news

OFT report "toothless" say PCA readers

The computer business is serving consumers well but could do better when it comes to aftersales support, according to the OFT (Office of Fair Trading) which has just completed a year-long investigation into the industry.

The OFT report, Consumer IT Goods and Services, says that overall consumers are satisfied with the price and performance of PC equipment, but that the support services offered by suppliers are the greatest cause for complaint, "with telephone helplines causing the most frustration".

While the OFT did note the worst offenders – firms who charge as much as £1.50 per minute for premium rate support lines – John Vickers, director general of fair trading, said that these companies would not be revealed to the public as the OFT "is not in the business of naming and shaming", and that such practices were "very much across the board" in any case.

This left some PC Advisor readers feeling that the report didn't go far enough. "There is nothing in this report that the consumer did not already know… Why not name and shame the culprits, this is the only way

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> Richard Murphy, PC Advisor reader

things will improve." argues reader Richard Murphy. Another reader, Joe McGinley, dismissed the report as "toothless".

The OFT believes problems with overpriced support lines can be best addressed by providing customers with more information up front about what they are buying so they will be able to consider its overall cost and quality.

But PC Advisor readers think it will take a lot more than that to improve PC support. Comments posted on our website forums showed that you think that the provision of good support requires changes on the part of both customers and manufacturers.

"Customers have a choice; they either have to pay full whack for their PCs [at a profit margin] that allows manufacturers to provide better support or they continue getting cheap PCs and accept that manufacturers' support is not really going to deliver what they want," says reader and ex-industry insider Colin Middlemiss. He believes that the way forward is "support services tailored to the user and charged accordingly".

The running cost of inkjet printers – specifically the price of inkjet cartridges – was also singled out for criticism in the report. The OFT recommends that the industry comes up with a standard measure of inkjet cartridge performance in the next 12 months.

This recommendation met with resounding support from our readers, who all thought the idea of an easy to understand, standard test would be really helpful.

The OFT has also issued a leaflet, Buying a PC, which you can get by calling 0870 606 0321. The full report is at www.oft.gov.uk/market+investigations/investigations/it+services.htm.

Top of the flops

BT Openworld is the most complained about ISP in the UK, according to telco watchdog Oftel. Its report looked into customer complaints about companies in the fixed line, mobile and internet access markets, measuring the number of calls it received between 1 April and 30 September 02.

Oftel receives around 100,000 complaints each year, and so far this year 11 percent have been about ISPs. Top of the ISP complaints category was BT Openworld with 1.6 complaints per 1,000 users, followed by Pipex on 0.6. The industry average was 0.4 complaints per 1,000. The full report can be viewed online at www.oftel.gov.uk/publications/consumer/comp1202.htm.

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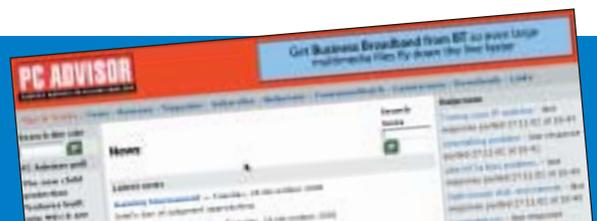
Why we buy broadband

While BT congratulates itself on signing up half a million broadband subscribers, *PC Advisor* readers are still put off by the cost.

Over half (54.9 percent) of the respondents to our poll on www.pcadvisor.co.uk said that they were unwilling to sign up for ADSL broadband because of its high cost. This is contrary to findings by telco trade union Intellect which said that people were put off broadband because a lack of awareness of its benefits. In fact in our poll only eight percent of users blamed ignorance for the slow takeup of broadband.

In a bid to boost its broadband customer base, BT will begin trialling a cheaper halfway house, in the shape of Midband, in Spring 2003. This service will offer data transfer rates of up to 128Kbps – placing it, as its name suggests, somewhere between the maximum 56Kbps offered by residential dialup and 512Kbps cable/ADSL services.

Should BT's Midband service ever make it beyond the trial stage it could potentially reach up to 97 percent of UK households and would carry a charge of around £20-25 per month.

But while cost clearly needs to be addressed, users still have to be tempted by the benefits of broadband by a so-called killer app. Currently the money is on online gaming, with both Microsoft and Sony launching services based on their popular consoles, and Screen Digest anticipating the market could be worth as much as $1bn (£600m) by 2006.

Backups are our right

A survey this month from Gartner research showed that most consumers believe creating backup copies of digital media is a right. And frankly, we agree.

After shelling out the best part of £20 for a CD which has an estimated lifespan of 15 years, it seems only fair that we should be able to make as many backup copies for personal use as they see fit. And a massive 82 percent of the people surveyed concurred, believing creating backups was completely legal.

"Until laws are passed allowing users the right to backup legally, uncertainty about the lack of basic archiving will stunt the growth of [CD sales] for the next three to five years,"

said Mike McGuire, research director at Gartner. This is presumably due to the fact that many buyers will turn their backs on original copies in favour of downloads and bootlegged versions.

MY TECHNOLOGY
phillipa forrester

Q. Mac or PC? Which do you use and why?

A. I use a Mac because I find it so innovative. I am currently making a wildlife programme and we are using Final Cut Pro 3 on the G4 PowerBook. I love it. It means that we can edit in the field and allows us to have a really good idea of what our programme will look like.

Q. When did you last get angry with a piece of technology and why?

A. The thing that really gets on my nerves at the moment is cabling. Because my laptop comes most places with me, nothing has a permanent place on the desk in the office, so there are wires everywhere.

Q. If you could invent a future technology device, what would it be?

A. It would probably be the piece of kit which we will all have in our pockets in 10 years time: the communicator which does everything from one unit – address book, diary, phone, camera, keys, internet, maybe even credit card. It's already happening but I want my name on the one piece that everyone uses to ensure my future as a billionaire.

Q. What technology product couldn't you live without, and why?

A. I suppose working life would be a lot more difficult without my Mac PowerBook, but there are other important machines to consider like my ice cream maker. I really wouldn't like to have to choose.

Q. What's your home page or favourite website, and why?

A. I don't really have time to go surfing so I like sites that are useful rather than entertaining. Generally, if you can shop on it then I've been there and liked it.

Phillipa Forrester is a television presenter. She has has worked on shows ranging from the BBC's *Tomorrow's World* to *Robot Wars* and *Megalab 99.*

Sparing the rod

They say no news is good news, but when a month is dominated by a non-story, it isn't good news for us news editors. And this month has been just such a month.

We were looking forward to seeing the results from the OFT's (Office of Fair Trading's) survey into the customer satisfaction. But after hearing what the OFT had to say on the matter, we were left feeling rather disappointed.

Despite the fact that *PC Advisor* **often has to defend readers who feel they have suffered at the hands of shoddy suppliers, the OFT issued a pat on the back to the IT industry, saying the "consumer IT goods and service market is working well".**

To be fair, there are a lot of honest and trustworthy companies out there, but there's still room for improvement, particularly as IT suppliers reach out to less experienced users.

The OFT also recognises this fact, pinpointing telephone support and the cost of inkjet cartridges as particular areas for concern. Unfortunately, it's going to do precious little about it. While it recommends that the industry should be more transparent in its pricing, it is doing nothing to force them to be, and will not review the situation for another year, which is not that useful to those who want to buy in the next 12 months.

On the bright side the OFT does make one sensible recommendation – it says one of the best ways to make informed purchasing decisions is to read PC magazines like *PC Advisor.*

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Bluetooth finds its way

After a slow start Bluetooth short range wireless technology might finally be starting to fulfil its promise, thanks to its adoption in a wide range of devices over the past year.

Most of these products revolve around the mobile phone. But vendors and analysts at the Bluetooth Developers Conference in California last month said that such phone-related products are helping to foster wider Bluetooth adoption, while pushing up volumes and driving down component pricing.

"Mobile phones are going to be the dominating product when it comes to product volumes," said Johan Akesson, marketing director for Ericsson Technology Licensing in Sweden. He believes shipments of Bluetooth chipsets will grow by about 300 percent next year.

One growth area arising from the adoption of wireless technology in phones is in cars. Bluetooth add-on kits for cars eliminate the need for a special cradle to hold a mobile phone while the driver uses it in hands-free mode.

Audi has already announced that it will be incorporating Bluetooth technology into its cars from the end of the month.

The system features a rechargeable in-car Bluetooth handset that allows passengers to place and receive calls as well as transfer them to the wireless hands-free phone in the car.

Audi foresees this technology will become increasingly important in the near future as governments enforce more stringent rules over the use of mobile phones in cars to stop accidents caused when drivers make calls.

Cheaper, lighter plastic displays

Xerox has announced a new material, which will allow the creation of printed plastic transistors, enabling manufacturers to make inexpensive, lightweight, flexible displays for mobile phones, notebooks and televisions. It could even result in portable poster-sized television screens.

The substance, developed by a team of Xerox researchers, led by Beng Ong (pictured), can be used to make organic transistors on a plastic substrate. The benefits of the new material will be seen first in the manufacture of screens for mobile devices, which Xerox claims will be much more robust and won't break if a device is dropped.

The new material is an improvement on previous organic semiconductors as, unlike these, it doesn't decay on exposure to air, said Xerox.
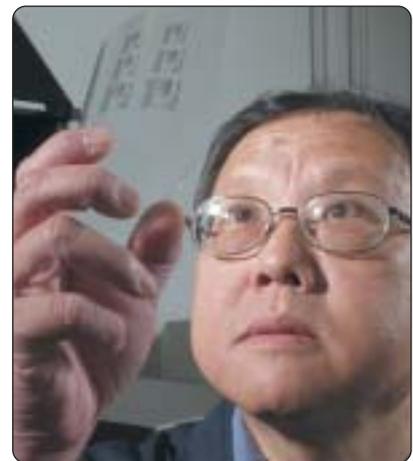
Xerox is not the only company that's currently working on this technology. Display manufacturer, E-Ink also plans to bring out its first plastic-based display next year.

Out of office security

TIF (The Corporate IT Forum) has warned office workers to be careful about what information they put in auto-response messages because of a newly discovered security risk.

The forum, an association of senior corporate IT managers, found criminals are using the information contained in 'out of office' auto replies to determine personal details, and in some cases even addresses, of staff through cross-referencing the data given.

Although the chances of criminals being able to find out your home address or other personal details is highly unlikely unless you actually include them in your message, the threat is nevertheless real and workers should be on their guard.

"You wouldn't pin a note to your door saying who you were and how long you were away so why put this on an email?" asked David Roberts, chief executive of TIF.

Despite the low risk, TIF still suggests that people are careful and has released a set of guidelines for those sending out auto-response messages which can be found at www.tif.com.

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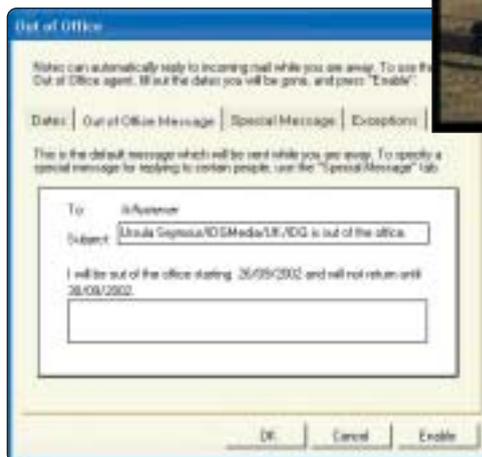
Stop viruses dead

Viruses and spam are a problem for any business trying to ensure the protection of sensitive data and networks. Antivirus firm Avecho believes it has the answer to preventing all unwanted onslaughts in the shape of its latest GlassWall software for small- and medium-sized businesses. The company even goes so far as to guarantee its package will stop all viruses and spam messages dead in their tracks.

Although it was not willing to give away too much about the technicalities of the program, the company says the software comes with a 100 percent guarantee. Unlike other packages that work on detection and scanning GlassWall simply blocks out all EXE (executable) files, the main virus carriers, from inboxes.

It also includes a spam filter that allows users to select which emails they wish to receive, and a content filtering system, which allows users to block out messages containing certain words or pictures. The 'guaranteed' service costs £75 a year and includes fancy extras such as email accounts and a helpline service. For more information visit www.avecho.net.

Get more from your mobile

Mobile phone service company Fastmobile has bought instant messaging to mobiles. Unlike current SMS services which are prone to delays caused by busy networks and impose limits on the size of files users can send, Fastxt is untrammelled by such restrictions. It is also a much cheaper alternative to SMS.

The service works over GPRS (general packet radio service), which sends data at high speeds and costs less than a penny per message. That's more than 11p cheaper than sending an SMS message on some networks.

But it's not only instant messaging that's on offer with Fastxt; content provider MVI has launched software that enables TV-quality video to be sent to your mobile or PDA.

MVI is in talks with several content providers to develop 30 channels of sport and entertainment, which will be available by Christmas 2003. The only problem now is finding yourself a bigger screen to view it on.

Internet implements
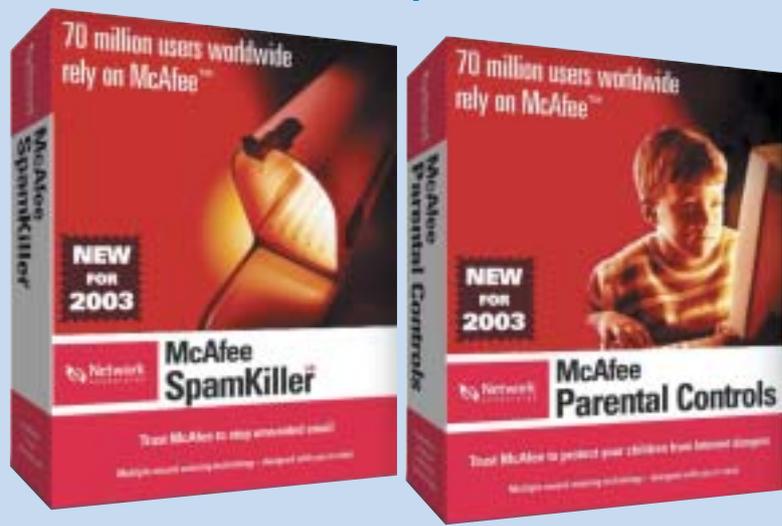
With a million UK users accessing broadband internet and home networking becoming more popular as people seek to share these high-speed connections, making the internet safe and effective is becoming an ever more pressing concern.

With this in mind, antivirus and security firm McAfee has launched two products: Parental Controls to keep kids safe while they surf, and SpamKiller which protects you from unsolicited emails.

Parental Controls is already a part of McAfee's Internet Security Suite, which also offers virus protection and a firewall, but the company believes it will be successful as a cheaper, standalone product. It costs just £17 as opposed to £49.99 for the whole suite.

The product allows parents to block sites containing any of a list of hundreds of words; they can also add their own keywords to the banned list.

Users can also protect private information such as credit card details, to suppress unsuitable content in chatrooms and message clients and to limit the amount of time children can spend online.

McAfee's second new release, SpamKiller, is designed to stop junk emails from clogging your inbox, as its name suggests. It uses constantly updated custom filters to block unwanted messages based on factors including sender, subject line and country of origin. It will also bounce back junk messages, making senders believe your email address isn't live. SpamKiller will also be £17.

Whistle while you wait

Korean telco SK Telecom has come up with a way for mobile owners to choose the sound their callers hear while waiting for their call to be answered. Called 'colour-ring', the service allows users to select the type of music their callers hear, from pop hits to sounds from nature. The service has already won over a third of SK's subscribers in the eight months since it was launched, netting the company around £2.6m each month. With profits like this to be made, other carriers are starting to sit up and take notice and SK is hoping to export the service to Europe.

Profitable event

ProfIT, an exhibition aimed at showing small businesses how technology can cut costs, improve efficiency and add to the bottom line, is taking place at Sandown Park centre in Surrey, from 11-12 February. It promises to cover buying PCs, choosing software, e-commerce, broadband internet, mobile technology and customer management without resorting to technobabble. For more information visit www.profitevent.com.

Mini memory cards

Hitachi has shrunk the already tiny multimedia card media to an even dinkier dimension. The RS-MMC (reduced-size multimedia card) is half the length of a standard MMC, measuring 24x18x1.4mm and weighing just 0.8g. But it can be used in the same slot as a normal MMC or SD (Secure Digital) card. The RS-MMC comes in 16MB, 32MB and 64MB capacities and should go into mass production in the second half of this year, when Hitachi will add 128MB and 256MB versions. Prices are expected to be similar to those of standard MMCs, perhaps slightly higher. Currently a 64MB MMC costs around £35.