All in the detail

If you've ever purchased a PC or peripheral via a high street vendor, only to drag it home and discover that vital pieces are missing from the box then you're not alone – it happens to unsuspecting customers all the time. Ben Camm-Jones gives some tips to make sure you get the full package

I f you're not prepared to buy something as costly and complicated as a new computer over the web or telephone, the other option is visiting your nearest PC superstore. After all, it's far easier to make a purchasing decision when you can examine and experience the system first hand.

It's worth spending time to assess your PC needs before heading down to the nearest showroom. Some users will want a PC specifically for work purposes, so plenty of RAM and a crystal-clear 19in monitor will be important considerations.

Serious gamers, on the other hand, would require a top-of-the-range graphics card and surround sound speaker system. If surfing the internet takes up a major part of your PC working day then choose a system with a bundled broadband modem.

Take a look inside

If you're able to order a prebuilt system and take it away on the same day, don't be tempted to sling the unopened boxes into the boot of your car and head for home. You wouldn't buy a house or car without giving it a close inspection and the same goes for a PC. It's best to remove the system from the box to check your purchase thoroughly. Of course, the sales staff might not be particularly keen on this idea, but insist and tell them you'll take your business elsewhere if they won't allow it.

The threat of losing out on your cash is often the best way to make sales representatives extremely co-operative. Remember, it's your money and you are in control, so don't let sales staff dictate to you. Be polite but firm.

You don't necessarily have to open up the casing and look inside the tower unit, but do give the system a once-over. Check for the necessary cables, look at where the CD and floppy drives are situated and inspect your USB and FireWire ports. If you're expecting to get USB 2.0 Hi-Speed ports then look for the relevant logo.

Of course, many PCs are built to order and will be delivered to your home at a later date. However, you should still run through every detail of the specification before leaving the store. Make sure you have a copy of the agreed specification list – the retailer should be able to give you a printout – and, once you take delivery of the PC, check that everything is as you ordered before signing the proof of delivery.

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Under warranty

It's likely that sales staff will offer you an extended warranty. Be warned, though: these have suffered bad press recently (see *Are warranties worth it?* on page 27). The OFT (Office of Fair Trading) states that the Sale of Goods Act 1979 will cover you if the PC is not of satisfactory quality or fit for its purpose. It also highlights that many sales staff are paid commission on each extended warranty sold.

The PC will come with a standard guarantee, the terms of which depend on the manufacturer and your place of purchase, and this may be perfectly adequate for your needs. Be clear about what the warranty is offering – how long it lasts and what it covers – before you even begin to consider the extended version. There might, for example, be a separate guarantee for the monitor.

The minimum length of a PC warranty is one year but three- and four-year contracts are fairly common. Onsite cover is preferable, but if any repairs are to be carried out offsite check whether the cost of having the system collected and then returned to you is covered.

Add on your peripherals

Printers are not often bundled with PCs, so if you require this peripheral then see what's on offer in the store. Don't be too hasty to throw one in your shopping trolley, though, as you may be able to get a better deal elsewhere.

The necessary cables to get your printer up and running should be with the device in the box. One thing you need to check is the interface type. If you buy a printer that uses the Hi-Speed USB 2.0 standard but your PC only has Full-Speed USB 1.1 ports then you won't get the speed advantage – your data transfer rates will be limited to a sluggish 12Mbps (megabits per second). It's best to look for a printer that's bundled with a USB 2.0 card.

There's also the small matter of consumables. How much are you going to be paying for your ink cartridges and how long are they going to last? If you're going to be using your printer on a daily basis then the cost of ink cartridges is a major issue – it might be worth forking out more on an expensive printer that has cheaper ink cartridges. Alternatively, if you're not planning to buy many replacement cartridges then the cost of consumables is less of an issue.

Smoothly does it

Buying a new PC is not a transaction you're going to jump into without a second thought and there's an awful lot you need to know before you seal the deal. Provided you do some research beforehand to ensure you get exactly what you're after in the store, there's no reason why everything shouldn't go smoothly. ◼

What's in the box?

Whatever kind of peripheral device you're buying, there's a few extras you'll need to get things running smoothly. Usually, everything you need will be included as part of the deal. But if you see what looks like a great bargain, it might be the case that costs have been cut by leaving something vital out. Save yourself time, expense and hassle by reading what you should expect to be bundled with three of the most popular peripherals: CD and DVD drives, scanners and digital cameras.

CD and DVD drives
- **Screws and brackets (internal drives only)**
- **CD/DVD burning software**
- **Packet-writing software**
- **Blank media**

Scanners
- **USB cable**
- **Power cable**
- **Image-editing software**
- **Optical character recognition software**

Digital cameras
- **Rechargeable batteries**
- **Some type of storage media**
- **USB cable**
- **Imaging software**
- **Carrycase**