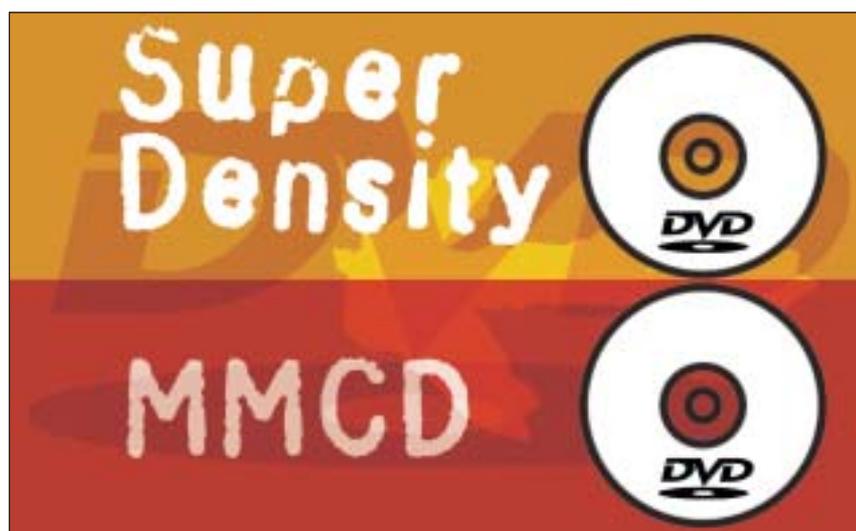


readers' writes

We know that PCs can drive you mad, but keyboards? Juggling a mouse and the number pad proves too complex for one righthanded reader, while others are still battling the less tangible frustrations of XP incompatibilities and poor aftersales service



Double standards

I am planning to upgrade to a DVD writer and have read your articles and Top 10 charts on the subject with interest. But I'm confused.

I want my new DVD writer to produce DVDs that will be compatible with the system that wins the current battle in the DVD recorder war. Isn't it therefore a bit premature for you to start making recommendations and for me to buy?

Your chart awarded the Ricoh MP125A-DP a Best Buy, but the review says that its DVD+R system is "not endorsed by the Forum", whatever that means.

Is it possible for you to provide a definitive explanation of compatibility issues and how they fit in with the new DVD recorder systems?

Colin Tyers, Bedford

Emma Northam replies: the standards battle that is currently taking place in the recordable DVD space has its roots in the formation of the single DVD-Video format in the mid-90s. Before the 10 companies that created the DVD Forum agreed on a single format there were two competing formats: Super Density backed by Toshiba and Matsushita (Panasonic) and MMCD (multimedia compact disc) backed by Sony and Philips.

The two sides eventually agreed to a common format, although friction between Sony and Philips and the other members was sometimes evident in issues such as patent licensing. However, it became most visible when Sony and Philips, along with HP and Ricoh, developed the DVD+RW format to compete with the DVD Forum-backed standard.

If you remain unwilling to side with one camp or the other just yet, choose a multi-format drive such as the DRU-500A offered by Sony. For a full explanation of what the various standards mean, see our Top 10 CD and DVD drives chart on page 251.

Steady on

It is distressing to read that your ConsumerWatch section's recommended approach to a complaint with a PC supplier is that a "steady reasonable persistence" pays off. This is a dreadful indictment of the quality of service given by PC suppliers – in that case it is Dell which has a reputation for good aftersales support.

In the last issue's Behind the news Andrew Charlesworth says "you get what you pay for" when it comes to support. Well, my recent experience of buying a PC system tells me that onsite warranty is either included in the price or

you can choose to pay for the level of support you require.

I have just ended a two-month horror story with one of your Top 10 recommended suppliers. I eventually threw in the towel and demanded a refund. Should I still be calm and apply "steady reasonable persistence" in this situation?

I would very much like to see the Top 10 charts include ratings for customer service – guaranteed onsite visit times and telephone response times or something similar. The OFT (Office of Fair Trading) report is right and customers already pay for aftersales support which, in my experience, has been dismal.

David Cobb, Herts

Andrew Charlesworth replies: we've been through this a dozen times. How can we put customer service ratings in the Top 10s unless we have a definable way of measuring it.

One PC is representative of all the PCs of that model. But one customer is not representative of all customers. We even say this on the intro page of the Reviews section every month. And as you'll see, it's an issue I've chosen to address in my Welcome column on page 18 this month.

The OFT report said the PC business is by and large doing a good job. I said aftersales support is inadequate and won't get any better until customers are used to paying for it – separately – as a matter of routine. You had a bad experience with a warranty that was included in the price of the PC. I think that proves me right.

Visit www.pcadvisor.co.uk/consumerwatch and talk to Multivision, Mesh, Higrade, Dell, Time, Evesham et al. Do they think we give them an easy ride? I think not.

Page perfect

I note the new issue nomenclature 'Spring 2003'. Does this mean fewer issues? On a different note, Tom Lucas got an easy

prize last month. The topic of manuals is an old bone of contention. But it is logical to put these tomes on a disc rather than add the price of print and shipping them to the product's cost. After all, once the user has got to grips with the product it is seldom referred to again.

As for the print friendliness of Adobe Acrobat, nothing could be easier. The manual for my camera is 240 pages thick – a hefty weight to cart around. But I found it a relatively pain-free matter to print selected pages (A5 format) of the topics I have difficulty with or need to mug up on because of infrequent use. I then insert them into one of those slim binders to carry in my camera bag.

John Ash, via email

Rosemary Haworth replies: seems we can't win. We introduced a Spring edition of PC Advisor in order to address a problem some of you had already commented on: our nominal cover dates were getting too far ahead of the actual publication dates. So we now appear on newsstands every four weeks rather than every calendar month.

As for CD-based manuals, software production costs are kept low by providing electronic manuals. As with anything, this makes sense to some and incenses others. Talking of which...

Flippin' 'eck

Am I the only person on the planet who thinks that the standard keyboard layout is actually backwards? Let me put that another way. Is a 'righthanded' keyboard in point of fact 'lefthanded'?

Nine out of 10 of us use the mouse with our right hand. Long years of mousing, however, have made it abundantly clear to me that by far the most ergonomically suitable place for the mouse is immediately to the right of the Enter key – in other words in exactly that space occupied by the secondary keypads.

Try it. While sitting properly centred at your keyboard with your fingers on the home keys, close your eyes, raise your right hand up to your shoulder and then drop it again, naturally and comfortably.

It falls immediately to the right of the Enter key and on to the arrow keys – and that is where the mouse should be. As things are, however, the mouse must be

Star letter

Having recently swapped a three-year-old Windows 98 laptop for a desktop system with XP Home, I spent several hours downloading XP drivers for my 'old' hardware (scanner, zip drive, printer, webcam) from the various manufacturers' websites.

As I now have a 19in monitor and SoundBlaster card, I decided that games should feature on this system so I bought a Saitek Cyborg 3D USB joystick. The box it comes in states that it is compatible with Windows 95/98/Me/XP which to my mind is rather misleading as one would expect that the Saitek Smart Technology CD-ROM that boasts "minimum install – maximum power" contains drivers for all the systems mentioned on the box.

But XP is not supported on the CD; the required drivers are another hefty download of over 11MB. This software has not gained the WHQL certificate from Microsoft, although Saitek is at pains to point out that the software has been extensively tested on Windows XP and found to cause no problems.

Well, it does run on my machine providing you remember to disconnect the USB cable before switching off the base unit – otherwise Windows does not shut down properly. Microsoft has another nice little earner issuing certificates which no doubt cost the earth to obtain for developers/manufacturers like Saitek. Who suffers? We do.

I don't expect to purchase any product that claims one thing and then have to buy additional services to actually get it working.

R E Golding, Kent

Write to us

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positioned that much further to the right, requiring both a longer reach and, more importantly, an uncomfortable and unnecessary rotation of the forearm some 30 degrees outwards.

And what of the numeric keypad? As it happens, for all of us righthanded people, we would be far better served if it were at our left hand. Sound crazy? Not so. Read on.

Keypad users come in two sizes: those who hardly use it at all and those who use it a lot. Of the former, righthand or lefthand, it hardly matters.

We who use it a lot, though, would much rather use it – like we do our calculators – with our left hand for the stupendously simple reason that we want our right hand free for using a pen.

(Yes, we still like to use pens. We like to crunch numbers with our left hand as we write with our right.)

But no. Still we must remain slaves to that myopic tradition initiated by some long-forgotten and semi-talented keyboard designer, whereby (and, again, try it yourself) we righthanders, if we want to do some old-fashioned but still very practical pen-and-calculator work, must pick up the pen to write then put the pen down to use the keypad, then pick up the pen again to write, then put the pen down to use the keypad again, then pick up the... and so the madness goes.

All you keyboard manufacturers out there, take note. Flip the bleedin' things over!

DP O'Hanlon, via email ■