



What did Andrew want?

- Good all-rounder
- Decent colour output
- Stylish model
- Crisp text
- To spend £300 or less

Reader's choice: inkjet printers

This month's star of Reader's choice had a budget of £300 to spend on a new inkjet printer for use at work and home. Spencer Dalziel talked him through the options

Buying the right printer to suit your requirements and budget is no easy task. There's a rich profusion of models available because they're used for such a wide range of leisure and business applications. Whether you want to print high-quality family photos, create professional proofs for clients or churn out draft text and graphics quickly, everyone, it seems, needs a printer.

Some models are dedicated to particular tasks such as photo printing, while others are great all-rounders. Before you even think about parting with your cash you need to work out what your requirements are in order to narrow down the options.

This month Andrew Pardon contacted *PC Advisor* to ask us to help him spend £300 on a printer. Andrew, who lives with

his wife Marcia in St Albans and works as a service support worker, wanted to buy a printer for home and work use. He has particular requirements for the printer due to the nature of his work.

"There are new regulations at my work that require the introduction of a Widget communication system for our clients. It's a picture-based sign language system for people with learning disabilities. We have a cheap printer at work that's okay for text, but [now] we'll need absolute clarity for graphics," he explained.

While the printer must be able to cope with his working demands, Andrew also wants to use it for his own projects. "I've started an Adobe Photoshop course at Oaklands College and I want to bring my work home and print the results on a good-quality printer," he said, adding that

Marcia would probably hijack the printer for printing family snaps as well, so it needs to be able to output photo-quality images.

The models we suggested for Andrew were Canon's Bubble Jet i550, Epson's Stylus Photo 830 and HP's DeskJet 5550.

First impressions

The good news is that Andrew needn't spend anywhere close to his £300 budget for what he wants. A capable inkjet printer, which can output both text and photos should only set him back under £150, so he can spend the rest on inks and paper.

The three models we looked at couldn't have been more different aesthetically. Andrew immediately noted that the designs varied from "sexy to hideous". He elaborated: "The Canon printer looks like an oversized loo-roll holder, Epson's model looks like a normal printer and the HP looks really neat."

After checking out the initial feel of each model we let Andrew set the printers up and run some of our print tests. He thought that all were easy to set up, although the Canon has four separate ink tanks and a printhead to install before it can be used. This wasn't too much of a chore, though, and the instructions helped.

Pros and cons: the contenders measure up

Canon Bubble Jet i550

Pros: best value for money, good text and photo output

Cons: dull colours, ugly

Canon: 0870 514 3723

Website: www.canon.co.uk

Price: £106 ex VAT



OUR CHOICE

Epson Stylus Photo 830

Pros: cheapest, great colour scheme

Cons: high running costs, bad draft output

Epson: 0800 220 546

Website: www.epson.co.uk

Price: £82 ex VAT



HP DeskJet 5550

Pros: good all-rounder, stylish

Cons: most expensive to buy and run, slow print output

HP: 0870 547 4747

Website: www.hp.com/uk

Price: £124 ex VAT



READER'S CHOICE

Epson's low-cost 830 returned some mixed results. Bumping the resolution up produced better print jobs, but Andrew didn't like the draft mode text or graphics. He also found photo printing too dark on default, although detail was good. Overall, Andrew thought the text and graphics high resolution prints were the best. "The colour matching is excellent," he said, "it's almost exactly the same as the colours on the screen."

Canon's i550 was fast and, like HP's 5550, it produced good-quality text at the lowest resolution. But Andrew didn't like the banding on graphics when printing at low resolutions and he found the colours too dark. "There's no intensity to the colours. They look really dull," he said. However, Canon excelled with photo-quality printing and here Andrew thought the i550 did the best job.

Although neither of us felt HP's 5550 excelled at any type of print job we had to admit that it didn't perform badly either. So while it didn't have the best-quality output, Andrew liked its all-round usefulness. "It does a better job over all the tests we've seen," he said.

What the experts say

The Epson Stylus Photo 830 is the cheapest device and has some good specifications for the price. It's an entry-level model aimed at first-time buyers interested in photo printing. The claimed print speed of 14ppm (pages per minute) for monochrome and 13.7ppm for colour may not be the fastest, but our tests proved these figures were the closest to the mark out of the three contenders.

Andrew isn't that bothered by print speed. He liked the quiet operation of the Epson, but was put off by the high running costs. Its colour cartridge lasts just 220 pages and overall it "wasn't in the same league as the Canon or HP".

Canon's i550 might not be much of a sight to behold and it's a noisy runner, but it packs some great specifications for the price. It has a top resolution of 4,800x1,200 and a quoted speed of 18ppm for monochrome and 11ppm for colour. While the actual speeds we got weren't as fast as they should have been, it was still the quickest performer.

More importantly, if you run out of a colour the separate ink tank system means you only renew the ink you need which saves money over time and makes this the cheapest printer to run, with colour pages costing 4.4p and mono 2.7p. Colours were a little muted but text was sharp and we thought that this compromise was worth it for the low costs.

The HP 5550 didn't impress us when it came to running costs, as it is expensive at 4.8p per mono page and 7.6p for colour pages. It was also the slowest printer we tested and, while the 1,200x1,200 resolution looked impressive, in reality the results weren't that outstanding. But as an all-purpose printer it's a good choice.

The reader's choice

We tried to steer Andrew towards the Canon i550, but he was happier with the HP 5550 despite its high running costs. "I'm not too concerned about running costs if the printer justifies the expense. I know the Canon is fast and is the best value for money, but I like the all-round output from the 5550," he explained.

"I think Marcia and I would prefer something that looks nice on the desktop so the 5550's design helps," he added.

Our tip for Andrew would be to shop around for third-party ink cartridges for the printer, as this will help keep costs down. ■

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