With the turnover of new PCs on the market spinning almost as fast as their processor speeds, choosing a PC can be a daunting task. Spencer Dalziel helps a *PC Advisor* reader make the right choice

# Reader's choice: budget PCs

**C**hoosing the right PC is a tricky decision. To ensure that you get the best computer for your money, it's essential to have some idea of what you are looking for to guarantee that the system you choose will meet your needs. This month we help one of our readers pick out his perfect PC, and we hope our advice will be useful to everyone about to take the plunge and invest in a new computer.

Matt Cannon got in touch with us because he's after a new PC for home use. Matt is a manager for a media sales company in London and recently moved to Essex with his girlfriend, Anna. Being in an IT-based environment, he's quite knowledgeable about PCs. As a result, Matt is specific about what he's looking for: "I'm surrounded by IT hardware at work, so I've got a fair idea of what's on the market. And because I've already got through a couple of PCs I'm pretty sure what I want."

Matt told us the final decision would be a joint one between him and Anna. Though their opinions differ they've both agreed

that a familiar brand and a warranty are vital: "I bought my last PC from a smaller manufacturer because it was a powerful model and not [that expensive], but it only had a year warranty." He added, "I ended up having loads of trouble when things went wrong, so I want to make sure I get a brand name and a better warranty just in case."

### My last PC was a powerful model, but it only had a year warranty. I ended up having loads of trouble when things went wrong, so I want to make sure I get a better warranty

Matt has £1,500 to spend so we suggested three models in our Budget PC range that we thought might suit his requirements. The models we chose were: Packard Bell's i-Design 170; Mesh's Matrix 2000+BPC and Evesham's Axis 1900+.

### First impressions
We included the Packard Bell i-Design as it is a big-brand PC aimed at home users. It can't match the other PCs for specs, but the smart styling makes it an attractive addition to your home decor. Another bonus is that the peripherals are wireless, so there aren't so many cables cluttering up the place. On pure aesthetics Matt thought this was appealing: "Anna would love this. She doesn't want the house to be overtaken by a new PC, so this would fit in beautifully. It's small, so it won't take up much room, and it looks great."

### What the experts say
The Packard Bell outshines the others in terms of looks, but we didn't think it would

Next up was our Best Buy, the Matrix 2000+ from Mesh, which boasts high-end specifications and features for its low price. Matt told us that he wants to use his PC as an entertainment system, so we thought he'd appreciate the potential of this model. It comes with a top-notch audio setup, while a pin-sharp monitor complements the first-rate graphics. Matt was impressed by this line-up, but was put off by the case which opens up with a key rather than screws: "It's easy enough to open, but I know I'll lose the key."

Our third choice, the Evesham Axis, is an ex-Best Buy. Matt was pleased with the software bundle and comprehensive documentation: "If anything goes wrong I'm happy opening up my PC to see if I can fix it, but I still feel safer knowing it comes with a good manual."

Matt has a digital camera and printer, so he was pleased there were enough free USB ports on all three PCs to connect his devices. However, the i-Design 170 uses up one for the transmitter for the wireless peripherals, leaving only one free.

### What did Matt want?
- A budget PC for around £1,500
- A familiar brand name
- A good warranty
- Good customer service and support
- High-quality graphics
- First-rate sound, with 5.1 channel support
- Manual and documentation

## Pros and cons: the contenders measure up

**Packard Bell i-Design 170**
Pros: Stylish design; familiar brand name
Cons: Low-end specifications; one-year warranty
Price: £1,199
WorldBench score: 74
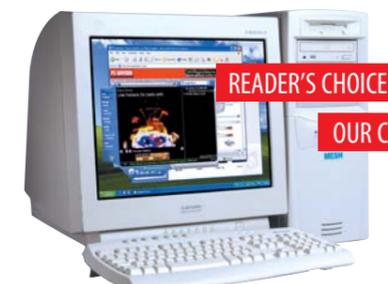Packard Bell: 08705 901 3000
Website: www.packardbell.co.uk

**Evesham Axis 1900+**
Pros: Three-year warranty; good documentation and specifications
Cons: Shadow mask monitor
Price: £1,049
WorldBench score: 117
Evesham: 0870 728 7070
Website: www.evesham.com

**Mesh Matrix 2000+BPC**
Pros: Three-year warranty; good entertainment system; large hard drive
Cons: Only 256MB DDR RAM
Price: £999
WorldBench score: 118
Mesh: 020 8208 4702
Website: www.meshcomputers.com

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satisfy Matt's entertainment needs. The 32MB integrated graphics can't compete with a 64MB standalone card and the 15in flat-panel and two speakers weren't up to scratch. Also, Packard Bell's post-sales support only runs to a one-year collect-and-return warranty.

Matt liked the Mesh's three-year onsite support guarantee: "If the manufacturer can send someone out to repair it then I'll be a happy man." The Matrix is also a powerful PC and it has a large 80GB hard drive. If Matt plans to store images, games and music on his PC, this is essential.

The Evesham Axis can almost match the Matrix point for point. It has a three-year onsite warranty, 80GB hard drive and serves well as an entertainment system. The only two differences were the slightly higher cost of this PC and the monitor. When Matt saw the Samsung 957DF he was impressed with the design and size.

Overall, we think the Mesh Matrix 2000+ BPC just beats the Axis thanks to its lower cost and better monitor.

→ Spencer points out that the Mesh's Samsung monitor was more impressive than the Evesham's offering

↘ Matt tests out the Mesh Matrix 2000+ BPC to see if it could serve as an entertainment system

### The reader's choice
Matt was tempted by the Mesh, but he was concerned that it only had 256MB of DDR (double data rate) RAM. However, his fears were allayed when we showed him the spare Dimm slots free for extra memory, which would allow him to boost RAM up to over 1GB. With memory at around £40 for 256MB he would be able to use the change from his £1,500 to beef up the capacity to far more than he is likely to need.

Finally, Matt went for our choice, the Mesh Matrix: "This PC has almost everything I need. I'd love to combine the build of the i-Design with the features of the Mesh, but I'll be happy settling for this." It's the perfect choice for a buyer who's after a PC that packs some clout, but also wants the security of a good warranty. ■

## How to contact us

If you are thinking of buying some new hardware and would like our help, email details of your requirements and budget to us at reviews@idg.com or write to Spencer Dalziel at *PC Advisor,* Fifth Floor, 85 Tottenham Court Road, London W1T 4TQ.