

The Stock Boy Screwed Up and Other Computer Scams

Revenue Canada has agreed to allow businesses to write off the purchase of Y2K-compliant computers in one taxation year if bought prior to June 30, 1999. But before you rush out to replace your old system, here's some tips for buying safely, born out of my own sad story.

Four years ago I purchased my first computer, a custom-built beauty I spent good money on to ensure quality components—or so I thought. There were problems immediately and in the first three months my beautiful new system crashed no less than four times. The company at first refused to acknowledge liability, choosing instead to blame me, the novice user. Eventually they conceded the modem was defective and replaced it. That solved most of the problems but I was still left with a constantly malfunctioning Soundblaster sound card. In exasperation I opened up my computer tower (*after turning off the juice*), took out the sound card, noted the serial number, then emailed the manufacturer, Creative Labs.

A few weeks later I received a letter from Creative Labs indicating mine was not a Soundblaster card. It may contain a Soundblaster chip, they noted, sold to a third party manufacturer (called an OEM or Original Equipment Manufacturer), but it was not marketed under the Creative Labs trademark so they couldn't help me. Incensed, I checked my bill for I remembered specifically buying a name-brand card, not a lesser priced OEM. Sure enough, my bill said Creative Labs.

Phone calls to Consumer and Corporate Affairs and to the police revealed a common consumer fraud: the company I purchased my system from sold me a name-brand item but installed a lower quality component in its place. It works like this: manufacturers such as the aforementioned Creative Labs sell their old technology to third parties who then combine it with other bits and pieces to create, for example, a cheaper modem or sound card. For the most part OEMs can be quite reliable and a cost-effective approach to buying a computer; the fraud only occurs when the salesperson tells you it's a name-

brand item when in fact it only contains a name-brand chip. You've paid the higher price for the latest technology and the manufacturer's warranty and tech support, only to discover you've got a cheap knock-off, an in-store warranty only, and no support. And forget about laying charges—criminal fraud require proof of intent; as the officer put it to me, "All the salesperson has to say is that the stock boy screwed up."

Another common sales game is the pre-packaged computer built around a hot new component like the latest Pentium chip. The salesperson talks up the chip but avoids hard questions about the rest of the components. Dig deeper and you'll most likely find a cheap modem, cheap sound card, cheap video card, et cetera. Ask to upgrade those components and they'll be happy to—for an extra fee and with no rebate for those components you're trading in. In other words, you take the computer as is or you'll find yourself paying twice for the items you upgrade. My advice is to buy custom-built; it's almost always more cost effective than buying a pre-packaged system and you get the exact components you want and need.

The best approach to buying a computer is to take your time: time to clarify your needs, research what's available on the market, shop around, follow up referrals from friends, then ask a lot of questions about the components you're buying before you hand over the cash. Demand a detailed, itemized bill specifying brand names where applicable. Check the manuals and drivers you get with your hardware—is the company logo on them or do the covers look generic? Is there a warranty card? A tech-support line? Lastly, before you fire up your new system, take off the tower cover and check the components. Name brand items will have the company logo imprinted on them (as opposed to just the name on the chip). If something is amiss, take the system back to the store and demand an explanation.

Michelle Demers