

Netbooks

An Underappreciated Business Tool

Although they've been slow to gain acceptance among business users, netbooks are winning over the hearts and pocketbooks of the general public. In fact, on July 3, 2009, seven of the top ten selling computers on Amazon were netbooks. That's pretty incredible when you consider the fact that netbooks comprised less than 1% of total computer sales about two years ago.

What is it about these small, modestly powered computers that make them so popular with consumers? The short answer is price and portability.

For those of you unfamiliar with the term, Wikipedia defines a netbook as: "a laptop computer designed for wireless communication and access to the Internet." Initially, netbooks were designed primarily for web browsing and email. With the increased popularity of "cloud computing", netbooks are now also being used to access web based applications. The reason that netbooks are appropriate for cloud computing is that generally speaking, web based applications typically make fewer demands on the netbook's internal components; most of the heavy duty computing is done by the remote server.

Many observers trace the beginning of netbook acceptance in the US to the release of the first ASUS Eee PC in 2007. This early netbook had a 7 inch screen, a small keyboard and it ran on the Linux operating system. All of this was done to keep the price as low as possible. Since that time, manufacturers have experimented with various configurations. In the US today, the best selling models appear to be at the larger, pricier end of the spectrum, with nine or ten inch screens and more spacious keyboards. Currently, the newer models tend to favor the Windows XP operating system, but it is expected that manufacturers will shift to a version of Windows 7 when it is released. It is also expected that the first netbooks powered by Google's Android O/S will ship before the end of 2009.

You can sometimes snag a netbook for as little as \$199, but if you want a new model with a ten inch screen, a good keyboard, and some version of the Windows operating system, expect to pay between \$325 and \$425; that's cheaper than the typical entry level mainstream laptop price, but not by much. A typical mainstream laptop, however, usually weighs between 5.5 and seven pounds. When you add in the power cord and accessories, it is easy to exceed ten pounds of travel weight. Netbooks on the other hand, often weigh less than three pounds. With power cord you are still in the four pound range, and their smaller size makes them easy to transport. Due to their minimal size and weight, users are apparently willing to take their netbooks with them everywhere; they may have hesitated to do so with a larger, heavier, more expensive laptop.

Of course low price and portability are only relevant if a netbook can add to your productivity. Our research indicates that netbooks are not an ideal tool for all PFP's, however many will benefit greatly by adding one to their toolkit. The ideal candidate for a netbook is someone who travels out of the office often and who likes to travel light. A growing number of PFP's who own a mainstream laptop have

decided to purchase a netbook as a secondary computer for those instances where the full capabilities of their primary computer are not required. It is also worth noting that those who rely mainly on a desktop computer and who venture out only occasionally, a netbook may be all the laptop that they need.

Advisors who require frequent access to the web and who deal with a heavy volume of email will definitely appreciate a netbook. While it is true that smartphones are great for reading email and for composing short replies, more lengthy email messages are much easier to compose on a netbook than on a smartphone. The same can be said for surfing the web: smartphones are great for short web sessions, but if you are going to be online for an extended period of time, a netbook is preferable.

The latest generation of netbooks offer sufficient power for basic word processing and spreadsheet work. They are also appropriate for delivering a slide presentation. Many netbooks include a built in webcam, so they offer video conferencing capabilities too. Virtually all netbooks feature built in Wi-Fi for connecting to the Internet. As indicated earlier, netbooks can be used to access web based applications.

Increasingly, PFP's rely upon web applications for CRM, financial planning software, portfolio management software and other industry specific applications. Those who rely on these applications may find the netbook a suitable travel partner. PFP's are also beginning to rely upon netbook friendly general purpose online applications such as Google Docs (<http://docs.google.com>), the ThinkFree suite (www.thinkfree.com) as a substitute for or a supplement to their traditional suite of office products.

While just about any netbook can be adapted for business use, today we'll highlight two that represent solid choices for the PFP user. The first is the Lenovo S series of netbooks. The S10, which was originally offered with an underpowered three cell battery, now features a six cell option that offers over five hours of usage on a charge. Lenovo's experience in producing the excellent ThinkPad line of business laptops is clearly evident in the S10's design. It has a solid feel to it, and the keyboard is better than average for its class. Of particular note for business users is Lenovo's OneKey Rescue System. This proprietary system is designed to launch a diagnosis and recover application at the touch of a button to help you fix problems and restore data should a crash occur. Some configurations of the S10 also feature VeriFace recognition software. This software allows the user to use face recognition technology in order to log on to their system. Weighing in at less than three pounds, the S10 represents a good business style netbook for under \$400.

The new ASUS Eee PC Seashell line of netbooks, such as the 1008HA and the brand new 1005HA (the current bestseller on Amazon) eschew the typical no nonsense business design in favor of cutting edge style. The design of the Seashell PC's strikes one as more of an Apple Mac look than a PC one. They are thin and attractive, but they give up nothing in the way of functionality. Like the latest MacBook Pros, these units feature built in batteries that promise excellent run time. The 1008HA claims over 6 hours of usage unplugged, while the new 1005HA claims over 10 hours. Use under normal conditions will be less, these numbers are nevertheless impressive. Both of these units feature roomy (92%) comfortable

keyboards, clear crisp screens, Wi-Fi, Bluetooth, a full array of ports, plus a built in webcam and microphone. Both models feature an easy restore feature that reset the computer to factory defaults. Both also include 10 GB of free online storage from ASUS.

While netbooks lack the power of a traditional laptop, and none include an optical drive (you can purchase an external one if necessary for a modest fee), they are perfect for the PFP who wants basic portable computing on the road at a reasonable price. They are so inexpensive that you won't hesitate to upgrade to a newer model when your current one outlives its usefulness.

If you are a power laptop user, a netbook is not the right product for you, but if you are among the majority of PFP's that only make light use of a laptop while traveling, a netbook can help you lighten your load and save you some money.