Reader's choice:
multifunction devices

Capable of a variety of jobs from printing and copying to faxing and scanning, multifunction devices are a great choice for space-strapped home users, says Spencer Dalziel

In the past MFDs (multifunction devices) have struggled to secure their place in the home market due to their high cost and consumer concern that the quality offered by separate products couldn't be matched. Times are changing, however. MFDs have always filled a useful niche in small businesses and workgroups where office space is limited and several convergent factors have lead to the explosion of these devices for home users.

The jack-of-all-trades-and-master-of-none tag is an increasingly obsolete way of describing MFDs thanks to huge improvements in quality, affordable pricing and the mammoth growth in digital imaging technology. People are now looking for high-quality, all-in-one devices that cater for an array of imaging functions. From archiving photos to creating leaflets, an MFD is a useful purchase. And, as with any piece of hardware, you need to do your research before making a decision.

Rosemary Moore from Norfolk contacted *PC Advisor* because she was about to take the plunge and purchase her first MFD. It will service the needs of her family and produce pamphlets for St Edmund's, her local parish church.

Rosemary works for Norfolk Probation and lives in Acle with her three sons, Tim, Tony and budding programmer Nik who accompanied Rosemary to our offices to help her choose the right product.

Between Nik and his brothers, the MFD was going to have to cope with heavy-duty output. Nik said, "I print off guitar tablature and homework and Tony's always messing about printing off loads of stuff on our old HP Deskjet."

Rosemary added, "With myself and the boys making good use of the MFD I want a sturdy model. I also don't want to spend a fortune on ink cartridges. I'll primarily use it for mono printing and colour graphics with occasional photo use. Size matters but I am not overly concerned with looks and it has to be reliable."

The two MFDs we tested were Epson's Stylus CX3200 and the HP psc 2210.

First impressions

Rosemary was immediately impressed with the dimensions of both units. A couple of years ago MFDs were bulky devices, but today most models are about the same size as a large inkjet printer.

Rosemary mentioned that looks would only be important if "there was little to choose between the two" and said she'd have no trouble finding a space for the Stylus CX3200 or the psc 2210.

Rosemary and Nik ran both MFDs through a series of printing and scanning tests. It was immediately noticeable that the Epson and the HP had differing pros and cons.

The first thing Nik picked up on was the operating volume of the Epson model: "It's much faster than the HP but it's really noisy." We asked Rosemary if this would be a problem at home and received the obvious answer: "Well, with three boys in the house…"

The default print setting on the psc 2210 was quite dark. This worked well

Pros and cons: the contenders measure up

HP psc 2210
- **Pros: fax, specifications, storage media slots**
- **Cons: expensive running costs**
- **HP: 0870 547 4747**
- **www.hp.com**
- **£248 ex VAT**

Epson Stylus CX3200
- **Pros: value for money, reliable**
- **Cons: light default printing, running costs**
- **Epson: 0800 220 546**
- **www.epson.co.uk**
- **£126 ex VAT**

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with black text but it masked some of the detail on colour output – especially on photo-quality digital imaging.

The CX3200 has a light palette and colour graphics output in draft mode wasn't impressive. That said, Rosemary didn't mind too much: "At least it's legible. If I'm producing pamphlets for the church and want a more professional finish I'll just bump up the quality setting."

Nik found the HP's software too simplistic and Rosemary preferred Epson's coverage of manual configurations in the utility settings. "I like knowing I can change settings to get the image just as I want it and the Stylus CX3200 gives me better options," said Rosemary.

When it came to scan jobs and photo-quality output both models coped well. Nik was a little disappointed with the HP psc 2210's PhotoRet interpolation technology, however, as the images were suffused with unnatural colour.

What the experts say
The HP psc 2210 is a sturdy MFD that offers 1,200x1,200dpi (dots per inch) printing and 48bit colour scanning at 1,200x2,400dpi. The Stylus CX3200 can't match these specifications, with 48bit colour scanning at 600x1,200dpi and an optimised print resolution of 5,760x760dpi. However, Epson's model performed very well on lower specifications and had no problem turning out impressive results.

In effect, the HP psc 2210 operates as a home photo lab and anyone with an interest in imaging will find the MFD's overall functionality very impressive.

Rosemary stated that she's only interested in occasional photo printing, but she also mentioned she is considering making the jump to digital in the future. If so, she'd find the HP's slots for different storage media come in handy.

Speed isn't an issue for Rosemary so it didn't matter that the 2210 couldn't match HP's claimed print speeds. To be fair, even though the Epson Stylus was a quick device it couldn't match its claimed print speeds either.

Another distinct advantage HP's offering had over the CX3200 was its fax functionality. But Rosemary said she rarely uses her own fax so, in her case, this wouldn't be a deciding factor.

Rosemary said she'd rather stick to the low end of her budget and the 2210 is quite expensive. Epson's CX3200 might not have the versatility of the HP model but it's much cheaper to buy.

There's no difference in running costs between the two MFDs. Both devices are quite expensive with black text costing 4.4ppp (pence per page) and colour costing 7.4ppp.

While both models looked sturdy enough to cope with heavy use we did have some paper-jam problems on the 2210. This was easily remedied, but Rosemary did point out that it could be an expensive mistake if printing digital photos on photo paper.

The reader's choice
Both the Epson Stylus CX3200 and HP psc 2210 have great features to offer users who want the convenience of an all-in-one device. But only one model was suitable for Rosemary's needs. This month's winner is Epson's CX3200 because it offered great value for money and performed well despite having lower specifications than the HP. Neither did it suffer from any paper jams in our tests. With running costs already high, Rosemary didn't want to waste ink on jammed paper.

Given the expected heavy-duty output and at least four users at the Moore family home, it was vital the product Rosemary bought was up to the task. We asked Rosemary if she was willing to pay out a bit more money for the HP 2210 but she stuck to her guns: "To justify the extra expenditure the 2210 would have to outperform the CX3200 in every respect and it didn't do that." ■

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