

BEST BUYS FOR 2002

Each month, our Top 10 charts bring you the Best Buys and Recommended products across a variety of categories. But what makes a top product is all about your needs – and that can go beyond pure performance. Benn Camm-Jones showcases award-winning hardware and software of the past year to help you choose the right tools to see you through the next 12 months

★ Business PCs

Mesh Matrix XP 1900-R85

With the latest PC specs improving every month, an office computer needs to be cutting-edge unless you want your business to be behind six months down the line. So, offering ground-breaking components and great value for money, we're placing our bets on Mesh's speed king, the XP 1900-R85. Fantastically fast, packed with RAM and backed up by an 80GB hard drive, our reviewers loved this machine. For the complete spec line-up, see page 79.

Mesh: 020 8208 4702; www.meshcomputers.com; £1,399



Also consider...

Hi-Grade Meridian XP1.8G PA

With a 1.8GHz Athlon XP chip and 512MB RAM, the Hi-Grade is certainly no slouch in the performance stakes. The Meridian should speed through the graphics-heavy presentations or spreadsheets so beloved of business users.

Hi-Grade: 020 8532 6100; www.higrade.com; £1,439

Evesham Evolution 2000

Our second recommendation is Evesham's Pentium 4-based PC. The Evolution's excellent hardware line-up has proved its stamina, taking an award in our Top 10 chart for the last four months.

Evesham: 0870 160 9500; www.evesham.com; £1,499

★ Home/work PCs

Hi-Grade Meridian N1400PV12

A PC for home workers needs to be fast and capable but, with price a greater consideration, breakneck speed tends to be less important. Enter the Meridian N1400PV12. This 1.4GHz Athlon XP system offers the best of both worlds, proving you can have it all. A great price and astounding speed make this our choice for small business or home users. On the down side, Hi-Grade offers only a 17in monitor, but graphics are ably supported by a GeForce3 card and the audio setup is also impressive.

Hi-Grade: 020 8532 6100; www.higrade.com; £849



Also consider...

NEC Powermate i-Select XL3

NEC's 1.4GHz Athlon-based Powermate is £350 more than the Hi-Grade, but it does come with a reassuring three-year onsite warranty, a DVD-R/RW drive, a 19in monitor and a bulging software bundle.

NEC: 0870 010 6326; www.nec-online.com; £1,199

Panrix Magnum 1400PA

Coming in £50 cheaper than the NEC is Panrix's Magnum 1400PA. Not only is this 1.4GHz PC fast, with over 40GB of storage, but it's also ideal for peripherals freaks because there are no fewer than five USB hubs where you can attach digital cameras, scanners and so forth.

Panrix: 0113 244 4958; www.panrix.com; £1,149

★ Low-cost home PCs

Multivision Vision Elite XP LT

Looking for a low-cost system that can cope with many tasks, such as sending email, surfing the internet, homework and games for the kids and occasional work tasks, like the dreaded household accounts? This Multivision system is ideal. It's fantastic value at £699, especially if you're looking to buy a new system with Windows XP preinstalled. The monitor lets it down slightly, but Multivision bundles a nice Logitech keyboard and mouse and the webcam is a handy extra for taking advantage of XP's built-in video-conferencing capabilities.

Multivision: 0121 550 8000; www.multivision.co.uk; £699



Also consider...

Systemax A13000RV 1170

Sporting AMD's second-fastest processor, this 1.3GHz Athlon system has plenty of poke, plus our reviewers really liked its tall, elegant case – a bonus for a PC that's going to be adorning your living room or spare bedroom.

Simply: 0870 729 7364; www.simply.co.uk; £699

Compute It ValueMax Home Office 850

It may be right at the bottom of our Superbudget chart, but the ValueMax has been a regular entrant since August 01. Compute It bundles a printer with this system but there's no CD-RW. However, the Home Office could still be worth a look if you've less cash to splash.

Compute It: 0870 748 7487; www.it-pc.co.uk; £599

★ Notebooks

Dell Inspiron 8100

When it was first reviewed back in October 01, the Dell Inspiron 8100 scored a perfect 10 for build quality, features and performance. This portable is also blisteringly fast, so it's not surprising it is still such a hit with us. With a 1.13GHz Pentium III (one of the fastest mobile processors available) 256MB of RAM and a 48GB hard drive, the Inspiron 8100 puts many systems in our Power PCs chart to shame. Ideal for presentations, spreadsheets, the internet and more, this unit is the businessman's best friend.

Dell: 0870 907 5668; www.dell.co.uk; £1,999



Also consider...

Atlas Flyer 3400 1.2T Celeron

The Atlas Flyer may not be the fastest notebook in its price range, but you do get Windows XP, a 1.2GHz Intel Celeron processor, 256MB of RAM, a 30GB hard drive and 14.1in screen. There's even a DVD/CD-RW drive.

Hi-Grade: 020 8532 6111; www.hi-grade.com; £1,099

Samsung VM8090 CXTD

Samsung's VM8090 CXTD offers a still less pricey option for the cost-conscious notebook buyer. The 900MHz Celeron processor is plenty fastest enough for everyday tasks, and the silver and metallic blue casing will appeal to style gurus.

Samsung: 020 8862 9311; www.samsung.co.uk; £949

★ Subnotebooks

AJP M722

Subnotebooks are perfect for the occasional road warrior who needs more functionality than a handheld PC can offer, but not as much power as a notebook. AJP's 1.5kg M722 is fairly priced, features an 850MHz Pentium III processor and proved reasonably fast in our tests. In order to keep its subnotebook small and light, however, AJP has stripped it of drives. So if you require a CD, DVD or floppy disk you'll need to plug in external drives – an important point to remember if you're considering a subnotebook.

AJP: 020 8208 9700; www.ajp.co.uk; £1,249



Also consider...

Sony PCG-SR31K

Even lighter than the AJP M722 at 1.4kg, the PCG-SR31K's batteries will last for five and a half hours. Although the processor is only a 750MHz Pentium III, the Sony achieved a reasonable turn of speed. However, at £1,534, the PCG-SR31K isn't quite as good value as the AJP.

Sony: 0870 542 4424; www.vaio.sony-europe.com; £1,534

Rock Pegasus XS PIII-700

A cheaper buy is Rock's slender Pegasus. This 700MHz system comes with floppy disk and DVD-ROM drives which can be used simultaneously, as well as a quality keyboard and display.

Rock: 0870 990 9090; www.rockdirect.com; £1,399

★ Flat-panel displays

NEC MultiSync LCD1830

The fall in 15in flat-panel prices is great news for anyone looking to throw out their bulky old CRT monitor and treat themselves to a slimline LCD panel. The LCD1830's 18.1in screen actually boasts a viewable area equivalent to a 19.5in CRT. Hardware specifications are impressive, and include a 160 degree viewing angle, a 0.28mm pixel pitch and a 300:1 contrast ratio. Text definition is pin-sharp and the gorgeous colour palette is a visual treat.

NEC: 0845 121 9200; www.nec-monitors.com; £729



Also consider...

Taxan CrystalVision 780

An outstanding flat-panel, and a good size at 17.4in, the Taxan's image quality is second to none with a maximum resolution of 1,280x1,024 at a refresh rate of 75Hz and a pixel pitch of 0.27mm. The CrystalVision is quite bulky at 10kg, but this is still half the weight of a CRT.

Taxan: 01344 484 646; www.taxan.co.uk; £749

Diamond Technology 1510P

With its extensive range and variety of options, Diamond Technology's 1510P is a solid buy. Though not the most exciting flat-panel around, the 1510P is a slimline screen at a price you can't argue with.

Diamond: 01628 788 5000; www.diamondtechnology.co.uk; £330

★ 17in/19in CRT monitors

CTX EX710F

This superb 17in monitor has spent more than six months at the top of our chart. With its low price and excellent display the CTX EX710F remains just as good a buy as it was when we first reviewed it in May 01. Shadow mask units like this one are cheaper than aperture grille tubes and that keeps the price down to £153. Image quality is good with a dot pitch of 0.25mm and a maximum resolution of 1,600x1,200 at 75Hz. With a three-year onsite warranty, the CTX EX710F cannot be bettered for all-round good value.

CTX: 01923 810 800; www.ctxeurope.com; £153



Also consider...

Mitsubishi Diamond Pro 730

The 17in Diamond Pro shares the impressive hardware features of the CTX, but comes in £26 more expensive.

Mitsubishi: 0845 121 9200; www.mitsubishi.com; £179

Iiyama Vision Master Pro 451

The Vision Master Pro provides a superb display. No wonder it's been our favourite 19in CRT since July 01.

Iiyama: 01438 745 482; www.iiyama.co.uk; £306

LG Flatron 915FT Plus

With a dot pitch of 0.24mm and a maximum resolution of 1,600x1,200 at 85Hz, the 19in Flatron generates razor-sharp images.

LG Electronics: 01753 500 470; www.lge.co.uk; £265

★ Flatbed scanners

Visioneer OneTouch 8700 USB

It's truly amazing what a high-quality scanner you can buy for under £100 these days. The OneTouch 8700's optical resolution is a remarkable 1,200x4,800dpi (dots per inch) which, coupled with a 48bit colour depth, gives fantastic results. Our tests showed not only crisp quality across all scan jobs, but speedy delivery as well. Our only word of warning regards file size: an A4 file scanned at the highest resolution takes up a huge 1.5GB, so your PC needs a lot of storage space.

Visioneer: 01483 445 480; www.visioneer-europe.com; £83



Also consider...

Microtek ScanMaker 3800

Combining a low price with great features, the ScanMaker is a speedy unit with a good software bundle. It is a particularly good buy for anyone with an older PC as it scans produce small file sizes.

Microtek: 01327 844 880; www.microtekeurope.com; £66

Acer S2W 5300U

The Acer is a good looking scanner and, at £82, is a good buy too. It produces great results and is easy to use, but operates quite slowly. With an optical resolution of 1,200x2,400dpi and 48bit colour depth, the S2W 5300U also has enviable specifications.

Acer: 01633 628 600; www.acercm.co.uk; £82

★ Colour inkjet printers

Canon Bubble Jet S630

Canon's Bubble Jet S630 combines high print speed with a quality of output that's second to none. Graphics are flawlessly defined and, while text output can't match laser printer quality, it's as clean and crisp as that of any comparable inkjet. If we have a slight niggle, it's that with the Bubble Jet's high price tag you might expect lower running costs. Having said that, the rates of 2.1p and 6.2p for a page of mono and colour respectively are still far from excessive.

Canon: 0870 608 8833; www.canon.co.uk; £160



Also consider...

Epson Stylus Color 680

A firm favourite with the *PC Advisor* Reviews team, Epson's £59 Stylus Color 680 is great value for money with cheap, long-lasting toner cartridges. This printer's main strengths lie with graphics; text reproduction is less strong.

Epson: 0800 220 546; www.epson.co.uk; £59

HP PhotoSmart P1215

The P1215 offers outstanding performance, with vibrant graphics and clean character definition. It also features card slots, allowing you to bypass the PC and print out your snaps directly from a digital camera.

HP: 0870 547 4747; www.hp.com/uk; £195

★ Monochrome laser printers

Brother HL-1650

The Brother is a bulky piece of kit and at £519 it's not cheap. However, the HL-1650 is well equipped to cope with a heavy workload, so it comes out top in the monochrome laser printers category. The bundled network management software lets you share the Brother with several PCs. It knocks out 13ppm (pages per minute) and costs under a penny a page to run. The toner displays no streaking – even on tricky images and graphics. Overall, the HL-1650 is a very economical printer.

Brother: 0161 931 2354; www.brother.co.uk; £519



Also consider...

Kyocera Mita FS-1000+

At £299, the Kyocera Mita is a cheaper than the Brother. It also costs less than a penny per page to run. It only offers a parallel connection – ideal for use with an older PC – which lacks the simplicity of USB. No slouch at 11ppm, it's not quite as cumbersome as the HL-1650 either.

Kyocera: 0118 923 0789; www.kyocera.co.uk; £299

Canon LPB 810

Canon's low-priced, simple, no-frills printer is easy to set up. But its real selling point is its space-saving footprint. The U-shaped paper feed keeps it compact and, at 6.2kg, it is also very light.

Canon: 0800 252 223; www.canon.co.uk; £178

★ PDAs

Toshiba Pocket PC e570

The Toshiba e570's excellent hardware setup, combined with the new features of Pocket PC 2002, produce a PDA that can do every task you could reasonably ask of it – and a few more besides. This sleek silver device has handwriting recognition capabilities, and bundles Pocket Outlook and Word. There's a massive 64MB of RAM, and memory expansion is also possible via CompactFlash or Secure Digital slots. An impressive package, the e570 is currently the most capable personal digital assistant you can buy.

Toshiba: 01932 828 828; www.toshiba.co.uk; £399



Also consider...

Palm m505

The slightly cheaper Palm m505 is a solid, all-round performer and even boasts a colour screen. At just 1cm thick and weighing a mere 128g, the m505 will also fit neatly into a pocket.

Palm: 020 7365 9820; www.palm.com/europe; £339

Handspring Visor Pro

Handspring's Visor range of PDAs is well worth a look. Our pick is the value-for-money Visor Pro, which runs the Palm OS and comes with a generous 16MB of memory, which makes it the perfect device if you want to store images, games and web content and use demanding applications.

Handspring: 020 7309 0134; www.handspring.co.uk; £229

★ CD burners

Philips 20x10x40x

Philips' drive performed faultlessly in our labs, taking just three minutes 25 seconds to write our mixed test files to a CD-R – the fastest time we've seen by a long way. And performance didn't diminish when we tested it with CD-RWs: the 20x10x40x took just over five minutes to transfer the same files to a rewritable disc. Compatible with every CD format under the sun, this is a complete package for anyone who wants to burn their own CDs.

Philips: 0800 896 324; www.pcstuff.philips.com; £119



Also consider...

Plextor PlexWriter 24/10/40A

The PlexWriter was one of the first CD drives with 24-speed writing, and took just four minutes 22 seconds to write 336MB of data to a CD-R. However, some media may be unsuitable for 24-speed writing; check Plextor's website for compatibility.

Plextor: 01782 254 777; www.plextor.co.uk; £129

Cyberdrive 16x12x40x

This budget-priced drive held its own in our tests, writing 336MB to a CD-R in four minutes 18 seconds, and to a CD-RW in four minutes 26 seconds. But lack of buffer underrun support may waste media.

Cyberdrive: 01256 707 070; www.cyberdrive.com; £80

★ Office suites

Office XP

Microsoft takes the star prize in this category. Office XP doesn't look markedly different to its predecessors, which means you'll find it easy to use almost immediately. The changes that have been made are mainly to do with usability, although there are a couple of new features as well. These include Smart Tags, which pop up every time the software makes a correction for you and allow you the option of telling the suite not to make certain corrections in the future.

Microsoft: 0870 601 0100; www.microsoft.com; from £499, upgrade from £199



Also consider...

Corel WordPerfect Office 2002

Corel's suite is loaded with features and WordPerfect is one of the best word processors around, giving you a high degree of control over document formatting. The price is reasonable, too: £370 for the Professional edition and £302 for Standard.

Corel: 0800 581 028; www.corel.com; from £302

StarOffice

StarOffice is fantastic value as it's a free download, but this doesn't mean it's short on features. The suite runs on Windows, Linux or Sun's Solaris OS and you don't need to open a new application every time you want to work with a new type of data.

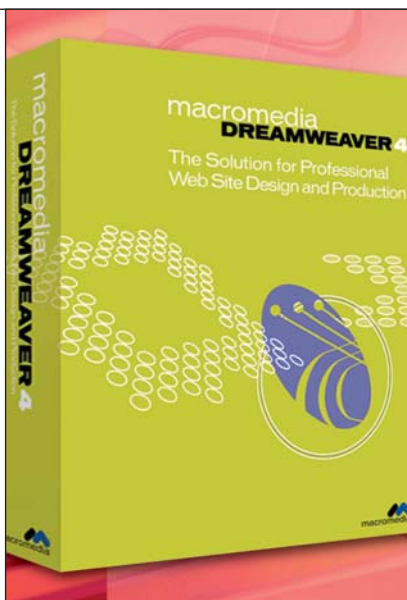
StarOffice: 01276 704 570; www.sun.com/star/staroffice/get.html; free download

★ Web design software

Macromedia Dreamweaver 4.0

A worthy winner of our web design category, Dreamweaver 4.0 has been designed to simplify the web page creation process with a host of easy-to-use tools. Syntax highlighting means that HTML tags are easily recognised from the surrounding text. The JavaScript debugger allows you to see exactly what is going on (and what's going wrong) as your code runs. O'Reilly's reference material will even help you with problems you might encounter with HTML, JavaScript and CSS (cascading style sheets).

Macromedia: 0800 169 8216; www.macromedia.com; £219



Also consider...

Namo WebEditor 4.0

Namo's WebEditor 4.0 is a basic package that even beginners could get to grips with, yet it's also sufficiently functional for someone who wants to manage a small business online. With a price tag that's under £80, it's a real bargain too.

Namo: 020 7221 4600; www.namo.com; £79.99

NetObjects Fusion MX

Fusion MX offers a hassle-free way to get your business online. This is another package that beginners will find easy to use, allowing you to create a professional looking and easily updatable website with the minimum of fuss.

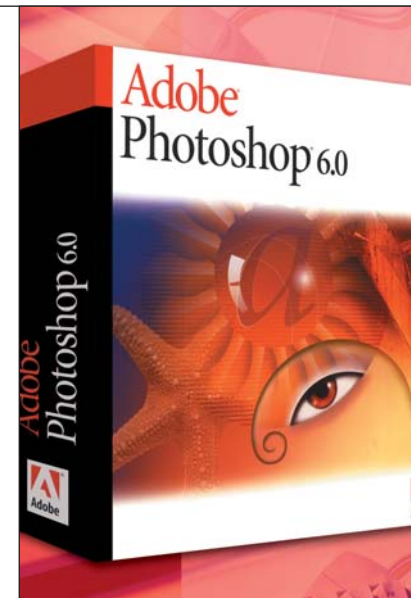
NetObjects: 01883 745 111; www.netobjects.com; £85, upgrade £55

★ Image-editing software

Adobe Photoshop 6.0

Photoshop is arguably the best image-editing package on the market and it effortlessly takes the top spot in this category. The price tag is a little higher than that of other image editors, but if you've ever used this package then you'll be prepared to pay the extra cash. The Adobe Photoshop interface is well laid out, incredibly straightforward and very easy to use. Version 6.0 also contains brand-new features, such as support for PDF and the ability to handle an unlimited number of graphics layers.

Adobe: 020 8506 4001; www.adobe.co.uk; £550



Also consider...

Macromedia Fireworks

Fireworks has been designed specifically for creating web graphics. This Macromedia vector-based image package lets you create and animate graphics and text for use on the web. Other useful features include a pop-up menu creator.

Macromedia: 0800 169 8216; www.macromedia.com; £219

Jasc Paint Shop Pro 7.0

Paint Shop Pro 7.0 is a comprehensive and impressive image editor at an affordable price. Although it remains somewhat in the shadow of Adobe Photoshop, it will delight digital photography enthusiasts as its digital camera integration is the best that we've seen.

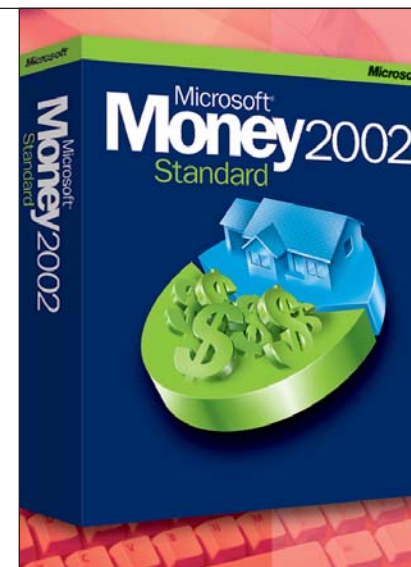
Jasc: 01295 258 335; www.jasc.com; £69.99

★ Accounting software

Microsoft Money 2001 Financial Suite

Sitting pretty at the top of the accounting software category is Microsoft Money 2001 Financial Suite. One of the best features about this application is the integration of Microsoft's financial website, MoneyCentral. This allows you to get online help with mortgages, savings and other such tricky topics. It is full of useful features and, as you can track income and other deposits, payments and forthcoming bills, you will be completely in control of your finances. At £43, it won't break the bank either.

Microsoft: 0870 601 0100; www.microsoft.com; £43



Also consider...

Quicken 2001 Deluxe

This program was only narrowly beaten to the top spot by Money 2001 Financial Suite. With many new features such as Smart Banking, which allows you to use Quicken for online banking, it's easy to see why it's so popular.

Intuit: 0800 585 058; www.intuit.co.uk; £51

Intuit QuickBooks 2001

Intuit QuickBooks is a great application if you are considering computerising your business accounts for the first time. It's versatile, easy to use and, as it's aimed at small business users, not badly priced at just £84.

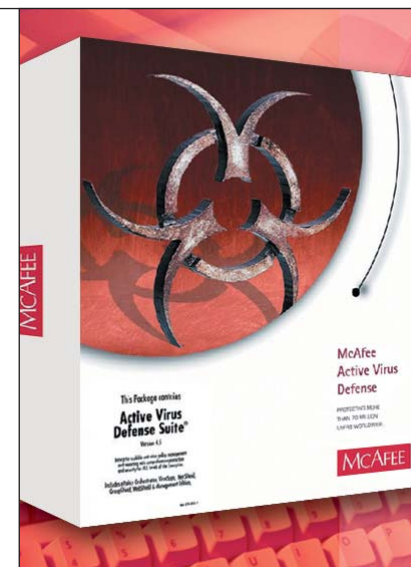
Intuit: 0800 585 058; www.quickbooks.co.uk; £84

★ Antivirus software

VirusScan Security Suite 4.5

Dr Solomon has been protecting our PCs for a number of years now. VirusScan Security Suite 4.5, which we rank number one, is the latest version aimed at small business users. It has a good interface, loads of features and excellent network support. As you install the software, VirusScan automatically fires up your web connection to download the latest virus databases file. At £41 per node for a 10-user, two-year licence, it is reasonably priced, too.

McAfee: 01753 217 500; www.mcafee2b.com; £41 per node for a 10-user, two-year licence



Also consider...

Norton Internet Security 2002

Norton's Internet Security protects your system from any type of virus. This powerful suite includes Norton AntiVirus, Personal Firewall, Privacy Control and Parental Control.

Symantec: 01628 592 222; www.symantec.com/nav; £42

PCNetSafe

PCNetSafe automatically encrypts data. A great, though, pricey package.

PCNetSafe: 01883 744 649; www.pcnetSAFE.com; £99 for a reader and two cards ■



See www.pcadvisor.co.uk/about/printplus.cfm for our 2002 digital camera recommendations