



Reader's choice: budget notebooks

Armed with £1,500 and a stringent list of requirements, this month's reader was after a powerful notebook for work and play. Spencer Dalziel did his best to oblige

Trying to buy an all-singing, all-dancing notebook with enough futureproofing to last a good few years is a difficult task. Add some budget restrictions to the mix and it's really hard to come up with a model that will cope with everything you throw at it.

Notebooks have come on a long way in the past year and for the first time they're really snapping at the heels of their desktop counterparts. A never-ending stream of statistics indicate that consumers are turning to notebooks to provide both home entertainment and business solutions. However, you'll have to pay top dollar to buy the best there is and this isn't an option for everyone. It's vital to find a compromise between your budget and requirements.

We were contacted by a reader looking for the best possible model to suit his

budget. Mark Palmer used to work as a civil engineer for a construction company but found himself in an IT-based role when the company moved into business support services for the public and private sector. He lives in Redhill, Surrey, with his wife Julie, daughter Rebecca and an old 266MHz Dell PC with a 12GB hard drive that can no longer handle his needs. "I want to start editing digital video and creating home movies. Eventually I want to write them on to DVD so I'll be getting into DVD authoring and digital imaging."

We asked Mark why he didn't want a PC for the job and he replied that mobility was a key factor in his purchase: "I really want to move around with my new computer. We have an NTL broadband connection but it's only downstairs and a PC won't fit [in the room]. I also want to

What did Mark want?

- To spend up to £1,500 inc VAT
- Good performance
- Good keyboard
- Ample storage
- Big screen
- Decent graphics
- Doesn't need Speedstep

take it to my dad's or on holiday." We looked at three notebooks in Mark's price range of £1,500: the AJP 8640, the NEC Versa m300 and the Rock Xeno-m.

First impressions

Mark immediately noticed something was missing from our line-up. He had seen adverts for Hi-Grade's new model, sporting one of the first DVD-R drives in a notebook. This would have been a perfect choice but sadly Hi-Grade couldn't get one to us in time. Mark didn't seem too perturbed by this because he intends to hook up external drives anyway: "As long as I get a good notebook I don't mind paying out more for an external DVD-R drive. I'm going to attach an external La Cie 200GB hard drive and lots of digital-imaging devices."

Mark wants optimal performance for his money and this dictated the type of manufacturers we assessed. Bigger company names like Sony, Toshiba and Compaq tend not to offer notebooks with cutting-edge components as it's harder for retail brands to come to market quickly. Having an interest in IT, Mark was already pretty savvy about what he wanted from a

Pros and cons: the contenders measure up

AJP 8640

Pros: powerful, sturdy, large screen, USB 2.0, right Ctrl key

Cons: no internal DVD-R drive, Windows XP Home bundled

AJP: 020 8208 9700

Website:

www.ajp.co.uk

Price: £1,199
ex VAT



NEC Versa m300

Pros: best design, 32MB USB storage device

Cons: slowest model, no right Ctrl key

NEC: 0870 010 6322

Website:

www.nec-online.co.uk

Price: £1,069 ex VAT



Rock Xeno-m

Pros: fast mobile processor, Windows XP Professional bundled

Cons: expensive, bad graphics, no floppy

Rock: 08709 908 888

Website:

www.rockdirect.com

Price: £1,368 ex VAT



notebook and he'd requested models from smaller manufacturers.

First up to impress was NEC's Versa. Mark intends to use his notebook for watching DVDs so it was good to see impressive DVD playback on the 14.1in screen. Bar a 32MB portable USB storage device, though, this proved to be its only selling point.

Mark added: "I think the keyboard is a bit too springy and it lacks the all-important right Ctrl key." This seemed like a small aside so we asked him for further explanation: "In my job I have to create a lot of spreadsheets and I touchtype to do it. I only use the right Ctrl key and it would really throw me if it wasn't there."

What the experts say

NEC's Versa will save Mark some money but it doesn't have the power or features list to compete with the other models. The 1.8GHz Mobile Pentium 4 processor has the benefit of Speedstep technology, which saves on battery life, but Mark isn't too concerned about this: "I'd rather have a faster desktop processor. I doubt I'll use the notebook on the go - I'll plug it straight into the mains."

The Versa's 40GB hard drive is ample room for Mark to store digital video until he buys his external La Cie drive but the 256MB of DDR (double data rate) RAM isn't quite enough for video editing; he can get better performance for his money.

While Rock's Xeno houses a mobile processor it's a 2GHz chip that's twinned with 512MB of DDR RAM so it will have no problem handling Mark's requirements.

It's the most expensive notebook we looked at and doesn't quite have the value-for-money status of NEC or AJP's models.

On the down side, Mark won't be getting a floppy drive with this model and he thought this remiss of Rock: "I do a lot of work that's too small to bother burning on to a CD so a floppy drive's perfect." Mark will also miss out on decent graphics performance because the Xeno's integrated graphics can't compete with standalone cards.

AJP lacks an internal floppy but one is included in the generous price offer. We think this was the only minus point on an otherwise excellent model that will suit Mark down to the ground. The 15.1in screen is perfect for viewing DVDs and it's the most powerful budget model by quite a way. This is thanks, in part, to the inclusion of a 2.4GHz desktop processor and 512MB of DDR RAM. There are plenty of USB ports so it's easy to attach peripherals and it also includes the USB

2.0 standard. Faster than FireWire, this is the best connection for transferring large digital video files. The graphics are crisp and clear and there's also that all-important right Ctrl key. This has to be the notebook Mark should buy.

The reader's choice

Mark agreed that the AJP 8640 was the best solution. It is the top performer he can get for his money and it can cope with nearly everything bar making the tea. We did scare Mark with some tales of possible overheating problems associated with putting desktop processor technology into notebooks but this didn't faze him: "I want to be futureproofed and I think the AJP gives me as much support as possible. I'm after the fastest model for my £1,500 and this is it."

The 8640 may weigh in at a hefty 3.4kg but, again, this didn't trouble Mark: "Most of the time it'll be hooked up to a monitor and all the peripherals upstairs." ■

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