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Sunday, April 16, 2006

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Practical printing solutions for home or small office

By Help Desk

Al Gordon

Let's talk about what really counts when you go looking for a printer: Can you buy the ink cartridges at Costco?

With a low-price inkjet printer, within a year you more than likely will spend more on the ink than on the printer. For more expensive units, maybe it will take two years. This clarifies the task of choosing a printer quite a bit. HP, Epson, and Canon printers and cartridges are the easiest to find in superstores and low-price outlets. Hence, when in doubt, go with one of these brands. All three companies make capable devices and the ability to get supplies at a discount is the single most effective step you can take to lowering your per-copy printing costs.

For small and home offices, "all-in-one" inkjet units that combine a printer, scanner, fax and, of late, photo printer into one device are cost — and space — effective. Last year, I looked at the HP lineup, so this year I tested Epson's Stylus CX5800F and Canon's PIXMA MP830. Epson and Canon, unlike HP, usually go the "almost all-in-one" route — no built-in fax. The CX5800F is Epson's first with stand-alone faxing; the MP830 is the sole such unit in Canon's lineup.

I liked both printers. Comparison testing makes no sense because the two products have different price points and are aimed at different audiences. The Epson can be purchased for as little as \$130 after rebates, while the lowest price I found for the Canon was \$100 more. The extra money for the Canon gets you a document feeder, a photo view screen, and faster print speeds. It makes sense in a small office, while the Epson is more suitable for home office use. Unfortunately, neither has built-in networking; you would have to go to HP for that.

The key points about both units, however, are something else: individual ink cartridges and straight paper paths.

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HP inkjets come with two cartridges: black and color. The color one actually holds several different color inks and if one runs out, then the whole cartridge has to be replaced. Over time that adds up. Both Epson and Canon make cartridges for each individual color, so you don't have to toss the cyan because you are out of magenta.

Both Epson and Canon also design their printers so that you can stack paper in a chute in the back and the paper follows a path with just a slight bend past the print head and into the output tray, instead of the sharp U-turn of a HP. For most printing work, this may not be all that big a deal. But when you are using photo paper or doing a job where the alignment is sensitive, this is more likely to yield output that is neither warped nor misaligned.

Competition is a good thing for consumers. That Epson has entered the true all-in-one market and Canon has an attractive new offering should mean more good choices for home and small office users.

However capable printers and all-in-ones may be, candidly they stink at printing individual labels or addressing individual envelopes. For this, a better solution is the Dymo LabelWriter 400 series.

Hook up one of these thermal printers to your computer; feed in one of the scores of available labels, and you are you are good to go. The printers let you address your envelopes, label file folders, identify CDs and other media — pretty much everything one might want to label.

I tested the "twin" model that holds two rolls of labels. While one of the intended purposes is to let you run large jobs more quickly, I find its most valuable use is in minimizing time you spend changing labels. Often there is one type of label that you use all the time (usually an address label), so put it on one spindle of the Twin and use the other for the labels you change frequently.

Earlier this month, Dymo sweetened the deal for its LabelWriters by launching its new "Dymo Stamps" service, run in conjunction with the Endicia online postage vendor, that lets you purchase and print your own postage stamps. In other words, postage meter without having to buy or rent a meter. The big incentive here is that you do not need to pay a monthly fee — the going rate is about \$16 — for the service. You only pay for the postage itself.

A nice convenience for the small and home office.

Al Gordon is a Massachusetts-based media and political consultant who also writes about technology. You can read more of his articles at www.algordon.com/techblog.html and e-mail him at eagle@algordon.co

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