

# ConsumerWatch

You'd expect a trading company to answer its phones sometime, wouldn't you? Not in the case of Ebuyer's strict wall of silence when a reader tried to exchange an item. Elsewhere, Time takes its time rectifying an error, and there's secondhand dealing at PC World... again

ConsumerWatch is more than used to dealing with companies that have fallen somewhat short on the customer service front, but we're still taken aback when we come across a company that doesn't ever seem to pick up its phones.

Reader Robert Collins wrote to us with this very complaint about online retailer Ebuyer and we found that while Ebuyer *does* answer the phone, it takes its time.

The problem began when Robert ordered a processor from the Ebuyer site. A keen PC builder, he had been exploiting the savings made by buying components over the internet for some time. On this occasion, however, things didn't go according to plan and Robert received a 256MB stick of memory instead of a chip.

Normally this sort of mistake should be sorted out in three easy steps: contact the supplier, return the mistaken article, obtain a refund or replacement. Unfortunately, this proved challenging for Robert who found himself unable to make contact with the staff at Ebuyer.

## Silent treatment

"Truth be told," a clearly irate Robert wrote to us in November, "[Ebuyer] has basically refused any form of contact - telephone number always engaged, no reply to email, no reply to enote/enotes. I have sent a letter via Royal Mail Special Delivery and I have yet to hear anything back."

His accusation of wilful refusal to communicate demonstrated the level of frustration Ebuyer's silence had aroused in him. Since it was such a serious charge to level, we tried to look into it.

We spent a long time trying to get through to Ebuyer on the phone. Both the customer service number and the contact our advertising department had for the company continually rang unanswered. Tantalisingly the line was



occasionally engaged, suggesting that someone somewhere was talking to them - but it wasn't us.

Finally, after over a fortnight of trying, we got through and spoke to a representative. The lady on the line informed us that Robert's case was

view that Ebuyer was wilfully ignoring customer complaints but didn't deny the company has certain drawbacks.

"There is an issue with Ebuyer, in that it appears to be unable to operate a half-decent customer service system," he says.

"I can't imagine it is doing it on purpose, but its ability to sell products far outweighs its ability to deal with complaints."

## No answer

Glaves says he has been to Ebuyer's premises on several occasions to offer advice on its operations.

From what he saw, he was able to hazard a reason for the company's problem.

"It has a very small team which doesn't get round to dealing with the weight of complaints," he says. "Ebuyer won't answer calls or post and just funnels stuff into its email system. This obviously causes a lot of frustration and we have received several complaints about it."

Unfortunately, Trading Standards says, there are no regulations

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being dealt with but wouldn't be drawn on the reasons for the delay or on Ebuyer's customer service procedure in general. And no, there wasn't a manager to talk to.

We were perilously close to siding with Robert's opinion that refusing to communicate is policy at Ebuyer, but we contacted the Trading Standards Office in Sheffield to find out its opinion of Ebuyer.

Phil Glaves, principle trading standards officer, rejected Robert's

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that relate specifically to the way companies deal with customer enquiries.

In a case such as this, you are advised to send a letter to the managing director of the company stating your demands for a refund or replacement, a reasonable timescale for carrying them out, and what you intend to do if they aren't. In this case the recourse would be to a small claims action in the County Court.

Robert's money was refunded eventually. Ebuyer's team finally answered his email 27 days after he first complained. Glaves says organisation has improved since he visited Ebuyer, but there is still some way to go.

## One previous owner

PC Advisor is sad to report that we have once more received reports of retail giant DSG (comprising Dixons, PC World and Currys) selling secondhand goods as new.

On Friday 9 January, Gary Davey bought as new a Hercules AIW 9800 SE graphics card from his local PC World outlet in Colchester. The box on the shelf was empty - he assumed this was for security purposes - and a

security guard provided him with the goods at the till.

Once home, Gary opened the box to find the card in an antistatic bag with sticker stating 'Fully guaranteed exchanged product'. Yet again, there had been a hiccup in the retail group's returns procedure. An apologetic PC World offered a replacement, but Gary went for a refund instead.

**There are no regulations that relate specifically to the way companies handle customer enquiries**

This is far from being an isolated incident. It represents the latest in a long line of reaches in DSG's malfunctioning returns procedure...

**June 01** PC Advisor reveals that between November 00 and January 01, a major London branch of Dixons sold the same notebook 'as new' to two separate people without removing a previous customer's personal information from the hard drive.

**July 01** The Cheltenham branch of Dixons sells a 'new' Toshiba laptop to

Duncan Stephens. His computer is secondhand and contains the internet dialup details for a previous owner. Dixons tries to blame the former owner, claiming he hadn't told them the hard drive still contained data. Later it shifts the blame to 'inexperienced staff'.

**June 02** The Harlow branch of PC World sells a 'new' hard drive to one of our readers. It turns out to contain the name and details of its last owner. Our reader is also billed twice for the full cost of his drive.

**Christmas 02** Ray Dickson buys a 'new' £200 CD-RW drive from the Dixons outlet at The Fort shopping complex in Erdington,

Birmingham. Opening files on the disc left in the drive, he is confronted, to his horror, with explicit pornographic footage and images of children.

**July 03** Reader Dave Stirrat buys a PC from PC World. The machine gives him trouble from the start and eventually PC World agrees to provide a replacement. A week or so later, Dave receives a phone call from a total stranger who has bought a new computer from PC World. The hard drive contains all of Dave's personal details as well as those of his girlfriend. ☒

## Personal data privacy campaign

Have you ever been sold a PC that had someone else's information on? Or has a PC you returned to a company been resold without being properly wiped? If either of these things has happened to you, we want to hear from you.

If you find a previous customer's data on a PC purchased from the Dixons Stores Group don't forget to email Simon Turner, DSG's managing director, at [simon.turner@dixons.co.uk](mailto:simon.turner@dixons.co.uk).

Email us at [pcadvisor\\_consumerwatch@idg.com](mailto:pcadvisor_consumerwatch@idg.com) and we'll take it from there

## Ahead of Time

Someone who knows a thing or two long waits and lack of communication is Time customer James Kemp. Due to a disability following an accident, James couldn't use a keyboard so he needed a computer with microphone input and speech recognition software. He settled on a modified Time system and was told it would take around two weeks for the order to be made up and shipped to him.

So imagine his surprise when a new computer was delivered to his home only two days later. Alarm bells should have been ringing already, but James was just happy to have his new system and got a local specialist round to assemble it for him.

## Hired help

The hired help's fee of £50 proved misspent, however, when it emerged that James' new PC did not have the crucial extras he required. Other parts of the package he had paid for were also missing. Time later told us that the wrong system had been sent out in error.

James made a series of phone calls to Time, trying to get the system picked up and the right one delivered. After he wrote to PC Advisor, we also spent many hours on the phone to Time, as at nearly every step of the way there were misunderstandings and problems. Finally, almost two months after he had first contacted us, he rang to deliver the news he'd received his system.

## Slow mo

In a final phone call to us, James remarked on the patience we must have in dealing with the company. Like reader Robert Collins, whose story is outlined on the opposite page, at many points James had become demoralised by Time's slow and inadequate response to his problems, and highly suspicious of the company's desire to sort the issue out at all.

All ConsumerWatch can say is that snarling down the phone will often do you no good whatsoever. Knowing your rights and demanding them calmly is almost always the best policy.