

Do you want the extended warranty? The smart answer is 'sometimes.'

BY JANICE PODSADA

HARTFORD, CONN. — Lloyd Wimbish of West Hartford has refused many a cashier's offer to spring for the extended warranty on a product.

"I usually don't buy them," the retired spokesman for the Connecticut legislature's black and Puerto Rican caucus said as he walked toward the Best Buy store at Corbins Corner in West Hartford.

But when he bought a \$900 Nikon digital single-lens-reflex camera, he plunked down an extra \$100 for the extended warranty.

There it made sense, Wimbish said: "One repair can cost \$400 to \$500."

You're standing in the checkout line clutching your new notebook computer when you overhear the cashier ask the customer in front of you: "Do you want the extended warranty?" It's a question you'll hear frequently these days, whether you're buying a \$1,200 TV or a \$15 pair of headphones.

Purchases of extended warranties are up 10 percent this year, according to the [Service Contract Industry Council](#), a trade group. Last year, 42 percent of consumers purchased warranty contracts for their computers, up 37 percent from 2007.

This holiday, consumers are expected to spend \$1.3 billion on extended service contracts, according to Warranty Week.

Consumers "tend to be more risk-averse and are less willing to absorb the cost of an unexpected

product repair or replacement," said Timothy Meenan, the council's executive director.

If you're stumped standing in the checkout line wondering whether to buy the extended warranty, take heart: You may have as long as 30 days to decide after the date of purchase.

Ask the store to provide you with a copy of the contract terms and conditions. The window would give you time to research the service-contract supplier with the Better Business Bureau and the state insurance commissioner, Meenan said.

In other cases, it's an on-the-spot no-brainer decision, said Mark Kotkin, director of survey research for Consumer Reports.

"I bought a pair of headphones for my iPod for \$15, and they tried to sell me the extended warranty for \$20," Kotkin said. "When the warranty costs more than the item, that's crazy."

Most of the time, extended service contracts aren't worth the additional dollars, according to Consumer Reports. Many electronics items, for example, come with a manufacturer's warranty that covers product defects.

According to Consumer Reports, products seldom break within the extended warranty window "after the standard warranty has expired but within the typical two to three years of purchase." For example, most electronic items are built and priced to be replaced every couple years.

"The chance that even something relatively fragile like a laptop breaking is not great, and the average cost of the repair can cost the same as the extended warran-

ty," Kotkin said. "Put the money you would have spent on the extended warranty in the bank."

But Meenan cautions that manufacturers' warranties are getting shorter and may not cover what you think they should cover, he said.

In recent years, extended warranties have begun providing enhanced services that manufacturers don't offer, such as 24-hour hotlines and expert technical advice. Best Buy and other retailers offer several levels of extended warranty coverage for desktop and laptop computers. Best Buy's "advanced plan," for example, covers accidental damage from handling or spills.

When it comes to giant television sets, few manufacturers will come to your home to make warranty repairs. Extended service contracts often offer in-home repair, said Meenan, who once shipped a Sony TV to the service center for a warranty repair. "They fixed it and brought it back 45 days later," he said.

Kotkin acknowledges that there are other instances when the extended warranty can be handy.

"We recommend getting one for the Apple computer," he said. "The tech support that comes with the extended warranty is great. Without it, the tech support is skimpy."

And if you're so bold as to disregard a Consumer Reports warning and buy a product or a car or truck with "a poor reliability track record," Kotkin said, "you might consider buying the extended warranty."

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