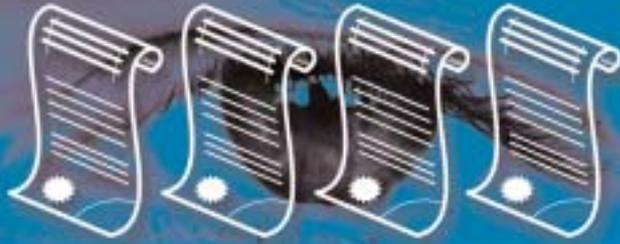


Changes in store for extended warranties



The government may institute changes to the sale of extended warranties as soon as September this year, following an investigation by the Competition Commission.

The CC's enquiries will determine if unfair practices exist in the sale of extended warranties and whether certain retailers control an unfair market share.

In particular, the CC is concerned about a 'scale monopoly', in which Dixons Stores Group controls over 25 percent of the extended warranties market, and a possible 'complex monopoly' where a wider group of retailers seek to maintain a beneficial, and uncompetitive advantage. Activities of this nature would include: restricting the choice of products and information

The enquiries will determine if unfair practices exist in the sale of extended warranties and whether certain retailers control an unfair market share

about alternatives; using misleading and high-pressure sales practices; including unfair terms and conditions in the agreement; and charging prices above competitive levels.

The Consumers Association and *Which?* magazine expressed their approval of the investigation, although as yet they remain unsure what remedies the CC's report, due in July, will recommend to the DTI.

"Everyone can see the problems, but it's difficult to define the solutions," says Phil Evans, principle policy advisor at the CA. Evans suggests the CC will have to find a way of forcing retailers to advertise and sell warranties from other providers.

Dixons, which industry sources have suggested makes 40 percent of profits from extended warranties, has contested the CC's calculation of the size of the market, hoping to prove its share is less than 25 percent.

Dixons' spokesman Hamish Thompson also denied that customers had a lack of choice, saying, "Our customers are discerning and they do shop around." This directly contradicts our recent *PC Advisor* poll in which 97 percent of readers agreed that 'retailers of extended warranties exploit limited consumer information'.

• Turn to ConsumerWatch on page 82 for further discussion of extended warranties.

Snooping laws loosened

The Home Office has released its draft code of practice on data retention, scrapping its planned extensions to the Ripa (Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act) following an outcry from civil liberties groups and the general public.

Under the provisions of Ripa only the police, intelligence services, Customs & Excise and the Inland Revenue had the power to require ISPs, telcos and postal operators to hand over detailed customer information on request. But the government's proposed plans extended

this power to many more bodies, including local authorities, Trading Standards and the Financial Services Authority.

Now it has backed down somewhat: "We are tailoring the amount of access to the need for it, to allay the concerns of members of the public about intrusion into their personal records," says Home Office minister Bob Ainsworth.

Among the government's proposals is a so-called 'double lock' safeguard where access to certain information is only granted after prior approval by an

independent judicial third party, such as the Communications Commissioner.

It also recommends restricting the information public authorities can access and the reasons allowing them to see limited data in the first place. Meanwhile the Home Office agreed to a maximum 12-month period for telco data retention and four days for web activity logs.

The full consultation document can be found at www.homeoffice.gov.uk/oicd/antiterrorism/consult.htm. All comments must be submitted by 3 June 03.



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Office 2003 strictly business

The next version of Microsoft's Office has been sent to half a million testers worldwide in advance of the full release which is slated for mid-2003.



The suite is being pitched at "information workers", according to Microsoft's Joe Eschbach, who says the software has been designed "to manage the tidalwave of information companies have to deal with".

With the release of Office 2003 there will be a clear shift towards businesses. "We are moving from personal to enterprise productivity," says Eschbach. To this end, a couple of new applications have been introduced – InfoPath and OneNote.

InfoPath 2003, previously known as XDocs, allows users to create dynamic forms to collect and manage information, while OneNote 2003 is a sophisticated note-taking tool. OneNote is designed to mimic paper-based note-taking while allowing users to store, organise and reuse notes digitally, it can be used on a desktop or notebook, but would be particularly useful with a tablet PC.

In the spirit of helping users manage information, Outlook 2003 sports several enhancements to make organising your emails simpler. A groups feature helps categorise and find messages more quickly, and a junk mail feature cuts down on spam while adding the ability to block missives from untrusted sources.

Many of these features will benefit end users, but given the high price tag this version will likely end up with it's hardly a surprise Microsoft intends Office to be a business-only tool. A great deal of the extras in 2003 only come into play if you link up to Microsoft's SharePoint Portal Server 2.0, also due out this summer.

Users who opt for the full solution can manage information rights to lock down confidential emails, preventing them from being forwarded or auto deleted over time. SharePoint Server also enables easier sharing of information collected using InfoPath.

• For more information see our workshop on Office 2003 in the next issue of *PC Advisor*, June 03.

US invades air travellers' privacy

In a move that appears to mark a massive breach of personal privacy, the EC has given US Customs direct access to all European airline database information.

Airlines flying to the States used to send a PNR (passenger name record) to US officials 15 minutes after takeoff. This new agreement means all PNRs must be received prior to departure, giving America the power to remove passengers from a plane that's still on the runway in another country.

But civil liberties group Statewatch says there is no agreed limit on how many agencies in the US

will get access to airline database information. "Anyone who believes that US customs, which is now part of the Home Security Department, will limit itself solely to downloading data on passengers booked to fly to the US is very naive," said Statewatch's Tony Bunyan.

The European Union said it respected the "good faith of US Customs" to protect the principles of the Data Protection Act.

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

A. PC – because I'm a gamer, not a designer.

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

A. Actually, just a few hours ago. My PC froze so I did a hard-boot, losing all the work I'd done. I only realised later that the batteries had run out in my wireless mouse, so I needn't have lost anything at all.

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

A. A sensor that knows when my cat is about to walk across the keyboard so instantly hits the save button.

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

A. I need them all. But, if I have to choose, the internet. It informs me, entertains me, plays music to me and keeps me in touch with friends. It finds me work, and then helps me to research and deliver it. I even do my banking and my weekly shopping on it.

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

A. My home page changes depending on what's going on in my life. Currently it's eBay, because I'm trying to get a good deal on a digital camera.

Kate Russell is a journalist and TV presenter. She has contributed to a number of leading computing magazines, as well appearing regularly on Sky and the BBC as a technology reporter. Look out for her on LWT's *The Week*, on 13 April, where she'll present a slot encouraging viewers to get interested in IT.

MY TECHNOLOGY
kate russell



PHOTOGRAPH: VALERIE GUNN

Centrino leaves rivals “dead in the water”

It's only a matter of time before Intel's latest mobile processor, Centrino, takes over from all other portable PC chips, according to the company.

“When Centrino comes it will change the ground rules for mobility. So it will be interesting for me to see how quickly Centrino supersedes all other mobile solutions out there, whether it be Mobile PIII, Mobile P4 or any other variations on the notebook computer,” said Howard High, Intel's strategic communication manager, during an exclusive interview at the Intel Developer Forum.

High dismissed competitors such as Via and Transmeta with their low-power Cyrix and Crusoe chips as “dead in the water”, because they are “so far behind when it comes to performance”. AMD's Athlon isn't seen as a rival either, owing to its poor battery life, so High sees nothing on the horizon to beat Centrino.

But Transmeta spokesman, Philip Bergman, hit back at High's comments, claiming: “Transmeta's next-generation processor coming in Q3 of this year will



be a very competitive product and will have plenty of performance to serve the marketplace.” He said that Intel's comments were “not credible”, as the company had “no way of knowing the performance level of Astro [its next generation chip]”.

Furthermore, AMD launched a slew of 12 processors for notebooks recently. These include five low-voltage models for ultra-light portables that extend battery life while increasing performance.

Rambus dumped – finally

Canterwood, Intel's latest top-of-the-range processor and chipset combination, was on show at IDF. The unveiling means the days are numbered for Intel's troubled memory format, Rambus.

The 875P chipset supports dual-channel DDR 400 memory, where Intel's previous high-end offerings plumped for Rambus, and adds support for an 800MHz system bus – 267MHz more than the previous 533MHz offering. A new 3GHz Pentium 4 will be introduced to take advantage of it; this should not to be confused with the 3.06GHz chip/533MHz bus model.

Dual-channel, as used by nVidia in its nForce chipset, increases performance by providing two separate memory pipes to the processor. But to take advantage of the increased bandwidth, two separate memory chips are required on each channel. So for a total of 512MB, you need to put a 256MB stick on each.

The new chipset is compatible with the fast serial ATA hard drive interface, so drives might finally start appearing, and adds two more USB ports bringing the total supported to eight.

Intel pushes the three Cs

Intel boss Craig Barratt gave an upbeat keynote speech at the Intel Developer Forum in San Jose. His message was simple: if developers can come up with solutions that help businesses and consumers to communicate by converging computing and telecoms technology, the market is wide open for real growth.

The company showed off several concept devices to illustrate just what sort of hardware may prompt people to reach into their pockets and invest in new technology.

First up was Newport. Described as a “next-generation mobile solution for knowledge workers”, it is a tablet-style PC which enables wireless communication with a remote location. Newport also offers so-called “closed lid” computing, whereby it is able to detect networks and connect to the internet even with its lid down. Users can read and reply to messages via a small LCD (liquid crystal display) in the lid.

Next came a dual-screen desktop solution aimed at those same knowledge workers. Called Marble Falls, it allows collaboration with offsite colleagues and enables each user to



access information held on the other's computer. Consumers are not left out of the picture as the dual-screen concept was also adapted into a system called Powersville that offers real-time video editing.

Combined with a personal media player, Powersville would allow users to stream video to any screen in the house, or even to access the data remotely to stream at another location.



Online jammers could face the slammer

Under proposed changes to the European Union's cybercrime code, online protests could be classed as a denial of service (DoS) attack, carrying far heavier sentences of up to two years imprisonment.

This would make events like the 'Jam number 10 on the 10th' virtual protest – organised by Body Shop founder Anita Roddick (pictured) on 10 March, and the virtual march on Washington that took place on 26 February – illegal.

Such events, organised in these cases to protest against the war on Iraq, ask participants to bombard the government with emails, faxes and telephone calls, expressing their personal views on the conflict.

"The UK's Computer Misuses Act doesn't sufficiently cover denial of service attacks," said Harjinder Obhi, solicitor at law firm Bristows. "This new [EU] framework will allow the government to punish people who specifically go out to attack sites. The question will be one of intention – whether the person simply intended a peaceful protest, which is legal, or whether they intended to deny service to a [site] which isn't," said Obhi.

Around one million people took part in the Washington protest, jamming switchboards around the city for up to 12 hours. Number 10 refused to comment on how many calls it received, although phonedlines seemed to be working freely throughout the day.

ASA cracks down on new media messaging

The ASA (Advertising Standards Authority) has extended its code of advertising practice to cover email and text message campaigns.

The code acts as a rule book for all non-broadcast advertisements, sales promotions and direct marketing communications.

For the first time it will be extended to cover new media, including website pop-up and banner advertising, email and SMS marketing.

The new regulations say that any unsolicited marketing emails must state their nature in the subject line, without the need of the recipient to open up the message.

The other rule that specifically targets new media requires companies to get the explicit consent of recipients before they send out marketing messages via email or SMS.

This rule applies to new customers only, which means companies are still free to send out similar offers to their existing customers. But the code states that each time a message is sent, customers must be given the right to refuse all future missives of this type.

The regulations apply only to messages originating in the UK, but the ASA says it has cross-border agreements with many countries that allow it to enforce the controls overseas.



The full code can be viewed at www.cap.org.uk, while complaints should be made to the ASA which can be contacted on 020 7580 5555.

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Long live fuel cell batteries

How to power ever more juice-sapping portable devices is a problem currently perplexing hardware designers. One possible solution could be fuel cell batteries, which offer longer life and don't need recharging.

Many manufacturers have talked about fuel cells, but Toshiba is first off the block with a prototype DMFC (direct methanol fuel cell) for portable PCs.

This prototype combines the benefits of fuel cell technology with the small form factor required for use in a portable computer. It currently offers an average output of 12W and a maximum output of 20W, and provides a claimed five hours of battery life with 50cc of fuel.

To cut down the size of the fuel cell, Toshiba reduced the amount of water required to dilute the methanol which allowed it to shrink the fuel tank to one tenth of the size previously required. It also developed a new material that enabled it to create smaller cells.

The fuel cell is able to monitor the power required by the PC so it can deliver the optimum amount at any given time, and in idle times store excess energy for use at a later time.

Toshiba has used the same electrodes found in lithium-ion batteries so it can connect directly to a notebook in the same way as a traditional battery. The company hopes to bring its fuel cell batteries to the market in 2004.

Blue lasers beam in to Japan

Sony has taken the wraps off the first video recorder that uses blue-laser technology. The BDZ-S77, based on the Blu-ray optical disc format announced just over a year ago, is being promoted as a system for recording high-definition television broadcasts.

The technology was developed because DVDs cannot hold enough data to be suitable for high-definition video. Blu-ray uses a blue laser to record data on discs, while CD and DVD systems use red lasers. Blue lasers have a shorter wavelength – 405 nanometers, compared to around 650 nanometers on DVD systems – which means the laserbeam can be focused on to a smaller area of the disc surface. A smaller area is needed to store one bit of data, so more can be stored on a disc.

Sony's first generation recorder will land on Japanese retail shelves on 10 April priced of ¥450,000 (£2,421).

Sony has also announced its first Blu-ray discs, which have a capacity of 23GB and will be priced at ¥3,500 (£19) each. These discs can store up to two hours of high-definition video, four hours of standard definition digital broadcasting or 16 hours of analogue programmes. The company has no plans to launch the recorder overseas as yet.



Oleds go mainstream

Oled (organic light emitting diode) displays are to debut in Kodak digital cameras, according to an announcement from the camera maker and Sanyo.

The two companies are joining forces to produce the displays at a factory in Japan and the first units off the production line are to be



2.2in models destined for use in Kodak's EasyShare LS633 digital camera.

The camera, which was announced at the annual PMA (Photo Marketing Association) convention in Las Vegas, will also feature a 3.1Mp (megapixel) CCD (charge-coupled device) and a 3x optical zoom. It will be sold worldwide for approximately £250.

Camera maker, Sanyo, plans to use the displays in a mobile phone handset for the Japanese market.

Oled displays are widely expected to take over from LCD (liquid crystal display) screens as they offer brighter pictures, with richer colours and consume less power.

However, Oleds have a limited lifespan and cost around 50 percent more than traditional LCDs, but as they become more mainstream lifespan will increase and prices fall.