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## [Best Buy Optimization Is A Big Stupid Annoying Waste Of Money \(http://consumerist.com/2010/01/consumerist-investigation-best-buy-optimization-is-a-big-stupid-annoying-waste-of-money.html\)](http://consumerist.com/2010/01/consumerist-investigation-best-buy-optimization-is-a-big-stupid-annoying-waste-of-money.html)

By [Meg Marco \(http://consumerist.com/cgi-bin/mt/mt-cp.cgi?\\_mode=view&blog\\_id=1&id=15106\)](http://consumerist.com/cgi-bin/mt/mt-cp.cgi?_mode=view&blog_id=1&id=15106) on January 4, 2010 8:28 AM 58



This "warning" appears on a Geek Squad sales info folder.

*Over the past year, a number of you have been telling us that, due to "pre-optimization" - sometimes impossible -- to walk into a Best Buy and leave with the advantage of paying a \$39.99 surcharge over the computer's advertised price). We deployed the Consumer Reports secret shoppers to 18 different Best Buys in order to deny the price advertised for a specific model because only pre-optimized computers were used. Consumer Reports engineers compared three "optimized" computers to three standard computers and found a performance improvement. In one case, an optimized laptop actually per*

### Optimize This

Would you pay \$39.99 to improve your computer's processor speed by 200%? What about software updates that would take your computer services that take an "incomplete" computer and make it more useful? Good deals, right? Just one problem: None of these claims about Best Buy's Geek Squad optimization services - is true.

We wanted to know three things:

1. What is optimization? What does the service consist of?
2. How is Best Buy marketing the service? How widespread is "pre-optimization," in which a store sells computers that have been pre-optimized?
3. Is optimization something you should consider? Can you do it yourself? Is it a good deal? Are there any downsides to the service?

To find the answers to these questions, we enlisted the help of the Consumer Reports secret shoppers, the technical experts of Consumerist readers themselves.



Preoptimized computers stacked up in a Best Buy s

### Meet Betty and Nelson

All Betty (not her real name, but a real Consumerist) saw the laptop she saw advertised in a newspaper circular,

It wasn't that simple. She was quickly informed that she would need to pay \$39.99 for optimization.

"I replied that I really didn't care about computer optimization for the laptop for \$649.99, the advertised price," Betty told Consumerist. "That there was nothing he could do about the \$39.99 optimization fee on the models left in the store."

Betty is the stubborn type. She refused to pay for a laptop at another branch. Once Best Buy employees informed her the pre-optimization issue persisted at other nearby branches,

After another 45 minutes passed, the second manager

Reader Nelson, however, wasn't as lucky. He wasn't able to get the deal. Despite protesting, he was charged a fee for a laptop.

"It wasn't optional," Nelson told Consumerist, "They only had Acer laptops and the only ones left were the optimized models. They were sold out too."

Nelson managed to talk Best Buy down 50%, to \$20.

he doesn't think pre-optimization is fair to the people who don't want the service.

### What is optimization?

Getting to the bottom of what exactly the consumer gets for their \$39.99 was more difficult a proposition than we initially assumed. We contacted Best Buy and enlist the help of CR's electronics testing experts to tell us what had been done to them, but we started by looking :

Here's how they describe the service on [the Geek Squad blog \(http://www.geek squad.com/intelligence/blog/what-exactly-is-gee](http://www.geek squad.com/intelligence/blog/what-exactly-is-gee)

“

*Our Geek Squad Agents enable up to 100 system tweaks that improve PC performance and functionality, including optimization, quick launch and taskbar cleanup and program shortcut creation.*

”

There are also several different types of "new computer" services being sold to prospective buyers. They include, but are not limited to, system optimization. The services range in price from \$29.99 to \$219.99, and include offerings for both Windows PCs and Macs.

**NEW COMPUTER SETUP**

DATE: / / AGENT NAME: CUSTOMER SPECIALIST NAME:

MISSION BACKGROUND

LAST NAME: FIRST NAME: PHONE: ( )

ADDRESS: E-MAIL:

CITY: STATE: ZIP CODE: USER NAME & PASSWORD:

HIGH-SPEED INTERNET:  CITIES:  DMO:  INTENDED USE:  CHILDREN:  PERSONAL:  FAMILY:  GAMING:  SCHOOL:

COMPLIMENTARY SERVICES WITH THE PURCHASE OF YOUR NEW COMPUTER

PERSONALIZATION OPTIONS SYSTEM FUNCTIONALITY CHOICE

GEEK SQUAD® BLACK TIE PROTECTION  STANDARD  ADVANCED  PREMIUM

ADVANCED PLAN INCLUDES:
 

- NORMAL WEAR AND TEAR
- ACCIDENTAL DAMAGE FROM HANDLING
- BATTERY REPLACEMENT (1 TIME)
- NO LEMON POLICY
- POWER SURGE REPAIR
- GOOD MAINTENANCE REWARD

PC SETUP SERVICES

<input type="checkbox"/> <b>STANDARD SECURITY &amp; PERFORMANCE</b> \$69.99 Computer Optimization, installation of Windows critical updates Installation and configuration of antivirus and anti-spyware software and updates	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>NEW COMPUTER SETUP</b> \$149.99 Unpacking and setup of computer, monitor, keyboard, and mouse Windows management Installation of 1 hardware device and update, plus 1 software application Configuration of computer to use existing Internet and email account
<input type="checkbox"/> <b>ADVANCED SECURITY &amp; PERFORMANCE</b> \$99.99 Standard Security & Performance PLUS: Create System Data for recovery in case of system failure	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>WIRELESS NETWORK SETUP</b> \$149.99 Setup or troubleshooting of a 2-device wireless network Installation and configuration of 1 router and 2 adapters Setup of wireless encryption for a secure network Configuration of file and print sharing
<input type="checkbox"/> <b>PREMIUM SECURITY &amp; PERFORMANCE</b> \$129.99 Advanced Security & Performance PLUS: 1-year ViSPy Protection: Free Diagnostic & Repair (\$199.99 value) in the case of spyware or virus infection (see reverse for details) (See reverse the Anti-Virus / Anti-Spyware Software Price Guide.)	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>1-HOUR TRAINING</b> \$149.99 An Agent gives you an hour of training on your PC and related topics (e.g. software, basic PC skills, digital photo, digital video, digital music, etc.)

NETBOOK SETUP SERVICES (Available only with Netbooks)

<input type="checkbox"/> <b>NETBOOK PROTECT</b> \$49.99 Installation and configuration of antivirus and anti-spyware software and updates Installation of Windows critical updates	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>ADD-ON SOFTWARE INSTALL</b> \$29.99
<input type="checkbox"/> <b>NETBOOK PROTECT with ViSPy</b> \$79.99 Netbook Protect PLUS: 1-year ViSPy Protection: Free Diagnostic & Repair (\$199.99 value) in the case of spyware or virus infection (see reverse for details)	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>ADD-ON OPTIMIZATION</b> \$39.99
<input type="checkbox"/> <b>EXTERNAL HARD DRIVE SETUP</b> \$39.99 Install and set up your external hard drive's software Configure a personalized backup schedule and options	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>ADD A DEVICE TO EXISTING NETWORK</b> \$49.99
	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>ADDITIONAL TIME WITH AN AGENT (30 min)</b> \$49.99

Services offered by Best Buy include "Netbook Prot of anti-virus software and Windows updates -- and :

On our first visit to Best Buy we intended to ask abc never seemed to come our way, so we grabbed a C being made available to prospective customers.

It included a confusing and intimidating order sheet mechanics, complete with official-looking carbonles replicate the experience of having your car servicece

For example, the folder contained a sheet that touts for free with all PC purchases. Geek Squad offers s Performance" (\$69.99), which includes optimization virus software (plus the cost of the software itself).

If, however, you choose computer optimization alon offered with "Standard Security & Performance," be

We drank coffee and tried our hardest to see why anyone would choose to pay \$69.99 for a service that was nearly identical to anything that sounded reasonable.



Consumerist reader Patrick sent us this picture of a designed to "prove" that an optimized computer bo

**The Secret Shopping Adventure**

According to Nelson, the salesperson told him that ' out of un-optimized laptops. "Yes, I felt it was an att told Consumerist. "She knew I wasn't going to budg what I was talking about."

With that in mind, we set out to see if Betty and Nel make inflated claims about the value of these servic optimized computers to customers who didn't want

To help us find out, we dispatched the Consumer Reports secret shoppers to 18 Best Buy branches in 11 states.

The shoppers are scattered throughout the U.S. and are responsible for researching and sometimes purchasing the products th shopper was to go to a Best Buy location and inquire about an advertised laptop, then report back about the optimization optior characterized by the sales staff.

The first shopper reported back within a few hours. She had indeed been denied the advertised deal because all available units

Here is her account of the conversation:

“

**Salesperson:** Best Buy has this model, but it's \$369.99 instead of \$329.99.

**CR Shopper:** Why?

**S:** Because it was already optimized.

**CRS:** What does this mean?

**S:** The model is quicker, the user can "sign on" and it won't have to be configured. **CRS:** Why is it quicker?

**S:** Because they removed the trial version of products like Norton.

**CRS:** Does that mean that I will not have anti-virus protection?

**S:** They can install a 6-month antivirus program.

**CRS:** Is the optimization optional?

**S:** It's not optional because we don't have any of this model without the optimization, but we have other laptops that are not

**CRS:** Can you waive the fee?

**S:** The fee can't be waived because it's already installed.

"

We also learned a few other interesting things about Best Buy's optimization sales pitch. One shopper was told that optimization was a great idea. The same shopper was told that he could try to optimize the computer on his own, but without assistance he would not be able

When the shoppers asked if they could duplicate the optimization themselves, they got a variety of estimates of the time they would save. One was told she would save "an hour and a half," while another was told that downloading Windows updates alone would take 6 hours. **a computer at home would take about two days!**

Another shopper was warned that the laptop was "incomplete" without optimization.

When she asked what the salesperson meant by "incomplete," he told her that it didn't come with anti-virus software or Microsoft Office. Optimization was her choice, but that Best Buy didn't "recommend getting online" without it.

He explained, "You'll get online, get a virus, and end up spending \$200 to clean it up."

When she asked if she could install anti-virus software herself instead of paying Geek Squad to do it, she was told installing software

During this same conversation, our secret shopper says the salesperson also told her that the manufacturer's warranty was "obscure" and that service contracts (which she would need to pay for, of course, and that were not included in the optimization price).

Not all salespeople touted optimization, and many branches did have unoptimized units of advertised laptops in stock, and were available. One sales rep even told our shopper not to buy a laptop during that visit, because some "truly amazing sales" were coming up :



Dean Gallea of Consumer Reports, in the lab with laptops from Best Buy ([see video here \(http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...\)](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=...))

### In Which There Is Science

Though we did learn a few interesting things about optimization, closer to being able to tell if optimization was a good

So, we asked Consumer Reports' electronics testing department to test optimized laptops from a local Best Buy: An Asus U3000 and a Toshiba Satellite A505-S6980. They then compared the results to see what kind of improvements optimization might c

Here's what they found:

“

*When we received our test models, the initial impression was of a rushed service: Some samples were left in standby mode for days. A quick start guide for one laptop had been mixed in with the papers in another laptop's box, and a power cable for*

*Upon comparing the optimized changes, the first noticeable change was a cleaner desktop. Most of the removed shortcuts were by the manufacturer. The programs themselves were still installed and available for later access. Updates had been downloaded. A factory default setup can affect how the system is optimized. On one laptop, for example, because Windows Defender was not*

*Some optimization changes seemed intended to make the laptop easier to use, such as adding the status bar to the file explorer. Including a link to the Downloads folder in the Start menu, for example, can save you a few clicks. Security setting updates, and in Internet Explorer, privacy settings were eased up to allow websites you visit to save info you provide on you*

”

Because optimization was being pitched to some of our shoppers on the basis of improving the computer's performance, we asked for optimized computers to ones with factory settings.

Here are the results of the tests:

“

*We ran the 3DMark 2003 graphics benchmark on each laptop, comparing optimized and non-optimized settings. For two of the laptops, performance changes were negligible. On the Asus laptop, however, optimized tests actually scored about 32% worse than the non-optimized tests to isolate the source of this performance change. On none of the three tested laptops did the optimized settings give a performance improvement. [Emphasis added]*

”

And finally, we wanted to know if a consumer could "optimize" their own computer.

“

*Some of the optimized settings were changes that typical users can do themselves, and basic security measures, such as turning on Windows Defender and your anti-virus software are active and updated, and keep a recovery backup of your system and files. However, you might not make, and as a performance enhancement, the optimization failed to impress.*

”

## In Which We Draw Conclusions

Based on the results of the tech team's tests, **we believe that optimization is not a good deal for most consumers.** Our test **performance**, and there are a number of free ways to do many of the same tasks (though you may be out of luck if you just have a laptop). We've listed a few of them below.

Yes, having Geek Squad download your Windows updates can save you time, but the tech team found that the service was incomplete, and of course, **a power cable was missing from one of the computers.** The computers we received still had the trial software **removed from the desktop.**

We asked Best Buy about the inconsistent information provided by their sales staff, and about some of the more incredible claims they admitted that boasts of a 200% performance gain "seem a bit aggressive." He also said that no stores should refuse to sell a computer.

"This is about the choice," the spokesman said. "If you don't want it, you don't have to get it." He added that "we always try to sell you what you want to have the choice," and suggested that customers who feel they were pushed into optimization when they didn't want it should complain.

We asked Best Buy about the real value of optimization to consumers. The spokesman acknowledged that the service "isn't for everyone." He said that one advantage of optimization is the "customization" that can be performed for individual consumers. For desktop computers - which aren't customized for individuals - he suggested that "things like the updates and tweaks and removing programs" would be helpful. "I would get optimization for my parents," he said.

## The New Service Economy

Best Buy takes the position that optimization is simply a choice available to consumers, and that it's not for everyone, but looking at the company is betting heavily on services like optimization to take them through the recession and beyond.



Is Best Buy Mobile, with its emphasis on "specially trained, impartial mobile phone specialists" the shape of things to come? .

In a [recent Fortune magazine article \(http://money.cnn.com/2009/11/30/bestbuy\)](http://money.cnn.com/2009/11/30/bestbuy), Best Buy CEO Brian Dunn cited "connectivity" (such as Geek Squad's ability to connect electronics together more effectively) as a potential \$250 billion business opportunity to remain competitive with more diverse big box threats like Walmart.

The company is experimenting with a new store layout that eliminates dedicated stations for MP3 players, laptops, and such, according to Fortune. Each store will have a Geek Squad station where staff members who might turn your tech questions into sales opportunities for Geek Squad (which recently started to offer a support service for electronics), says

company - Geek Squad.

"The operative word here is 'owned,'" Dunn told Fortune. "Outsourcing works for back-office operations, but we believe that when you own it."

Geek Squad's services still represent a tiny percentage of Best Buy's income, but that number is growing. According to a [prese \(http://library.corporate-ir.net/library/83/831/83192/items/297530/Lehman%2520Bros%2520Presentation%2520Public%25204\[1\].28.06\)](http://library.corporate-ir.net/library/83/831/83192/items/297530/Lehman%2520Bros%2520Presentation%2520Public%25204[1].28.06) company's fiscal 2006, Geek Squad services and Best Buy's appliances installation business accounted for about 2.5% of domestic revenue brought in by extended warranties and other service plans. By 2008, the Geek Squad and appliance installation revenue share declined to 2%.

At a 2008 conference associated with the W.P. Carey School of Business of Arizona State University, Sean Skelley, then Best Buy's (and currently president of international retail operations), said that Geek Squad - which Best Buy purchased in 2002 - gave the company's customers, [according to a W.P. Carey online article \(http://knowledge.wpcarey.asu.edu/article.cfm?articleid=1731\)](http://knowledge.wpcarey.asu.edu/article.cfm?articleid=1731). Skelley was "special agents" to refer to its staff. "We were interested in Geek Squad for these stories," Skelley said, "and the brand element

Skelley also waxed rhapsodically over another company's creation of a service that kept customers coming back for more, as if you know you're supposed to get your oil changed every 3,000 miles. But that was a Jiffy Lube marketing creation rather than an actual company pulled customers back into their stores on a frequent, regular basis."

Ultimately, it's not Best Buy's official policy to press customers into buying anything they don't want, and they suggest you report Best Buy's new post-Circuit City business strategy is to concentrate more on "services." It might be helpful to keep that in mind.

### Optimize Yourself!

You can optimize your computer on your own with free software and a little patience. You'll have to learn a little about your PC. In addition to using some of these tools, you should also keep your web browser up-to-date - and stop downloading cursors and

Task	Program
Overall optimization	<a href="http://www.ccleaner.com/">CCleaner (http://www.ccleaner.com/)</a>
Remove trialware	<a href="http://www.pcdecrapifier.com/">PC Decrapifier (http://www.pcdecrapifier.com/)</a>
Change startup options	msconfig
Remove unnecessary software	Programs and Features (Add/Remove Programs in Windows XP)
Block spyware	<a href="http://www.microsoft.com/windows/products/winfamily/defender/default.msp">Windows Defender (http://www.microsoft.com/windows/products/winfamily/defender/default.msp)</a> <a href="http://www.safer-networking.org/index2.html">Spybot Search and Destroy (http://www.safer-networking.org/index2.html)</a>
Protect against viruses	<a href="http://www.free-av.de/en/trialpay_download/1/avira_antivir_personal_free_antivirus.html">Avira Antivir Personal (http://www.free-av.de/en/trialpay_download/1/avira_antivir_personal_free_antivirus.html)</a> <a href="http://free.avg.com/us-en/homepage">AVG Free (http://free.avg.com/us-en/homepage)</a>