

# readers' writes

This month's letters highlight how delicate the issues we covered last month can be. Our star letter shows that a canny buyer can sidestep the warranties trap, whereas another reader sees the problem from the salesperson's side. Likewise there's a split in your reactions to monitoring children's internet activity: do our kids deserve privacy or is it too much responsibility for them?

## Warranties: who's really under pressure?

From reading October's ConsumerWatch article on extended warranties, it seems that one of the advantages quoted by the PC World salesperson for the Coverplan service agreement was the inclusion of a PC Healthcheck. I have just checked this on my own Coverplan documents and it states the free PC Healthcheck is only offered for desktop machines. But wasn't your mystery buyer purchasing a laptop?

Personally I'm not unduly concerned at not being able to use this service on my Acer laptop; I prefer to keep all the software configuration in order myself with the help of *PC Advisor*. I'm not sure that the computer wouldn't come back from a Healthcheck with some settings changed by a well-meaning engineer and I would have to reset things to my own preferences.

I also have experience closer to home of stores pressuring staff to sell extended warranties. My daughter works part-time for a well-known high street retailer. The store manager continually pressures staff to sell these warranties, because "we haven't met our quota for today". My own feeling is that in many cases retailers are now trying to sell warranties as an optional 'bolt-on' accessory to provide standards of service that would have been taken for granted a few years ago.

**Chris Clifton, via email**

*Emma Northam replies: our mystery buyer was, indeed, looking for a laptop at PC World and he was offered the Healthcheck as part of his specific warranty. Of course Healthchecks are also available for non-PC World warranty holders, whether they have laptops or desktops.*

## Spitting image

You regularly discuss backing up data, but never seem to suggest the direct and, probably, cheapest route: disk imaging. On my last three PCs I've installed secondary hard drives, all of

the same size and specification as the Master drive. I use either Drive Copy or Double Image, which is a download not yet updated to work with XP, and spend 30 minutes copying the old disk to the new one every week. It has never let me down. And all it cost was just over £100 for an 80GB secondary drive.

**Alfred John Benson, via email**

*Emma Northam replies: we can't overemphasise the importance of regular data backups and you're right, disk imaging is one useful way of doing this. See our disaster prevention and recovery feature on page 150 for more information.*

## Broadly speaking

I read with interest your broadband supplement in the November 02 issue. I think it would be helpful for your readers if you explain how broadband can deliver such high speeds through the same wiring as a standard dialup connection which I am currently using. I can only manage a maximum speed of 45Kbps (kilobits per second) – the connection rate sometimes drops as low as 12Kbps.

I don't see how I can derive the stated benefits of up to a tenfold increase in connection speed through broadband when the BT wiring doesn't seem to be capable of giving a consistent maximum kilobits per second using my current dialup connection.

**Peter Baker, Maidstone**

*Peter Thomas replies: your confusion is understandable and you aren't the first person to wonder how so much extra data can be squeezed into a twisted pair copper phoneline while simultaneously allowing a normal phone conversation to take place.*

*Put simply, the ADSL (asymmetric digital subscriber line) technology splits the phoneline into two channels. One carries the analogue voice signal (the*



*channel that your conventional analogue modem uses) while the other channel carries the digital broadband signal at a far higher frequency than that used for voice communications. Try to imagine the phoneline being a pipe with another smaller pipe running inside it and you have a reasonable analogy – the inner pipe carries the voice signal, while data flows down the outer pipe at high speed.*

*The two signals are separated from each other by the ADSL splitter at your end of the line and are sent on their separate ways by special equipment in the BT exchange. It's a marvel of technology: once you've tasted broadband you'll never want to use an analogue modem again.*

## Beano there, done that

Yesterday I was a fairly broadminded person. I recognised that there was a demand out there for pornographic sites and that we couldn't criticise people for wanting to meet the needs of their fellow men (or women). Today, all that has changed. Why?

## Star letter

**A**s a private buyer I have made use of the salesman's enthusiasm for selling warranties to my own benefit. Having decided to purchase a laptop for my son's college course I knew I needed the warranty extended for the period of the course. By not accepting the warranty in the first instance I was able to get £200 taken off the price of the unit before agreeing to buy the laptop with extended warranty. The moral? Negotiate.

As a corporate network manager with 150 users I changed our whole strategy with regards to maintenance. When I started with my company our 10-year-old computers still worked well because they were under maintenance but were useless because of their obsolete specification. We have dropped all PC maintenance and with the money saved employed our own engineer at less cost. In conjunction with buying branded PCs with three-year onsite warranties, this has resulted in cost savings of tens of thousands of pounds.

Finally, a point of advice to system buyers: many component manufacturers offer longer cover than the single-year warranty of the whole PC. For example, if the drive fails it is still covered under the manufacturer's warranty for, in many cases, three years. Last year I reported the failure of a Quantum SCSI drive on 28 August. Its three-year warranty expired three days later so they replaced it for just the cost of posting it to them.

**Alan Stewart, Colchester**

*Our star letter writer wins a Canon SmartBase MPC400, worth £249 inc VAT. This four-colour, fully featured multifunction device combines a printer, copier and scanner in one compact flatbed unit. For more details, see [www.canon.co.uk/multifunction](http://www.canon.co.uk/multifunction).*

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Strangely enough, all because of *The Beano*. I'll explain. My 13-year-old son left his computer on after collecting his email today and, as I was about to shut it down while tut-tutting about how he always leaves things half-done, I glanced at the email on view. It was from a website offering the naughtiest 18-year-olds you can imagine. Clearly he was accessing things I didn't want him to.

On trawling through his internet history it was clear he had accessed lots of similar hardcore porn sites over the last two days. How had this happened? I had been (or so I thought) very conscientious in configuring the parental controls on his web browser with fairly restrictive settings and the controls remained active with my password as yet unhacked. Then I remembered *The Beano*.

Not that there's anything wrong with the comic's site. It is, in fact, a great

website for kids but it doesn't supply a contents rating to allow the web browser parental controls to grade it. When I first set up the controls my son wailed to me that he couldn't see *The Beano*'s site because the restrictions I'd set wouldn't allow it. The site very conveniently told me I could check the box in the browser which allowed access to unrated sites.

Not wanting to be a tyrant I did this, but I hadn't studied the software well enough to know I could have allowed unrated access to that specific site alone without opening access to all others. I thought most unrated sites would probably be okay. How wrong I was.

So this is my plea to all internet-naive parents out there: do not allow your kids to see unrated sites. Virtually all of the hardcore pornography sites are unrated as, unfortunately for me, is *The Beano*. **Irvin S-Allen, Cheshire**

*Wendy Brewer replies: many parents simply don't have the technical know-how to look for loopholes in content rating schemes and often even forget to rate email accounts which are prone to high levels of pornographic junk mail.*

*One of the main problems for parents is knowing which content filtering software to trust and, indeed, how to constantly monitor what sites their children are viewing. Even Icras (the Internet Ratings Content Association's) own free filter, which can be downloaded from [www.icra.org](http://www.icra.org), suffers limitations similar to those you outline.*

*Unfortunately, until filter systems become easier to use and control, many children are going to be left open to unsuitable content. Perhaps it's time software manufacturers started to listen.*

## Downsize and upgrade

Since moving into a smaller bungalow my wife asked me to downsize – that is, buy a laptop and dispense with the tower. After reading all the recommendations, both from you and the advertisers, I settled with a Sony Vaio. I have to sympathise with last month's star letter writer Kenton Evans to a degree, but I have a few queries. Can I upgrade my laptop, bearing in mind I have no IT skills whatsoever? If not, perhaps Kenton is right. Buy the best you can afford.

Another niggle: I would love a scanner that will do slides and negatives, but only one model in your November chart could – the Visioneer.

**Bernard Minns, via email**

*Ben Camm-Jones replies: it's possible to upgrade a laptop, but don't attempt it unless you're really confident. It is quite fiddly – you could damage other components in the process and invalidate your warranty. But next month we look at notebook upgrades in more detail – we've got hold of the ed's Sony Vaio and we're going to be making various improvements. Let's just hope he likes them...*

*In terms of scanners, there are a few models available on the market that have built-in transparency adapters, though many in our charts offer them as optional extras. You can also get models that can be stood on their side, rather than on their base, which might appeal to you if space is at a premium. ■*