

welcome

The Office of Fair Trading seems to think that the computer industry is supporting its customers well enough, but the future isn't half as rosy as its report suggests

Just before Christmas, the OFT (Office of Fair Trading) issued a report on the consumer IT market. Called *Consumer IT Goods and Services*, the study rather surprisingly concluded that vendors are doing a good job of serving their customers.

No one can deny that modern PCs represent tremendous value for money when it comes to the performance and functionality you get for the price. And while it's true that the PC suppliers do a great job when it comes to the price and performance of the products they sell, what about the quality of support?

Ever-cheaper gigahertz and megabytes mean nothing when you're listening to hold music in a customer services queue or waiting for a courier who never arrives.



Any hopes that the OFT would play the role of fairy godmother and restore the fortunes of PC support have been dashed by its wimpy report

The OFT has acknowledged that aftersales support is variable across the industry, and that the quality and price of support is far from transparent to consumers when they buy a PC. But astonishingly the research concluded that as thousands of reliable PCs are sold every year with only a few customers experiencing bad support, the industry must be working well.

The future is a blue screen

But these 'few' bad experiences will grow in number. Take it from us, dissatisfied PC buyers are not about to become an endangered species. Why? Because while on the one hand PC technology is getting more complex, allowing us increasingly to do a whole lot more than just word processing, while the audience is getting broader and less knowledgeable of the inner workings of these powerful devices.

Support, therefore, is more important than ever, but shrinking profit margins put pressure on suppliers to cut corners – and support is expensive with no tangible return, so it's the first corner to be cut.

Aftersales support is the Cinderella of the consumer PC business: sidelined by suppliers focused on building bigger, faster ever more powerful machines and kept poor by ever-decreasing hardware profit margins. Any hopes that the OFT would play the role of fairy godmother and restore Cinderella's fortunes have been dashed by its wimpy report.

If customers want good support they will have to get used to paying for it, and that will increase the cost of owning a PC far beyond just the capital cost of acquiring one at present prices. They will either have to pay a higher price for the PC in the first place, which is hardly fair on those who don't need the support, or, a better solution, buy themselves a support contract.

The corporate market has known for more than a decade that the cost of owning a PC is far more than the purchase price. But it could come as quite a shock in the consumer market. ■

Andrew Charlesworth

reader information

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Mr W Murray, Bristol; Mr K Lees, Worcestershire; Mr C Bell, Herefordshire; Mr C Ball, Cornwall; Miss J Aitken, Inverclyde; Mr M Barnes, Sheffield; Mr D Woodhouse, Reading; Mr S Slade, Lancashire; Mr M Taylor, Essex; Mr T Wheeler, Rugby.

Xara Webstyle, Xara X, Xara 3D: Ms H Davies, Bridgend;

Mr I Kirkcaldy, Fife; Mr R Coles, Cornwall; Mrs A Baker, Devon.

Trust Spycam 500 Flash: Mr J Rickard, West Midlands;

Mr C Johnston, Aberdeen; Mrs C Rayner, Northampton;

Mr N Booth, Grimsby.