

Readers' writes

While one reader receives a welcome discount, another battles to protect his PC from cyber intruders and our star letter writer dispenses some sound advice to Dixons Stores Group. And if a computer is a car then who's driving?



Discount by default

I recently went to the Croydon Computerworld store to buy a Benq FP731 TFT monitor. I'd already phoned to confirm it was in stock. On arriving I was told that I could buy it but the store couldn't accept credit or debit cards because their machine was down. The manager and lone staff member apologised very politely and said they would accept cash or cheques.

As I went to a cashpoint and withdrew the cash I suddenly thought because it's cash, perhaps I should ask for a discount. I was, after all, going to lose the security of buying by credit card. I returned to the store and made my request only to be told by the manager that this was out of the question as the monitor was already on discount at £269.99. Instead he offered me some CD-Rs as a goodwill gesture.

He looked at his stock and considered 50 Verbatim discs, but finally offered me 10 cheaper own-brand CD-Rs. I refused and asked for the Verbatim. He replied that he couldn't give me them as they were £16 and more than his life was worth.

Before I left, I asked for the number of the Bromley store as it

was missing from the website. The manager gave it to me but said I wouldn't get the monitor any cheaper there. I promptly phoned and asked for an FP731 to be put by and said I'd be there within the hour. I walked in and paid for it by credit card. However, even though the display machine was marked £269.99 when the box was scanned the price came up £249.99.

The salesman looked a little surprised but took my payment and off I went. I don't know what had happened - I was told in Bromley that Computerworld was upgrading computer equipment at Croydon.

So thanks Computerworld Croydon - you saved me £20! **Charles Smith, Bromley**

Better safe than sorry

I installed Norton Internet Security 2004 as I am increasingly aware of the need for a firewall to protect my home internet access.

While it seems a sound piece of software, I am slightly alarmed at the amount of supposed attacks it is flagging up. In one online session I can probably expect more than five pop-up boxes telling me that the software has intercepted a potential breach of one of my ports.

The IP address of the 'attacker' is shown and Norton lets me see a map of the world showing the location of the culprit and even some of their details. I have received access attempts from the US, UK, India, Belgium and Germany to name but a few. How exactly do these sorts of communications get through an ISP's security features? I have researched IP addresses and I understand you can tell quite a lot from the groups of numbers.

Thankfully, I am informed that Norton blocks these attacks. But I would still like to know if this is anything to worry about. For those not running any firewall software, are such intrusions likely to be of any concern? For all I know they could be innocent. I am running a virus checker with offices all over the world. Could it be that it is checking for updates from the best location?

I believe internet security is as important, if not more so, for home users as it is for organisations, especially if a user is not fully aware of what is potentially visible on their machine. A firewall seems like a must-buy in light of the above in times where cyber intruders can do all but shove their hand down

the phoneline and steal everything that you own.

Incidentally, the firewall has intercepted at least two Trojan horses since I installed it - my virus checker didn't even flinch!

Chris, via email

Simon Easterman replies: ISPs are waking up to the fact that web users need virus and hacker protection and many are now offering it as part of their basic package. You should make this one of your main considerations when choosing an ISP. But we also advise readers to take their own precautions, as you have done.

Not all viruses or attacks are dangerous, so the four or five your firewall is fighting off each session may well be mostly benign. However, you can't be too careful and your belt-and-braces approach is safest.

Loss of legibility

Following the correspondence in issue 101 about the redesigned magazine, it certainly looks pretty but I have to agree with those who say that it is much more difficult to read. And the consequence of this for me as an occasional buyer is I'm now less likely to buy it. Make it look nice, certainly, but not at the expense of legibility.

Ken Grainger, via email

Simon Easterman replies: you weren't the only one to complain Ken and we've taken it on board. You may notice, if you've bought this issue, that we have beefed up the font a bit to make it more legible. We hope that this time we've got it right and await your comments.

Driving the debate

I was particularly interested to read Fred Bateman's analogy of a PC as a car in the February issue. It's a valid point that he makes and I felt that he was rather ridiculed by the reply from Andrew Charlesworth, who I think has the wrong idea of what software does in a PC environment.

The 'engine' of a PC is surely its processor. I see the software as more akin to the driver, not the engine of the car. After all, if you removed the engine from a car it would not work at all. The same

Star letter

The same old punch bag, DSG (Dixons Stores Group) gets it again this month. Not that, according to Peter Thomas' report on page 30 of the February 03 issue, it does not deserve it. The company is not learning lessons it seems. I guess the question to ask ourselves is what is the reason that customers return the machines?

If the device is truly faulty and needs replacing then the DSG procedures need tightening up. Any machine that comes into the repair centre for remanufacture should have its disk reformatted as a matter of course. But I can imagine a system being accepted as a return in order to resolve a situation quickly, even if there is little wrong with the PC in question. It could then easily be put back on the shelf.

Perhaps through your good selves we can persuade DSG to adopt a simple procedure as the number of computers that are returned intact must be small. Having agreed to accept the machine it should be possible to take it and the customer into a side room and, in the purchaser's presence, reformat the disk. **John Ash, via email**

Simon Easterman replies: as Peter says in his article, DSG has continually proved itself immune to our suggestions that there is a problem with its returns process. Like an addict in denial, it's unlikely to accept that a solution is needed. It would seem that proof that remedial action is necessary has to be overwhelming before any results are gained. This is why PC Advisor would still like to hear from anyone who has had data protection problems with Dixons or indeed any other company.

goes for a PC: remove the CPU and see what happens!

Now if you remove the software - meaning only Microsoft software - then the PC does not stop working. Agreed, it is not a lot of use until you load more software, but the PC will still work. It will boot up using the Bios and can be made to run Linux or DRDOS if one wants to. The computer will perform as well with a Linux operating system as it did with a Microsoft one.

The software is a separate entity in a PC. It should be seen as a system enhancement not a necessity. After all, if you really wanted you could program a PC to do your bidding by running an Assembler language. This is done for microwaves and so on. I have even seen C++ books showing how to create your own operating system.

What has happened is that Microsoft is trying to become

all-pervasive with its voracious marketing. I remember the early days of the video recorder, when VCR2000 was better than the Betamax and VHS formats. But as we all know VHS won with good marketing.

I tend to agree with Fred. We users should be able to make our own decisions about what we buy and use on our PCs. **Peter Davis, Hampshire**

Andrew Charlesworth replies: is software analogous to the driver of a car? Or is the driver the computer user? Or maybe Bill Gates is the driver and the car is Intel and we are but pedestrians crossing his path. That's the problem with extended analogies - everyone has a valid interpretation. But the fact is that Microsoft has voracious lawyers. If they say you can't reuse the operating system, the company's in a position to enforce it.



Write to us

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Our star letter writer will win a digital imaging package bundling Jasc Paint Shop Pro 8.0 and Paint Shop Photo Album 4.0 which are worth £99.95 and £29.95 respectively.