

IT Feature

The \$59 PC Has Arrived on the Market

MicroWorkz' WEBzter Jr. is a great deal for not a lot of money

by Péter Jacsó

Two years ago, in my Multimedia Medley columns in the July/August and September 1997 issues of *Information Today*, I raved about the first brand-name sub-\$1,000 PC: the Compaq Presario 2100. It came without a monitor, but Compaq offered a 14-inch one that had a remarkably clear and sharp screen. By the end

of the year it garnered lots of accolades and awards, and made competitors like IBM get into the ring. The next giant leap was the sub-\$600 PC. (These appealing numbers always mean that the monitor is not included.)

As of this writing in March the sub-\$300 PC is the craze, and rightly so—when all is said and done it turns out to be fully functional PC for \$59, with the monitor not included. When I enthusiastically alerted my

editor to this revolutionary new product and listed its specifications, he put aside my e-mail believing that there must be a typo. He thought that I must have omitted a "9" at the end. I did not.

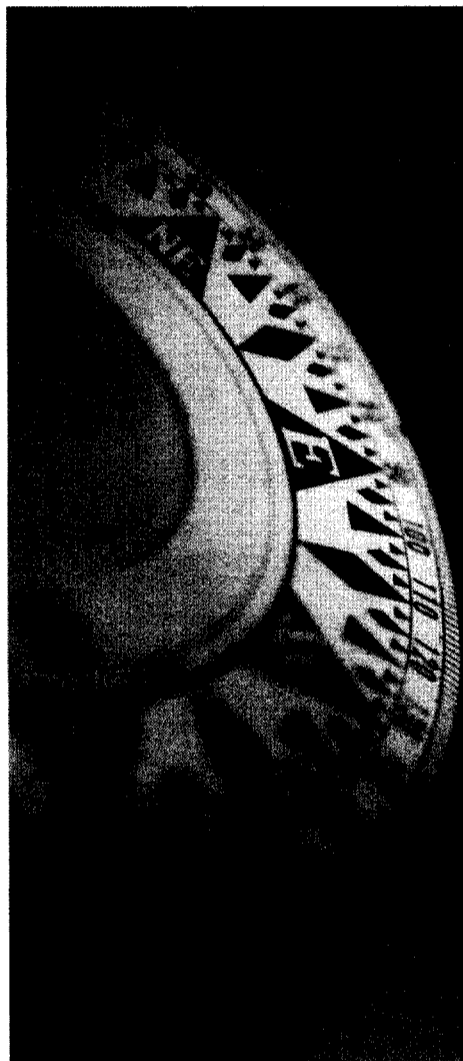
Meet the WEBzters

MicroWorkz is the progenitor of the family, and it is not new to offering bang for the buck. The company has been selling inex-

pensive computers—such as the zPC, zPC Pro, zPC Extreme, and the Workz—at sub-\$1,000 prices and creating custom specifications, like adding internal Zip drives. For a time it was impossible to get through to MicroWorkz, because 7 million people tried to access the WEBzterPC Web site (<http://www.webzterpc.com>) on March 15 and it crashed. The interest is understandable as you get incredibly good value for the money, even at first blush. (See Figure 1.)

WEBzter is the network PC that will bring the Internet to millions of new users, not the sub-\$500 Network Computer (NC) that Oracle CEO Larry Ellison promised—with support from Sun Microsystems' CEO, who is also game for anything that goes against Microsoft—in his bombastic style in 1996, but could never deliver. As I pointed out in a CD-ROM Commentaries column in the April 1996 issue of *IT*, their sub-\$500 NC was an ill-conceived idea fueled by these guys' obsessive desire to break the Wintel (Windows-Intel) hegemony, no matter how sophomorically. In the past 2 years these brothers in arms have preached the advantage of a Network Computer that would run on an Intel-incompatible processor using a non-Windows operating system without any local storage capacity for programs and data. They envisioned users happily downloading application software whenever they needed it. Luckily, they gave up pontificating about this delirious idea when their NC debut was postponed time and again. The CEO of Network Computer, Inc. even resigned last spring. The few NCs that made it to poor, unsuspecting users cost more than \$1,000—twice as much as Ellison, et al., promised—and had little software to use.

So for \$299, the WEBzter Jr. is a *real* deal, without the crippling limitations of the NC. As for its bundled software, Windows 98 is what people camped out for in front of shops not long ago to buy for \$100-plus. And WordPerfect Suite 8 provides more word processing, spreadsheet, and presentation features than most of us would ever need. As for hardware, the 300-MHz processor with 32 MB of RAM and a 512-K secondary cache is good for everyone this side of Computer-Aided Design and Hollywood Studios. The 3.2-GB hard drive is fine even by today's standard. When it comes to modems, nothing is ever fast enough, but 56 Kbps is decent, and there is even an expansion card to replace it with a network card for the cable modem. There is a 16-bit sound card but no speakers. But don't worry, you will be surprised what good-quality speakers \$30 can buy. There is no floppy drive, but most people can happily do without them, and technical support personnel in libraries, offices, and schools will be happy to note that users cannot bring in their virus-infected floppies. Instead, what you would put on a 1.44-MB floppy you could easily send as an e-mail attachment. The lack of a CD-ROM drive may be more of a problem for home users, but for your peace of mind and convenience MicroWorkz offers a Convenience Package for \$99 that takes care of all of the above, packing a floppy drive, a CD-ROM player, and two speakers. The USB port opens the possibilities of connecting additional peripherals in chain.



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What? Only \$59?

If you add up the street price of these components you realize what a deal you get. Then throw in 1 year of unlimited Internet service that is worth about \$240 at the going monthly rate of \$19.95, not even counting the one-time set-up fee. (Even students and faculty members who normally enjoy free services courtesy of their colleges or universities would benefit from this because some of those institutions' servers are so overloaded that it is hopeless to log on from home. And even if you can get on, you are sometimes disconnected after 30 minutes.) Altogether you save \$240, paying just \$59 for the PC plus \$139 for a 15-inch monitor, if you don't already have a spare one from your dead PC. In the end you get a highly functional PC for the price of a piece of typical consumer electronics. At that price it is almost an impulse buy that will make small and large offices, schools and churches, libraries and information centers order them on a whim. Do your math: How many WEBzter PCs can an academic library buy by canceling just one of its most outrageously priced and least-used scholarly journals? [Editor's Note: See this month's Internet Insights column on p. 38.] A family will likely trade in its TV/VCR combo to buy WEBzter Jr. for Junior. Adults will not be left out of the loop, either; a WEBzter Jr. is the perfect birthday gift for Mom or Pop to stay in contact.

So while the WEBzter Jr. is practically an impulse buy, it comes without the compromise of buying, say, a moped in place of a car. MicroWorkz is already inundated with orders, but shipping was expected to begin in mid-April. If the company does a good job assembling these PCs and does not mess up on the delivery side, it will be able to sell far more than its estimated 1 million a year. Beyond newbies, those who have a 2-year-old computer with a 100-MHz Pentium, 16 MB of RAM (and no cache), a 1.2-GB hard drive, and a 28.8-Kbps modem will buy this gem and may save the cost of a monitor as well as the CD-ROM drive that came with their ailing and overloaded PC. I am sure that the producers of utility programs and Web page creation software will, for peanuts, allow MicroWorkz to bundle light versions of their programs in the hope that customers will upgrade later.

Last time I wrote about an awesome PC deal, I practiced what I preached: I bought one. Shall I do so now, too? As of this writing, I don't know. There may be an equally good deal that I fancy even more. Read on.

The emachine 333id

MicroWorkz also has higher-priced models endowed with even faster processors, larger hard drives, more memory, and other goodies right out of the box, and still in a very attractive price range. (See Figure 1.) But I cast my eyes on a PC that has the ultimate attraction for me at home: a 5x built-in DVD-ROM drive. I am lucky to have on-campus access to a PC with similar configuration as the emachine 333id, so I know what I'm missing at home when I can't use the few good DVD-ROM encyclopedias on the market or rent

	WEBzter Jr.	WEBzter	WEBzter Sr.	emachine 333k	emachine 333id
Processor type	Cyrix MII	Cyrix MII	AMD K6-2	AMD K6-2	Celeron
Speed	300 MHz	366 MHz	400 MHz	333 MHz	333 MHz
RAM	32 MB	32 MB	64 MB	32 MB	32 MB
Video RAM	2 MB	8 MB	8 MB	4 MB	4 MB
Hard drive	3.2 GB	4.3 GB	6.4 GB	3.2 GB	4.3 GB
Floppy drive		1.44 MB	1.44 MB	1.44 MB	1.44 MB
CD-ROM		24x	24x	24x	
DVD-ROM					decoder 5x with software
Modem	56 Kbps	56 Kbps	56 Kbps	56 Kbps	56 Kbps
Sound	16-bit	16-bit	16-bit	16-bit	16-bit
Speakers		2	2		
Serial port	2	2	2	1	1
Parallel port	1	1	1	1	1
USB port	1	1	1	2	2
Game port		1	1	1	1
Keyboard/Mouse	1/1	1/1	1/1	1/1	1/1
O/S	Win 98	Win 98	Win 98	Win 98	Win 98
Bundled Software	WordPerfect Suite 8	WordPerfect Suite 8	WordPerfect Suite 8	Microsoft Works	Microsoft Works
Free Internet Service	1 year	1 year	1 year	1 month	1 month
Price	\$299	\$499	\$699	\$499	\$599

Figure 1

some of my favorite movies on DVD-Video. The \$599 price tag on this emachine makes it as excellent a deal as the \$59 actual cost of WEBzter Jr. (So you could say that my editor was right: I omitted the "9" after \$59.)

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