

Empty promises?

Warranties and customer service – two words that never wander far from the lips of *PC Advisor* readers and writers alike. So when does onsite actually mean onsite, and why do PCs never enlighten our lives like we expect them to?

The customer is king, goes the saying. But in the PC business we know it's only a figurehead position. It seems the supplier can dispense with the monarchy any time it likes. A no-quibble money-back returns policy is often taken for granted in general retail, over and above the 'fit for purpose' concept of consumer protection law. Try finding a mail-order PC supplier which will agree to a refund without lengthy debate with a customer services supervisor first.

Double standards

Having bought an onsite warranty for a washing machine, you can reasonably expect that if it breaks down during the warranty period, a technician will come to your home and repair it.

But if your PC breaks down, expect to spend hours on the phone with a technical support operator who talks you through half-a-dozen possible solutions before telling you that the machine must be returned to the manufacturer. Objecting on the grounds that you have an onsite warranty is fruitless: the technical support operator tells you it's a motherboard problem which can't be fixed in the field. Kiss goodbye to your PC for a week or two.

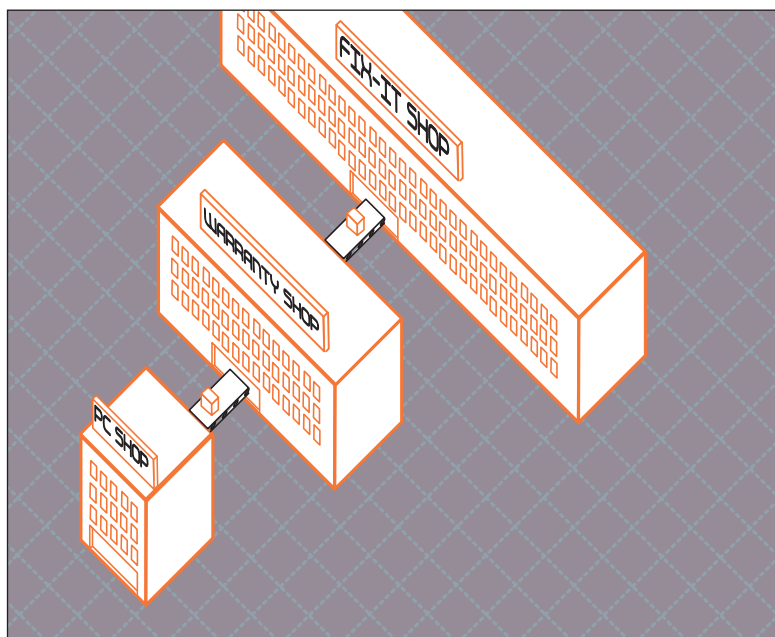
The problem occurs because PCs are sold as if they are like any other consumer durable. But a washing machine, hi-fi, TV or mobile phone is relatively simple compared to a PC. The result is too much technology in the hands of the ignorant.

Ever since PCs were sold to unsuspecting consumers en masse – for about the last seven years – the PC industry has been in denial that it created its own aftersales support problems

Reality PC

PCs are advertised as if they will change your life, bringing you new dimensions in communication, business efficiency, entertainment and personal productivity. It's all true, but only provided you have the technical proficiency to wield the PC like a craftsman wields his tools. The reality is more likely to be hours of frustration shouting at a screen displaying indecipherable error messages while listening to the supplier's helpline hold music.

Eventually, after much reading, browsing, trial and error, listening to 'experts' and zen-like patience, some of the fog lifts and the PC will begin to behave. Only then do the possibilities promised by the ads seem vaguely achievable. And after weeks of fruitless chagrin, being able to print a one-page letter seems like the pinnacle of business efficiency.



What is the solution? One route is to raise the level of knowledge among customers. PC suppliers often say that you can't buy a car without learning to drive. In other words, you don't buy a car and then moan to the dealer that you can't drive it. Cute analogy, but it doesn't absolve PC suppliers from their responsibilities.

PC suppliers are painfully aware of their reputation for poor customer service. In the course of researching various companies for our *Supplier profiles* section (see page 72), we are often told by suppliers that they want to delight their customers. They employ more customer support operators in their call centres and launch initiatives, such as Tiny's customer charter. Mostly these initiatives are aimed at managing customers' expectations, a euphemism for feeding customers the truth about the pitfalls of owning a PC in a palatable way.

Changing attitudes

Essentially, suppliers are reaping what they sowed in the 'good days' when they were box-shifters selling over-priced machines with little regard for customer support. Now that cavalier attitude has come back to haunt them.

Ever since PCs were sold to unsuspecting consumers en masse – for about the last seven years – the PC industry has been in denial that it created its own aftersales support problems. Therapists say that recognising a personality problem is half-way towards solving it. If that applies to the PC business, we've got a long way to go before consumers are truly and routinely satisfied. ■

Andrew Charlesworth