

Whether it's your first time or your third, buying a PC is an expensive and confusing affair. As well as being overwhelmed with the choice of computer specs and their designs, customers have to decide whether to buy a bespoke setup or an off-the-shelf system. Sue Medley helps narrow down the options

Buy or build?



Here's a typical scenario: you have used a PC workstation for years in the course of your nine-to-five job and, seeing its worth in the office, have finally decided that a PC would also be beneficial at home. However, you've never actually bought your own system and don't have the first clue about whether what works in your office is what you should be aiming for in a home computer.

Alternatively, you might have bought a PC in the past and be keen to replace an ageing system with one that closely matches your specific computing needs but doesn't cost over the odds. Where's the best place to go to ensure you get the right deal? And should you buy online or via mail order if you want to call the shots over specifications, such as the graphics card and brand of monitor?

All these questions come up time and time again on *PC Advisor's* online forum and as mailbag queries. There's no definitive answer about how to buy a PC or where to get it from, not least because there's no such thing as a 'typical' PC buyer. Computers are both capable of and used for so many different tasks by people with such different needs and levels of experience that we can't hope to provide a single solution to suit everyone. What we can do, however, is highlight the options available, their plus points and pitfalls, and get other readers who have recently bought a new system to tell you about their experiences.

We had a lot of input from PC users of all levels of expertise; some use theirs for business, others for pleasure. Many

readers also shared their opinions on *PC Advisor's* online discussion forums at www.pcadvisor.co.uk. We're grateful to you all for telling us about your purchasing experiences – be they good, bad or indifferent.

For those about to buy a new PC, we hope the advice given in the following pages points you towards the most suitable place for you to get your ideal system. Either way, feel free to drop us a line here at *PC Advisor* and tell us how it went – that way, we'll be better able to pass on your experiences to those buying PCs in the future.

First among equals

Going to buy your first PC can be a daunting experience, especially if you're new to the world of computers. Even those of us who came to PCs through an 8bit route, starting with Spectrums or Commodores, found it a culture shock. We suddenly had to think in terms of hard disks and DOS rather than tapes, floppy drives and Basic. Modern machines running a user-friendly operating system, such as Windows XP, make life a lot easier, but there's still the complication of CD-RW and DVD drives, different types of RAM and makes of hard disk.

Case study one: Dixons PC bundle

Name Mike

Occupation Librarian

Based Alnwick, Northumberland

Bought A PC bundle from a Dixons showroom which included a printer and scanner

Experience "Knowing zilch about computers, I phoned a friend who helped me sort out what I wanted such as internet access and DVD. The salesperson was helpful, didn't patronise an ignoramus, and kept all his promises regarding delivery dates and arrangements."

Recommended "For customers who need help through the cyber-jungle I would certainly tip my hat to Dixons. Next time I would check out the computer press to see what's available, with a better appreciation of how to match my choice to my needs and with a better grasp of the trade jargon than I had last year. I wouldn't be an expert, but I would have more confidence in my own ideas about what to buy."

Case study two: built-to-order PC

Name **Nick**
Occupation **Manager**
Based **Worcester**

Bought **Desktop PC custom-built locally**

Experience "I never have and never would buy a computer from a mainstream dealer. Instead, I choose the specifications I want and then get the precise system built by a small, local and trusted company. I can then go back to them with any problems."

Recommended "I would recommend getting a PC built to order by a local firm. Not only are they there on hand should any help be needed, rather than the faceless £1-a-minute helplines of large boxshippers, but you can get the machine tweaked for the tasks you intend to use it for. In addition, a machine from a local company is more likely to use generic components that can be replaced easily or upgraded in the future. It pays to take into account the cost of running and maintaining the computer and not just the initial price."

It's not surprising that many first-time buyers opt to get their first PC off the shelf. In theory, it couldn't be easier. Walk into a computer shop, point to your choice, hand over a credit card and take your new PC home with you. But is it that simple in practice?

Five years ago, there was more choice, not only in the make of computer but also where you could buy it. There were more local independent outlets and fewer superstores. It's worth nurturing a good independent shop if you find one because the advice, service and flexibility will generally be better than a chain.

High street store

Buying an off-the-shelf system from a high street store has several advantages. The most obvious is the personal service you should get – we say 'should' because some readers we talked to felt they'd been talked down to by the salesperson. Seeing the machines set up, maybe even getting to try them, is also a big plus.

This is especially important with laptops where, for example, the keyboard layout can vary greatly from one manufacturer to another. Being able to look and touch avoids any nasty surprises later and you may be able to identify hardware you wouldn't find comfortable to use long term, such as spongy or noisy keys.

Evesham spokeswoman Carolyn Worth told us, "The way customers want to buy is almost entirely a personal thing. Some customers enjoy the fun of visiting showrooms, discussing their requirements with, hopefully, enthusiastic and knowledgeable salespeople.

"A PC is not an investment you make lightly and so showrooms allow the opportunity to try before you buy. Showrooms can often set the tone for the rest of the organisation as well – if you visit a shop where the salesperson clearly hasn't got a clue, you tend to wonder a bit about the support you'll get."

But there are disadvantages to buying a prebuilt system. You can't fiddle with it too much in case you void your warranty and it may be configured in a way you don't like. For example, the hard drive will be formatted as one large partition whereas most users prefer different ones for the operating system, data, games and so on. Some prebuilt systems come with extras like educational software or games, depending on the package. Others include bundled hardware such as a printer or scanner. If you don't need these extras, it's a waste of money rather than the bargain the ad claims it is.

It's also worth considering the aesthetics of your purchase – even though

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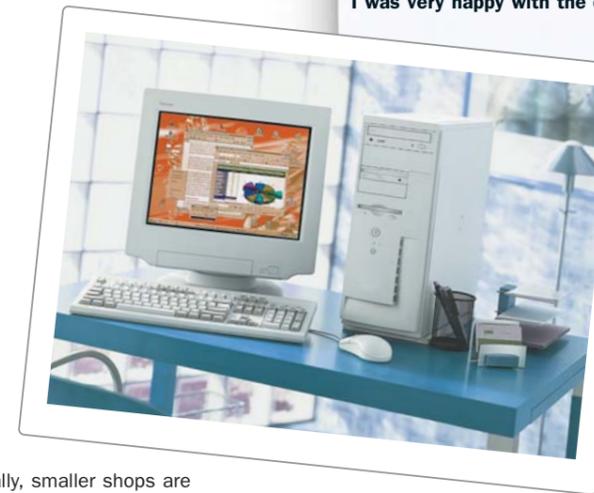
↑ Dell's website gives you a wide range of options for the specification of your prospective system

the computer's specs are the important thing, appearance still counts. If the case is ugly, will you want to look at it every day for the next few years? Visiting a store gives you the opportunity to decide.

David vs Goliath

Small local shops may not be able to compete on price with the big boys but they make up for it in other ways. A large store should have everything you want in stock whereas a smaller shop might need to order in. However, if you cultivate your small independent dealer though regular

Some customers feel that talking to enthusiastic salesmen face to face is not a particularly good use of their time. For them, the telephone is ideal



purchases, you will find it a great source of help

and advice. Generally, smaller shops are owned and staffed by enthusiasts who are often willing to take extra time to get to know their customers and help them make the right purchase.

Pick and mix

When the time comes to upgrade because your PC will no longer run the software you want, there are several options. Chances are you won't want a complete system, since you'll be able to use your existing monitor, speakers, printer, keyboard and/or mouse. So it's a choice between buying only the components you need or buying a complete system and trying to sell the pieces you don't want, which can be a time-consuming and frustrating process.

Welcome to mail order

Look through any copy of *PC Advisor* and you'll find plenty of adverts for PC companies of all sizes: some concentrate on prebuilt systems and offer a comprehensive selection from entry-level machines upwards, while others will let you select the build you want – choosing a specific graphics card or swapping the CRT (cathode ray tube) monitor for a TFT (thin film transistor) screen. Dell is a good

Case study three: prebuilt PC via mail order

Name **Dave**
Occupation **Office management/customer service**
Based **London**

Bought **prebuilt Evesham system via mail order**

Experience "I selected a prebuilt configured package plus warranty from Evesham because it has a history in the marketplace. I did the initial research via the internet then completed the order over the phone. I was very happy with the experience – they quoted 10 days delivery and I received it in five."

Recommended "I'm reasonably PC-literate but, from my experience, unless you are prepared to put in the time to build a system and really know what you are doing, then prebuilt systems plus warranty are [more] cost-effective in the long term."

Your money's worth

Two years ago, PC World was pushing its Advent Ego, with a 450MHz K6-2 processor, 64MB of SDRAM, 8.7GB hard disk, CD-ROM drive, 4MB graphics card and 17in monitor for £999 including VAT. How things have changed. Checking out the company's website a few weeks ago, PC World was selling an HP 491 PC with a 2.2GHz Pentium 4 chip, 256MB of RAM, 40GB hard disk, CD-RW/DVD combo drive, a 64MB nVidia GeForce4 MX 420 graphics card, 17in monitor and Windows XP for the same price.

You can even get a high-spec notebook for a similar amount. For £1,028 inc VAT, Dabs.com has an HP OmniBook XE3 which houses a 1.06GHz Intel Celeron processor with 128MB of SDRAM, 20GB hard drive, 14.4in TFT (thin film transistor) colour display, DVD/CD-RW combo drive, modem, LAN capabilities and Windows XP.

example of such a firm. Even some of its notebooks have several processor, memory, CD/DVD drive, hard disk and monitor options.

"Telephone sales give you the same opportunity as showrooms to gauge the quality of a business," Evesham's Worth points out. "Customers can ask questions and get a feel for how they will be treated. Some customers feel that talking to enthusiastic salesmen face to face is not a particularly good use of their time. For them, the telephone is ideal; they can ask their questions and get answers without having to move from their fireside."

Machines that are built to order are usually a better specification than those in a shop for the same price. The manufacturer doesn't have the overheads of a shop and can use the very latest components.

Ordering online

An increasingly popular buying option is to purchase over the internet. This is often part and parcel of the modern mail order business, and high street stores nowadays frequently have websites for online

ordering as well as a showroom presence. However, there are also PC traders that are almost solely internet-based. To cater for users of all abilities, shopping online has been made a much more user-friendly process. It's also more secure than it

Safety first (and second)

Whatever hardware or software you buy and wherever you decide to buy from, we advise taking a few precautions. We detail these every month in ConsumerWatch (see page 38), but here's a quick recap.

- **Take credit** Buy using a credit card whenever possible to protect yourself if the company should go out of business. But remember, some companies make a surcharge for credit card sales. If buying using the vendor's credit scheme, double-check what APR you'll be paying. Is the payment protected? What happens if you lose your job and can't keep up repayments?
- **Do your homework** Find out details of the warranty that's included as they vary wildly. Does it cover parts and labour? Is it onsite or return to base? How long does it last? Systemax gives a standard three-year warranty on all PCs with free lifetime technical support. Rock Direct offers an insurance-backed three-year warranty on its notebooks that covers parts, labour and carriage. Watford offers four different types – onsite, support contract, parts and labour, and extended – all of varying duration.
- **Be wary of extended warranties** Some companies give you a 12-month warranty and try to persuade you to pay to extend the cover period. It's up to you whether the peace of mind is worth the extra cost but you might want to check out our

warranty special in ConsumerWatch, starting on page 44, before you give in to the salesperson's patter.

- **Check delivery times** When buying mail order, how long will delivery take? Don't sign for goods you haven't checked without writing something to that effect on the delivery sheet.
- **Keep a record** Keep all your paperwork, including emails. Get the name of your salesperson in case you need to get back to them. If you have problems, does the firm have a helpline and, if so, how much will it cost per minute?
- **Be prepared** Think carefully about what you want before you buy, especially if you're a first timer. What do you want to do with your PC? Is it for business or home use? If you want to use it for gaming, you'll need different specs from one used for word processing. If you're going to be doing DTP (desktop publishing) or graphics, don't skimp on monitor size or you'll end up squinting at the screen.
- **Ask for an explanation** Salespeople may occasionally ask tricky questions. If you don't understand the options they're offering, ask them to explain. Buying a PC is a major purchase so don't rush into a decision or let yourself be pressured into it.
- **Be informed** Talk to friends. Ask what system they've got, where it came from and find out how happy they are with it. Read *PC Advisor*, check out our website and get advice from our forum members.

used to be, with many safeguards to protect your credit card details. This, too, makes it a more attractive option than it was in the past.

Dell's machines are an excellent example of systems that can be easily customised online to your own specifications. Its website uses

an easy-to-follow series of checkable options; you simply tick the checkbox beside your choice. All upgrade prices are clearly marked, as are any pieces of information that will help you make a decision such as which cable your chosen printer requires. There's even a home installation option.

Such useful additional information lends itself to online ordering. Evesham's Worth states, "We have more flexibility to be interactive and can notify customers of special and, particularly, short-term offers.

"We can advertise availability without disappointing people – as soon as the stock is gone, we can change our online advert, which you can't do in print. People who use websites tend to be confident about what they want. I think it's fair to say these customers are also very knowledgeable about the PC industry in general – they will probably have already trawled the web for feedback on how the various PC suppliers perform."

Build your own PC

More knowledgeable readers may choose a DIY route as this offers the most

flexibility. This is becoming a more popular way to get exactly the system you want. If you're not experienced enough to put the parts together yourself, it's usually possible to find someone who will do this for you, either as a friend or as part of their business. If you're not sure whether this option will save you money or whether it's just beyond your capabilities, turn to our *Build your own PC* workshop (starting on page 182) and find out exactly what expense and expertise is involved.

Self-building is not a first-time buyer option unless you like living life on the edge. Constructing a PC is a relatively straightforward business but you do need some knowledge about how part A plugs into slot B and you also need to ensure that all the components you buy will be compatible with each other. If in doubt, get advice from the vendor. The advantage is that you can buy exactly what you need, you don't have any unwanted components or peripherals left over and you end up with just the PC you wanted. ■

Case study five: custom built PC at home

Name Stag (online nickname)

Job Quality manager in IT

Based Manchester

Bought Built his own PC with chosen components

Experience Stag is an experienced PC user and has bought several systems in the past. This time, he decided to specify all his own hardware requirements and to build the system he wanted from scratch. "My last lot of hardware was bought from MicroDirect in Manchester. It's quite a large company with two showrooms in Manchester. It also offers mail order. I regularly use Ebuyer too. At the time it was slightly cheaper to buy on the internet, but the shop was very competitive and I could collect the parts that day. I have purchased from there many times and had no problems."

Recommends: "I would definitely choose the same route again, or purchase components online depending on the price difference, availability at the time and how soon I needed the PC." However, Stag adds a note of caution: "If you've never been inside a PC before it is very daunting building it yourself. It is also difficult to get any support from the suppliers if you are having problems."

Case study four: configured PC via website

Name Anne

Occupation Retired

Based Canvey Island, Kent

Bought Dell-configured system, bought online

Experience "I bought my PC from the Dell website, where I'd purchased a previous PC with no problems. This second time I customised the PC and was able to specify exactly what I needed. I shopped online because it allowed me to think carefully about what I wanted and keep returning to the site as I remembered items needed that had previously been forgotten. I also waited until Dell had a sale on."

Recommended "I'm happy with my online purchasing experience. It was much better than an impulse buy in PC World. There was no pressure from salesmen, something guaranteed either to make you buy or completely turn you off. I would wholeheartedly recommend this way of buying to anyone who has done their homework and is quite certain of the PC that is ideal for them. I would certainly repeat the experience for a third time."