THE MONTH IN FOCUS

Our online poll asked for people's views on PC makers' warranties and the results were shocking – over 87 percent of respondents thought they were a rip-off. The EC says Europe is seriously lagging behind in techno innovation. So while Sony releases an ever-more advanced robot, as if to prove the EC's point, Panasonic say it is to close UK plants.

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Warranties are a rip-off, say PC Advisor respondents

When we asked for your views on warranties you told it like you see it and, while Dixons objects, *Which?* agrees
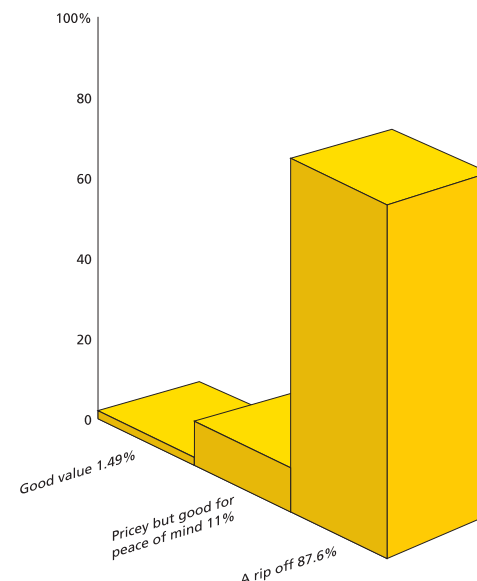
The people have spoken – warranties sold by electrical retailers are a rip-off, according to nearly nine out of 10 respondents to a PCAdvisor.co.uk poll on the subject. We asked almost 1,500 people and, with 87.6 percent against, this is the most condemnatory response we've ever seen. The overwhelming result reflects the bitterness expressed in a number of warranty-related threads running in our *ConsumerWatch* forum.

Just 1.5 percent of respondents consider electrical retailers' warranties to be good value for money, while 11 percent prefer to err on the side of caution and reckon that, though pricey, these warranties are good for peace of mind.

The results reinforce a recent mystery shopping investigation by the OFT (Office of Fair Trading), which has convinced the British Retail Consortium that its self-regulation may not be working. OFT's undercover shoppers found that when a faulty product is returned to a retail store, sales staff tended to pass on responsibility to the manufacturer of the goods. However, under the Sale of Goods Act it is the retailer which is responsible for products being 'fit for their purpose'.

And that's before taking into account the manufacturer's standard one-year warranty, which customarily includes free repair or replacement without dispute.

Dixons Store Group, which includes PC World, Dixons, Currys and The Link, rebuffed the complaints. "Around 70 percent of customers who renew their [coverplan] agreements do so more than once, so we must be doing something right," said a spokesman for the company.

But Mike Naylor, senior researcher for *Which?* magazine, points out that the cost of the repairs is often far less than the cost of the warranty. "You'd be better off saving the money and then dipping into it if you're unlucky enough to damage the goods", he said.

• Find out what your fellow readers thought and learn more about the OFT's investigation at PCAdvisor.co.uk. Simply type 'warranties' or 'special report' into the Quick search box, situated at the top of the screen

Panasonic to shed more UK jobs

Matsushita, better known as Panasonic, will close its mobile phone factory in the UK by the end of 2001 with the loss of 350 jobs, the company announced at the beginning of November. The Berkshire factory, founded in 1988, manufactures mobile phones mainly for the European market. With the closure of the Thatcham plant, Matsushita will shift its European mobile phone production to a factory in the Czech Republic from April 02, said Yasuharu Enda, a Matsushita spokesman.

"UK pounds are becoming more expensive, which is tough for a Japanese company," Enda explained. "But sluggish demand is the main reason. Inventory is increasing and we need to move our production base to the Czech Republic where labour costs and taxes are lower."

Matsushita has an affiliate company and two factories in the UK. It announced in March 01 that the other plant, a mobile phone packaging centre in Portsmouth, will be closed in March 02. A total of 550 jobs – 350 from Thatcham and 200 from Portsmouth – will be lost due to the closures, Enda said.

Europe must stoke IT fires

Europeans are trailing the US in technological innovation and this is reflected in our standard of living, says the European Commission. The EU's lack of urgency in bringing cutting-edge technologies to market is causing it to lag behind the US in competitiveness and living standards, the EC said in its annual report.

"For most sectors, R&D [research and development] intensity is higher in the US than in the EU. In office machinery and computers, research intensity in the US is three times greater than in the EU," said Erkki Liikanen, commissioner for Enterprise and the Information Society, in Brussels in mid-November.

Technology-driven industries have been a key aspect in driving productivity increases in the US for longer than the the EU, Liikanen said. "In bad times, short-term issues often dominate the policy agenda. However, neglecting our long-term priorities in the present economic slowdown would be a serious mistake. Only a dynamic and competitive enterprise sector can pull our economies into a new upturn," stated Liikanen.

One way of tracking the health of the IT industry in a given country is to measure the nation's success in international markets. Liikanen pointed out that, when it comes to hi-tech products, the EU's total exports are only about two-thirds of the corresponding US share. Although almost all EU member states increased the share of hi-tech products in their total exports between 1999 and 2000, "the differences relative to the US and Japan remain substantial.

"This gap underlines the need for continued and increased efforts to restructure, innovate and adapt new technologies. Behind the successful and innovative companies are always people with ideas and a willingness to take risks," says Liikanen.

> "Behind the successful and innovative companies are always people with ideas and a willingness to take risks"
>
> **Erkki Liikanen, european commissioner**

New Aibo robot pet more Metal Mickey than mimic moggy

Sony has unwrapped its latest Aibo entertainment robot. However, this futuristic-style model looks more like a cheap knock-off version of the cuter, cuddlier models that were also released recently.

Below the neck, the new Aibo – the ERS-220 – bares a resemblance to Sony's first edition, the ERS-110, and its successor, the ERS-210. However, from the neck up things are drastically different. Aibo's new head, complete with 21 flashing lights and a retractable headlight, makes the new model a lot more robot-like than pet-like.

"That's really what the Aibo is – a robot and not a puppy dog or a cat," said a Sony spokesperson. "The general public thought of [Aibo] as a replacement for a pet and it really never was intended as that."

Hardware-wise, the other main changes in the ERS-220 are in the number of joints. The new Aibo has no moveable ears or a tail and so only offers 16 degrees of freedom compared to 20 on the previous model.

On the software side, Sony has updated the Aibo system to allow for a 75-word vocabulary and enhanced photo-taking capability. A new package, Aibo Step, lets owners change the noise the ERS-220 makes when it walks, while Aibo Boost causes the robot to display emotions, such as excitement, alertness or curiousness.

← Sony's latest Aibo is a departure from previous models – it's less dog and more Dalek
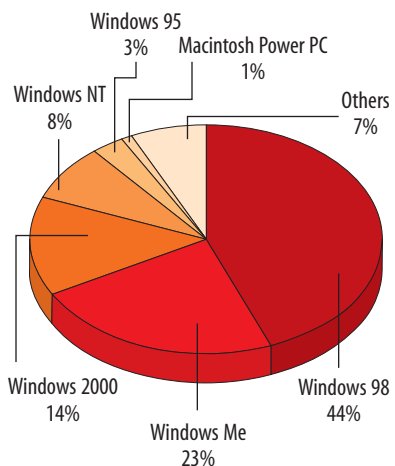
Daily news from www.pcadvisor.co.uk

To find out what's going in the world of IT, with stories from all over the world, log on to www.pcadvisor.co.uk and look for Latest news.

OUR LIVES IN NUMBERS: operating systems

- Windows 95 3%
- Macintosh Power PC 1%
- Windows NT 8%
- Others 7%
- Windows 2000 14%
- Windows Me 23%
- Windows 98 44%

Ever wondered what our website gets up to behind your back? Nothing bad, don't worry, but one thing it has to do is ask what operating system you're using. Our latest figures show that Microsoft rules, with almost no Macs looking in.

DTI backs campaign for safer online shopping

The DTI (Department of Trade and Industry) has mounted a safer internet shopping campaign to prepare people for the Christmas spending spree. The campaign, which includes a 10-point guidance list, aims to raise awareness about 'e-shopping' and reassure people that it's safe to buy goods online.

A survey was conducted in September 01 by the DTI, in association with pollsters Mori, to determine people's attitudes towards online shopping. The poll showed that people are still concerned over safety, even though they're buying more over the web.

The DTI's survey revealed that despite the popularity of online buying, with around 12 million respondents having purchased goods online, 47 percent of people were concerned about credit card fraud and 32 percent were worried about giving out personal information over the internet. And it's quite clear why. Over the past year there have been a number of serious 'glitches' by companies selling goods online, which have done nothing to increase people's trust of the internet and e-shopping.

At the end of November, BTopenworld, one of the companies that pledged its support for the campaign, admitted it had been infected by the BadTrans.B virus. This internet worm gives hackers access to customers' credit card details, and BTopenworld may have passed it on to 1.5 million customers.

• For the DTI's guidelines on internet shopping go to www.consumer.gov.uk

Antivirus protection is important, say readers

The prevalent threat of viruses has curtailed the growth of e-commerce and has been blamed for spreading unnecessary fear among computer users. Experts are now saying that people should be careful not to get wrapped up in the hype.

The number of viruses reported each year to antivirus firm McAfee is about 60,000, while Sophos has seen a growth of about 20 percent per month during 2001, receiving around 1,200 reports about viruses each month.
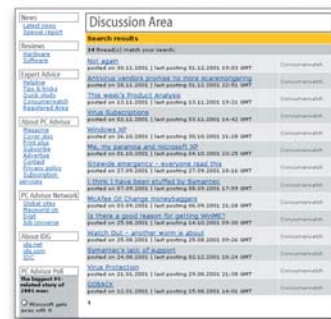
But only a small minority of these viruses – about four percent – can cause actual damage to systems. "It is easier than you can imagine to write a virus," said Graham Cluely, senior technology consultant at Sophos. He adds that only a small minority of people can be bothered to do so.

"Although scaremongering may have encouraged some people to install security patches, on the whole it just damages the credibility of people in the antivirus industry," says Cluely.

McAfee's antivirus expert Jack Clark agrees: "We attack every virus that is sent to us, but [scaremongering] and dead ends waste time when we could be fighting real viruses."

But it seems *PC Advisor* readers think that, even though there might be commercial imperative to antivirus firms banging on about getting protected, the protection afforded by security programs is worth it.

In a response board set up in conjunction with our online edition of this story, your comments were unanimous. "Give me viral hysteria over complacency or ignorance any day," said one reader. For more on this, go to the *ConsumerWatch* forum at www.pcadvisor.co.uk/registered and search for 'antivirus'.

Robots of the deep
From March 02 thousands of robots will be clinging to the bottom of our oceans to help the Met Office forecast the weather. Project Argo will send free-drifting robots to depths of around 2,000m. They will then float to the surface every 10 days to beam results to the Met Office.

Is it a PC? No! It's supercomputer
A six-teraflop supercomputer designed for severe weather forecasting, earthquake modelling and other projects was unveiled recently at the Pittsburgh Supercomputing Center in the US. For your information, a teraflop equates to one trillion floating operations per second. Pittsburgh's new supercomputer is the second biggest in the world, beaten only by IBM's 7.226TF ASCI White.

IBM releases pixie drives
IBM has launched hard disks that were manufactured using its cutting-edge 'pixie dust' technology. The Deskstar 120GXP, the Travelstar 60GH and the Travelstar 40GN all store about four times as much data per square inch as previous drives. Officially called antiferromagnetically coupled media, pixie dust comprises a three-atom-thick layer of the precious metal Ruthenium between two magnetic layers on a disk.

TDK takes to the wireless
TDK has noticed that most of us are still desperate for Bluetooth, and has released a Palm-connected Bluetooth wireless device. The blueM slides on to the back of a Palm, connecting via the docking port on the bottom of the handheld. It allows the device to communicate with any Bluetooth-enabled device within range, including PCs, notebooks, printers and handhelds. Prices are around £150.

Comdex special

We sent two intrepid journalists to the Comdex Fall IT show in Las Vegas to see what state the IT industry is in. Overall, the answer was 'struggling', but there's certainly some interesting kit on the horizon, including USB 2.0 and Intel's Mobile Pentium 4 chip

The power of Intel's new mobile processors

Intel took the lid off its next generation of mobile processor, the Mobile Pentium 4 chip, at the Comdex IT show in Las Vegas, in November. The processor should be out at the end of the first quarter of 2002. One sideline improvement is that the Mobile Pentium 4 chipset, the 845, will support DDR (double data rate) RAM.

Intel's P4 processor will support a 400MHz frontside bus across the range, which seems to allow for future developments in SDRAM (synchronous dynamic RAM technology – that is, beyond 266MHz of DDR RAM.

Intel refused to talk about what speeds the Mobile Pentium 4 processor would achieve on release. However, according to an industry-only Intel roadmap seen by *PC Advisor,* the power will range from 1.7GHz for high-end users to 1.4GHz for mainstream consumer use.

Why notebooks need this kind of power is a question few manufacturers will address – even Intel sidestepped the issue when asked. Indeed, do laptop users need this pace in a notebook when, by the second quarter of 2002, they will have 2.2GHz to 2.4GHz desktop units available to them? The 'traditional' place for high-power applications, then, is unclear. To find out more, see the Intel interview, which features on the Comdex video on this month's cover disc.

Comdex round-up

Handhelds and other 'non-standard' computers appeared to be the bread and butter of the Comdex IT show. Bill Gates lauded the tablet/notebook in his keynote speech, while companies showed off a variety of PDAs (personal digital assistants) and add-ons.

The oddest thing displayed at Mobile Focus, a round-up for analysts and the press of the latest and upcoming smaller devices, was a Handspring Visor module that can give you a massage. The Raycom device works by sending electrical impulses down two wires. These are connected to pads, which are similar to those a person wears when getting a cardiograph.

We also clapped eyes on Ericsson's much-coveted T66 mobile phone (above), which should be out in the UK by the time you read this. Plus, there were Nokia's Bluetooth headsets (left), which are better looking than even Ericsson's latest headset. For an in-depth look at the show, see our Comdex video on this month's cover disc.

Compaq bungs out slim systems

Declaring the PC far from dead, Compaq unveiled its Evo D500, a space-saving, ultra-slim desktop that runs quietly even when sporting Intel's fastest processor. Compaq plans to ship the first unit, running Intel's Celeron chip, in the first quarter of 2002. PCs based on Intel's next-generation Pentium 4 chip will ship sometime after that, said Jeri Callaway, Compaq vice president and general manager of the access business group. Compaq did not disclose pricing.

Mounted horizontally, the D500 takes up less space on a desk than a 17in monitor. Using its bundled stand, you can also place the Evo on its side and run it as a super-thin tower.

A specially designed cooling system enables the PC to safely operate the future Pentium 4 chips. That same system should make the D500 more people-friendly – running as much as 50 percent quieter than previous desktop PCs, Callaway said.

Son of USB is upon us

USB 2.0 seems to have walked the race with FireWire to become the de facto connectivity standard, with big names such as Sony, Adaptec and Plextor showing their support for the interface at Comdex.

This may come as a surprise, given the troubled introduction of the initial USB specification. Although more than adequate for printing and scanning, when it came to bandwidth-hungry applications like storage and video, USB 1.1 just couldn't cut the mustard. Critics also highlighted its 12Mbps (megabits per second) transfer speed compared to FireWire's 400Mbps.

USB 2.0 offers a hefty theoretical maximum 480Mbps of bandwidth. According to the USB-IF (USB implementers forum), this means you burn a CD six times faster and get full-motion 30fps (frames per second) video where 1.1 could only manage 20fps.

Jungle bungle delays relaunch

Jungle.com is girding its loins as it prepares for a major overhaul of its online shopping mall. This comes after a massive backlog of 2,000 orders forced the online retailer to push its relaunch into the new year.

The relaunch, which is scheduled to go live on 8 January 02, was originally scheduled for the end of October 01. However, the deadline had to be postponed after the implementation of a new information management system resulted in a scrambling of order details.

The bungle provoked a raft of threads in the *PC Advisor* website's *ConsumerWatch* forum, including a record-breaking 126 postings to the thread entitled 'Jungle.com and how three days equals one month plus'.

At the time of going to press, Jungle.com appeared to be on the verge of getting its house in order, with the number of complaints to *PC Advisor* slowing to a trickle. Reader Mark Bridgett, for example, had finally received his copy of Microsoft's Office XP almost two months after placing his order with Jungle.com.
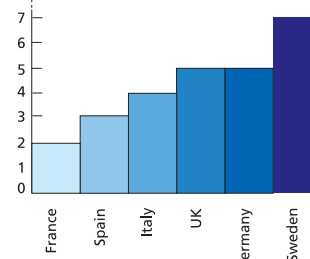
Meanwhile, *PC Advisor* forum contributor Graham Friar had just received a refund, weeks after Jungle.com promised a full repayment having failed to deliver an HP 959 colour printer. Mr Friar originally placed his order at the beginning of September. At the height of Jungle.com's crisis in early October, around 2,000 customers were affected. A month later the figure still stood at around 800.
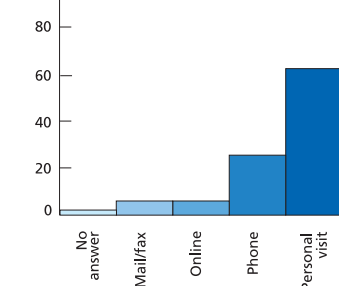
OUR LIVES IN NUMBERS: online banking

Percentage of people who bank online

Preferred banking methods in the UK

Despite the expansion of online services, 63 percent of UK consumers prefer face-to-face banking.

Source: Datamonitor

Cybercrime deal gets rubber stamp

An international agreement on cybercrime was composed in Budapest in November by countries including the US, Canada, Japan and South Africa. This follows months of negotiations between Europe and America.

Governments, police forces and industry specialists have been working together to create a uniform approach to online offences, including everything from hacking and credit card fraud to child pornography.

The Council of Europe, set up to tackle the ever-growing issue of internet crime, was responsible for drafting the international convention. "Cybercrime and cyberterrorism represent a serious challenge to society as a whole and this convention provides the first co-ordinated and international response to this challenge," said Hans Christian Kruger, deputy secretary general of the council of Europe, at the signing.

The UK has already stepped up its internet security policies in the wake of the 11 September tragedies, giving police the ability to track the email communications and internet movements of any person suspected of terrorism.

The cybercrime treaty lays down common definitions of certain criminal offences, defines methods for criminal investigations and prosecutions and outlines methods for international communication.

• A full copy of the draft convention can be found at www.conventions.ceo.int

news in brief   news in brief   news in brief   news in brief   news in brief   news in brief   news in brief   news in brief

I can see clearly now
Sony is spicing up its Clie T400 PDA (personal digital assistant), launching a colour-screen version dubbed the PEG-T600. It features a digital-still camera card, GPS (global positioning system) and 16MB of RAM – double that of the monochrome model. But these extras swell the T600 to a thickness of 12.5mm, compared to the 9.9mm T400, and a weight of 138g, compared to 122g.

MS finally presses start
Microsoft's hotly anticipated Xbox games console has finally had its US launch, though UK households are going to have to wait until next year. Microsoft originally unveiled Xbox at a games conference in March 2000. It looks a worthy competitor for the PlayStation 2, with a 733MHz Pentium III processor, a cutting-edge 250MHz nVidia graphics chip and 64MB of DDR (double data rate) RAM.

Mini memory device has hefty price tag
Sony unveiled its MicroVault, a cool, keychain-sized flash memory device. Available in 16, 32, 64 and 128MB capacities, it eliminates the hassle of dedicated drives, adapters or drivers. However, this convenience comes at a not-so-cool price – the 128MB unit could set you back £200 or more.

LCDs flatten cathode ray tube
CRT (cathode ray tube) monitors are being eclipsed by flat-panel displays, according to a PCAdvisor.co.uk poll. Of more than 1,000 respondents, 41.7 percent thought the race was over. LCD (liquid crystal display) shipments make up 12.4 percent of the worldwide monitor market, according to researcher Display Search. Behind the boom is a 40 percent price drop in the past year.