CUSTOMER SATISFACTION SURVEY 2002 RESULTS

When we invited you to describe your PC buying experiences, over 4,500 of you joined in. Andrew Charlesworth presents an overview of our in-depth Customer Satisfaction survey results and looks at which vendors you'd endorse and which ones really must try harder

Over the years we've collected innumerable complaints from PC owners, which range from "I ordered a PC but it hasn't arrived two weeks after the supplier said it would be delivered" to "I've got an onsite warranty, but the supplier insists my PC must be returned to them for repair". These, and many variations on the same theme, are familiar stories at *PC Advisor*. They come from the many letters, emails, phone calls and threads in our ConsumerWatch forum at www.pcadvisor.co.uk/consumerwatch. We are the proud owners of a vast quantity of anecdotal evidence about the ability (or inability) of PC suppliers to provide aftersales support for their customers.

For the individuals involved, the problems they experience are long-running sagas that dominate their waking hours. Consequently their letters read like horror stories. Taken as a body of evidence they make the computer business look incompetent, cheapskate and indifferent to its customers when it comes to aftersales support.

But do the nightmares of a few represent the experiences of the majority? The only way to answer that for sure is to ask as many people as possible who have bought PCs about their experience of aftersales service. And, crucially, to ask whether these customers would recommend their suppliers to a potential buyer.

So that's exactly what we have done. Our online survey, all 87 questions of it, was designed to cover the majority of permutations we have heard of in customer support.

What follows is an interpretation of the results of that survey. We are indebted to the 4,642 people who gave up 20 minutes or so of their lives between 14 March and 17 July to provide us with this data.

For *PC Advisor* to say 'buy from supplier A and not from B' would be a mistake. No supplier is universally bad and certainly none is perfect. So, along with the most frequent criticisms of customer service, we have tried to explain why aftersales support may disappoint in the hope that the knowledge will relieve some of the frustration and help you to make informed decisions.

Not so smooth operators

When buying from a 'direct' supplier (one with no retail outlet from which you can walk away with the PC you want), delays in delivery of the computer you ordered and, in some cases, have already paid for, are a frequent source of dissatisfaction.

There are several reasons why the delivery date given by sales staff may not match the actual date on which your system arrives. These are largely due to the way in which the business of selling and making PCs operates. For a start, a PC is sold before it is made. PC building is much like the assembly of any other consumer durable with standard parts bolted together in standard configurations.

However, unlike vacuum cleaners, PCs are nearly always built to order and there are many variations on the standard. The clever stuff is controlling the inventory of components that make up the PC.

This involves a fine balancing act. Component technologies are developed and improved upon so quickly that the price of components drops faster than the FTSE 100 on a bad bear day. The PC maker needs to keep just enough components in stock to build what it thinks will be the number of PCs ordered before the next delivery from the component supplier.

The end price of the PC is based on the cost at which the components are purchased, plus charges of manufacture, overheads and a profit margin. If a PC maker orders too many components for the number of machines it can sell, it runs the risk of making a severe dent in its quite slender profit margin. On a £700 PC the profit is about eight percent (or £56), so overstocking a single component could wipe out all the profit and put the vendor out of business in a matter of weeks.

Chain gang

When a customer phones through an order, it triggers a process whereby someone selects the components to make the PC. The assembly team then puts it together, tests it and passes it to dispatch. Given a week's training, a Phillips-head screwdriver set and a steady supply of components, a team of three people can turn out a PC every 30 minutes. This means a turnaround of three days on the order is reasonable. But if the supplier has an unanticipated influx of orders or if demand exceeds supply for memory modules or a specific graphics card, the balance of inventory versus orders is upset and delays build up.

Even if sales staff are aware of this situation when they take your order, it is in their interests not to tell you because you might go elsewhere if they say your PC will take 17 days to build and deliver. So they fib: "It should take three days, sir. That's our normal turnaround time." It's when they start promising what they can't deliver that the problems begin.

Dell is the acknowledged industry master of inventory control. It can demand its suppliers set up warehouses on the doorstep of its factories ready to deliver every two hours. But the supply chain for PC components is long and complex. A chip will typically be designed in California, fabricated in Taiwan, loaded with software written in India and held briefly in a depot in Ireland before being plugged into a motherboard by a 17-year-old school leaver in a big tin shed in Barking.

But even Dell has problems with delivery times and small hiccups at the start of this chain are amplified as they get closer to the final customer.

Shoot the messenger

Couriers are frequently blamed for delivery failures, but a shoddy courier is no excuse. Who appointed the courier? Who manages them? More to the point, with whom does the customer have a contract? Not the courier, but the PC supplier.

Couriers provide shoddy service because the PC buyer is not their customer and because they are not paid enough to care. PC suppliers should pay couriers more and pass on the increase to customers. So the PC costs £5 more. Who cares, as long as it turns up when the supplier says it will?

Blame culture

We are sold PCs on the promise that our lives will be revolutionised. But despite Windows' ease of use and the wonders of plug-and-play products, a PC is far more complicated than any other device you are likely to own. Its many software and hardware configurations can never be tested fully and you will never exhaust their potential even if you discovered a new use for them every day for five years. This is why bugs (mistakes of programming) are still found in three-year-old software – no one can test all the features of every program on every possible hardware setup.

When it goes wrong we expect, quite reasonably, support to be provided and the problem to be fixed promptly. When tech support reality turns out to be 40 minutes listening to hold music at 5p a minute only to be told the irrecoverable crash your PC has suffered is your own fault for downloading a utility from the web, it is no wonder you feel aggrieved.

But PCs are often bought by people with little experience of their complexity or quirkiness, so they need a high level

NOTES ON THE TABLES

Tables 01 to 09 are a selection of results from the *PC Advisor* survey. The 10 PC brands in the tables aren't the only ones that respondents had bought, but they are the 10 that have the greatest number of respondents and are therefore the most statistically significant.

• **Table 01** is the closest you can get to an overall top 10. It answers the question 'Would you recommend the brand you bought to another buyer?'

Evesham, well known to regular readers of *PC Advisor* and visitors to PCAdvisor.co.uk, comes top: 88 percent of the respondents who own an Evesham PC said they would recommend the brand to another buyer. Tiny, now defunct and owned by Time – still trying to throw off its 1990s boxshifting image – comes off worst.

• **Table 02** shows what percentage of people who bought that brand of PC had to contact the support service for whatever reason. Evesham clocks up the most hits yet, according to table 01, is the brand whose customers would most likely recommend it to other buyers. Is this an anomaly?

Maybe Evesham comes top in table 01 because customers had to contact support (and did so successfully) rather than despite the need for contact. Dealing with a problem well seems to create a better impression than having no problem at all. And remember how emotionally attached to a brand people can become; it is in their interests to prove that they made the right choice.

• **Tables 03-07** are linked. Tables 03 to 06 cover four common reasons for contacting customer support: a fault with part of the PC; problems with setup; frequent crashing; and incomplete delivery of the order. Coming top in one of these tables is not good: it shows a higher percentage of this supplier's customers had problems. The number one supplier in each of these categories is given a score of 10 points, the second nine and so on until number 10 is given a score of one.

These scores are then totted up in table 07; the higher a supplier has scored, the more problems its customers have had that have caused them to contact the support lines.

Mesh comes out best in this chart, which is a measure of the reliability of a supplier's PCs: overall, Mesh customers had fewer reasons to contact customer support. Evesham can do no better than middling, despite the loyalty of its customers and their readiness to recommend the company to other buyers. Advent, the in-house brand of PC World and Dixons, comes off worst of all.

• **Table 08** puts Mesh bottom when it comes to solving issues first time. This could be caused by the few problems that they have being more severe. But less than a year ago Mesh was operating a callback-only system, whereby the customer's first contact was to log a call, not to deal with the problem straight away. This would have affected the result.

Dell does best at solving problems on first contact and, indeed, its whole support facility is geared to doing this (see Dell's Supplier profile in the December 2001 issue).

• **Table 09** shows which supplier's customers had the most delivery delays. Retailers, such as PC World (Advent), Time and Tiny, despite having the advantage of a local outlet, don't fare any better than mail order suppliers Mesh, Dell and Evesham.

Compaq and IBM, traditionally suppliers to corporate businesses rather than individuals, come out best. This is probably because they use a chain of authorised dealers. The machines cost more, but them not turning up on time is less of a worry.

Poor support costs customers real money. Losing your PC for a period of time while a problem is fixed is bad enough if it is your home machine, but can prove disastrous if you run your business on it. Only four percent of respondents lost money while their PCs were out of action, but the average amount was £2,330 – a significant figure for a small business.

01 REPEAT BUYERS

Percentage of people who would buy the same brand of PC again

1	Evesham	88%	**Good**
2	Dell	86%	
3	IBM	81%	
4	Advent	74%	
5	Mesh	73%	
6	HP	71%	
7	Packard Bell	70%	
8	Compaq	62%	
9	Time	41%	
10	Tiny	32%	**Bad**

02 TECH SUPPORT

Percentage of people who contacted a PC vendor's support service

1	Evesham	71%	**Bad**
2	Mesh	71%	
3	Tiny	68%	
4	Time	67%	
5	Packard Bell	65%	
6	Advent	60%	
7	Compaq	51%	
8	Dell	48%	
9	IBM	41%	
10	HP	40%	**Good**

of support. Even this wouldn't be such a problem if customers, having been told by the salesperson that using a PC is a cinch, didn't have such high expectations. All this adds up to support issues costing the PC business dear. It's a sure recipe for frustration and disappointment.

Learning to be self-supportive

For the vendor, support – mostly in the form of knowledgeable people answering low-level queries – is expensive. It has been recognised for a decade that the cost of owning a PC far outweighs the capital cost of buying it in the first place. The consumer PC business will have to head this way, too. Suppliers had better start preparing their customers to pay for good support. And customers will just have to accept that, if they are a novice, they'll have to pay to get the best out of their new hobby.

One way of weaning customers off live telephone support is the use of an online

knowledgebase that can be searched for answers. Support operations already have such a knowledgebase internally – that's what the tech support people are reading from when you phone up. But if it could be made available on a support website and accompanied by an artificially intelligent

search engine, it would take a lot of the strain off the telephone queues.

Experienced PC customers will take to this quite readily, but it's the novices who eat up the support staff's time. And what do you do if your PC is so knackered you can't even get online?

03 FAULTY SUBSYSTEM

Reason for contacting support service

1	Compaq	41%	**Bad**
2	Dell	39%	
3	Tiny	35%	
4	Advent	34%	
5	Time	33%	
6	Packard Bell	32%	
7	HP	31%	
8	Mesh	30%	
9	Evesham	28%	
10	IBM	21%	**Good**

04 PROBLEMS WITH SETUP

Reason for contacting support service

|			
1	IBM	25%	**Bad**
2	Compaq	22%	
3	Evesham	20%	
4	Advent	19%	
5	Time	19%	
6	Tiny	19%	
7	Dell	18%	
8	Packard Bell	18%	
9	Mesh	14%	
10	HP	7%	**Good**

Supplied as specified

In early June, Ian Plested from Sandhurst in Berkshire decided to replace his seven-year-old Gateway PC, which he used extensively in his orchid business for administration and printing brochures. The Gateway had never given him a moment's trouble, so it would be a tough act to follow.

After a bit of research, Ian decided on an Evesham Axis 2200+, which he had seen advertised in *PC Advisor*. As Evesham has a showroom nearby in Reading, Ian went down to see the system for himself. Satisfied that it suited him, he bought one there and then. He filled out an order form, specifying each component, paid his money and returned home to await his new PC.

However, when the system arrived, Ian noticed that there were some major discrepancies with the specification. The memory was a slower type than the one he had requested and the sound and video cards were not what he had ordered. He contacted the Reading showroom, but found the staff there underinformed and "actually rather unhelpful". And he didn't appreciate the "to-ing and fro-ing involved in dealing with them".

He had more luck when he contacted Evesham's head office, where staff explained there had been a problem with
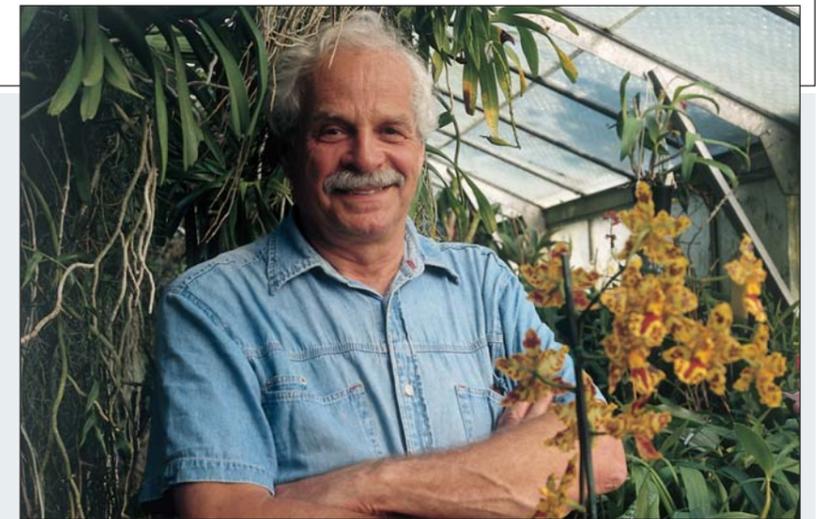
When the system arrived, Ian noticed that there were some major discrepancies with the specification

the assembly system at the factory. An engineer was sent round a few days later to replace the unsatisfactory components with the correct ones, leaving Ian finally happy with his new acquisition – albeit 10 days later than scheduled.

Reading branch manger Iraklis Papanikolaou confirmed that the difficulty had arisen from an internal problem at the assembly plant and that it had been rectified immediately. However, Papanikolaou said he had "no idea at all" what the problem had been.

At Evesham headquarters, spokeswoman Carolyn Worth thought it might have been due to a stock control issue and apologised for the inconvenience caused to Mr Plested. She also said branch staff often weren't informed of issues relating to the assembly plant and, for this reason, it is best if customers contact Evesham's headquarters direct if they have any problems.

Simon Easterman

05 FREQUENTLY CRASHED

Reason for contacting support service

1	HP	26%	**Bad**
2	Packard Bell	22%	
3	Mesh	21%	
4	Time	19%	
5	Tiny	19%	
6	IBM	14%	
7	Advent	12%	
8	Compaq	12%	
9	Evesham	12%	
10	Dell	9%	**Good**

06 ORDER WAS INCOMPLETE

Reason for contacting support service

1	Evesham	8%	**Bad**
2	Advent	7%	
3	IBM	7%	
4	Time	7%	
5	Dell	6%	
6	HP	4%	
7	Mesh	4%	
8	Tiny	4%	
9	Compaq	3%	
10	Packard Bell	2%	**Good**

07 OVERALL

Points allocated according to ranking in tables 03-06

1	Advent	27	**Bad**
2	Time	26	
3	Compaq	24	
4	IBM	24	
5	Evesham	22	
6	Tiny	22	
7	Dell	20	
8	HP	20	
9	Packard Bell	18	
10	Mesh	17	**Good**

08 AFTERSALES ISSUES

Percentage of problems resolved after first contact

1	Dell	66%	Good
2	Compaq	63%	
3	Evesham	63%	
4	HP	60%	
5	Packard Bell	58%	
6	IBM	57%	
7	Tiny	47%	
8	Time	42%	
9	Advent	38%	
10	Mesh	38%	Bad

09 DELAYED DELIVERY

Percentage of orders with delivery problems

1	Time	26%	Bad
2	Mesh	23%	
3	Advent	17%	
4	Dell	16%	
5	Tiny	15%	
6	HP	14%	
7	Evesham	13%	
8	Packard Bell	13%	
9	IBM	11%	
10	Compaq	10%	Good

Call waiting

Most support calls are made directly after purchase during the initial setup procedure. To answer these low-level queries, suppliers employ a small army of technically knowledgeable people. Customers expect such support operators to be know-it-alls incapable of showing emotion. Sadly they are all humans who row with their partners, have financial worries and are hacked off when they get caught in the rain.

When these mere mortals are faced with a customer who has already been wound up by 40 minutes of inane music and whose opening line is "You've ruined my life/I demand a refund/I'm taking you to court" (delete as applicable), it's no wonder tensions arise.

Parties on both sides of this interaction need to be more reasonable if problems are to get solved and PC ownership and associated support is to be more rewarding for all concerned.

CASE STUDY
All Meshed up

After purchasing a Mesh system in March 2000, reader Nick Gurney immediately had problems connecting to the internet. Mesh's technical support advised him to format the hard drive and reinstall Windows. This did not solve the problem but Nick decided to put up with the fault as he felt he was "faced with the complete disinterest of Mesh".

Several frustrating months later Nick went back to Mesh to be told, as he had suspected, that there may be a hardware problem. Despite having an onsite warranty, he was informed that the machine would need to be returned to the manufacturer.

Since Mesh had taken far longer than originally advised to fix and return the PC, Nick hoped he might at least get some sort of recompense for the "fruitless and needless" telephone calls and the inconvenience he had been caused. But no apology, explanation or compensation was forthcoming.

Earlier this year the machine again had to go back to Mesh, though not until Nick had spent a great deal more on phone calls to Mesh's technical support. Again, the machine was returned later than he had been promised. This left Nick with a rather bitter taste in his mouth. "I can't find words to persuade anyone strongly enough to steer well clear [of Mesh]," he told *PC Advisor*.

A Mesh spokesman told *PC Advisor* "We provide warranty support in accordance with their terms of business. Some items – like the monitor – are almost always done as an onsite swap-out. However, if our technicians believe the fastest way to get the customer back up and running is
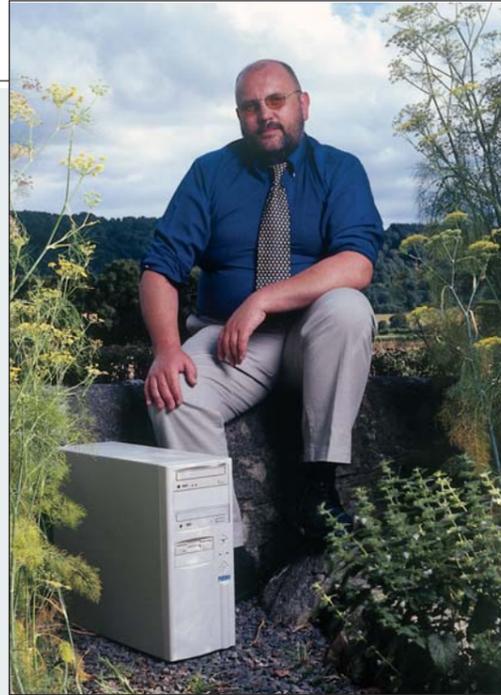
Nick decided to put up with the fault as he felt he was "faced with the complete disinterest of Mesh"

to bring the system back to Mesh for full diagnostic checking, that is what they will do.

"If you sell leading-edge technology to as many as 100,000 people a year, then not every order will be executed perfectly. Occasionally, a customer will experience more than one problem with an order and, in those cases, we apologise completely. We analyse these issues regularly and constantly put new procedures in place to prevent the problem happening again."

Mesh's spokesman went on to say, "If a customer feels they warrant compensation from Mesh as a result of their experience, they should set their reasons out in a letter and each case will be considered on merit."

Ben Camm-Jones

CASE STUDY
Not so special Dell-ivery

Forum visitor David Beaton ordered a Dell laptop with a bundled printer from the company's website. The laptop arrived at courier Walsh Western's depot on time, but the printer was nowhere to be seen and the courier refused to deliver part of the order. Over the next 22 days, David called Dell and Walsh Western 13 times, before establishing that the holdup was caused because the courier company hadn't received Dell's email instructing the release of the notebook.

Prompted by us, Dell representative Sarah Brown arranged delivery of both the notebook and printer within five working days. But the crossed wires still weren't sorted: while he was on the phone to Brown, there was a knock on David's door; answering it, he was met by a courier, laptop in hand.

The notebook's arrival was followed a week later – a month after the original delivery date – by the printer. Why did it take so long? Brown was only able to state that the company was having a bad month.

Needless to say, David is less than impressed with Dell's delivery system. "Six days my business has suffered my absence due to deliveries arranged with Walsh Western which don't come. I think Dell should refund my delivery charge. Minimum," he says, branding its service "extremely poor".

But Dell did offer a £200 refund and extended the laptop warranty from one year to two. "That appears to be the end of the saga," said a battlescarred David. "I don't feel I have had good service from Dell at all and will not recommend them or deal with them again."

Emma Northam

The printer was nowhere to be seen and the courier refused to deliver part of the order

Stand up and be counted
So which company should you buy from if you want to end up with a problem-free PC or at least know that if things go wrong your call will be dealt with promptly and courteously? There are no suppliers we can righteously stand up and tell you don't deserve to be in business, nor are any beyond reproach. For a summary of what our polled audience thought of their suppliers, see the tables and commentary on pages 148.

The activity of companies on our ConsumerWatch forum is a lesson in consumer relations – it takes time and effort to do it well. Mesh, Time and Evesham have been consistent in their activity, exposing themselves to the criticism of their customers in a public place frequented by 60,000 viewers.

No one expects these companies to be perfect – it's the way they handle problems that counts. Other suppliers have arrived on our forums with a flourish and then vanished. Ebuyer, for example, disappeared for a month or more, but has come back much to its credit. Dell, meanwhile, promised to 'do something about it' but took weeks to fulfil that promise.

PC World has declined to interact with its customers in such a public place. The criticisms go unanswered, the bad PR builds up and it looks as though the firm is indifferent to or hiding from its customers.

SAFETY FIRST (AND SECOND)

Whatever hardware you buy and wherever you decide to buy from, we advise taking a few precautions. We detail these every month in our ConsumerWatch section (see page 40), but here's a quick recap.

• Take credit **Buy using a credit card whenever possible to protect yourself if the company should go out of business. But remember, some firms make a surcharge for credit card sales. If buying using the vendor's credit scheme, double-check the APR. Is the payment protected? What happens if you lose your job and can't keep up repayments?**
• Do your homework **Warranties vary wildly, so check out the details. Does it cover parts and labour? Is it onsite or return to base? How long does it last?**
• Be wary of extended warranties **Some firms give you a 12-month warranty and try to persuade you to pay to extend the cover period. It's up to you whether the peace of mind is worth the extra cost.**
• Check delivery times **If goods are to be delivered, how long will it be before you receive them? Don't sign for goods you haven't checked without writing 'goods unchecked' on the delivery sheet.**
• Keep a record **Keep all your paperwork, including emails. Get the name of your salesperson in case you need to get back to them. If you have problems, does the firm have a helpline and, if so, how much does it cost per minute?**
• Be prepared **Before you buy, consider what you want to do with your PC. Is it for business or home use? If you want to use it for gaming you'll need higher specs than you would if you were just word processing. If you're going to be using it for DTP (desktop publishing) or graphics, don't skimp on monitor size or you'll end up squinting at the screen.**
• Ask for an explanation **If you don't understand the options on offer, ask the salesperson to explain. A PC is a major purchase so don't rush into a decision or let yourself be pressured into it.**
• Be informed **Talk to friends. Ask what system they've got, where it came from and find out how happy they are with it. Read *PC Advisor*, check out our website and get advice from our forum members.**

The bigger picture
By whatever medium a supplier chooses to conduct its customer support, it takes time and effort. Callbacks that never happen and emails that go unanswered betray a lack of concern for what happens to customers after the sale is made. So what is the essence of customer satisfaction? No company is perfect, but the way in which faults are dealt with is fundamental to good customer service.

Strangely, this survey shows customers have a better opinion of firms whose machines have gone wrong but have been fixed with aplomb, than the suppliers of products with which they have had no problems. And the fact remains that you rarely hear from happy customers. Thousands of PCs are sold every month – the majority of buyers are satisfied and never say a word about it.

Just because one person has had a bad experience with a supplier doesn't necessarily mean you will too. Look for trends, not individual horror stories. ■

Survey methodology

We carried out our Customer Satisfaction survey so we could measure how happy our readers are with the service they receive from PC companies in the UK.

The questionnaire was designed to investigate readers' experiences of both buying and owning a PC. Our questions covered a wide range of issues including the brand of PC each respondent owns, whether they would purchase the same brand again, any faults or problems their computer might have developed, and their interaction with the PC supplier's aftersales support service as a result.

Readers of *PC Advisor* and users of PCAdvisor.co.uk were invited to take part in the study and 4,642 people completed the questionnaire, providing us with a very strong sample of PC users whose answers are statistically accurate to +/- 1.5% points. It is worth remembering, however, that not every respondent answered every single question, so the base sizes will be reduced in some cases which will affect the accuracy of the results.

The questionnaire was accessed online and was designed and programmed by *PC Advisor's* Market Research department. The survey was promoted in *PC Advisor's* May 02 issue and a link to the questionnaire was included on the May, June and July 02 issue cover discs. Therefore, the actual fieldwork dates for the survey were 14 March to 17 July 02.

As an incentive to participate in the study, we offered people the chance to win a Canon PowerShot G2 digital camera with a retail value of £750.