

Best Buy in 1965 (Bring Your Firstborn)

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I stumbled across this **typewritten letter** on the documents page of famed computer scientist Edsger W. Dijkstra. The letter, written in 1965 is a basic request for a quote for a "general purpose digital computer" for the Technological University at Eindhoven (in the Netherlands). What is notable is the specifications and price:

- Number System - binary, not decimal. Hmmmm... Remember when base 10 systems were around? I don't.
- Memory - (quoting here) "A random access memory with a capacity of say, one or two million bits". Two million bits would be 250,000 bytes and according to this **handy calculator** that puts RAM somewhere in the 256k range (on the high end). Someone shout out if I got the math wrong.
- Backing Store - Discs or Drums. (quoting again) "We think that a capacity of 20 million bits would be sufficient." That sounds like about 2.5 megabytes - or .002 percent of a 1 GB USB key (do they make those any more?).
- Input Mechanism - paper tape reader.

Other comments of note:

- "We are not very attracted to punched cards." - I don't know of anyone who is, but there are crazy people out there on the Internet these days.
- "If you have noisy line printers and silent line printers we should prefer the silent ones."
- (regarding speed) "If a full length multiplication takes 10 mmsec it is fine; if it takes 25 mmsec we think it would be fine also. ...the difference hardly matters when in practice the machine spends eighty percent of its time winding and rewinding tapes!"

The Price

In 1965, what is the expected price of a machine as quoted above with less power than the music player in those annoying musical Hallmark cards? Dr. Dijkstra indicates to his prospective vendors:

"A million dollars is the upper limit. One or two years after the delivery we might be able to spend a quarter of a million to extend the installation if desired"

Isn't it amazing how far we have come? Here's a shout out to Dijkstra and all the other largely unheralded pioneers who slogged in the trenches so we can have I-phones, Macs, Netbooks and PCs today. Thanks guys! (We'll talk to you later about those musical cards - talk about the law of unexpected consequences...).