

There may be fewer and fewer first-time PC buyers, but we managed to find one who was trying to decide which superbudget system would most suit him. Andrew Charlesworth took him through this month's hot new crop and showed him how to get the most for his money



Reader's choice: superbudget PCs

Users looking to upgrade their systems or buy a second model are often well aware of what they want from a PC, but the first-time buyer is normally left out in the cold armed with little or no knowledge of what a suitable model is. With the proliferation of PCs, novice users find themselves an ever-decreasing minority but there will always be a steady stream of first-time buyers needing helpful independent advice on what PC best suits their requirements.

Paritos Jessa is a research analyst and lives in Luton with his wife Salma and their first child. While Paritos uses a PC for work he has never had one for the family home and his search for his first PC has left him frustrated: "I've shopped around in some of the big stores but I get just get bombarded with techno-babble by the sales staff." The one thing Paritos had decided on was his budget: "There's no need spending more than £750 on a PC because I don't want the extras. As long as I can surf the internet, send emails and get the best value for money I'll be a happy man." We pointed out to Paritos that even the cheapest PCs will have no trouble coping

with the day-to-day tasks he intends to use it for, so we'll have to help him look at other contributing factors that will help him decide. Bar the budget, Paritos was unsure about what he wanted so we chose some PCs with well-rounded specifications and features, ran WorldBench 4 on them and weighed up their pros and cons. The models we looked at were Carrera's SSC Octan 2100a, Multivision's Vision Elite 4200 and Ideal Computing's Aptus L150.

By contrast, Carrera's PC was picking up all the points in the style department. The swish NEC monitor complemented the glossy blue finish of the case beautifully and Paritos was fairly enamoured with the whole package: "I hope it works as good as it looks because I think Salma would love it. The beige keyboard and mouse look a bit incongruous though." We thought Paritos would like the Carrera because it's an excellent entertainment PC that would

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Paritos Jessa, PC Advisor reader

First impressions

The first thing Paritos noted was that he didn't recognise any of the manufacturers names: "When I was shopping around I could only find brand names like Compaq or HP so I thought I'd see something from those companies." We pointed out that smaller manufacturers often offer the best deals.

The Vision Elite is a serious affair with everything from the PC and monitor to the mouse and keyboard coming in standard office beige. Its only standout feature is the impressive 5.1 Videologic speakers. Paritos liked the fact that the look was consistent but found the end product boring: "It looks too much like a work product and I haven't got a study to put it in."

fit in nicely with the home environment and has the style to appease first-time buyers. It also comes with FireWire, USB and headphone connections underneath a flap on the front so he won't have scuffle round the back of the case.

In terms of pure aesthetics the Aptus from Ideal Computing is a bit of a mixed bag and Paritos didn't like it: "It's neither stylish or all beige so it comes across like an expensive toy. I prefer the Microsoft keyboard on this but it only has four speakers." We showed Paritos the built-in box on the front with four USB ports for peripherals and a headphone connection. He told us that once he knew his way around the PC properly he'd, "sort out a printer and a scanner," so the ports will come in handy.

Pros and cons: the contenders measure up

Carrera SSC Octan 2100a

Pros: styling; sound setup
Cons: unimpressive peripherals and monitor
Price: £699 ex VAT
Carrera: 0870 066 0682
Website: www.carrera.co.uk

Ideal Computing Aptus L150-

Pros: large amount of memory; decent monitor
Cons: onboard sound and only four speakers
Price: £699 ex VAT
Ideal Computing: 0870 745 5061
Website: www.idealcomputing.co.uk

Multivision Vision Elite 4200

Pros: long warranty; good graphics and monitor
Cons: onboard sound
Price: £699 ex VAT
Multivision: 0870 066 0882
Website: www.multivision.co.uk



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What the experts say

All three PCs came with 80GB hard drives which is more than enough storage. In terms of speed the Vision Elite was the quickest with the Octan not far behind.

Paritos wasn't concerned about getting the quickest machine but he did want to use his PC as an entertainment system. On that count the Ideal doesn't match the others - neither the graphics nor the sound is up to scratch. The Vision Elite also lacks decent audio capabilities but offers the best graphical performance, while the Octan offered a dedicated sound card. This appealed to Paritos as he wants to play music through his PC.

Paritos was clear about the warranty: "If anything goes wrong I want coverage for as long as possible so they can send

→ Andrew and Paritos check out how impressive the sound is on the three PC contenders
➤ Plenty of USB ports was essential as Paritos wanted to connect peripherals, such as a scanner and printer

guys out to fix it." In this respect Multivision wins out because it offers one of the best warranty deals with three-year onsite followed by three-year labour cover.

The reader's choice

It's been a couple of issues since our Reader's choice guest has chosen the same device as us, so we were pleased when Paritos told us he was opting for the Multivision PC. In the end it came down to the warranty: "I'm not sure about the look but it's well covered by the warranty and it's the best value for money." ■



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What did Paritos want?

- Value for money in a £750 PC
- Decent warranty
- Good entertainment system
- Basic consumer usage