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Least Expensive Laptops? Hint: It Ain't Dell...

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According to a recent research study on consumer spending habits, laptop computers are being purchased faster than their desktop counterparts.

When you think about it, it makes total sense. Performance levels for the average desktop PC are far beyond the needs of what most consumers require. So why not sacrifice a little performance in exchange for total portability?

I'm currently in the market for a new computer, and saw the logic in this thinking. One need only hook up an old monitor and keyboard then BAM. Portable and stationary computing nirvana.

To get a "real" bargain, everybody knows that one must build his own computer. Unfortunately, laptops don't offer that kind of luxury, and non-name brand laptops are a bad idea. So, for the first time in a long while, I'm finding myself researching prices from each of the major PC manufacturers.

I posted the best prices and specs (Dell online store) to a popular web discussion board in hopes that someone might be able to find me a better deal.

Everyone that chimed-in all agreed, the price I found was solid. Shortly before going off to make my purchase, I scanned a few other threads about laptops, one of which happened to be about an Apple PowerBook.

I hadn't considered Apple when conducting my initial search, nor have I really considered Apple for any computer purchase, but after checking out OS X on a friends computer recently caused me some serious OS envy.

After visiting both company's online stores, the two company's selection is a little misleading. Dell, for instance makes each of its laptops available on a single page, with several pre-configured laptops on display, all of which can be custom-configured from four different form-factors.

Apple divides its laptops into consumer (ibook) and professional (powerbook). Consumer versions have two different form factors with four pre-configured models (all of which can be custom configured). The professional line has

three form factors with four pre-configured models. (They too can also can all be custom configured.)

After looking over laptop configurations from both vendors, I was a bit thrown back when I found how similar prices were between the two companies.

I hadn't considered Apple in the past because I perceived their prices to be so much greater than their PC counterparts. In the same vein, I was somewhat turned off by the idea that I couldn't upgrade certain aspects of the Mac's hardware. With laptops however, a PC is no more expandable than a Mac, so that point is somewhat moot.

The following are three price comparisons for similarly-equipped machines from both companies:

Low-End Laptops:	
Apple ibook:	Dell Latitude X200:
OS: Mac OS X Jaguar	OS: Windows XP Home
12.1" Screen	12.1" Screen
Software: Quicken 2003 Deluxe, Wold Book 2003, Otto Matic, Deimos Rising, iTunes, iMovie, iPhoto	Software:
512K @700MHz	512K @266MHz
128MB SDRAM memory	128MB DIMM
700MHz PowerPC G3	Pentium III 933MHz
One-year Limited Warranty	Three-year Limited Warranty
Wireless: AirPort ready, Airport Card	Wireless: Dell TrueMobile 1150 miniPCI card
20GB Ultra ATA drive	20GB Ultra ATA Hard Drive
ATI Mobility Radeon 7500	
16MB dedicated video memory	
CD-ROM	External CD-ROM
Internal 56K modem	
47-watt-hour battery	48-watt-hour battery
Total: \$1,078	Total: \$1,349

Low-Middle Laptops:	
Apple ibook:	Dell Latitude X200:
OS: Mac OS X Jaguar	OS: Windows XP Home
14.1" Screen	14.1" Screen
Software: Quicken 2003 Deluxe, Wold Book 2003, Otto Matic, Deimos Rising, iTunes, iMovie, iPhoto	Software: WordPerfect Productivity Pack, Quicken New User Edition, Dell SecurityCenter, Dell Picture Studio, Dell Jukebox Plus
512K @800MHz	512K @266MHz

256MB SDRAM memory	266MB DIMM
800MHz PowerPC G3	Pentium M 1.3GHz
One-year Limited Warranty	One-year Limited Warranty
Wireless: AirPort ready, Airport Card	Wireless: Dell TrueMobile 1300 miniPCI card
30GB Ultra ATA drive	30GB Ultra ATA Hard Drive
ATI Mobility Radeon 7500	
32MB dedicated video memory	Up to 64MB shared system memory
Combo Drive	Combo Drive
Bluetooth Wireless	Bluetooth Wireless
Internal 56K modem	Internal 56K Modem
47-watt-hour battery	48-watt-hour battery
	6 Months of America Online Membership Included
Total: \$1,578	Total: \$1,680

High-End Laptops:	
Apple Power Book:	Dell Inspiron 8500:
OS: Mac OS X Jaguar	OS: Windows XP Home
15" Screen	15.4" Screen
Software: QuickBooks, Art Director's Toolkit, OmniGraff, OmniOutliner, iTunes, iMovie, iPhoto, iDVD	Software: WordPerfect Productivity Pack, Dell SecurityCenter, Dell Jukebox, Dell Picture Studio, Dell Movie Studio Essentials
1 MB L3 cache	512K @266MHz
256MB SDRAM memory	266MB DIMM
1GHz PowerPC G4	Mobile Pentium 4 2GHz
One-year Limited Warranty	One-year Limited Warranty
Wireless: AirPort ready, Airport Card	Wireless: Dell TrueMobile 1300 miniPCI card
Bluetooth	Bluetooth
40GB Ultra ATA drive	40GB Ultra ATA Hard Drive
ATI Mobility Radeon 9000	ATI Mobility Radeon 9000
Combo Drive	Combo Drive
Gigabit Ethernet	10/100 Ethernet
Firewire	Internal 56K Modem
Internal 56K modem	Internal 56K Modem
DVI & S-Video out	
47-watt-hour battery	72-watt-hour battery
	6 Months of America Online Membership Included
Total: \$2,378	Total: \$1,985

(When price comparing, there were instances when one reseller would force a particular feature while the other made it an option. This scenario occurred amongst both companies.

To make the comparison fair, I always added the equivalent feature to the opposite computer. This balance couldn't always be applied, as some resellers would force certain features while the other didn't even provide an option.)

What surprised me most, is that in nearly every laptop price comparison I made (seven total), I found that Apple's hardware was less expensive than Dell's, this even after Dell out-priced its PC competition.

For the first time in my life, I found myself unable to justify the purchase of a Windows PC, instead discovering that Apple offered more for the money.

If you're in the market for a new laptop, I'd suggest that you make a similar comparison before making a purchase.

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