced them on a product other than Word.

However, too few buyers consider the idea of rejecting the dominant brands and going with other products, paying nothing and instead downloading what is called "freeware." The August 2007 issue of *Computer Shopper*™ magazine, available on many news racks and online at www.computershopper.com, included an article that made side-by-side comparisons of leading retail brands and freeware brands in several different operational areas. The authors, Matthew Murray and Les Shu, concluded that, for many purposes, a Microsoft look-alike known as Open Office™ was every bit as good as Microsoft Office™ itself. (Open Office can be downloaded free of charge from www.openoffice.org.) Murray and Shu also felt that a product called Gimp™ (short for GNU Image Manipulation Program), originally created as a class project at the University of California at Berkeley, had a lot to recommend it over Adobe's™ pricy graphics and photo editing software, Photoshop,™ especially given the incredible cost differential. (Gimp can be downloaded free of charge from www.gimp.org.)

For other interesting examples of freeware that might be of interest in a law office environment or elsewhere, visit www.freeware-guide.com, www.tucows.com (a personal favorite that includes freeware, shareware, and fee-based software, rating all on a one to five cow scale), and a somewhat selective site at www.techsupportalert.com/best_46_free_utilities.htm.

Conclusion

Wise Cyberians can open that home office or that entry-level legal office on the cheap with a minimal investment to meet technological needs. Indeed, your alternatives are better than you thought. Be warned, however, that the software that is downloaded rarely offers training and sometimes comes without a manual. In addition, hardware purchased from noninstitutional sources may come with no warranty. See you next month in Cyberia. **TFL**

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