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Choosing and Using a Printer

A brief guide to your choices

Custom Internet Limited

Printers

Our world is filled with bits of paper and despite the constant drive to avoid printing and 'go paperless', life without a printer of some kind is not going to happen any time soon.

When the time comes to replace a printer or purchase an additional one, there are several factors to consider and it's best to think these through before selecting the one that best suits your needs.

1. What sort of material will you be printing – documents, photographs, detailed drawings etc.?

2. How much will you be printing – is it a few sheets per day, or quite lot?

3. What quality of output will you need?

4. How many users will need to share it?

5. What other features do you need. E.g. scanner, copier or fax machine.

Getting a printer that doesn't fit the job that you want it to do can be an expensive mistake, so it pays to look before you leap.

Printers are all the same, aren't they?

Er, no …. other than the fact that they all transfer a document or image from your computer on to paper or other 'hard' materials. Printers differ hugely in the way they actually work, their size, speed and cost.

Printers come in two basic size ranges:

1. Standard Desktop devices – used by most people.

2. Large free standing printers – often seen in larger offices. These are best suited to medium to large size offices or where there are specific high volume needs.

In general, there are two types of desktop printer in general use by home and small business users. The main difference is the way the images are transferred to the paper.

Inkjet Printers

Inkjet printers use conventional inks in a combination of colours to produce the final image. They all employ a black cartridge along with either a single colour one, or separate cartridges for each colour. Along with black, the standard colours are cyan, magenta and yellow though some more advanced printers use more. The additional colours are worth considering if you need to print high quality photographs.

The advantage with the multi-cartridge approach is that you only need to replace the colour that is expended.

Laser Printers

Laser printers use a combination of different colour powders or 'toner' which is laid direct on to the paper by some clever laser technology and then baked on. Laser printers are generally regarded as delivering higher quality, but at a higher cost – both for the printer itself and for the replacement toner.

Multi-function Printers

The addition of a scanner to a printer makes it into a versatile device which reduces the need for having separate bits of hardware. As well as being a printer, the device can now function as …

- A scanner.
- A copier – ideal when you just need a small number of copies.
- A fax machine – on the more advanced models.

Now the most common type of printer, these multi-function devices combine a great range of functionality in a small space and offer excellent value for both home and small business users.

Wired or Wireless?

Connecting up a printer has come a long way from the old bulky 'Centronics' cables. These days, connection by a USB cable is pretty much standard. For a single user with a compact setup, this works very well.

More recently, with improvements in the available technology, even 'entry level' printers are now offering wireless connectivity. As well as dispensing with the USB cable, this provides even greater freedom on the physical placement of the printer and the ability to print direct from multiple devices such as phones and tablets. Indeed for printing from iPads, tablets etc., wireless capability is a 'must have'.

Paper in – Paper out

It's worth thinking about the route that the paper takes through your printer. Some will load the paper from the top and pass it out through the front, whilst others load at the front, turn it round and pass it out at the front again. This second option, whilst potentially requiring less vertical space, means that the paper or card needs to turn some pretty tight corners inside the printer and so ends up more curled than it would in a more direct paper path. With ordinary

'office' paper, this is not too much of a problem, but card, envelopes, labels and heavier material may not print as well. The less you have to bend it, the less the paper will suffer.

Where do you put it?

It is usually most convenient to place your printer at desk height where it's accessible to everyone who needs to use it. Access will also be needed to load paper, collect the output, to place documents on to the scanner and for cartridge replacement and general maintenance. You may also want to consider where you will keep paper stock and spare cartridges.

Naturally, the printer will need power and if you have one that doubles as a fax machine, you will need to connect to the phone line.

Ink and Toner

In order to get the best results from your printer, it is important to use the correct ink or toner. Whilst the manufacturer's original cartridges are undoubtedly more expensive, they do produce a higher quality result and better yields than the lower cost compatibles. You may also find that using compatible cartridges will invalidate any guarantee. Over years of looking at customer's printing issues, we have found that poor quality cartridges have been one of the main causes of problems.

Paper and Stuff

If quality ink is important to help deliver a good print, than the right paper is also vital. There is no point in putting high quality ink on to poor quality paper. Do make sure that you have paper which is designed for the type of printer you are using.

Low grade cheap paper may allow the ink to absorb too quickly and so produce an image that is not as sharp as it might be. Getting the correct paper is especially important when printing photographs and there are many different weights and finishes available.

For most general purpose uses, we recommend a paper weight of not less than 80 g/m^2.   A heavier paper may also be useful and adds an extra bit of class for special letters or important documents.

Maintenance

Modern printers need very little maintenance other than the odd wipe or dust over. Do make sure that foreign bodies do not get into the paper path as the rollers and paper guides are easy to push out of alignment.

The odd paper jam is almost inevitable. Do exercise great care extracting stuck paper and make sure that no bits of debris get left behind.

If it gets dirty, the scanner bed can be given a careful clean with one of the readily available screen cleaning wipes.

If left unused for a long time, some inkjet printers may 'dry up' and produce a poor quality 'stripy' output. This will sometimes fix itself by printing a few pages or a photo. Alternatively, the printer settings will include a head cleaning utility – refer to your printer instructions.

Please get in touch with us if you would like more help and advice on choosing your next printer.

About Custom Internet Limited

Custom Internet Limited is a website design and IT Services company based in East Dorset. As well as website design, hosting,promotion and maintenance, we offer a range of computer training and other services.

Full details are on our Website at www.custom-internet.co.uk/

The Custom Internet Website also contains a variety of resources relating to personal computers and the internet. Go to www.custom-internet.co.uk/support/.

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