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Serving you right?

We asked for your PC buying experiences – the good, the bad and the downright appalling. Here we present the results of our Customer Satisfaction survey, looking at which vendors support their customers and which let them down

customer satisfaction survey

Customer service is a lottery. Comparing the performance of one PC against another is relatively easy: set them both the same task and see which of them completes it the quickest. This is in essence what *PC Advisor's* WorldBench test software, as used in our reviews and charts, does.

But how do you compare the aftersales service of one supplier against another? When we review hardware we can safely assume that one model of PC is the same as all the others of that system from the same supplier, so what we find of one applies to them all. But customers' experiences of service can vary widely, not just from one company to another but from the same supplier.

Methodology

PC Advisor's online customer satisfaction survey was carried out between 20 November 02 and 26 July 03. The survey was promoted in the February 03 issue of *PC Advisor*, as a banner ad on the PCA website and in email newsletters sent out to PCA online registered users. In return for taking part, respondents were entered into a draw to win a Palm m130 PDA or one of 10 copies of *The Internet in Easy Steps*. In total, 3,415 respondents completed the questionnaire.

So how can you measure service? We believe that the only way is by gathering data from a great number of customers over a lengthy period of time and looking at the trends year by year.

That is what *PC Advisor's* customer satisfaction survey seeks to do. We have collected the responses of over 3,000 PC

customers for the last three years. And the best conclusion that can be drawn from this data is that, regardless of whether you buy from a well-known brand name or a local high street independent, the service you get is highly variable.

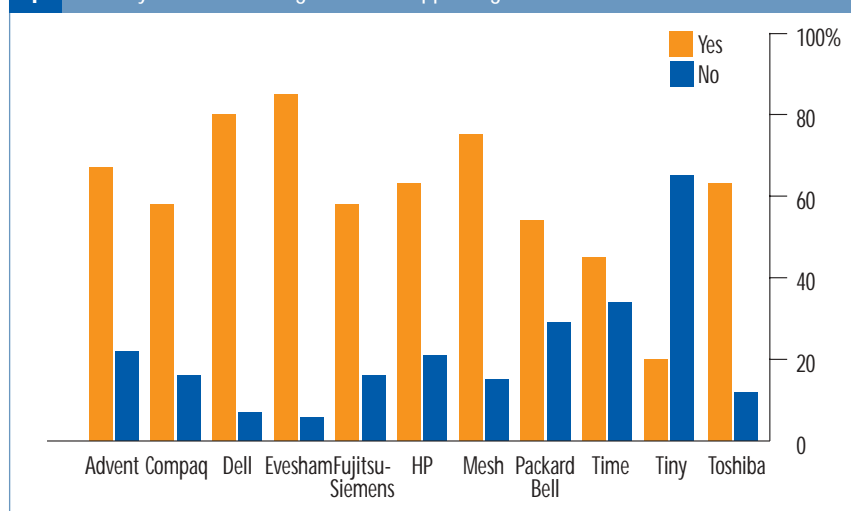
In short, customer service is a lottery. And it will continue to be so while highly complex PCs are sold to consumers with little technical knowledge and aftersales support is funded out of slender hardware profit margins.

Until suppliers are brave enough to unbundle support from the sale of hardware, help will continue to be an overhead, a corner to cut rather than a service professionally run to the benefit of customers.

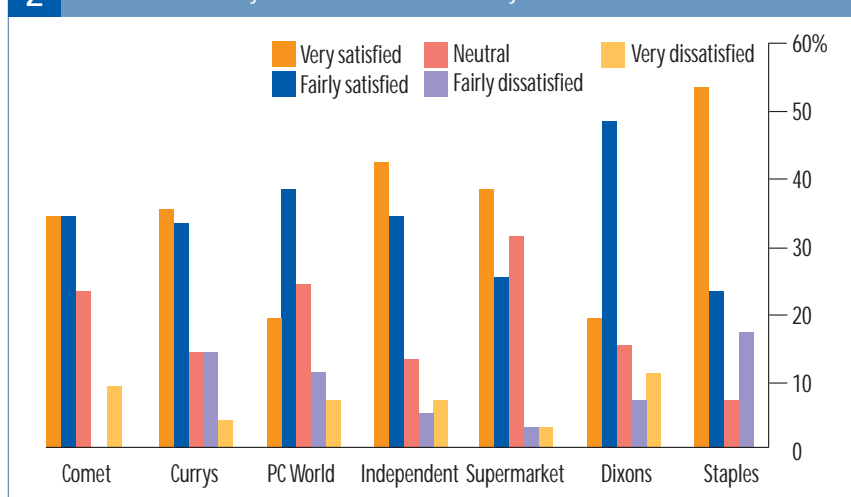
But to do so would require the suppliers to admit to prospective customers that the PC is not like any other consumer electronics device. A PC is costly to run, not so much money-wise, but in the investment required of the customer in terms of technical knowledge and time.

What follows is the results of *PC Advisor's* annual customer satisfaction survey and related articles that illustrate the state of PC postsales service today.

1 Would you consider using the same supplier again?



2 How satisfied were you with the level of service you received from a retailer?

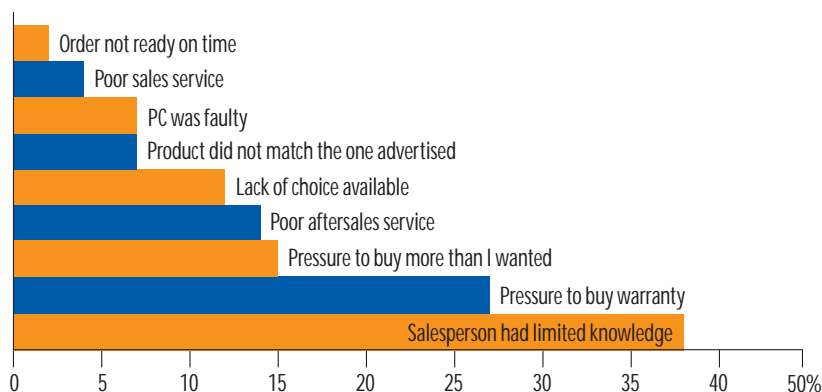


Would you buy from the same supplier again?

This is the most fundamental question you can ask any consumer to determine their satisfaction with the product they bought. This includes all survey respondents, whether they had cause to contact the company for support or not. It therefore represents their cumulative experience of the product over time.

Of course, figures can be distorted by fierce brand loyalty – a belief that, even if you have had a bad experience, other suppliers are worse still.

3 Reasons for dissatisfaction with retailer



Or it could be distorted by a nagging doubt that, even though you've had a good experience, you could do better if you bought elsewhere.

So which is the supplier that most people who bought from would buy again? Evesham is a clear leader with 85.4 percent of respondents who purchased an Evesham PC saying they would again. Market leader Dell comes in second at 79.9 percent with Sony and Mesh battling for third place.

Deceased Tiny comes last with only 20 percent saying they would purchase from the company again. The firm's collapse in 2001, buyout by Time and subsequent well-publicised shortfall in warranty provision, made enemies of many customers.

The Tiny debacle undoubtedly tarnished Time (it scored 45.2 percent), which always does badly in these surveys. Why is this? People still remember Time for its mauling by the BBC's *Watchdog* programme in the mid-90s and its ritual kickings ever since from Which?, the heavy boot of the Consumers Association.

First-timers

Time also sells through retail into the notoriously difficult first-time buyer market where satisfaction levels are lowest.

Novice users who bought Time as their first PC may also feel they have outgrown the brand when replacing their system. Dixons' own-brand Advent scores better than Packard Bell, despite the fact that Dixons is the exclusive outlet

for Packard Bell in the UK. But Packard Bell's PCs are often bundled with a printer, scanner and an array of software to appeal to first-time buyers – many of whom will look to a different supplier when it comes to buying a second machine.

Corporate manufacturers such as HP, Compaq (which is now owned by HP), Toshiba and Fujitsu-Siemens appear average.

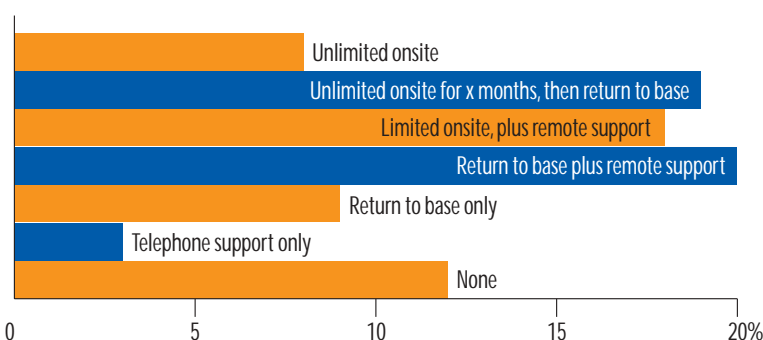
Regardless of whether you buy from a well-known brand name or a local high street independent, the service you get is highly variable

Problem resolving

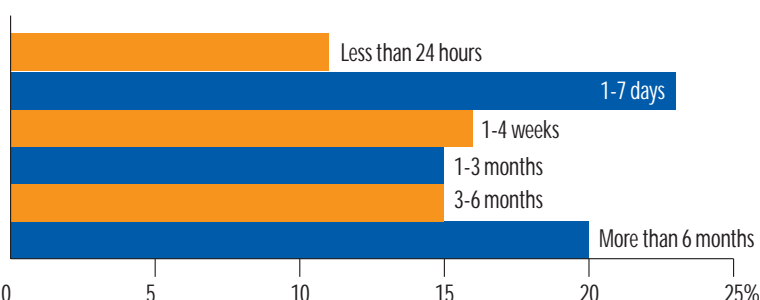
If you bought a PC three or four years ago and you've used it every day without a hitch, you're entitled to a favourable view of the supplier. But what happens when something does go wrong? The mark of a good company is how it deals with problems. In fact, customers often form a better opinion of a firm that sorts out their problems with aplomb rather than a supplier whose products never fail.

So which supplier's helpline is voted top by the people who had to call it? Evesham again, followed by Dell. The latter is often criticised by consumers as being too big to care, but Dell applies the same

4 What sort of warranty do you have?

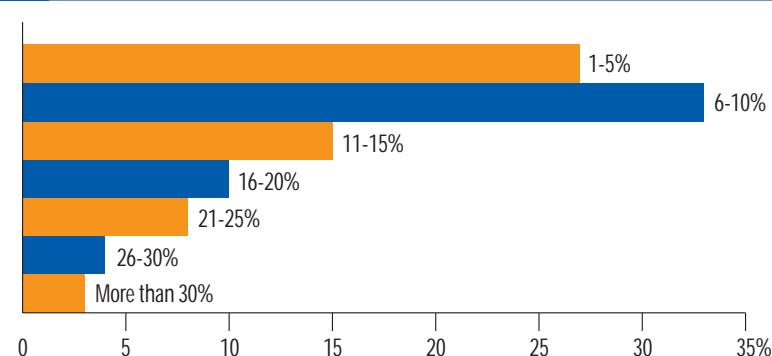


5 How soon after delivery of your PC did you contact the supplier's helpline?



customer satisfaction survey

6 How much did you pay for extended warranty relative to the price of the PC?



ruthless efficiency to problem resolving as it does to manufacturing.

Bottom of the pile for helpline satisfaction are Tiny and Time again. But remember these suppliers are likely to be

supporting first-time users. Oddly, Packard Bell does worse than Advent again, despite the fact that customers of both machines will be calling the same Dixons support team.

When computers go bad

Despite the claims of manufacturers, PCs can and do go wrong. While competent problem resolving can improve a supplier's image in the minds of customers, too often PCs fall over as soon as you get them out of the box. Alternatively they are cursed with an intermittent fault that shows up when work deadlines hit critical and the helplines are all engaged.

Talk to any computer supplier and they claim their DOA (dead on arrival) rate – that is, the number of PCs that fail to work the first time a customer turns it on – is an industry average. As a percentage of total sales, it's usually between one and two percent.

This is born out by the results of our survey – a DOA average across all

Case study: the two sides of Evesham

Every customer complaint is different and so is the response it gets. And judging from this year's responses this is the case again with every manufacturer having its share of satisfied and horrified customers. The Jekyll-and-Hyde behaviour exhibited by Evesham in the two stories following shows that even if you deal with a company that other customers say provides a good service, you might not be happy with the response to your specific complaint.

Pleased as punch...

Raymond Teece of Telford told us a familiar story of attentive service from the Worcestershire-based firm. In mid-2000 he bought a system from the Evesham website, which was delivered a few days

later. But from the very first attempt at setup the operating system refused to load. Raymond rang Evesham's 24-hour helpline, which at the time was free of charge. After assessing the problem over the phone, it was decided a visit from an engineer would be necessary.

Raymond can't remember exactly, but he says having called on a Monday he saw the engineer Tuesday or Wednesday. Seeing what the problem was, the engineer replaced the memory board and the system started to function perfectly. That wasn't the end of it, though, as the same problem

Even if you deal with a company that other customers say provides a good service, you might not be happy with the response to your specific complaint

reappeared over the weekend. Another call to the Evesham helpline, another visit from an engineer and this time the motherboard was replaced.

Pleasingly, the problem remained fixed and Raymond stayed happy. Of the service he received from Evesham, Raymond remains complimentary: "It was very good. They're a good company to deal with."

...maybe not

How then did *PC Advisor* forum regular BarryH come to describe Evesham as "difficult, obstructive and unable to offer a standard of service that one would expect"? Surely these two readers can't be talking about the same company.

Unfortunately, they are. It's not that Evesham wasn't attentive when BarryH

reported that his new Evolution 2400 system was showing a blank screen during the Bios setup. In fact engineers were sent round on a number of occasions, often staying for several hours. A graphics dongle was changed, as was the graphics card, monitor, motherboard and then the dongle again. No one could say Evesham wasn't trying.

But the problem persisted and BarryH soon decided he'd had enough. The PC malfunctioned since he had got it home from the Evesham shop so as far as he was concerned this was a clear case of goods unfit for purpose and, under the

suppliers of 2.3 percent is inflated by the fact that those who never had a problem haven't answered this question.

But more critical than DOAs, look at the 10.9 percent who had cause to contact their supplier less than 24 hours after taking delivery of the PC.

Some of this is caused by what is delivered not matching what was ordered, while some is down to what support line operators call Ebkac (error between keyboard and chair) – in other words, customers unable to set up their computers correctly.

But whatever the cause, it still means you have only a 90 percent chance that your newly delivered £1,000-worth of complex electronic equipment will make it past tomorrow without causing you grief.

Sale of Goods Act, he was entitled to a full replacement.

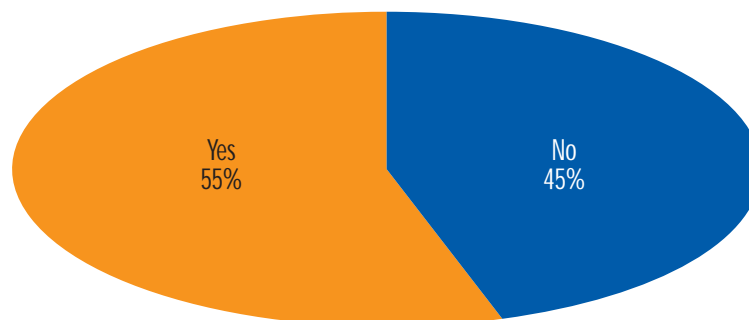
Evesham didn't see it that way and it was here that the relationship began to deteriorate. Long arguments over the phone ensued, with Evesham refusing to budge from its offer of bringing the machine in for further scrutiny. This is despite BarryH emphasising his strong legal position. In the end he asked for a refund and still had to threaten a county court summons to get that.

So even a firm with a good reputation for customer service has its Achilles' heel. In this case it seems to be an inflexible adherence to the complaints procedure. Gary Street, Evesham's service and support manager, explains that the normal practice in the case of total engineer bafflement is to get the system back into the labs to fully appraise the situation.

The service representative that talked to BarryH just wouldn't deviate from this prescribed course of action. "I have to hold my hands up," apologises Street, "we could have dealt with that better."

Simon Easterman

7 Was the problem with the PC solved with your first contact with the supplier's helpline?



This just ain't good enough

If a PC is sold as a consumer device it shouldn't require the services of an IT professional to talk you through setting it up correctly. PCs are still far too difficult to use and manufacturers are too focused on stuffing more features into their machines at the expense of usability.

Despite what Microsoft says, Windows XP is not easier to use than previous versions. It's easier to connect peripherals and set up a network, granted. But these are relatively esoteric operations that only a minority will ever do. How do I finish a session on the computer? I click on a button marked 'Start'. How logical is that? And the PC industry wonders why it's in a slump. Rant over – for now.

Early breakdown

Note that if a PC is going to fail, the chances are it does so within the first three months after delivery (64.6 percent). What can we infer from this? That PCs don't break down very often through wear and tear or some random combination of failures. Systems that do break down are probably faulty before leaving the factory

floor, even if the fault is undetectable by the manufacturer's quality control.

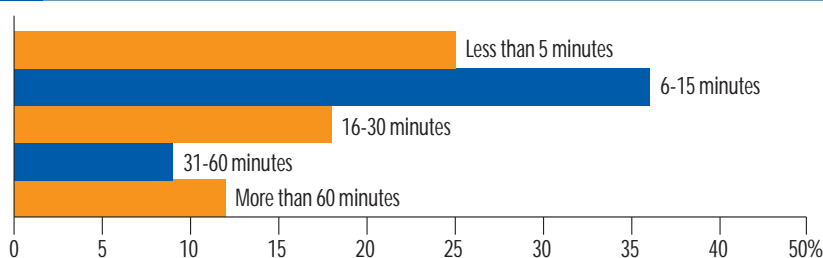
Lost time and money

When a system is broken it can't be used, obviously. Fig 11 (on page 97) shows the amount of time respondents were without their computer due to faults. More worryingly, many lost money while their machine was out of action, assuming it was a system used for business. While the majority of respondents lost less than £1,000 – which is bad enough – one person lost more than £25,000. Ouch.

Retailers

Staples stands out as the retailer with the highest level of satisfied customers, which is odd given that selling PCs is not the main chunk of Staples' business. Maybe it's hired some good knowledgeable people – when we look at the causes of dissatisfaction with retailers, staff ignorance is the biggest gripe followed by pressure selling, which largely incorporates overpriced and unnecessary extended warranties or trying far too hard to 'up-sell'.

8 How long did it take for the problem to be solved?



customer satisfaction survey

Case study: HP comes up trumps

Graham Youle from Sheffield bought an HP Pavillion 9810 PC in July 2001. It was bought from the Sheffield branch of Cole Brothers, part of the John Lewis Group. A keen digital photographer, Graham also wanted to use the PC for surfing the web, emailing and gaming.

After a few months a persistent problem rendered his PC virtually unusable and, after many fruitless calls to HP's helpline, the company eventually picked up the system. A faulty hard drive was diagnosed.

After fitting a new hard disk, HP returned the system to Graham four working days later. But it soon failed again. Once more HP took the PC away, bringing it back one week later having supposedly fixed the recurrent problem. Graham was not unduly inconvenienced by the temporary loss of his machine and was impressed with how quickly it was returned to him.

However, after three weeks it became apparent that the issue had not been solved. After printing out an error log he went back to the Cole Brothers store to discuss the matter. The department manager unquestioningly refunded the £40 he had spent on phone calls to the HP helpline. And as the PC was covered not just by HP's one-year warranty but also Cole Brothers' guarantee, Graham was offered a replacement machine.

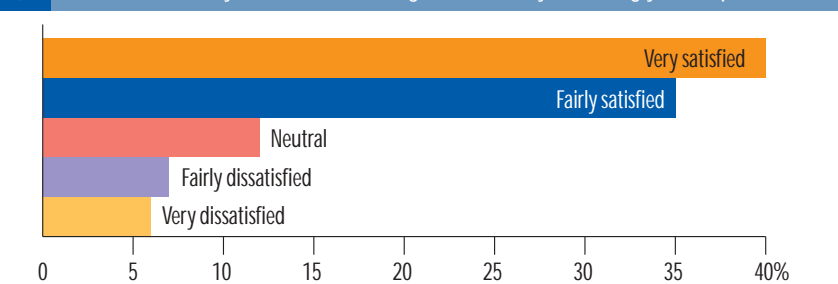
This model had a newer operating system, bigger hard drive and a Pentium 4 processor as opposed to [Graham's] previous PC's Pentium III chip. What's more, it cost over £500 less than his original machine so the difference was refunded to him

The system he had previously bought was no longer available, so Graham was offered an HP Pavillion 750UK. This model had a newer operating system, bigger hard drive and a Pentium 4 processor as opposed to his previous PC's Pentium III chip. What's more, it cost over £500 less than his original machine so the difference was refunded to him.

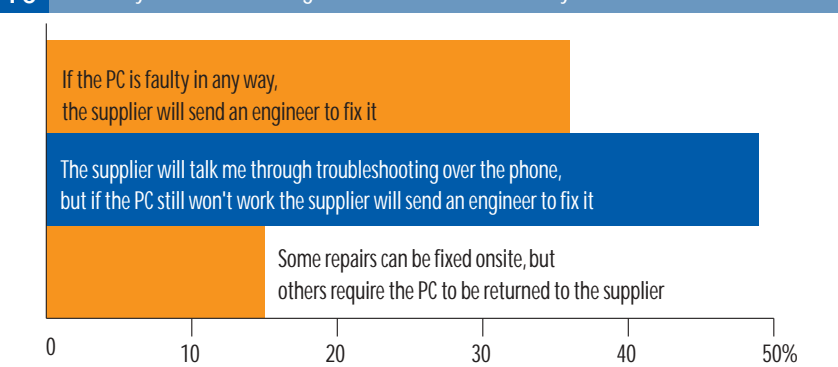
Graham was obviously delighted by this result. He has no beef with HP. "HP generally make good products. I think I just got a bad one," he says, adding that his new Pavillion PC has given him no problems.

Ben Camm-Jones

9 How satisfied are you with remote diagnosis as a way of solving your PC problems?



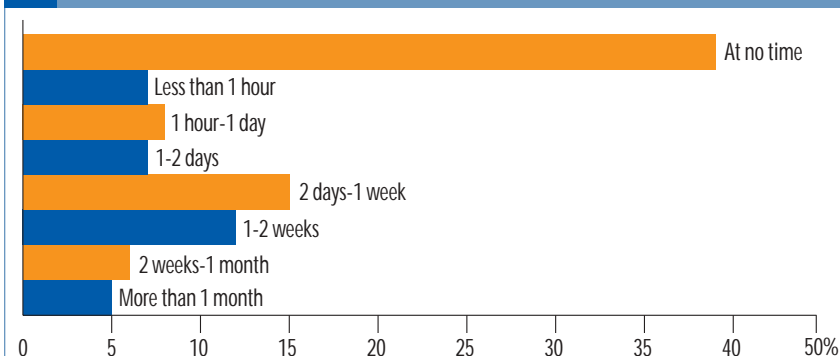
10 What is your understanding of the term 'onsite warranty'?



UK retail is infamous for poor-quality staff. In the US, knowledgeable incentivised sales people are the norm, even if their reduced sense of personal space does make them seem rather pushy. But in Britain's large chainstores untrained, badly-paid sales people are bullied by store managers, who are in turn bullied by area managers obsessed with 'making the numbers'. Anyone with ambition and intelligence leaves quickly. So much for us being a nation of shopkeepers.

Local independent stores come a close second for high street satisfaction. Usually run by an enthusiast brought up on a Commodore 64 and who built his first computer at the tender age of 14, he custom-builds a dozen PCs a week for local people. If he's good he won't try to sell you a PC capable of mapping the weather over the entire northern hemisphere when all you want is a letter-writing and email machine for your ageing mother.

11 When your PC was faulty, how long were you without its use?



Support: remote vs onsite

Anecdotal evidence suggests that computer suppliers' helplines are a disaster, but this is not born out in our customer satisfaction survey. There is a slight majority of respondents (55 percent) whose problems were resolved on first contact. Even so, 78.5 percent of companies resolved the problem within 30 minutes.

The problem for customers is that 10 minutes on a support line – let alone 30 – can feel like an eternity. The problem for suppliers is that telephone support lines have to be funded from ever more slender profit margins.

One of the smaller indigenous PC manufacturers – Mesh, Evesham, Hi-Grade, Multivision – will make between three and eight percent on the sale

The problem for customers is that 10 minutes on a support line – let alone 30 – can feel like an eternity. The problem for suppliers is that telephone support lines have to be funded from ever more slender profit margins

of a PC, depending on how lean their operation is and how well they have managed inventory that month. So that's around £80 on a £1,000 PC.

Case study: Time's mysterious warranty

PC manufacturers make a slim profit margin on computer hardware but there's much bigger profits to be made from selling extended warranties to customers. In some cases, they might even add the extended warranty without the customer's knowledge.

Ahren Lester from Dorset had previously built his own systems but decided to opt for a manufactured model for his next purchase. While doing some online window shopping, a £699 PC from Time Computers caught Ahren's eye. He placed a phone order straight away, opting to pay for the machine in instalments.

On 17 January 03 the new system turned up at the right place and the right time. Ahren told us he was happy because the system was "excellent". Then he got his first bill.

Despite requesting only the standard one-year warranty, Ahren noticed that the cost of a £500 extended warranty had been added to his payment plan. As Ahren rightly

pointed out, that's nearly as much as the cost of the PC itself so it stuck out like a sore thumb. He immediately called customer support to stop his payments and was initially told that he could get some of his money back in the form of vouchers for future purchases.

Not satisfied with this answer, Ahren stopped his payments only to discover that Time tried on two occasions to jumpstart the repayments.

After several tedious phone calls, escalating the complaint to senior management and two months' waiting, Ahren finally received a financial agreement on 28 March 03 that both parties agreed upon. The extended warranty was cancelled and Time extended Ahren's repayment period.

"Time gave good support in the end," says Ahren. "They apologised for the inconvenience caused and lengthened the time of my repayments but I didn't have to pay any interest on the extra payments."

Spencer Dalziel

"Time gave good support in the end. They apologised for the inconvenience caused and lengthened the time of my repayments but I didn't have to pay any interest on the extra payments"

Ahren Lester, *PC Advisor* reader

customer satisfaction survey

12	Which company has the best helpline?
1	Evesham
2	Dell
3	Toshiba
4	Compaq
5	Sony
6	Advent (PC World)
7	Fujitsu-Siemens
8	Mesh
9	Packard Bell
10	HP
11	Time
12	Tiny

'We asked respondents to rate their suppliers' helplines between one and five, resulting in the following helpline league table.'

Let's say a telesupport engineer costs £20 an hour when all the overheads are accounted for. Four hours' telephone support will wipe out the profit on a sale. An onsite engineer will cost double that hourly rate, so he wipes out the profit from a machine every two hours. Now you can see why, even though suppliers offer

The Competition Commission is of the opinion that the provision of extended warranties is confusing to consumers and that the warranties themselves don't offer good value

onsite support, they'd much rather talk you through a problem on the phone.

Fortunately, the majority (75.2 percent) of people are satisfied with remote problem solving. And nearly half (48.8 percent) realise that even though they have an onsite warranty with their hardware, the supplier will first of all try to talk them through the problem over the telephone.

However, 36.3 percent of respondents think that an onsite warranty means the supplier will send someone to attend to the slightest problem. Are they wrong to think this? Of course not, especially when the supplier's ad screams 'three-year onsite warranty' in 6in-high letters.

What the ad should say is 'three-year emergency cover when we've exhausted all other options and only if we think the problem can be solved onsite'. Indeed, some suppliers have had to change their warranty and advertising wording because of just this.

The fact is there are problems that an onsite engineer can't fix and require the computer to be returned to the supplier.

But the supplier doesn't know that until they've eliminated a few possibilities over the phone.

So if you have an onsite warranty, don't expect a man with a screwdriver to appear every time Windows hiccups. And look carefully at the warranty wording to ensure the supplier isn't misrepresenting the situation – especially if you have paid extra for the warranty.

At the time of going to press, the provision of extended warranties was still a matter of discussion between the Competition Commission and the retailers. The Commission is of the opinion that the provision of extended warranties is confusing to consumers and that the warranties themselves don't offer good value. As such, it has suggested various remedies. The retailers don't like the remedies because they have been making easy money from extended warranties for years. Fig 4 (on page 93) represents the type of warranty our survey respondents have, while Fig 6 (on page 94) shows how much on average they paid for an extended warranty.

Crawling up the complaints ladder

For all that we've said so far about improvements to aftersales support, sometimes things reach stalemate and you just have to take things further. Wendy Brewer outlines where to get satisfaction

Whenever you buy a new piece of PC kit, whether it's a desktop system, laptop, PDA or smartphone, you naturally assume that you'll also be buying a certain level of customer service. But all too often you find yourself banging your head against a wall after a frustrating series of conversations with unhelpful telephone operators.

The first course of action is to write to the most senior person you can identify in

the company, stating concisely what has gone wrong and what you expect them to do about it. Send the letter via special delivery. Be persistent but always polite and reasonable.

Sometimes your patience will be rewarded; other times you'll need to enlist some help to get results. If you're left out of pocket by a company that goes bust or that won't refund your money when requested, you may even need to take legal action. Below is a list of helpful outlets offering free advice and legal guidance.

PC Advisor's ConsumerWatch forum

Our online forum (www.pcadvisor.co.uk/ registered) is a useful place to chat with

Case study: one Dell of a service

Shortly after purchasing a Dell Inspiron 8000 PC, London-based Jonathan Pye spilled a glass of juice over his machine. As the warranty did not cover accidental damage, Jonathan had to return the machine at his own cost and shell out around £400 for repairs. It turned out the power adapter had blown.

A few months later Jonathan experienced a further problem and his Dell diagnostic disc isolated the CD drive as the offending component. Dell collected the machine at its expense but found no problem so returned the system. As soon as Jonathan tried to load something on to his PC,

though, the problem reappeared. It then took three months toing and froing, not to mention umpteen calls and emails to customer service representatives, before the machine was fixed. As Jonathan was studying for his PhD at the time, it was imperative the computer worked. For his trouble, Dell agreed to extend his warranty a further two years.

"Compared with other things I have heard about PC manufacturers, I guess I was treated fairly well. But compared with how I expected to be treated it was simply not suitable," explains Jonathan.

Wendy Brewer

other buyers who have experienced similar problems to yours. There's loads of handy tips and advice from readers as well as *PC Advisor* staff. We also have regular input from a selection of manufacturers including Evesham, Mesh, Dell and Time. These companies join in on discussion threads, using it as a chance to have their say and sort out those with particular problems.

The ConsumerWatch section within the magazine allows us to resolve a limited number of complaints but the amount we receive means we can't answer them all. However, drop an email to pcadvisor_consumerwatch@idg.com and we will do our best to chase up your problem with the manufacturer or retailer and hopefully resolve it.

Trading standards

Your local trading standards office is your second port of call. If you have access to the internet visit www.tradingstandards.gov.uk. Here you can use the TS finder to locate your nearest office. If you're not online consult your telephone directory.

You can contact the office by phone or email where you will receive independent advice and assistance. Trading standards has its own legal department, so advisors can chase up legal facts and, in some cases, even contact a company on your behalf.

Office of Fair Trading

The Office of Fair Trading covers three specific areas: competition enforcement, consumer regulation enforcement and

markets and policies initiatives. In most circumstances the OFT will advise you to contact your local trading standards office before speaking to them. However, if the case shows an obvious disregard for consumer legislation or regulations on the part of the trader, then the OFT will take direct action. A verbal slap is usually enough to get things rolling. For general enquiries call 0845 722 4499 or email enquiries@oft.gov.uk. There's also lots of advice and guidance at www.oft.gov.uk.

Citizens Advice Bureau

Your local Citizens Advice Bureau will offer you free legal guidance on most issues. To find your nearest centre, log on to www.nacab.org.uk and run a search by postcode. Most of the centres work in partnership with local solicitors, giving them access to the latest court judgements and legal precedents. The CAB will even give you advice on how to fill out a form to bring about a court case.

Small claims court

Before you take a company to court, it is wise to inform them of your intention in writing. It is good policy (and can strengthen your case) to send a letter advising them you will be taking legal action if they don't resolve the problem before a certain deadline, say 28 days. If your claim is for less than £5,000 then you will be able to use the small claims procedure. Claims for larger amounts than this will need to be handled by a solicitor.

Small claims actions take place in local county courts and are assessed by district

Pry before you buy

Before buying a machine we advise you check a list of approved members on one of the large trade associations' websites as well as reading reviews of the item in question. Retra (Radio, electrical and television retailers association), for example, compiles a list of approved retailers on its website. All companies must comply with Retra's terms and conditions, which contain rules about such issues as pricing and delivery.

If you're about to spend a substantial sum it's worthwhile reading what existing customers think in online forums such as *PC Advisor's* at www.pcadvisor.co.uk/registered. Alternatively do a keyword search and look for information on the company's past customer service history – usually a good indicator of what you can expect.

PC Advisor has written profiles of a number of computer suppliers that give you a feel for the type of company you are dealing with, its relative size and whether you as an individual will be important to them. A back catalogue of these can be accessed on our website (www.pcadvisor.co.uk/magazine). Other useful links include www.retra.co.uk; www.aecportico.co.uk/directory/amdea.shtml; and www.dasa.org.uk.

judges. The procedure is pretty simple and you shouldn't need to hire a solicitor as you or a friend/neighbour can present the case.

You may, however, want to run the facts past a solicitor for added assurance that you have a strong case. Unlike other court actions, you cannot claim back solicitors' fees even if you win. But a victory will allow you to claim court costs. These are charged in relation to the amount you are claiming, so a claim for £300 or less will cost £30 rising to £120 for claims between £1,000 and £5,000.

A good place for advice and to pick up all the necessary forms to begin the action is at www.courtservice.gov.uk. If you do not have internet access you will need to go to your local county court in person to pick up these forms. You can even make a claim totally online through www.moneyclaim.gov.uk – simply submit all your evidence online and then wait for the case to be resolved. The status report lets you see exactly how your case is going and read final judgements.



Case study: Sony fails to impress

Within a matter of days after Stephen McGinness of Enfield purchased his £1,300 Sony laptop, disaster struck. His wife accidentally spilled her coffee all over the machine and, to his despair, Stephen was unable to get the keyboard to function. As this was an accident Stephen presumed repairing the machine would not be covered under the terms and conditions of the warranty. Sony's customer helpdesk didn't even mention his rights under his warranty when he contacted them.

At Sony's expense the laptop was shipped to the company's Heathrow repairs centre, with Stephen hoping that the keyboard could be cleaned out or replaced for a nominal

fee. Stephen made several calls over the course of a few weeks. Finally his requests to be called back were met. He was told his machine had been sent to France for repairs. After more calls and two further weeks, he was called by Sony customer services who informed him the repairs would cost £1,100 (almost the same

After more calls and two further weeks, [Stephen] was called by Sony customer services who informed him the repairs would cost £1,100 (almost the same as the original purchase price)

as the original purchase price). He was then given three options: he could pay the full cost of repair, send £35 for his machine to be returned to him or hand the laptop over to Sony and cut his losses.

With little choice left, Stephen sent the £35 postage fee and reclaimed his broken machine. Stephen has since claimed on his household insurance for a replacement laptop and has hooked up a USB keyboard to his Sony notebook, which otherwise functions perfectly.

"Sony's customer service staff have been arrogant and disinterested. I felt complete disregard for my problem. All they were interested in was selling me a new laptop. I'll never buy a notebook from Sony again," states Stephen angrily.

Sony fights back

Sony's response to this story is as follows: "The reason that the unit was sent to France is that the Heathrow centre does not handle out-of-warranty units (and this problem invalidates the warranty). It did take longer than usual to contact the customer – which does happen occasionally – but we have stricter systems in place now to prevent this.

"Regarding the advice he was given, liquid spillages are pretty severe and obviously a progressive problem. After examination by our engineers, they recommended the three courses of action that they saw to be appropriate.

"It would have been unwise of them to suggest using a separate keyboard, knowing that the problem would gradually worsen due to corrosion of the mainboard. Please also note that this happened almost a year ago last October and we have not heard from the customer since."

Wendy Brewer

customer satisfaction survey

A day in the life of a service engineer

Providing customer support is an expensive but essential part of a PC manufacturer's business. Rosemary Haworth spent a day on the road with one of Evesham's engineers

Dominic Hopton has been on Evesham's callout team for four years. He covers the Bristol area up to the company's headquarters in Worcester and typically checks into HQ once a week. Evesham's onsite engineers plan their own days and Hopton opts for short but intense ones. He picks up details of the next day's visits by dialling in to Evesham's support database and updates the records for the jobs he's just fulfilled.

After finishing his scheduled appointments on a Friday afternoon, the boot of Hopton's Peugeot is refilled with a standard kit of replacement PC parts. Any unusual components are identified when the customer first calls and supplied by the support centre.

Fixing faults

Hopton's first job was to visit a home user having problems with his system's audio setup. It was the third Evesham PC he'd bought in four or five years and the first time he'd called out an engineer. Hopton fixed the problem by simply plugging the speakers into the correct sound port.

Hopton called on two regular customers that day. First, design company Colin Angell where customer Mike Hocking had recently bought an Evesham notebook running Windows XP Pro. It had developed a keyboard fault that had rendered the Fn key permanently active. Hopton replaced the keyboard but the problem persisted.

As with many computing woes, the culprit turned out to be software related. Hocking had installed a program to sync his mobile phone with his notebook and XP Pro had thrown a wobbly. Thankfully, undoing the damage simply required Hopton to set a new Restore Point on the machine and revert it to its fully functioning state of two days previously.

Next we headed to Dolphin Systems, which customises PCs for the visually impaired. The company had just bought a server but the system didn't want to



recognise one of the hard drives. After flashing the Bios and running a series of standard memory tests, Hopton found the problem was a faulty processor. He confirmed this by using a non-identical CPU from his pool of spare hardware. He offered to leave it in the PC but customer Martin Harris opted for an engineer to drop off a replacement part the next day.

Pinpoint the problem

The final call was to a company that designs and makes mouldings. Their brand-new server-specification machine had an intermittent fault and didn't seem to take to its Intel Xeon processors. Another Evesham engineer had already taken a look at the system and, like him, Hopton found that a series of standard memory tests revealed no faults.

Hopton swapped the Xeon chip for another. However, he wasn't confident that it would perform without fault from now on as the system was using cutting-edge components. Intermittent faults are the most troublesome to support but Evesham claims that only three percent of callout problems require a second visit. ■

