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There's a mixture of good and bad news in this month's ConsumerWatch. *PC Advisor* readers let rip on StarOffice being a serious threat to Office XP, Multivision takes its time, Dell joins our happy band of official forum vendors and Plextor gets it right

PC Advisor poll

At £52.99 StarOffice 6.0 represents a serious threat to Office XP (£482)

Agree  (64.7%)

Disagree  (35.3%)

From a total of 1937 votes

← Microsoft had better start watching its back: nearly 65 percent of respondents in our online poll believe that StarOffice is a serious threat to Windows XP

Educational IT support engineer Paul Dick has just ordered the educational licence of StarOffice 6.0 for £45. "Sun's education deal means we are free to distribute the software to all students and staff," he enthused. Because Paul works at a private school, he reports that Office 97 is on most of the school's PCs. "For areas where [Office] is not really needed I think StarOffice will serve as a good alternative to another Microsoft licence. We can hand it out to kids who have no Office software and non-teaching staff are also eligible."

Meanwhile, network administrator and software engineer Barry Scott has been using StarOffice for some time. He is particularly keen on the new interface: "I like StarOffice and have done since its early days," he says. "When you put together an impressive feature set, a low asking price and compatibility with Microsoft Office documents I'd have thought its future is more or less assured."

"Microsoft seem hell bent on their money-making spin and a combination of their aggressive, expensive and confusing licensing arrangements means more and more people will be looking to alternatives that don't break the bank and offer suitable features based on their requirements," Barry adds.

A costly factor

According to Microsoft's Stephanie Thorn, desktop product marketing manager for Office XP, the disparity in pricing is greatly

Star-spangled software

Aimed squarely at Microsoft Office, rather than lower end desktop suites such as EasyOffice and Microsoft Works, the word on the street is that nine months into the IT industry's worst ever year, businesses are attracted by the prospects of saving thousands of pounds. Sun's quality-assurance tests have added to the air of confidence surrounding the product, with the company pledging to issue patches to fix any glitches.

Other attractions include the ability to install Sun's retail package on up to five PCs, unlike Office XP which can only be run on two systems concurrently. Meanwhile industry analyst Gartner believes that, on its current course, Sun could swallow up to 10 percent of the office suite market in the next two years.

Hoping to tap into Sun's new found cockiness we further canvassed the opinions of *PC Advisor* readers.

If *PC Advisor* readers are to be believed, Microsoft's cash cow, Office XP, could soon find itself losing customers as PC users move over to cheeky upstart StarOffice. Nearly two thirds of respondents (61.5 percent) to a recent *PC Advisor* online poll indicated that they thought the sixth and latest version of the Sun Microsystems-owned office suite represents a "serious threat" to Microsoft's current stranglehold. Although Sun Microsystems started charging for the office software suite for the first time back in May 02, at £52.99 it is still around £430 cheaper than a standalone version of Office XP.

The latest incarnation of StarOffice is widely regarded as the best so far, although this is hardly unusual in the software world. Up and down the country IT experts have spent the past four months loading up version 6.0 and taking it out for a spin for both their employers and clients.

How to contact us

Got a problem with a manufacturer or vendor? Unsure of your consumer rights? Interested in a company's reputation? Get yourself to the ConsumerWatch forum.

[www.pcadvisor.co.uk/
consumerwatch](http://www.pcadvisor.co.uk/consumerwatch)



ILLUSTRATIONS: AILEEN O'DONNELL

"When the cost of upgrading has to be faced, any reasonably priced alternative [such as StarOffice] will be attractive"

Gordon McMichael, *PC Advisor* reader

lessened once training costs are taken into account. "For power users, StarOffice isn't something you're going to pick up in five minutes," she says.

PC Advisor reader Gordon McMichael, who is self-employed, agrees with Microsoft to a certain extent. "For someone working from home, time is money," he says. "All you want is the computer doing what you need. I think that the biggest hurdle StarOffice has to overcome is that not everybody wants to spend hours learning a new office suite. It's not as if it is some kind of crossword puzzle."

Gordon has been experimenting with StarOffice but finds "the help screens very frustrating and time-consuming". Ultimately, however, he thinks pricing will count against Microsoft. "When the cost of upgrading has to be faced, any reasonably priced alternative will be attractive," he concludes.

Veni, vidi, vendor

Pulling your hair out trying to get hold of a vendor? The *PC Advisor* ConsumerWatch forum can help. We've got several official vendors on board, each with their own official threads. We have signed up the following, and there are more lined up:

Dell
Mesh
Evesham
Time
Multivision
Watford Electronics
Pipex
E-buyer

If you're a vendor and would like to set up an official presence email us at pcadvisor_consumerwatch@idg.com.



Multivision gets it right – eventually

Reader Andrew Piggens ordered a PC from Multivision in August last year. When it arrived the machine's specifications were not exactly as ordered. Only two of the four specified USB ports were fitted and the speakers were ex-review (still covered in stickers from the PC magazine that had tested the system). The speed of the processor was slower than the one he ordered (1GHz as opposed to 1.33GHz).

Andrew was also perturbed by the general condition of the system when it arrived. "You wouldn't believe the way the mouse and keyboard were just thrown into the main package, or the filthy state of one disk and the packaging," he explains.

Invoking his rights under the Sale of Goods Act, he wrote to Multivision explaining that he was formally rejecting the PC and was promptly phoned and promised a replacement. A year later he still hadn't received it, although the company had finally agreed to collect the computer and rebuild it.

Reaching his final tether, he turned to the *PC Advisor* ConsumerWatch forum, where Multivision has an official customer service presence. In a matter of hours he received a telephone call from the PC vendor, offering him a replacement system comprising brand-new components.

Dell serves up ConsumerWatch support

Dell has become the latest vendor to join *PC Advisor*'s band of IT companies

offering an official helping hand via our ConsumerWatch forum.

The world's biggest direct PC company has created its own thread in the forum, inviting customers to forward "questions or queries on your Dell system that you feel remain unresolved". And the firm has conjured up an email address for that very purpose: ieuk_customerrelations@dell.com.

Dell joins the likes of Mesh, Evesham, Time, Multivision, Watford Electronics, Pipex and Ebuyer in creating an official presence in our forum.

Praise you

The *PC Advisor* ConsumerWatch forum likes to report on good service as well as uncovering vendor misbehaviour. 'Credit where credit is due', we like to say. This month it's a pat on the back for CD drive manufacturer Plextor.

Back in June reader Sharon Hogan was ready to give up on her Plextor PlexWriter when it gave up on her. She contacted Plextor without too much hope as the CD-RW was two months out of warranty. Sharon sent an email to the company explaining the situation and received an email back the same day. Courier company DHL would collect the faulty drive and return it to Belgium, with no charge to the customer. Impressed so far, she was still expecting an email with a quote for repairs further down the line. A week later a brand-spanking-new CD-RW was delivered without any charge at all. So 10 out of 10 for goodwill, Plextor. ■

consumer tips & tricks

Got an unresolved problem with a vendor and unsure what to do next? Get along to our ConsumerWatch forum, ask for some level-headed advice and read about other forum members' experiences. Here's our selection of choice cuts from the online clinic

Q I was sent a number of computer books in the post that I didn't order. I gave them to my brother who found them useful for his university course. That was three months ago and now the company wants me to pay for the goods. Where do I stand?

A Under the Consumer Protection Distance Selling Regulations (2000), if you are sent goods you never asked for they are unsolicited and can be treated as a gift. You can do what you want with them.

Q The PC I bought six months ago has packed in and the manufacturer is no longer trading. I've heard I might be able to claim against my credit card company. Is this the case?

A Your credit card company is liable for any breach of contract under the Consumer Credit Act (1974), which means you've got a two-line whip should the goods you buy on the credit card subsequently turn out to be faulty.

The item, however, has to be in excess of £100. These rights are given to you under the Consumer Credit Act (1974) under a principle known as 'Equal Liability'. This means that the credit card company and the supplier have the same obligations and responsibilities to you for the goods being satisfactory. If the goods turn out to be faulty you've got two ports of call – the retailer and the credit card company.

Q Is it true that oral contracts are not worth the paper they're written on?

A Actually, verbal contracts are just as binding as written ones. Be sure to take your tape recorder, though, as the major difficulty with verbal contacts is proving a transaction happened in the first place.



Q I bought goods from an online vendor a month ago and they still haven't arrived.

A Under the Consumer Protection Distance Selling Regulations (2000), if goods haven't turned up within 30 days, you have the right to a full refund.

Q I bought my PC on direct debit. The computer keeps crashing but the manufacturer is refusing to respond to me. What can I do?

A Okay, we're not going to tell you to buy by credit card instead after the event. Though it may be tempting to do so, we would advise against cancelling any direct debit payments going out to the company. You could end up on a debt black list, creating big problems for yourself in the future. You might, for example, be refused a mortgage if the lender's investigation into your credit-worthiness turns out to be negative.

Q Why is it that when you complain it seems impossible to get a decent on-the-spot decision from a frontline shop assistant?

A There's a problem with trying to get staff to act as decision makers. Most retailers would not dream of allowing their counter staff to make decisions about refunds and warranty claims – and for good reason. The staff member acts as the retailer's agent, and therefore a promise made by a junior staff member might be binding on the company. For that reason the majority of retailers operate a hierarchical responsibility system and all questions and complaints that may involve a product replacement have to be referred to an official decision-maker.

Q I've written to the company with my complaint, but have not received a satisfactory reply. What should I do next?

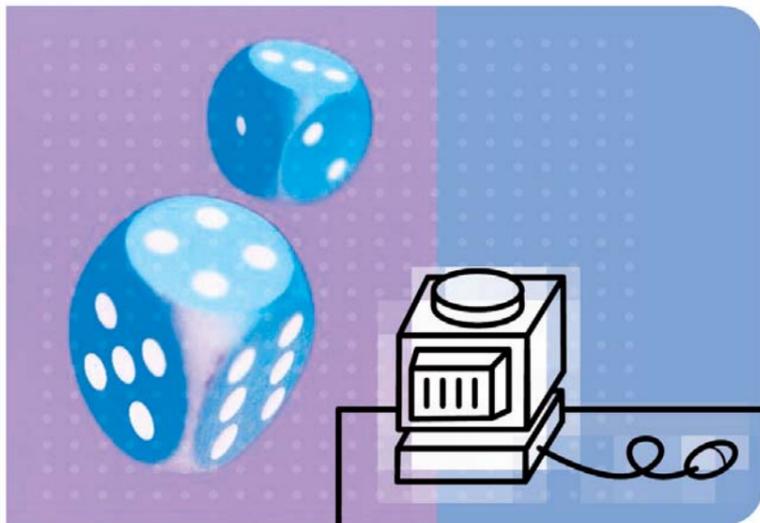
A Talk to your local Trading Standards Office or Citizens Advice Bureau. Their advice is free – it is paid for by the tax payer – and they can refer you to relevant party, which may in turn take up the complaint on your behalf. ■



Got a problem with a vendor? Get yourself to the ConsumerWatch forum at www.pcadvisor.co.uk/consumerwatch

terms & conditions

October will see Windows XP enjoying its first birthday. As its proud parent gets ready to celebrate, *PC Advisor* forum editor Peter Thomas assesses the operating system's first year and asks whether it has proved its critics wrong



Microsoft released Windows XP back in October 01. The latest version of the Windows family received a lukewarm and largely unenthusiastic reaction from the PC community. Indeed, the reaction of one visitor to the *PC Advisor* website was, "The more I learn about XP, the more I shudder." The reason? Windows Me was still relatively new and most users were happy with Windows 98 SE or 2000.

When it came to operating systems we were spoilt for choice and few people wanted to fork out for a radically new system that wouldn't work properly unless it was 'activated' online with Microsoft. The software giant's insistence that we ask for permission to reinstall the operating system after a hard drive reformat was another major irritant, leaving many forum users deeply concerned at what they saw as an unnecessary restriction.

A poll of *PC Advisor* forum users conducted just before the 25 October launch showed that more than half (50.9 percent) indicated they had no intention of upgrading until Microsoft did away with the activation process. And nearly a quarter (24 percent) said they would never upgrade.

Things are looking up

Nearly a year on and things don't look so bad: over a quarter of all visitors to the *PC Advisor* website have made the move to XP and the number of threads complaining about the activation procedure have almost disappeared. The trend is set to continue with the announcement of a classic Microsoft armlock – refusing to support Windows 98 beyond June 03.

According to David Weekes, Microsoft's Windows marketing manager, the first nine months saw worldwide sales of over 47 million Windows XP licences, outstripping even Windows 95 as the fastest-selling version. To get a feel for XP's impact we invited contributions from our forum visitors, nearly a year on from our original poll.

"Last year I was apprehensive," Azhar Zaidi explains. "However, having installed XP and used it for well over eight months now, I am totally converted and my apprehensions have been allayed."

Peter Jackson was similarly impressed: "It is definitely the most stable version of Windows that I have ever used. Before and after the installation I had the minor inconvenience of having to download a few drivers but that is my only quibble. For me it is as if Windows has finally grown up – no more tantrums and blue screens."

Over a quarter of all visitors to the *PC Advisor* website have made the move to Windows XP and the number of threads complaining about the activation procedure have almost disappeared

Doubters fight back

Almost 60 percent of respondents were impressed by Windows XP, but some still have their doubts. Rod Gray didn't like the activation requirement: "My copy of Windows XP is lying in the back of the cupboard while I continue to use Me. I object to registering and re-registering a piece of software for which I have bought a licence. I don't see why if I buy a new bit for my PC it is any business of Bill Gates'."

All in all it's been a good start for Windows XP, but what of the future? We're used to Microsoft pumping out new versions almost without a pause, so is there a new product waiting in the wings? "There is a successor to Windows XP, currently codenamed 'Longhorn', but this will not see the light of day before the autumn of 2004," says Weekes. According to Weekes Microsoft is now planning longer product lifecycles for Windows, following feedback from customers.

A major Service Pack for Windows XP is planned for September 02. At 200MB it will make narrowband dialup users wince, prompting Microsoft to make the download available on a CD. ■



Look out for the latest edition of *Tips & Tricks*, which includes 50 pages dedicated to Windows XP. See page 157 for more information

legal advisor

What is the Data Protection Act and what steps should firms take to ensure they aren't breaking the law? Michael Clinch, senior litigator and partner at law firm Picton and Howell, gives a brief overview and highlights the basic issues that affect businesses

Whenever you collect, save or transfer personal data about an individual you are under a legal obligation to comply with the requirements set out in the Data Protection Act. Failure to do so can be a criminal offence, so if your business relies on the use of personal data you should notify the Information Commissioner and put internal procedures in place to ensure compliance with the act.

Personal data

The Data Protection Act does not apply to company details such as its name and address. However, if your database includes the name of any individual within the firm, this amounts to the processing of personal data and the act applies. Rules are stricter if you process highly sensitive data, including religious belief, racial or ethnic origin or political opinion.

The eight principles

Under the act, personal data must be:

1. Fairly and lawfully processed,
2. Obtained only for specified and lawful purposes.
3. Adequate, relevant and not excessive in relation to the purpose/purposes for which they are processed.
4. Accurate and kept up to date.
5. Kept for no longer than necessary.
6. Processed in accordance with rights of data subjects.
7. Protected by appropriate technical and organisational measures against



unauthorised or unlawful processing, against accidental loss, destruction or damage.

8. Kept within the EEA unless adequate level of protection for rights and freedoms of data subjects is granted.

Subject access rights

Individuals have the right to see all the data held about them. Businesses must comply but can charge a maximum of £10 for doing so provided they reply within 40 days of payment of the fee.

What you should do

• Notification Notify the Information Commissioner that you are processing personal data and renew the notification every year.

- Internal guidelines and procedures Review these to make sure that all personnel dealing with personal data are aware of the obligations under the act. Take legal advice or get a lawyer to undertake a data protection audit of your procedures.
- Website Make sure that a Privacy Statement is posted online. Alert visitors and ask their consent before processing their personal data. Check to see whether you're using cookies and if they are allowed.
- Contracts If you are exporting data outside the EU, make sure you are using Model Clauses in contracts relating to the export of data. These clauses are designed to protect the rights of the individuals whose data is being exported. Failure to use these clauses could result in prosecution. ■

PC Advisor 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 have happened to you, we want to hear from you. If you find data on a PC purchased from the DSG (Dixons Stores Group) don't forget to email Simon Turner the managing director at simon.turner@dixons.co.uk.

Email us at pcadvisor_consumerwatch@idg.com and we'll take it from there



contacts

Where do you turn when things go wrong? There may be an issue with the ad that attracted you in the first place. So if you've been left with a useless piece of kit for which the manufacturer made extravagant claims, it could be worth informing the ASA

The ASA (Advertising Standards Authority) is the governing body responsible for regulating all non-broadcast advertising. Its role is to ensure that all advertisements are 'legal, decent, honest and truthful'. Its regulations cover advertising wherever, and in whatever form (other than radio or television), they appear. The ASA has clarified a series of codes that also governs advertising over the internet.

The codes apply to: online advertising in 'paid for' space (for example, banner and pop-up advertising); advertising in commercial emails and sales promotions wherever they may appear online. The ASA stresses that these codes do not in any way affect your statutory rights under the Data Protection Act. The Distance Selling Directive will provide protection for buying online.

I'm free! (well, nearly)

The ASA produced a report in September 00, which looked at the promises of 'free' web access. What emerged was many of these ISPs actually charged for an element of their services. Deals were heavily

oversubscribed, and many users were disappointed. ASA regulations require advertisers to show that they have anticipated demand, making it clear if stocks are limited and, hopefully, preventing the fiascos of PCs-for-£100 firm Smarttalk and no-charge ISP Breathe.com from recurring. Where companies have failed to anticipate demand, they will be in breach of the codes.

This aspect of the ASA's code could start the ball rolling against firms that become 'victims of their own success'. Regrettably, this phrase is fast becoming a euphemism for companies whose board members failed miserably to conduct standard business assessments of demand.

Surf yourself silly

The ASA also refused to uphold claims against BT that its ads claiming 'unlimited surfing every weekend with BT Internet' were misleading. The complaint was made because BT kicks customers offline after two hours, whether or not they are downloading or uploading data at the time. This was deemed not to be in contradiction to its claims of 'unlimited surfing' because people can reconnect immediately. That may seem odd, but the ASA tries hard to be fair and regularly upholds complaints made against the big boys.

Making your voice heard

To make a complaint about an advert call 020 7580 5555. Alternatively, fill in the claim form at www.asa.org.uk, via the Contacts icon. All complaints must be made in writing and sent to: Advertising Standards Agency, 2 Torrington Place, London WC1E 7HW. ■



Where to turn for help

If the worst happens, it's good to know where to go for help. Here we list some important contacts which can help with a variety of problems from software copyright issues to non-delivery or payment problems.

- Citizens Advice Bureau **For general legal advice and to find out your rights. For information, or to find your nearest CAB, call 020 8333 6960 or visit its website at www.nacab.org.uk.**
- Consumers Association **For advice on all consumer transactions, call 020 7830 6000 or turn your browser to www.which.net.**
- Fast (Federation Against Software Theft) **Regulators of software copyright law. Clivemont House, 54 Clivemont Road, Maidenhead, Berkshire SL6 7BZ. Call 01628 622 121 or visit online at www.fast.org.uk.**
- Office of Fair Trading **OFT, Fleetbank House, 2-6 Salisbury Square, London EC4Y 8JX. For general enquiries, telephone 0845 722 4499 or log on to www.ofc.co.uk.**
- PC Association **Non-profit organisation offering advice to both trade and consumers. You'll find tips on buying safely and a forum for complaining when things go wrong. Turn your browser to www.pcauk.org.**