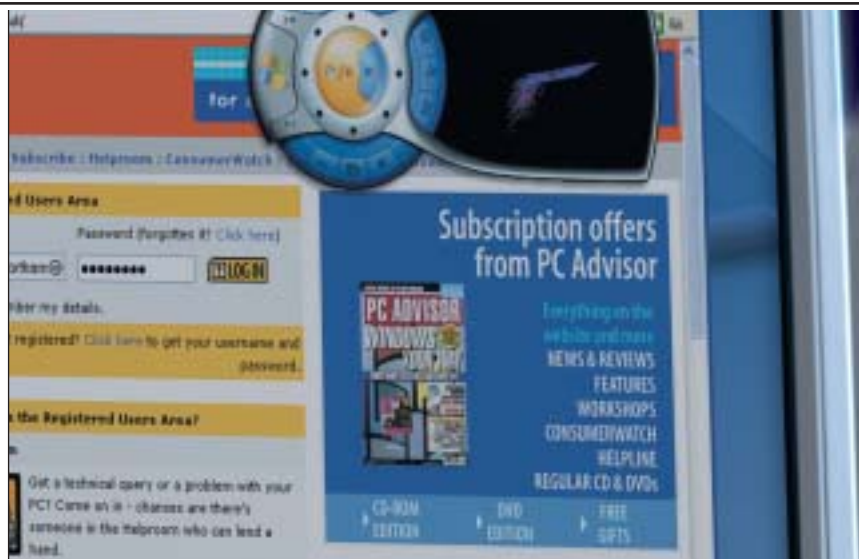# TOP 10 CHARTS

How to buy

Even if you choose to buy from a firm with a great track record, it's no guarantee that your PC purchase will go without a hitch. So, whether you're looking for your first computer or are a seasoned PC shopper, bear in mind the following basic dos and don'ts when you hand over your credit card. They should save you unnecessary grief if your system turns out to be a turkey.

• High street Buying at a high street outlet is still the most expensive route to take, because you're paying extra for the vendor's overheads. Remember, too, that you won't necessarily be able to pick up your new PC there and then as most systems are still made to order. However, you will be able to try out a test model and many first-time buyers find this aspect of reassuring.
• Mail order Choosing the mail order route will get you a better price as many dealers don't have to worry about the costs and expenses of a shopfront. However, this way of buying requires a lot more confidence. Jot down your specification requirements before placing your order and be prepared to argue with the sales staff because they'll try to convince you that you need higher specifications.
• Online Buying over the internet is a good option if you're after a decent deal. It's very cost-effective for dealers as well, so they'll entice you with great offers and the best specifications. You can usually configure your own system, too. The down side is you will need to know what you want as there's often no one on hand to help you. One point to remember is that you should get an order confirmation via email immediately.

For any of the above options, don't forget to test the company's customer helpline, too. If it's impossible to get through, just imagine how frustrated you will be holding on the line when you have a problem.

Following on from last month, where we looked at 17in and 19in monitors, we've been putting their thin and stylish cousins through the paces with a roundup of the latest flat-panel displays. Once the preserve of company directors and those with more money than sense, flat-panels have consistently dropped in price so that they're more affordable than ever before. So if you fancy swapping that conventional bulky CRT (cathode ray tube) for a thin, stylish flat-panel turn to page 238 for a look at what's available.

We've also refreshed our Budget PC chart – an ideal compromise between the ultra-cheap Superbudget arena and the more expensive Power PC level. Our Budget chart covers PCs from £700 up to £1,200, giving a good spread of machines for those that want value for money. Turn to page 230 to see how this month's new entries fare.

Prices

Our price categories for PCs and notebooks are as follows: Power PCs, over £1,200; Budget PCs, £700-£1,200; Superbudget PCs, sub-£700; Power notebooks, over £1,500; and Budget notebooks, sub-£1,500. Our Digital camera price categories are: Professional, over £700; Intermediate, over £300; and Beginners, under £300.

All prices printed in *PC Advisor* are quoted by the manufacturer or distributor and exclude VAT. Prices are only intended as a guide and you may see products on sale for less or more than our quoted price. If you're interested in purchasing any of the products reviewed in *PC Advisor,* please contact the manufacturer or supplier direct, mentioning both the magazine and the issue in which you saw the product. If they won't supply the product as reviewed, contact us at reviews@idg.com. Please note manufacturers are under no obligation to feature reviewed products on their website.

PC Advisor's recommendations are for guidance only and are not a guarantee of suitability. The publisher takes no responsibility for purchasers' decisions.
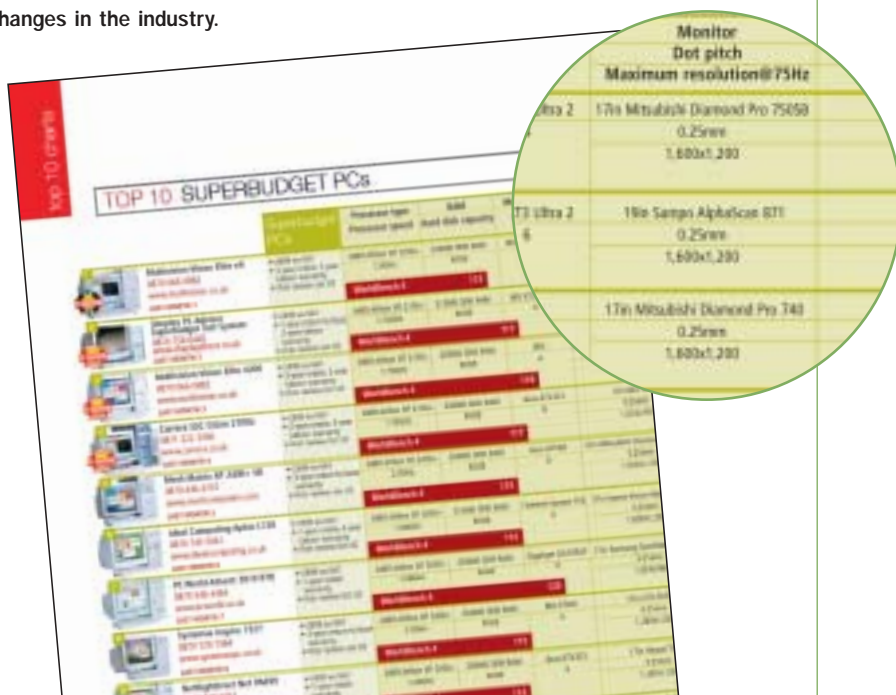
The Top 10 chart awards

Top-ranking products are eligible for either Best Buy or Recommended awards. A Best Buy product takes the number-one spot in its chart, thanks to a superlative combination of features, performance, value for money and customer service (where we have the data). Those that earn a Recommended award are pretenders to the Best Buy crown. Almost as good, these Recommended products offer great value, quality and performance.

All chart rankings are based on a calculation of features and performance compared to price, so the highest-scoring products also represent the best value for money

How to read the charts

Our charts are easy to navigate and include a comments section, which summarise the main pros and cons to help you see at a glance whether a particular product is for you. We focus on two main charts every month, reviewing a clutch of the latest models against the existing chart entries. Other charts are regularly updated, too, as new entries enter the market, so check our tables before you buy. Under each chart you'll also find useful buying advice to help guide you through your purchasing decisions.

All chart rankings are based on a calculation of features and performance compared to price, so the highest-scoring products also represent the best value for money. Charts are introduced, amended or removed as and when necessary to cover any emerging hardware sectors, advances in technology or changes in the industry.

What is PC WorldBench 4?

WorldBench 4 is the latest version of our benchmarking software, which has been updated to allow us to test PCs running Windows XP, and also contains an upgraded base system against which results are compared.

The PC WorldBench 4 benchmarking software tests how well a system runs 11 different applications and provides the best indication of its real-world performance.

The 11 packages are: Photoshop 5.0, PhotoPaint 8.0, Quicken Deluxe 99, Lotus 1-2-3 9.0, Lotus Word Pro 9.0, Access 2000, Excel 2000, PowerPoint 2000, Word 2000, Netscape Communicator 4.73 and Visio 5.0 SE. Test results are then collated and compared against a reference system – namely a Gateway Select 1200 PC, with a 1.2GHz AMD Athlon processor, 128MB of RAM, 20GB Quantum Fireball hard drive and VisionTek GeForce3 graphics card. To make it easy to compare, the control PC's score is set at 100, so a system that scores 150 is 50 percent faster than the control PC, and so on.