



PC World comes clean this month over its walk-in Healthcheck clinic, a reader overcomes his Lidl problem and we show you how to spot a scam

Readers of December's ConsumerWatch will know that we were less than impressed with PC World's 50-point Healthcheck – the retail giant's walk-in clinic for sickly computers. PC World presents Healthcheck as an opportunity for customers to ensure their computer is running efficiently, is secure from hackers and free of viruses.

Posing as members of the public, we strolled down to our local Tottenham Court Road PC World outlet with a three-year-old Carrera PC in tow. The service we received was somewhat disappointing – we felt our £29.99 (now £39.99) would have been better spent on a few CDs or a computer game. In the end all we got was a virus removed and a recommendation that we invest in some more memory.

Steve Campbell, operations director at PC World, wrote to us to apologise for the shoddy service and offered us a complimentary Healthcheck. So thanks for that Steve, especially as it now costs an extra £10.

However, we still felt a little put out that the Tottenham Court Road-based PC World couldn't spare a technician for more than five minutes with us, especially as the original press release promised us an hour with a Healthcheck expert. Was it just us? Maybe it was something we said.

According to a staff member at one of London's biggest PC World outlets, it isn't just us. "On average a full Healthcheck, as per company policy and procedures, should last 45-60 minutes," says our source, who can't be named for obvious reasons. "The customer should be present when the Healthcheck is being done, but staff aren't following these guidelines. They tell the customer to come back in an hour or so."

Apparently it's a question of capacity. On an average day there are just four to five trained staff available to do the Healthcheck and the store has to get through a minimum of 40 checks a week, which means the technicians could do without pesky customers asking awkward, time-consuming questions.

We, on the other hand, reckon that if you're going to cough up £39.99 for a Healthcheck, you should demand a one-on-one consultation with a technician. This is especially true in light of



the fact that PC World's press office states that the length of Healthcheck depends on how many questions are asked by the customer. It also implies that it is up to the customer whether they sit in on the Healthcheck.

"The new 50-point system lasts as long as is necessary to complete it. We would like all customers to sit in on the Healthcheck, however some choose not to," said a spokeswoman for PC World. "The length of the check depends on the number of questions asked by the customer. It is uncommon for it to take less than an hour."

Healthcheck is turning into a nice little earner for PC World. At the bigger London-based stores, according to our source, there are a minimum of 40 Healthchecks carried out every week. Using the *PC Advisor* office calculator, that's just under £1,600 per week. On average, the total revenue for Healthcheck for the larger London stores is between £2,400 and £3,000 a week, or getting on for £150,000 per year – and that's before the margin PC World gets on the software and component upgrades that often accompany the outcome of a Healthcheck.

If you've been at the receiving end of a 50-point Healthcheck, we'd like to hear from you. Were you offered the opportunity to sit in? Did you get a full hour? Post your experiences in our ConsumerWatch forum at www.pcadvisor.co.uk/consumerwatch.

How to contact us

Got a problem with a manufacturer or vendor? Unsure of your consumer rights? Interested in a company's reputation? Get yourself to the ConsumerWatch forum.

www.pcadvisor.co.uk/consumerwatch



“We have warned about the danger of postal scams, but people also need to bear the same warnings in mind if they use mobile phones, fax machines and email”

Lidl stumps up

German budget superstore Lidl has finally been ordered by the courts to refund *PC Advisor* reader David Sharpe after it sold him ‘unsuitable’ goods back in July.

Since Lidl was unable to advise ConsumerWatch on the situation, David decided to take his case to the small claims court where he successfully won back the full cost of his machine. In fact, Lidl offered to resolve the matter a day before David’s 24 October hearing.

David accepted the company’s offer but, based on his past dealings with Lidl, decided not to take its word and attended the court hearing anyway. Unsurprisingly, no one from Lidl turned up and the court found in our reader’s favour.

The ruling ends a three-month-long battle with Lidl to get a refund for a new PC that David bought from the superstore. When he got it home, he found it had another user’s data on it. Subsequent attempts to return the PC were

stonewalled by Lidl shop assistants and, claims David, he was even visited by a Lidl member of staff who tried to force him to take back his old machine.

Our advice to anyone intending to purchase goods from such stores in the future is to check the product before you buy it. Return faulty or unsuitable goods as soon as you can and make sure you write down any faults which appear on the equipment and contact your local trading standards office. Well done, David. It just goes to show that the small claims track can often yield positive results.

Techno scams

The government issued a stark warning to consumers last month to be wary of email, fax and mobile phone scams that could leave them out of pocket. At the launch of National Consumer week, consumer affairs minister Melanie Johnson told people to be on guard when receiving unsolicited messages on their phones or computers.

“We have warned the public about the danger of postal scams, such as bogus prize draws and competitions, but people also need to bear the same warnings in mind if they use mobile phones, fax machines and email,” Johnson explained.

There have been several mobile phone- and fax-based scams recently, including one which sent a text to your phone saying ‘I fancy you’ and giving a premium-rate number to call to find out who the sender was. This sort of con is particularly worrying as it is clearly aimed at younger people who use mobile phones.

Another swindle involved asking hotels to fax brochures to a potential customer, but once again the number provided was premium rate. Other cons involve offering prizes and free holidays to encourage people to call a premium rate number in order to claim.

The government hopes publicising such scams will raise awareness and encourage consumers to report them so perpetrators can be caught. ■

Spotting a scam

Icstis (the Independent Committee for the Supervision of Standards for Telephone Information Services) outlines several ways to identify a possible scam:

- the approach is unsolicited
- there is only a short time to claim the prize or reward
- you are required to send a ‘processing’ or ‘management’ fee to claim your prize
- you are asked to buy goods in order to get your prize
- you have to call a premium rate line
- the promotion is sent from overseas
- you are asked to send money out of the country, particularly to the Netherlands or Canada
- prizes are quoted in foreign currency
- you are asked to provide credit card or bank details
- you are asked to recruit others for the scheme to claim your prize.

Icstis also tells consumers to watch out for premium rate numbers that often start with 090. Premium rate reverse bill text messages usually contain a short four or five digit code number to reply to. Icstis says you should always read the terms and conditions of any promotion before taking part and don’t reply if you have any doubt about its legitimacy.

To keep your phone and fax safe you can bar premium rate calls and unsolicited commercial faxes. You can also stop unwanted text messages by registering with Icstis’ telephone preference service on its website.

Find out more...

More tips on how to spot and avoid scams can be found at www.ripofftipoff.net. If you think you have been a victim of a scam, advice on what to do about it can also be found here. Alternatively, you can call 020 7215 5000 or turn to the *PC Advisor* ConsumerWatch forum at www.pcadvisor.co.uk/consumerwatch and tell us your story.

Veni, vidi, vendor

Pulling your hair out trying to get hold of a vendor? The *PC Advisor* ConsumerWatch forum can help. We’ve got several vendors on board, each with their own threads:

Carrera
Dell
E-buyer
Evesham
Mesh
Multivision
Pipex
Rockdirect.com
Time
Watford Electronics

If you’re a vendor and would like to set up an official presence email us at pcadvisor_consumerwatch@idg.com.

consumer tips & tricks

Issues surrounding EU consumer protection have cropped up again and again in the ConsumerWatch forum in recent weeks. Guy Dixon cherry picks the best postings

Q I bought a notebook from a well-known PC retailer via its website, but after discussing the price with my partner decided we couldn't afford it. Can I cancel the order without losing my money?

A The EU Directive on the Consumer Protection (Distance Selling) Regulations came into effect with the intention of protecting consumers who buy via the internet, over the phone, through mail order or indeed any form of purchase where face-to-face contact is involved. Protection includes a seven-day cooling off period allowing the consumer to withdraw from the contract. This starts from the moment the goods are received.

Q So the CDs, videos and DVDs that I bought over Christmas from Amazon could, in theory, be returned and fully refunded?

A The seven-day cooling off period only applies to CDs, videos and DVDs if they have been unopened. This is an obvious attempt to combat piracy.

Q What other rights does the Consumer Protection (Distance Selling) Regulations offer?

A Consumers now have better protection against credit card fraud. The credit card companies are now legally obliged to cough up a complete refund in the event of your credit card details being used fraudulently. You also have the right to receive clear information about all goods and services prior to purchase. And once you've bought the goods you are now legally entitled to full confirmation in writing.

Q Does the directive apply to retailers operating outside the European Union?

A No it doesn't. Resolving disputes with retailers outside the EU can prove much more problematic. And don't expect the backing of your credit card company if something goes wrong. While most companies will consider claims matching the value of the original purchase, it is worth checking the small print before placing your order.

As ever, if you do make a purchase from a website outside the EU do your research on the vendor first. Watch out for web traders that do not give 'Contact us' details. It might be worth



contacting local enforcement agencies – along the lines of our own Trading standards – who may be able to vouch for the vendor's trading status.

Q So EU consumer protection initiatives are proving a boon for UK shoppers as long as they stick to long distance vendors within the Union?

A Not in all cases. As part of its long-term strategy to harmonise member state laws, the European Commission wants to remove Section 75 from the Consumer Credit Act. Under this section, card issuers and retailers are liable if anything goes wrong with a transaction costing between £100 and £30,000. The clause is there to act as a safeguard for consumers, protecting them from rogue traders and credit card scams. "The rest of Europe does not have this protection. UK law does not follow the norm and unfortunately certain current legal rights will have to be sacrificed in favour of EU legislation," said an EU spokeswoman.

Q Will this favour the retailer over the consumer?

A Even from a retailer's point of view the changes could be bad news. Although liability would shift from them back to the consumer, customers may be reluctant to perform transactions, especially online, with no guarantees or insurance. "Consumers would definitely feel reluctant to use their credit card at all [if Section 75 were removed]," said a spokesman at the Consumers Association. However the EU proposals are still being penned and the good news is that an uproar at these early stages could stop the plans. ■



Got a problem with a vendor? Get yourself to the ConsumerWatch forum at www.pcadvisor.co.uk/consumerwatch

terms & conditions

Spam is the scourge of 21st century computing with electronic junk messages now accounting for one in six emails. But what can be done about it? *PC Advisor* forum editor Peter Thomas investigates

If you're running a PC that has internet access then sooner or later you're going to get spammed. Unsolicited emails at best are a nuisance, but when you start receiving upwards of 100 messages a day – all from individuals or companies you've never heard of – it takes on a more serious aspect.

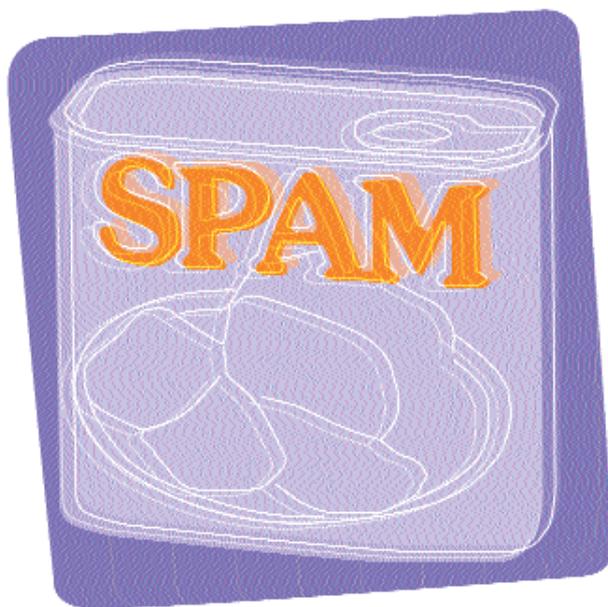
What a waste

And the situation is getting worse. Let's suppose that one million spam messages are sent in a single 'campaign' and each message takes a recipient 10 seconds to identify it as spam and delete it. That adds up to 2,778 hours of wasted time.

"You ain't seen nothing yet," says Satish Ramachandran, chief executive of spam-filtering company Mirapoint. According to Ramachandran, spammers will increasingly take advantage of wireless networks and users should expect an exponential rise in the amount of junk in their inboxes. According to a recent report from filtering firm MessageLabs, one in six emails is now a spam message – a massive annual increase of 81 percent.

Of course, you can configure your email software to delete or reject suspect messages – and this works to a degree. There are also third-party spam-blocking applications like MailShield from www.lyris.com. The problem is that these solutions are designed to deal with the effect when what we should really be doing is tackling the cause.

In a recent poll on the *PC Advisor* website, we asked online visitors for their view on how spam should be tackled. Nearly 43 percent of the responses were in favour of tougher regulations as a means of control and another 34 percent thought that the onus should be on ISPs



Microsoft has enlisted the help of antispam company Brightmail in an attempt to deal with the deluge of spam that's descending on Hotmail account users

to introduce more effective email filtering. So what's being done? The answer is 'quite a lot' but, in the words of the famous song, it's a long and winding road.

Time to take action

For two years now EU legislators have been looking at the subject of unsolicited email and online data security. The result? The Telecoms Data Protection Directive. Back in September a majority of Euro MPs voted in favour of an amendment

that would have prohibited the sending of unsolicited email without prior permission – requiring PC users to 'opt in'.

The UK government has taken a distinctly tepid line. "The Government has decided that the most effective way to control unsolicited commercial email is through self-regulation by the industry," said a spokesperson for the DTI. That decision looks set to be overturned should the European antispam legislation become compulsory for all member states.

Meanwhile Microsoft has enlisted the help of antispam company Brightmail in an attempt to deal with the deluge of spam that's descending on Hotmail account users. Brightmail can identify spammers using its database of over 200 million email addresses. The plan is to stop vast quantities of unsolicited mail from ever reaching Hotmail's 110 million users.

You've got mail

Unfortunately, UK ISPs don't seem to be taking the problem seriously. Looking for guidance on three of the UK's biggest ISPs – that is, BTopenworld, Freeserve, and Tiscali – revealed only basic instructions on how to set up mail filters in Outlook Express and how to avoid revealing your email address in Newsgroups. This simply isn't good enough: spam is an invasion of privacy and we think that ISPs should join *PC Advisor's* campaign for real mail.

In the meantime, those of you who want an industrial-strength spam blocker would do well to check out SpamAssassin Pro. It integrates well with Microsoft Outlook and will import your contacts and place them on a 'whitelist', so there's no possibility of Auntie Rosie's birthday email being deleted by mistake. Download a 14-day trial at www.deersoft.com. ■