

Both Comet and Mesh are hauled in for questioning this month as two readers share their frustrating experiences. One customer found his machine played up fresh out the box; another complains his PC was delivered dead on arrival. Neither retailer was quick to respond until ConsumerWatch heard their stories

All over the country, thousands of customers are unpacking brand-new computers, starting them up and getting on with using them without so much as a glitch. Elsewhere, a few excited new owners will be deflated to find their machine is a dud but will know to simply package it back up and get the supplier to give them another one.

But what happens if you fall between these two poles and your newly hooked-up PC looks like it might make that crucial first boot but for a significant little hiccup you reckon some tweaking might solve?

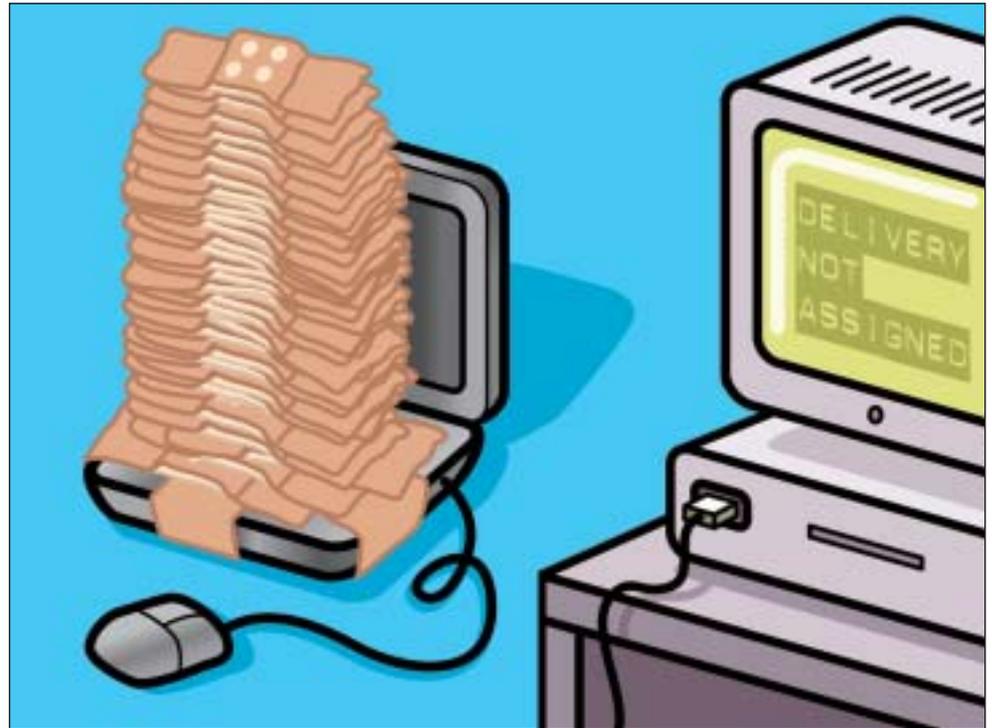
It's tempting to be a have-a-go handyman, perhaps with the help of the manufacturer's helpline. This isn't a bad idea and can often work. But you can find yourself swamped by supplementary conditions (imposed by manufacturer or supplier) on your statutory right to an exchange or refund. Trading Standards suggests you consult them first and confirm your rights before deciding whether to rescue or reject your flaky PC.

Comet kerfuffle

Roger Burstow of Plymouth learnt this lesson the hard (but ultimately not injurious) way when he bought a Fujitsu-Siemens laptop from Comet. Having set up the system he was modifying the desktop for the first time when it spontaneously shut down and restarted.

Something was clearly wrong with the machine and Mr Burstow gamely tried to sort it out. He ran the product recovery disc provided and, when this didn't work, called Fujitsu-Siemens. With their assistance the notebook seemed to get going, but come the next morning it failed to awake.

As it was a Sunday and the Fujitsu-Siemens helpline was closed, Mr Burstow took his problem laptop back to the Comet store he bought it from. He told the duty manager the history and said he thought it was pretty clear that the machine wasn't fit for purpose and, in accordance with the



provisions of the Sale of Goods Act, he'd like to exchange it.

To his dismay the manager refused, saying he'd have to get the manufacturer to fix the machine or declare it irretrievable before Comet could provide a replacement. And so, unwittingly, Mr Burstow entered into the supplier's 'alternative course' for dealing with problem machines. Alternative, that is, to giving an automatic replacement.

It's time for answers

Comet has a service agreement with Fujitsu-Siemens (and indeed all the manufacturers whose products it sells) to support their PCs. It is reluctant to replace machines that are covered by this agreement as Fujitsu-Siemens won't redeem any machines it hasn't written off, meaning Comet would incur a loss.

The upshot for Mr Burstow was that he had to remain patient for a week while Fujitsu-Siemens worked out the source of the problem (it was a conflict between the motherboard

and graphics card and was solved by running a simple patch that the manufacturer sent out promptly).

It also meant a week of frustration and anxiety as Mr Burstow worried about being fobbed off - and possibly ripped off - by Comet. During this week he made countless calls to Fujitsu-Siemens, Trading Standards and his credit card company.

We talked to the Trading Standards Office in Plymouth, which had been perturbed by Mr Burstow's story. Trading Standards' enforcement officer Peter Spiers told us Comet and Fujitsu-Siemens' 'alternative route' is acceptable, but it could have been seen to be restricting the customer's statutory rights.

"I couldn't say it was wrong, but I didn't particularly like it. Customers can end up with an inferior remedy than under their statutory rights, but as long as it works [as in this case] and the customer is happy, it's okay." Spiers added.

Spiers particularly objected to Comet giving the impression that

their alternative route (consulting first with the manufacturer) was the only option presented to Mr Burstow, even though he was within his rights to ask for a replacement. Had he been more aware of these rights, Mr Burstow would have had a better chance of getting a working laptop quickly.

Know your rights

Spiers' advice is to phone Trading Standards as soon as a fault becomes apparent and find out your rights. The alternative route that Comet offered him wasn't the only one open to Mr Burstow and he could have stood firm and demanded a replacement. It may not have materialised that day as Comet would have got Fujitsu-Siemens to look at the machine one way or another to verify it wasn't working, but Comet would have had to accept the law.

Above all, be careful what you do to the machine, even if it's on the advice of the manufacturer. "If I was on the phone to the manufacturers and they advised me do a system reinstall, knowing my statutory rights I would refuse, take the machine into the supplier and let them mess around with it. Attempting your own repair can affect your statutory rights," says Spiers.

What a Mesh

But what if your computer doesn't even arrive? We were contacted by Elfed Wright on behalf of a friend who'd ordered a PC from Mesh and was still waiting for it five and a half weeks later. Initially he'd been told it would arrive after two weeks.

When this didn't happen he made the first of countless calls to Mesh's customer services department to find

out where the problem lay but got a different answer each time. One day he'd be told there was a delay in delivery times and he'd have to wait. The next he'd be given a delivery date within a few weeks. His friend stayed in on the specified day in question, but the computer didn't arrive. Back on the phone, Mr Wright was eventually told that the order was on hold and was given a number to contact to find out why.

When this bore no fruit, an increasingly annoyed Mr Wright resumed calling customer services, but his mood wasn't improved by having to spend ages waiting to speak to a representative. After a while his wife cannily suggested calling the sales line to see if they answered quicker. Sure enough, it worked.

Sales fix

Not only did he get a prompt answer, Mr Wright also got some useful info from the sales team. The order had been delayed because Mesh required the debit card security number (three digits found on the reverse of the card) before they'd process the order.

Mr Wright promptly supplied the number and, a week or so later, the PC was with his friend. But why the endless wait? And why did it take so many calls before Mr Wright could obtain any useful information? Surely something in the Mesh ordering system wasn't working properly.

Nick Walter, Mesh's head of marketing, confirmed that the interminable wait had been the result of structural shortcomings in Mesh's administration, spiced up with a pinch of human error.

The original problem was that when Mr Wright's friend placed her

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order by letter, neglecting to include the card security number (which, indeed, most of us haven't even heard of), she also failed to include her phone number. This meant that Mesh, which uses the phone as the main channel of communication, became a little flummoxed.

Walter assured us the company has a stock letter that it sends out in cases where crucial information is omitted. In fact, he sent us a copy of one to prove it. Shame nobody sent one to Mr Wright's friend as it meant she didn't know anything was amiss. Early August is obviously a difficult time in the Mesh offices.

Talking telephone numbers

What about Mr Wright's innumerable phone calls? Didn't they provide ample chance for a Mesh representative to get the crucial digits? The problem there, Walter tells us, was that Mr Wright was calling the customer service line and customers only enter the Mesh customer database when they have completed a purchase.

Apparently, this is why no useful information was forthcoming until Mr Wright called the sales team in frustration. Walter assures us that Mesh is installing a complete new customer database that will give every department access to customer information, from sales to services, in the new year and that will end this kind of inefficiency.

We can only hope that the new database includes a reminder function so that when information requests need to be sent out, they actually are.

For his part, Mr Wright says he is unimpressed with Mesh's excuses and has vowed never to deal with them again. We hope his friend doesn't experience any problems with her new PC then. ☒

PC Advisor personal data privacy campaign

Have you ever been sold a PC that had someone else's information on? Or has a PC you returned to a company been resold without being properly wiped? If either of these things have happened to you, we want to hear from you. If you find a previous customer's data on a PC purchased from the Dixons Stores Group don't forget to email Simon Turner, DSG's managing director, at simon.turner@dixons.co.uk.

Email us at pcadvisor_consumerwatch@idg.com and we'll take it from there