Tips for Buying a New Printer
by Bryan Smith, LTCL Tech Coach

About every ten years (if I'm lucky!), I'm faced with the task of buying a new home printer for those increasing rare cases when I need to print something. There are lots of brands and lots of models, and lots of different features that pop up every few years in printers. What has worked best for me is to think about my home printing requirements and then start looking at reviews online. This week's column is going to focus on requirements, and then give tips on how to select one that works best for you.

Requirements

- Do you need to print photos? I rarely print photos, but when I have, I'm often disappointed, and then I go to Walgreens or CVS and have them print high-quality photos for me.
- Do you need to print in color or only in black and white?
- Do you want to easily print on both sides of the paper? This feature is often referred to as auto-duplex or two-sided printing. If you only need to print on both sides rarely and you have patience with re-learning how to re-feed one-sided copies into the paper tray, then you could get by with a printer that only supports single-sided printing.
- Do you need the printer to support wireless printing? All home printers can be directly attached to a computer or a laptop, and some allow you to connect the printer to your home network via an ethernet cable. If the printer is connected to your network via an ethernet cable or with Wi-Fi, then computers and other devices on your network can share the printer.
- Do you need to print from your mobile devices (smartphones and tablets)? Most printers that support wireless printing support mobile devices, but it's important to check that the model supports your devices.
- Do you need fax capability? We may be done with faxes, but they are not done with us(!). There are still a few use cases where institutions, mostly government, still require transmittals via fax. Hopefully this will disappear in the next few years and we will be able to see old fax machines with curly thermal paper in museums.
- Do you make copies of a multi-page document frequently? If so, then the need for an auto-feeder that takes the stack of papers and automatically feeds them past the optical

scanner can be quite useful. Else, you will be forced to place each page on the scan bed one-at-a-time. And some auto-feeders even support two-sided documents (this is a feature found on the highest-end models which are typically used in commercial office settings).

- Is the footprint, i.e., size dimensions, of the printer an important factor? While the width and depth of home printers don't vary wildly, some printers are quite tall. Some very basic printers are small enough to fit into a medium-sized drawer.

There are other features and functions, but I think the ones above are the biggies.

Budget

What is your budget? I know for me, the answer is "as low as possible, but I don't want to be unhappy or buy another printer anytime soon!" There are really two budgetary concerns

- Cost of acquisition. What is the purchase price of the printer? All printers come ready to print, meaning that they come with ink or toner, so this is the cost to start printing.
- Cost of ownership. What is the cost per page or per year, including paper? This is where manufacturers sometimes play a little game. They may sell the printer at very low prices/margins to get you to buy the printer, and then sell you ink at very high prices/margins that could cost as much as half the price of the printer! Yikes. Many review sites will estimate the cost-per-page or ink cost/year for printers, and they can range from 1.5 cents per page up to 10 cents or more per page, depending on what you are printing (black text printing is cheaper than printing a high resolution color picture). So, if you are printing a lot, this is a very important consideration.

You might also find "ink subscriptions" from brands, and especially from office supply stores. They almost feel like extended warranties when I hear the salesperson describe them to me. For some, it's a great deal – especially if you print a lot. But do the math – calculate how much you will print because maybe you will only need new ink cartridges every 18 months like me.

Brands

It's hard to shop just by brand. If you look at printer reviews, like from Consumer Reports, some brands have "excellent" models and they also have "not recommended" models. I have also witnessed that some years, one brand may have the best reviews and the following year, that same manufacturer has the worst models. I guess what I'm saying is that brand loyalty may not get you the best printer when it's time for your purchase.

Store versus Online Purchasing

In a perfect world, we would have time to research the best printer and then wait for the best prices to occur when we purchase the printer on the very last day of our old printer's life. Ahh – bliss. But that's not reality. If your printer dies in the middle of page 1 and you need that hardcopy today, the store might be your only option. But never fear, with your requirements in

hand, you can go to the store and find your options, and then, with your mobile device you could look at some ratings from <u>multiple sources</u> to make an informed decision. Sometimes, in-store sales can provide you a better price than online.

Summary

If you can consider your true requirements up front, and then look at printers, you may save yourself some headaches and dollars later. Be sure to not only consider the cost of acquisition of a printer, but the total cost of ownership which includes ink/toner and paper, including specialty paper (like photo paper). Research exact models of printers since brands aren't always consistent across their products, and lastly… Happy Printing!

<u>Tech Coach Assistance</u>

Tech Coaches are now providing remote Tech Coaching. Simply send an email to *techcoach@laketravislibrary.org* and one of our coaches will respond to assist you with any questions or challenges you.