Shopping for a PC

Shop talk

We visited a number of shops to find out at first hand what people are interested in buying

Bank holiday weekend, the parking lot at Brentford's PC World. People clutching plastic bags filled with boxes of floppy disks, printer ribbons, or games CD-ROMs stream around a salesman waiting next to a stack of two big boxes on a trolley. Another household buys a computer.

Last year at this time, every store and every display was dominated by Windows 95, and customers worried about whether to change to it and what hardware they needed. This year, the theme is more diffuse. Alongside standard worries about what computer to buy, customers worry about price cuts (should I wait another month?).

It's understandable. This time last year, a 540Mb hard drive was newly cheap at £149. Now, that same drive costs £99 and £150 will buy you 1Gb, a size almost unimaginable for consumers only two years ago. Memory prices have crashed, too, down to £30 for a 4Mb SIMM that last year would have cost four times that. The average price of a PC, though, hasn't changed: you're still looking at somewhere between £1,000 and £2,000; though what you get for that money is a massively overpowered beast if all you want to do is put words in a row.

The woman hovering over the Compaq Presario gestures at the £1,299 (Pentium 120, 8Mb of RAM, 1Gb hard drive, bundled software including Quicken and Claris Works) price tag and wants to know if it is good value compared to the similarly priced Packard Bell one aisle away (Pentium, 8Mb, 850Mb hard drive, but with a voice modem, and a bundle of Microsoft software). The salesman tells her husband the PC can be used as an answering machine, and mentions the possibility of installing a TV card.

They, like most people, want the computer to be all things to their family. They want to run the husband's small business on it and keep accounts. For that, they could use any PC on the market. The snag is the kids: they want games. And games are the resource-hungriest applications around. The salesman, meanwhile, has probably never run a small business at home. So he doesn't know to ask them if they have two phone lines; if they do, and want to use the fax line to make modem calls, they'll find they have to replug the voice modem when they want it to answer incoming voice calls. He doesn't warn them about the importance of backup systems, either.

An aisle away, a man plays golf on a desktop while he waits for his university-aged son to find a computer he can afford, to write term papers on. That sounds minimalist until the son, hovering over the bargain table, says he's studying computer science and needs something high-powered enough to compile programs at speed, especially since his girlfriend, a step or two away, is also a computer programmer. He wants 2Gb of hard drive space and a really fast Pentium. This family has five kids, from school age to mid 20s, and this is their third computer purchase this year. The father bought a PC a few months back, and a younger son adores his Apple Mac.

'There's a big difference between what people buy and what people should buy,' says Kevin Karunananthan, a senior salesman. Popular items, he says, include games, CD-ROMs starring celebrities, and additives like sound boards when people find that the sound board bundled with their multimedia PCs doesn't emulate a Sound Blaster card, or colour cartridges to let them print the occasional colour copy off their black-and-white inkjet printers. 'I tell customers they have to like the look of the PC and be confident about what they're buying', he says, adding that, 'Customers are becoming more intelligent. They're listening to more people.' Including, he says, their kids, who have a strong influence on what computer their parents buy.

Sometimes not as much as they'd like. 'What I want,' says Maggie McDonald, a journalist and single parent, 'is a typewriter, filing cabinet, and Internet e-mail and I'm in complete collision with my teenage son who wants games and graphics and music and CD-ROMs.' She thinks her son is influenced both by magazines and the equipment he plays with at friends' houses; he talks in unaffordable gigabytes while for her anything that's reasonably priced will do. The result, she says, is that 'It makes it very easy to put off buying anything because we can't agree.'

Not everyone follows the crowd: a computer industry type is mulling over the system boards. Just looking, he explains, at what he could do to beef up his system. Turns out he's built it himself from parts sourced from magazine ads. He'd built one for his sister, too, but found that didn't work out as well, as she didn't have sufficient expertise to fix it if anything went wrong. She'd moved on to an AST with a three-year warranty. He himself has recently finished building his second machine, a significant improvement on his first. His tip: always get at least a mini-tower, so there's room for expansion.

'Kids have a strong influence on what their parents buy.'

He is actually more the type you'd expect to find bargaining with hucksters over untidy piles of merchandise in Tottenham Court Road. There are some risks involved when buying there. Stores come and go all the time, so it's important to make sure that whatever you buy has a proper warranty; some stores occasionally sell US imports, so always ask, don't assume. But there are some advantages, too, as there tends to be good variety, and the prices typically rival those of mail-order suppliers when you take into account delivery charges and delays.

At Shasonic, one of Tottenham Court Road's two biggest stores, salesman Selvyn Buchanan stands near the IBM and Toshiba laptops, and fields questions from an impatient customer who wants to know the price of a particular Toshiba laptop, delivered today. Buchanan quotes a price. Ah, but can he preload Microsoft Office? Buchanan quotes another price, and the customer walks out, dissatisfied.

'That's not selling,' says Buchanan; he means he's not going to throw in extras for free, the way this particular customer wants. This customer isn't atypical: he's made up his mind what he wants, and he is aggressive about demanding a good price. In general, Buchanan says, the last year has seen a lot more home users entering the store. 'They're getting a lot more confident.'

Right now, he says, there's a run on AST desktops – Pentium 100, 8Mb of RAM, full multimedia, modem – among the store's customers, who typically want to use the machines at home to handle small business accounts, school and university homework, and more general business work spilling into evenings at home from daytime jobs. Laptops do well, too, but here he notes that most people want basic machines.

'As long as it does the job,' he says, 'they don't care about colour.' But you can't get a basic laptop any more: dual-scan colour has come down so dramatically in price that colour laptops are actually cheaper than black-and-white ones were a couple of years ago. The laptops on display at Shasonic – from IBM, Toshiba, Texas Instruments, and Zenith – all seem to have the kind of built-in multimedia capabilities that are so antisocial when used on trains.

'People are afraid to buy anything in case they could get it cheaper by waiting another month.'

Across the road at Micro Anvika, the customer who is quizzing the salesman about the neighbouring laptop's capabilities is insistent on running a scanner with it. There are some good prices here: a discontinued IBM Thinkpad is going for £1,299, with 8Mb of RAM and a 540Mb hard drive. Near it languishes an ex-demo 486SX/25 Twinhead subnotebook for only £499.

Salesman Rick Yagodich tells us 'Most people are buying machines that are far more powerful than they need.' This from a man whose Windows swapfile is seven times the size of our Compaq Aero's 84Mb hard drive. He has one customer, he says, who has equipped his three-storey house with a network on each floor and a computer in each room (even the small ones), all hooked together via primary-rate ISDN/30 lines. A more common specification, though, is a Pentium 133, 2Gb hard drive, and 16-32Mb of RAM. And then, he adds, they take it all home and play games. The latest-thing mentality, he adds, sometimes doesn't pay off. People coming in asking for 8x and even 10x CD-ROM drives rarely realise that it's just as important to compare seek times. On a CD-ROM disc with lots of little files, higher speed may mean poorer performance.

Nearby in MicroWorld, the salesman who last year, when asked what people buy, said, 'Everything that's cheap' says it again. But given a little time, he goes on to say, 'People have lost confidence.' He means the many price cuts in the last year, including two in the last few months from Toshiba alone. People come in, he says, and ask if prices have settled down now, and are afraid to buy anything in case they could get it cheaper by waiting another month. Meanwhile, stores like his are hurting. 'We lost £4,000 on memory and CPUs,' he says, 'so now we just buy what we really need.' His own ideas go against the latest-thing mainstream; he advises against buying Windows 95 because it requires, he says, a lot of technical support, and he dislikes the attitude that a PC is a perishable item. His own business, he says, is running on a 486/40. ●

Wendy Grossman