

welcome

PC buyers want high-powered super-machines that will never go wrong, and suppliers in this competitive market have no choice but to sell them this dream. Unfortunately, this leaves little revenue to cover technical support – how to break the cycle?

This month we publish the results of the first *PC Advisor* customer satisfaction survey, a culmination of months of research to provide real data on customers' experiences of aftersales service from PC suppliers.

If you're expecting some suppliers to be praised as the paragons of service and others to be damned, then you will be disappointed. There are no PC suppliers we can righteously tell you don't deserve to be in business, nor are there any above reproach. The way the PC business works mitigates against the provision of a high level of post-sales service.

We don't need no education

A PC is far more complicated than any other device you are likely to own. It has so many permutations of software and hardware that they can all never be tested fully. Every time you turn the PC on it is subtly different from the last time you used it.

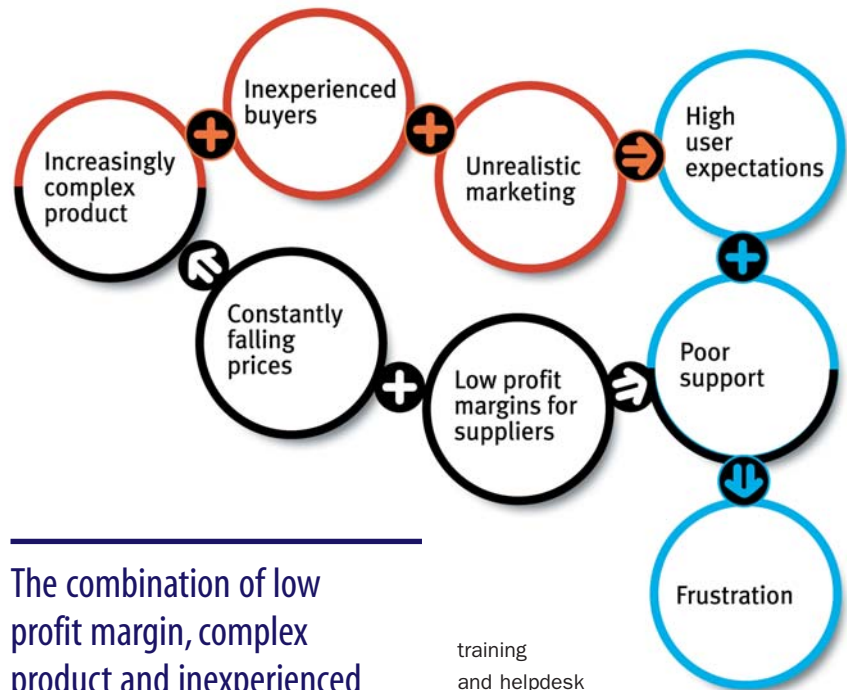
But PCs are often bought by people who have very little experience of their complexity or quiriness – a sure recipe for frustration and disappointment.

The complexity of the product combined with the inexperience of the user necessitate a high level of support. But even though this is the case, it wouldn't be such a problem if the expectations of the average customer weren't so high.

But PC buyers are a very demanding audience. Let's face it: we are sold PCs on the promise that they are easy to use and will revolutionise our lives. Customers don't just expect not to have to pay for support, they don't expect to need support at all.

Spiralling complexity

But suppliers cannot provide a high level of support because their profit margins, already slender enough, are constantly under pressure from falling prices. They maintain their margins only by providing higher specifications in their machines. Unfortunately greater functionality



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inevitably means more complexity, thus continuing the circular equation of misery.

This combination of low profit margin, complex product and inexperienced users with high expectations is costing the PC business dear.

How can we break the circle? You can't restrict the sale of PCs to those who are competent and don't need support. You can't expect the PC suppliers to put up their prices to leave a margin to provide support either; that would penalise those customers who don't need it. Nor can you put warnings on PC marketing collateral (Government warning: PCs may seriously try your patience.)

Risky business

In the corporate market it's long been recognised that the purchase price of a computer is only a small proportion of the total cost of ownership. Services like consultancy, installation, integration,

training and helpdesk support are seen as necessary on the part of the customer to get full use out of their investment in IT, and are even desirable for the supplier because they produce a higher profit margin.

With such slender margins on selling hardware, you'd think PC suppliers would be keen to introduce services for consumers in the form of training and a roster of support services charged on a rising scale.

But then that would break the myth about PCs being easy to use. Customers don't expect to need training or support. No supplier wants to be the one persuading a first-time buyer they need to purchase a training and support package that will double the cost of their PC.

The Office of Fair Trading is currently conducting an investigation into IT consumer goods and services. It will be interesting to see what conclusions Britain's premier watchdog comes to, especially regarding the story of simple operation that PC suppliers have for years been allowed to peddle. ■

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