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# Sale of Goods Act set to benefit consumers

This March saw changes to the regulations governing the sale of goods in the UK, some of which have implications for purchasers of new PCs.

The adoption of a new EU directive means that the UK Sale of Goods Act will be amended in favour of consumers, shifting the burden of proof regarding faulty goods from the consumer to the seller within the first six months after purchase. Consumers will also be able to seek repair, replacement or full or partial refund on these goods.

"It is a practical and valuable approach to most people's consumer problems," says Andre Patel from the Consumers Association. But in the UK the move "doesn't change the standards very much. It more harmonises the rules of other countries, so people know wherever they buy in EU they have the same level of protection."

To obtain a full refund you have to return faulty goods quickly, as you will be entitled to a refund only if you take goods back "within a reasonable time of sale". A specific time is not defined but Patel says it's around two weeks in most cases. However, you can claim for a "reasonable amount of compensation" for up to six years after purchase.

If you are seeking a full refund or compensation you still have to prove the goods were faulty at the time of purchase. But if you request a repair or replacement within the first six months after purchase you are no longer required to prove the fault was present on purchase. This is assumed unless the retailer can prove otherwise.

While the new regulations may shift the responsibility of proving goods were not faulty at point of sale on to the retailer, consumers should still be wary as the rules do not apply if goods were obviously flawed. You also cannot expect redress if the damage is due to fair wear and tear, an accident or misuse, nor if you simply decide you no longer want the goods.

Consumers who purchase custom-specified computers direct can also request repair, replacement, partial or full refunds under the following circumstances:

• where installation by the retailer is not satisfactory;
• where installation instructions have serious shortcomings;
• generally where a product does not match the public statements made about it by the retailer, manufacturer, importer or producer;
• where a specially commissioned product has relevant failings.

# Assault on spam

The DTI has opened its consultation into the implementation of the EU's Electronic Communication Data Protection Directive, with its main objective to discuss anti-spam laws.

The tide of unsolicited emails is growing rapidly, comprising an estimated 42 percent of the annual total of outgoing messages according to anti-spam company Brightmail.

UK anti-spam laws will technically ban the sending of bulk email without prior approval. This will restrict mass-marketing campaigns sent by firms in the EU and US to email accounts and mobile phones.
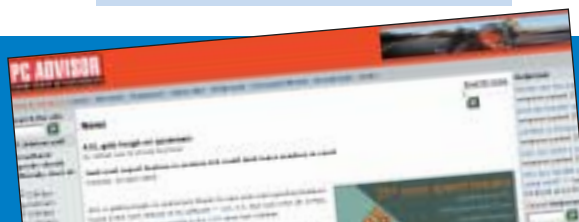
But the problem is that most junk mail comes from outside the EU. According to messaging specialist Mirapoint, 60 percent of bogus email comes from companies and individuals beyond the threshold of existing laws. Only global laws can truly prevent spam but, even then, without the support of technological advances, some junk mail will still get through.
• For more information go to www.dti.gov.uk/cii/regulatory/ telecomms/telecommsregulations/ comms_dpd.shtml.

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# Broadband price cuts for some

BT has announced plans to cut the price of wholesale broadband connections by up to £2 per customer per month, while extending its broadband reach to 80 percent of the country by 2004.

Consumer wholesale prices will be cut from £14.75 to £13 with further discounts available for volume customers. But it is still not clear whether these price cuts will filter down to end users, as ISPs Freeserve and AOL stressed they had no intention to reduce their costs.

Business wholesale prices – for firms using 500Kbps services or above – will come down by a staggering 50 percent. ISP V21 was the first to slash its prices within hours of BT's announcement, saving small businesses up to £75 in initial ADSL setup fees and reducing monthly subscription costs by up to £36.

But the savings apply only to those who rent BT's IPStream network, leaving ISPs – such as Tiscali, which pays BT a monthly charge to hook into its own DataStream infrastructure – less than impressed. "A 50 percent reduction has been applied to business broadband products – those that most directly compete with DataStream," says Sergio Cellini, Tiscali UK's CEO. "If similar price cuts were applied to DataStream it would ensure cheaper prices for the consumer. This is a clear discrimination against DataStream and is an effort to squeeze competitors' margins. This is Broadband BT not Broadband Britain."

BT says it has also made "technological advances", which include installing more fibre optic cables and the integration of new software into existing networks, giving it the potential to reach 90 percent of UK homes and small businesses. BT's broadband services currently offer around 67 percent coverage.

The new initiative means trigger levels can be set for a further 600 exchanges, although BT has made no promises that these grades, currently set at between 300 and 500 registrants, will be lowered. Trigger levels for the first 200 exchanges, set at the end of April, are expected to take coverage up to 75 percent and levels for the remaining exchanges will be announced in the next few months.

## Ex-partner for sale, one careful owner

Sick of your partner? Why not make some money out of your lousy lover? That's what one dumped girlfriend tried, putting her ex up for sale on eBay UK. The lot was soon pulled, but did attract some bids despite the unflattering description. The top bidder was promised their purchase would "treat you badly, mess with your head and destroy your self esteem". But the seller did offer to throw in some Prozac, as she felt the 'lucky' winner would need it.

## MY TECHNOLOGY
### noel edmunds

**Q. Mac or PC? Which do you use and why?**
A. I am technophobic and therefore an IT desert, hence my first reaction was to consider rainwear and police constables. I do have a personal organiser and she's called Gaynor.

**Q. When did you last get angry with a piece of technology and why?**
A. Last night when the bottle opener fouled up and the cork disintegrated, ruining a particularly fine Chablis.

**Q. If you could invent a technological device for the future, what would it be?**
A. It would be a box mounted on wheels, running on rails between Exeter and Paddington and capable of proceeding safely, comfortably and regularly on time. The first person to invent one of those would clean up.

**Q. What technological product couldn't you live without and why?**
A. Video-conferencing. Without it I wouldn't be able to run a number of businesses, located in different parts of the UK, from my home in Devon. It has greatly increased the efficiency of my companies.

**Q. What's your home page and why?**
A. It's www.videomeetingcompany.com – 'nuff said.

Noel Edmunds had a long career on radio and TV. He started out at Radio Luxemburg, moving on to Radio 1 a few years later where he hosted the Breakfast Show. He also worked on TV shows including *Multicoloured Swap Shop, Telly Addicts* and *Noel's House Party.* He is the founder of the Unique Business Group, which is the parent company of Video Meeting Company.

# Warning of Linux viruses rebuffed

US firm Central Command got short shrift from UK security and Linux specialists after releasing a statement stressing the need for virus protection on Linux systems. It warned that as Linux becomes more popular, inexperienced users will fall victim to the increased attention it will receive from virus writers.

But Eddie Bleasdale, director of Netproject, dismissed this, saying it was impossible to conduct a virus attack on a Linux system. Indeed, he said he would pay £10,000 to anyone who could infect a well-configured Linux system with a virus.

This confidence was echoed by a spokesman from UK security specialists Elefire, who pointed to the fundamental building blocks of the two systems – Windows and Linux – as the reason for the disparity in their levels of vulnerability.

The Windows OS allows any operation possible within the constraints of the hardware it runs on, says the spokesman. This means viral attacks can easily force PCs to perform damaging procedures.

The Linux OS only allows functions specified by the network administrator. This means that even if a virus gains access to a Linux client it cannot cause any damage, providing it has been correctly configured.

# The future of mobile entertainment

Researchers at the Mobile Entertainment Forum have given their predictions on the growth and evolution of mobile entertainment, which basically refers to applications run on wirelessly networked personal devices – from downloadable games for mobile phones to MP3 players.

In its paper, *Mobile Entertainment Scenarios: Outlook and Opportunities in an Emerging Market,* MEF identifies the opportunities and threats facing all companies that would like to shape the future of mobile entertainment. "As the market continues to evolve, the technologies, services and business models which will drive the future of mobile entertainment have yet to be defined," says Dr Steffen Leistner, vice president at research firm Booz Allen.

If network operators, such as Vodafone or O2, take control this could pose a major threat to mobile device manufacturers which will be pressured into working directly with the operators in order to succeed. But customers may place less importance on networks, choosing to play their devices predominantly offline. If this happened, device manufacturers could be put into a more powerful position.

Irrespective of which body takes control of the market – network operators, content providers or mobile virtual operators – its success will depend on the methods of delivery, including bandwidth availability, capacity, transmission quality and security.

The dominance of one group is therefore unlikely. Inadequate networks, poor content and overpricing will make people reluctant to sign up and mobile entertainment operators would do well to keep in mind the deterrents to broadband adoption.

## Website accessibility for all

The Disability Rights Commission has launched what it claims to be the most comprehensive investigation into website accessibility for the disabled, searching over 1,000 sites.

The formal study, a collaboration between the DRC and the Centre for Human Computer Interaction at London's City University, will 'identify barriers to web access and help site owners to recognise and avoid them'.
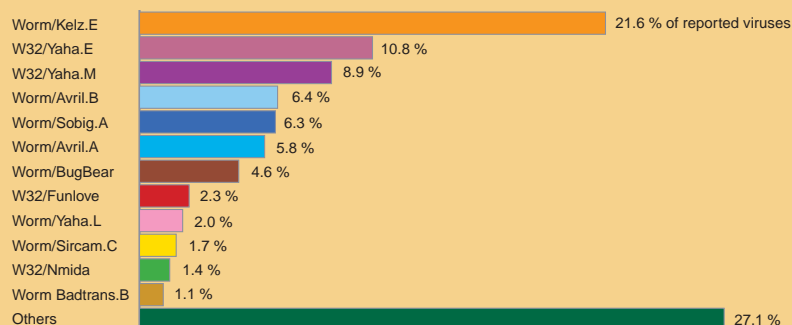
"The problem at the moment is that we don't know what these barriers are and that's what we need to investigate," says DRC spokesman Patrick Edwards.

"There are no strict legal obligations for companies to make their sites accessible to disabled people. Instead, it is down to the company to enforce rules of good practice."

But all government websites, including education and healthcare sites, must provide equal access. Results of the investigation will be released at the end of the year.

## Dirty dozen: the viruses of March 03

Viruses still pose a major threat to internet users, and what's more the same viruses have been reported for the last five months. This means people still aren't paying enough attention to installing and updating their antivirus software. The chart below shows the top 12 viruses reported by Central Command for March 03.

| Virus | Percentage |
|---|---|
| Worm/Kelz.E | 21.6 % of reported viruses |
| W32/Yaha.E | 10.8 % |
| W32/Yaha.M | 8.9 % |
| Worm/Avril.B | 6.4 % |
| Worm/Sobig.A | 6.3 % |
| Worm/Avril.A | 5.8 % |
| Worm/BugBear | 4.6 % |
| W32/Funlove | 2.3 % |
| Worm/Yaha.L | 2.0 % |
| Worm/Sircam.C | 1.7 % |
| W32/Nmida | 1.4 % |
| Worm Badtrans.B | 1.1 % |
| Others | 27.1 % |

# It's expensive to talk

The new wave of 3G phone services are too expensive to attract many customers in Britain according to the *MobileUK: Mobile Phones and Everyday Life* report commissioned by Microsoft and PricewaterhouseCoopers.

While many phone operators are pinning their hopes on rapid uptake of 3G services, such as picture and video messaging, the report's authors are sceptical about how much success these paid-for extras will have in the UK.

The running costs of a 3G phone could be as much as £600 per year and most customers are currently only paying well under half that on their mobile phones.

"There is a myth that talk is cheap. In fact, for most people, talk remains an expensive worry that needs to be kept under control," says co-author Max Nathan. "Until 3G becomes better value most consumers will find it an expensive worry too far," he adds.

In order to ensure that 3G services are successful, the report suggests four economic tests that a service must pass: they must offer competitive pricing; be practical and offer real benefits to the user; recognise when users are mobile; and the services must avoid the WAP trap by being simple and easy to use.

# Europe finally gets its own domain name

The European Commission is consulting its 15 member governments over a draft decision to pick a Belgian-led consortium to run the long-awaited .eu top-level domain name registry. The appointed registrar was supposed to be announced last year but a lack of bidders has drawn out the process.

The frontrunner is the Brussels-based Eurid (European Registry of Internet Domains) consortium which has been set up by three domain name registration groups from Belgium, Italy and Sweden.

It plans to sell domains for €10 (around £6.50) each initially with the intention that this will fall to €5 (roughly £3.50) after a year. The final decision is due next month after the consultation process with the member states is over.

Meanwhile, regulatory body Icann is discussing plans to make domain name transfer between registrars simpler, forcing the removal of all unfair constraints on handover.

In the current situation, 'losing registrars' (which registrants are seeking to transfer away from) are allowed to hinder the process by imposing inordinate fees or long grace periods on transfer requests. Such restrictions will be forbidden by the proposals and registrars will no longer be allowed to use a website lock to enforce payment of fees for future periods of registration.

The proposed regulations require that transfer be "easy, fluid and transparent" and should be effected within about 72 hours. They even state that registrars are encouraged to automate the transfer process as much as possible.

# Advertisers hit console market

Product placement in films has long been big business – just look at the funky Nokia phones in *The Matrix* or any of James Bond's ultra-cool cars. Advertisers have now cottoned on to a new area where subconscious marketing will work just as well – computer gaming.

This idea has been around for some time: plenty of driving games feature advertising banners; The Sims Online featured burgers and chips courtesy of McDonald's and Intel; and BMW provides your wheels in Need for Speed. But according to Michael Oxman, manager of advertising group Jam International, this trend is will continue. Video games are the new platform for advertisers and soon they will be littered with familiar logos.

There are many benefits for advertisers. Unlike TV, players are immersed in the game so brand impressions are repetitive. Players can even interact with brands – in The Sims Online you can set up your own McDonald's franchise to earn extra cash or munch on burgers to sate your hunger. It's impossible to flick channels when the ads come on and brand exclusivity can be guaranteed. For the gamer there is also the added element of realism.

But whether the widespread takeup of video game advertising will bring down the price of titles is uncertain. Gaming manufacturer EA is sure it will not, as the process involves further testing and manpower that result in extra costs. However, Jam's Oxman believes prices will come down long term

"by generating incremental games revenues for the publisher".

# Dell takes first steps into printer market

As promised, Dell has entered the printer market with the launch of four models in the US, although UK customers won't be able to buy these units until late 2003. The UK launch, which is slated for 1 September, should see around six new printers arriving on our shores. Dell chose to delay the European launch so it could offer the full range from day one. The further two models should launch in the US in June.

Just like its entry into the PDA market with the Axim, Dell clearly intends to compete on cost. UK pricing will be announced at the launch but, if the US is anything to go by, the printers will be priced below equivalent rivals.

Dell's printer range covers a spectrum of users from home to workgroup. Kicking off the range is the low-cost colour inkjet A940 multifunction device that offers scanner, fax and copier facilities. The other three printers are all laser models – the 19ppm (pages per minute) 600dpi P1500 straddles home and professional users, while the 22ppm S2500 and S2500n are designed for the office.

Dell plans to sell its own-brand toner with the printers. The whole range will use software that automatically detects when supplies is running low. When this happens, a dialog box will pop up onscreen and users will be taken directly to a dedicated website that detects the printer and offers correct replacement cartridges. Alternatively there will be a phone number to call.

# Blackberry picks consumers

Wireless communication company Research In Motion will be bringing a version of its new Blackberry 6200 handset to the UK this summer. For the first time in the company's history the device will be aimed at the consumer market.

Previously the Blackberry, which integrates a mobile phone and PDA into one handheld device, has been sold as a communications tool for large companies, enabling mobile executives to read email and access corporate databases and applications via customised middleware.

But a version of the 6200, launched at CeBit in March, will be sold with O2, T-Mobile or Vodafone contracts to 'prosumers', defined by RIM as consumers who want the device for a combination of work and leisure.

Customers will be able to forward up to 10 email addresses to the 6200, access its PDA functions as well as use it as a mobile phone for voice and SMS messages.

Price and final release date have yet to be decided but the 6200 "won't be an impulse buy", says Tilly Quanjer, European spokesperson for RIM.

## Canon offers online photo service

Canon is hoping to build a unique online community among its digital camera users with the launch of its Image Gateway. The site (www.cig.canon-europe.com), which will be open to all European Canon digital camera users, enables them to create and share an online photo album as well as download images, text and sounds to personalise their cameras.

Users will get 100MB of storage capacity and they can organise images into themed albums such as weddings, holidays or birthdays.

Canon intends to expand the services by the end of 2003, allowing users to share images in the form of e-cards, screensavers and slideshows. It also plans to allow users to share and store video clips.

From mid-2003 Canon will roll out an online photo printing service, currently freely available to owners of the following Canon digital cameras: PowerShot G3, PowerShot S45, Digital Ixus v3, PowerShot A70, PowerShot A60, Digital Ixus 400, PowerShot S50 and EOS10D. Future plans include the support for Canon digital camcorders and Bubble Jet printers.

# News in brief

### Corel up for sale
Software vendor Corel is in talks with two venture capital firms about a possible takeover. It's also sounding out other buyers and is actively seeking takeover proposals. If a buyer is found it will spell the end of one of the industry's longest standing companies – it has been around since 1985.

### Creative gets smart
Creative is planning a portable SmartMedia player for Microsoft's Media2Go platform, which lets users enjoy music, video and pictures on the go. The devices, which are due out at the end of the year, will offer storage capacity for over 8,000 music files, 125 hours of video or up to 30,000 photos.

### MP3 Rio firm bankrupt
Rio MP3 maker SonicBlue is the latest tech company to file for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection. It is proposing to sell off the divisions responsible for its popular consumer devices to Japanese firm D&M Holdings and Opta Systems, subject to approval from the bankruptcy court.