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The people's choice

We analyse sales figures to see what's moved the most units on the PC market and give our opinion on what the alternatives offer

Welcome to the 1998 Best Sellers issue. This year we have once again analysed and distilled data from a range of market research surveys to bring you a comprehensive rundown of this year's top-selling PCs, software packages and peripherals. We take you through the leaders in 25 categories, offer our advice and opinions and look at other players in each field, to bring you our best-ever buyer's guide.

Not every best seller is automatically the best product in each category, which is why each one includes a *What PC?* alternative choice for you to consider. Also, where a product has been superseded by a more up-to-date version, we've included the most current information available.

Finally, to paint the clearest picture, every product has contact details and all of the prices quoted include VAT.

This year some of our categories have been updated to reflect the changes in the market and to keep up with your demands. Digital cameras have been included to complete the hardware front, while the new Utilities section makes sure you know how best to keep your PC in tip-top condition.

PCs

There's been more activity in the PC arena than ever before, and last year's top-of-the-range 166MHz and 233MHz Pentium MMX systems have been replaced with Pentium II PCs running at up to 400MHz.

We've also seen the introduction of the Celeron, Intel's cut-down Pentium II designed for the budget market, as the chip giant attempts to fight off stiff competition from rivals AMD and Cyrix. The practical upshot of all of this is more bang for your buck, and even the PCs in our under-£1,000 category are perfectly designed for a full range of home and office applications.

Along with faster processors, this year has seen a huge increase in memory and hard disk sizes, even faster CD-ROM drives and the introduction of newer, higher-capacity DVD-ROM drives.

DVD discs can store up to a whopping 17Gb of data and the drives can be used to play the latest DVD movies, when combined with an MPEG2 decoder card.

Manufacturers have also been quick to replace ageing PCI graphics adaptors with Intel's Accelerated Graphics Port (AGP) technology.

Super floppies such as the Zip drive and LS120 are also finding their way into more systems and the Universal Serial Bus (USB) has now firmly established itself as a new standard for connecting peripherals with true Plug 'n' Play. In short, never before have PCs offered so much for so little money.

Peripherals

The peripherals market has seen something of a shake-up in terms of both price and performance. Photographic-quality colour printing at home is now a reality and you can pick up a leading inkjet for just £204.45. Those looking for professional-quality laser printers will be pleased to see that the top performer in this category is just £364.25. Once restricted to professional artists, flatbed scanners are also now within the reach of the average user.

On the screen scene 17in monitors are becoming increasingly attractive, allowing users to take advantage of larger desktops and higher graphics resolutions for a more comfortable working environment. These are backed by even better video cards, and we've seen a horde of 3D graphics systems arrive to cope with ever increasing numbers of games and multimedia applications.

Finally, increasing interest in the Internet and the arrival of the V.90 standard for 56Kbits/s modems has prompted even more of us to go online and explore.

Software

Some might say there has been less change in the software world than in the realm of hardware over the last 12 months, and indeed last year's best-selling office suite is still the leader. However, Microsoft's flagship application is available in several versions to suit a wide variety of needs and it now has some interesting new competition.

After much debate we've also seen the launch of Windows 98, which brought us better integration with the Internet, enhanced multimedia facilities and faster PC performance.

As expected, most of the other major applications have been updated, again adding elements such as Internet support, and the games market has been quick to adopt new technologies.

Tomb Raider II's Lara Croft showed us just what you could do with 3D, and we understand that Tomb Raider III is just around the corner...

