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Help Desk: This Mac lives up to its hype

The question for users contemplating moving to a Mac these days no longer is, "Should I buy one?" but rather, "Should I buy one now?"

Apple has had a remarkable resurgence. On top of the runaway success of the iPod music player and the iTunes Music Store download service, sales of Macintosh computers have increased sufficiently to move Apple past Lenovo (the former IBM PC operation) into fourth place in U.S. market share.

While Apple's 4.5 percent share may be a pittance compared with market leader Dell's 19.3, it's a marked improvement over market shares in the 2s that Macs had been recording. The prior trends were leading the Mac to extinction; the latest results signal a Mac comeback.

Particularly good news for computer users is that Apple truly has earned its revival.

If Apple has had a major flaw historically, it has been in sometimes selling the sizzle more than the steak. Macs command a price premium over Windows PCs and, with all due respect to the sensibilities of Mac loyalists, there were a great many years when the units just weren't worth it. Macintosh's stylish designs housed computers that had lackluster performance and compromised versatility.

Several things changed the picture dramatically. Computing has become about entertainment and multimedia — a Mac strength — not just about word processing, spreadsheets and other business applications — Windows' strong point. Apple has built upon this strength by making networking and the addition of peripheral devices (printers, scanners, etc.) extremely easy.

Second, when Apple founder Steve Jobs regained control over the company, he pushed through a move to the OS-X operating system, which combines the user-friendly Mac interface with an industrial-strength backbone. This has meant a stable, secure platform. And the latest incarnation of the OS, 10.4 (popularly known as Tiger) released a few months ago is unambiguously easier to use than

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Windows. Tiger, for example, has built-in desktop search features (called Spotlight) that put an end to the problem of never being able to find files when you need them.

Third, Windows has faced constantly increasing security threats, viruses, worms, Trojans, spyware and so on. Windows users are in a "heads you lose, tails I win" situation — if the intrusions don't compromise your system's performance, the security software you have to run to protect yourself will. Macs' security features are generally more robust, but here there is a benefit in having a smaller market share. If 90 percent or more of the PC universe is running Windows, they are the more tempting target for hackers.

Finally, there is Apple's recently announced decision to move from Motorola and IBM processors, called PowerPCs, to Intel processors, the dominant brand in the Windows world. The problem with PowerPCs is that while they were supposed to be breakthrough technology that would be faster than Intel architecture, they never really delivered. Apple users now can be certain their computers will match up against Intel-powered machines because Macs, too, will be Intel-powered.

For years, I had scoffed at the cult-like devotion of Mac loyalists, and I started experimenting with Apples a year ago mainly to get up to speed on them in advance of the return of the MacWorld trade show to Boston. In the months since, however, I made a striking discovery: Macs are a superior tool for getting real work done.

Simply put, Macs require less care and feeding than Windows PCs. Mac will crash; apps will fail; systems will freeze. But much less so than on Windows. And setup tasks, whether it is installing new software or connecting new hardware, is infinitely more simple. With a Mac, you spend more time doing work and less time swearing at your computer.

Macs are not for everyone. Apple has little penetration into the "enterprise" — big businesses and other institutions — market, so they are not a good choice if you inhabit that world. If you rely on very specialized software that is Windows-only, again Macs are not the right choice. However, most individual and small-business users won't have that problem. You won't necessarily find the same software you use in Windows for the Mac, but there will be an equivalent.

So, as noted above, the question becomes: Do you wait for the new Intel Macs or not? If you have standard computing needs, my advice is that there is no need to wait — the existing Mac lineup is solid and, let's face it, any computer, Mac or Windows, is obsolete the minute you buy it. However, if you are using Macs for things such as commercial graphics, video, or multimedia editing and production and therefore need the maximum horsepower, you might want to wait for the Intel-powered units. Also, while Apple's lower-priced notebook line, the iBook, remains a good value, the premium PowerBook line will be much more attractive with higher-performance, cooler-running Intel chips.

Life is too short to spend it configuring Windows. Macs now are

more than just a pretty face; they will make your life easier.

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