

Business owners should do homework before buying a printer

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To Hal Dobry, three laser printers at \$99 each was a steal.

Within a few months, though, printer sticker shock set in. His first replacement toner cartridge cost just under \$100 — on sale. When a drum head failed after one year's use, Dobry learned a new head would set him back \$125.

"The printers worked well, but they used a lot of ink and a \$125 drum head priced the machine right into obsolescence," said Dobry, president of *Auto Insurance World* in West Palm Beach.

Business owners face similar confusion when purchasing new printers. Inexpensive machines make buying decisions seem simple. Yet the cost of replacement ink or toner cartridges, as well as the cost of other parts, can surpass the machine's original price. While some news reports point to price wars between ink and toner manufacturers, costs still can seem high compared to the initial purchase price of a printer or copier.

Many consumers instead are asking questions before making a purchase. Beyond speed per print or the quality of the color, consumers are inquiring about cost per print, replacement costs for cartridges, and availability of other replacement parts, said Bob Bloom, vice president and chief operating officer with *Ink & Toner USA*, a West Palm Beach copier and printer supply retailer.

Bloom recommended that customers find several printers or copiers that meet specific needs for speed, functionality and overall size. With those model numbers in hand, customers then should price new or refurbished replacement ink or toner cartridges for each, he said. Search prices on retailer shelves or online, and hunt for insights or feedback on specific models on Web review sites, said Bloom. Bloom won't recommend brands, since most have various features that outperform one another, he said. But he can quote the cost of a replacement cartridge or part.

Among other points Bloom said to consider before purchasing a printer or copier:

Is the user a snowbird? Less use might cause ink to dry and ruin the print head.

What will the volume be? Fewer pages might mean a less expensive machine will suffice. Also, high-capacity ink or toner cartridges often are less expensive per page than lower-capacity models.

Are generic or remanufactured parts available? "Compatible" (generic) and refilled cartridges typically are less expensive, but aren't available for all models.

Instead of replacing the worn-out head on his laser printer, Dobry called Bloom. He ended up buying a new printer. Now, before buying any printer or copier, Dobry will call Bloom to inquire about cartridge replacement prices and overall costs per print. He asks about low speed, cost and maintenance, and which model likely will last the longest, he said.

Bloom also told Dobry that with certain printers, the toner cartridge and drum head are one piece. That reduces the need of replacing a separate head, Bloom said. Dobry also now knows that with machines priced so low, he's better off buying than leasing his machines, he said.

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