



Warranties: what's the choice?

The Competition Commission has come up with two possible solutions to the extended warranties problem. In a follow-up letter to its inaugural missive – sent to retailers back in May – the CC has established two remedial packages, each of which covers four basic requirements.

First, that consumers should be provided with the information they need to make an informed choice. Second, that they should have time to reflect before buying an extended warranty. Third, that alternative providers should have the chance to put forward their own extended warranty products. Finally, that retailers should be governed by an independently managed and enforced code.

The first package also requires retailers to:

- display the price and duration of the extended warranty with the price of the appliance it relates to;
- provide consumers with a leaflet that covers statutory and cancellation rights, alternative providers, broad categories of product reliability, repair costs and whether the warranty is insurance-backed;
- provide a written quote, stating the price and duration of the extended warranty. It must also commit the retailer to selling at that price for the next 30-45 days and offer a full refund if the policy is cancelled within 60 days;



Polar feels the cold

PC maker Polar Technology has joined the slew of smaller companies succumbing to the cold economic climate, going into liquidation back in June.



A source close to the company revealed that, while Polar had been struggling, what led the directors to pull the plug was a burglary during which stock was stolen.

According to our source, the company had trouble getting their insurance to pay out and this was the final blow that pushed them into voluntary liquidation.

Any customers who wish to find out more should contact the liquidators, Grant Thornton, on 0161 834 5414 or write to them at Heron House, Albert Square, Manchester M60 8GT.

- write and remind consumers of their right to cancel, pay a pro-rata refund on any unexpended portion of the warranty if it's cancelled after a 60-day period, even if a claim has been made;
- be governed by an independently managed and enforced code.

The second package broadly covers the same aspects as the first, but with two extra conditions:

- that the sale of the extended warranty should not be completed on the day of the sale of the appliance;
- that point retailers could only sell a warranty that extended the manufacturers guarantee by one year, but they could give a quote for an extended warranty.

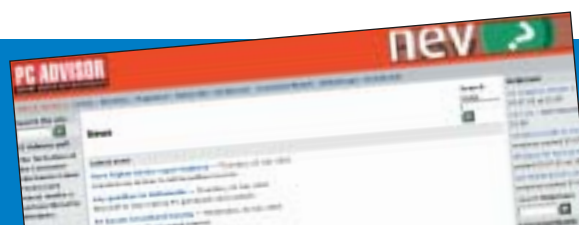
Consumer watchdog Which? has championed the proposals as a victory for consumers, but expressed disappointment that retailers will be self-regulated. It believes the current framework has failed consumers and holds little hope that self-regulation will work now.

The follow-up letter has been sent out to retailers, manufacturers and insurers who have until 5 August to respond. The CC is due to deliver its final decision on 30 September. Watch this space.



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Recycling rewards required

Printer manufacturer HP is setting up a program for individual consumers to send in empty ink cartridges for recycling. The program, called Planet Partners, will be in place in the UK early next year but there will be no financial incentive for consumers to return spent cartridges. In fact, HP officials are not yet sure whether the company will even subsidise the postage for returned cartridges.

This could prove a stumbling block. As environmentally conscious as *PC Advisor* readers are, over half (54.4 percent) of those who took part in our online poll admitted they would be much more likely to use the scheme if they were offered a refund on their next cartridge purchase – especially considering the current furore over the excessive pricing of cartridges (see Behind the news on page 26).

A further quarter (23.9 percent) would be happy to send the products off if HP paid the postage, which we think is a pretty fair solution. But a small minority of voters (7.1 percent) would take part in the scheme even if it means they'll be out of pocket, simply because they feel recycling is their responsibility.

Meanwhile, 14.6 percent would rather recycle the cartridges themselves by refilling and reusing them. HP said it expects to recycle 17 million inkjet cartridges in 2005.

AOL's broadband blarney



When one of *PC Advisor's* readers contacted internet service provider AOL to cancel his dialup account, he was offered a broadband upgrade for £19.99 a month – rather surprising considering it's advertised at £27.99 per month. He was quick to share his good fortune on our ConsumerWatch forum at www.pcadvisor.co.uk/consumerwatch.

Sadly, when we contacted AOL's cancellations department we found the offer wasn't available and that it had probably been a limited trial. But although it couldn't beat the offer, AOL did have some remarkable claims to make about what its broadband service could offer. We were told that it is the fastest broadband supplier offering upload speeds of a massive 532Kbps (kilobits per second). And there was us thinking that the speed for uploading data via ADSL was 256Kbps.

Not only that, but according to AOL's cancellations department it also offers better security than rivals such as NTL and Telewest by providing a secure line rather than a shared-line connection.

As none of this makes any sense, we gave AOL's Jonathan Lambert a call to find out just why its cancellations department was making these outlandish claims. He assured us these aren't standard selling practices. He said the company had taken on several new members to its customer services team and all AOL operators are now being briefed to insure future information given to customers is correct.

If you've experienced any similar problem drop an email to our ConsumerWatch section on pcadvisor_consumerwatch@idg.com.

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

A. PC. Macs are too trendy.

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

A. An HP Jornada... nightmare. So I went and got another trusty Nokia Communicator.

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

A. Wait and see what I have designed. It's coming out in the autumn.

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

A. My Communicator, my Sierra wireless modem card for my Dell Latitude and my Epson AcuLaser colour laser printer – ideal for printing out designs fast and being able to send cheap digital prints of the kids to my mum.

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

A. Blackburn Rovers and eBay for adding to my collection of mass-market art.

Wayne Hemingway is the founder of Red or Dead. He is a regular commentator on fashion and design on television and radio.





Movie biz targets P2P pirates

Following the example of the music business, the movie industry is targeting individual P2P (peer-to-peer) pirates with an advertising campaign currently running in cinemas and on television across the US. The ads, which can be viewed at www.respectcopyrights.org, are designed to show how P2P activities affect the 'little guys' in the movie business, hoping to shift attention away from the million dollar-grossing studios and stars.

Rich Taylor of the MPAA (Motion Picture Association of America), which is running the campaign, told US news site The Pittsburgh Channel: "I think [the public] doesn't get that [movie piracy] is not a victimless crime. They think the only people impacted are those on the red carpet who have plenty of money."

The ads aim to show that these losses are not just hitting fat cats and feature a host of people who work in movies such as cinema staff, set painters and musicians. They also point out to those downloading movies that what they are doing is illegal and can have serious repercussions.

The latter point is one on which, so far, the movie industry has not been as tough as the music business. The Recording Industry Artists Association is bringing legal action against around 75 people per day, including individual fileshoppers. So far the MPAA has stuck to going after the big guys – those services set up to facilitate movie piracy – but it still considers pursuing individuals as an option.

HP hits outerspace

Before you start picturing HP's HQ being transported to the moon, it's only its equipment – specifically its iPaq Pocket PC h5550 – that will be launched into outer space. The TransOrbital's TrailBlazer spacecraft, the first commercial mission to gain approval from the US to explore, photograph and land on the moon, will be using the iPaq to facilitate wireless communication within the satellite. The handheld will integrate with the TrailBlazer's systems to share data and streamed video with those back on Earth.

V-spam slammed

Spam mail could be more than just irritating, according to industry group TIF (The Corporate IT Forum). It has identified a new form of virus that is spread via junk mail to avoid antivirus and firewall systems.

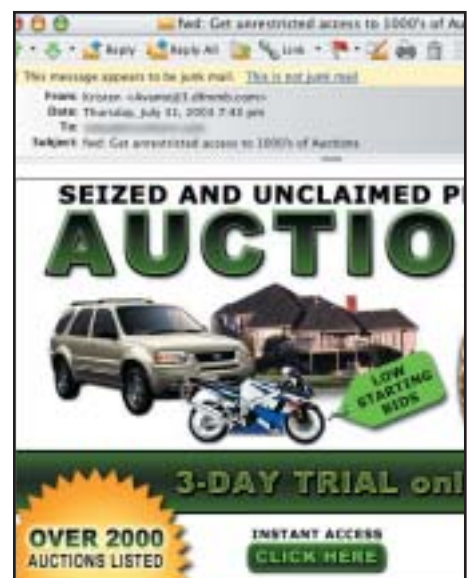
TIF warns that spam mail can include links that, if clicked, activate a bug or more worryingly a keylogger virus which records keystrokes to work out things like passwords as well as bank and credit card details.

The new menace, termed v-spam, is often disguised as a mail offering to unsubscribe the recipient from a junk emailing list or promising a special offer or discount.

TIF chief executive David Roberts warns of the danger of following such spam mail links: "Clicking on a link is the equivalent of handing a burglar the keys to your house. People must understand that there could be a nasty shock lurking behind each and every spam mail."

TIF has issued the following guidelines to help users avoid infecting their computers:

- Ensure your antivirus software is up to date.
- Don't click on links in mails from unknown senders or be conned by 'great offers'.
- Only click on a link if you are sure it is from a reliable source.
- Think twice before forwarding a spam offer to a friend.



SONY

sales slump

Japanese giant Sony has been hit hard by sluggish demand for its core products, including electronics, games and music. It recorded a 98 percent drop in profits in the first quarter of 2003 compared to the same period last year.

Worldwide sales of Sony's PlayStation2 console dropped from 4.59 million to 2.65 million units. This is probably due to gamers who want a PS2 have already invested in the console, while other gamers are opting for rivals such as the Xbox and GameCube.

The electronics giant also suffered a blow in the digital cameras department with sales down a whopping 10 percent on last year.



gets a leg up

In a move that could potentially bring Linux to the masses, eight of the world's top consumer electronics vendors have formed an alliance to promote development of the open-source operating system for use in digital devices, including audio and visual equipment and mobile phones.

Sony, Philips and Matsushita, which makes the Panasonic brand, are among the founding members of Celf (CE Linux Forum). Their goal is to make Linux more suitable for consumer electronics products and to provide wider use of the operating system in this specific community.

The move will come as a blow to Microsoft which has been promoting the use of its own software in DVD players, televisions and other electronics gear.

The benefits of Linux are that it carries no licence fees and vendors have access to its source code. This enables them to make any changes they like so long as they share the modifications freely with others.

Narrowband gets benchmark

It's good to see that Oftel is still looking out for narrowband users, who often get forgotten in the enthusiastic rush to broadband. Thanks to a ruling from the watchdog, telco operators BT and Kingston Communications must provide customers with a minimum rate of internet access.

The new benchmark connection speed of 28.8Kbps (kilobits per second) for narrowband dialup will replace the previous requirement of just 2.4Kbps. If the companies fail to meet the requirement customers can demand quick action to fix the problem.

Samsung's superfast CPU

Electronics giant Samsung is touting its S3C2440 chip as the "world's fastest CPU for gadgets" – such as handheld computers and smartphones.

With a clock speed of 533MHz, it is designed to keep power consumption to a minimum and will support features such as a camera, touch-screen interface and USB. This will pave the way for flashier multimedia content and services.

Samsung is also sampling the chip in 400MHz and 300MHz versions. It will support Windows CE, Palm, Symbian and Linux operating systems.



Gates dubs Longhorn "a bit scary"

Longhorn, the next version of the Windows operating system, will be so different from its predecessors that users may not like it right away, according to Microsoft chairman Bill Gates (pictured).

"Longhorn is a bit scary. We have been willing to change things," Gates says.

"[Longhorn] should drive a whole range of upgrades but that could be delayed," he continues. Because of differences with the previous versions of Windows, it could be a year or two after its release before computer users really pick up Longhorn.

"Longhorn is innovative... there is a lot of work to be done in terms of what has to go in," Gates explains. Asked if Microsoft would consider dropping some of the innovations it has planned so the product can come out sooner, Gates replies "No – if you split it up then you delay one of the really great pieces. We need a big-bang release to drive excitement."

Microsoft has been tight-lipped about specific features in Longhorn, but early versions of the product have been leaked to the internet. Major changes are expected to the graphical user interface and include either a new file system or a technology update to the existing file system.

Gates refuses to comment on the release date, although Microsoft promises more details about the operating system release in October at the Microsoft Professional Developers Conference. A beta of Longhorn is planned for next year.

Playback permitted

Windows users now have a place to go for legal downloads in the shape of BuyMusic.com. Parent company Buy.com launched the service this month, billing it as "the world's largest legal download store". The service will offer around 300,000 tracks from five major record labels and thousands of independents. Songs will cost around 50p each, with albums starting at around £6.

Meanwhile Roxio, which purchased ill-fated Napster at the end of last year, has announced it will be relaunching the service, dubbed Napster 2.0, in time for Christmas. The site will boast access to 500,000 tracks, although the price structure has yet to be revealed.

These 'legal' services come some months after Apple's launch of its iTunes Music Store, which is averaging 100,000 downloads per day. Josh Bernoff, principal analyst at Gartner research, predicts a dozen similar services will pop up over the next year from the likes of AOL, Amazon and Microsoft's MSN.



News in brief

ISP offers more broadband connections

AOL made its mark in the battle of broadband operators this month by joining forces with NTL to offer high-speed internet access over its cable networks. AOL customers will now be able to choose between ADSL or cable at 512Kbps and 600Kbps respectively for £27.99 a month.

Geeky gobbledegook

It comes as little surprise that consumers are delaying hardware purchases because of their confusion over PC terminology. A survey, conducted by chip maker AMD, shows a gap is forming between the new products that the PC industry puts on the market and the adoption and understanding of that technology by consumers.

Intel gets inside healthcare

Intel and the Alzheimer's Association are to fund a consortium aimed at using technology to ease the suffering of those afflicted by the disease. They hope to encourage more companies, universities and health organisations to join up and help develop new models of care based on computing, communications and home-help technology.

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