readers writes

One reader digs up the age-old debate on printer manufacturers failing to bundle USB cables with their devices, a forward-thinker asks why are screens measured in inches, and our Star letter is awarded to a man with bags of confidence and a battered PC

Why cut the cables?

I purchased a new Epson Stylus Color 680 printer, travelled home and excitedly set about unpacking it to connect up and get printing. But an essential part was missing – a cable to connect the printer to the computer, without which the printer was useless. I then had to make another journey – more cost – to purchase a USB cable. That jacked up the price of the printer up from the £70, as advertised, to £83.

Apart from being more than a little annoyed at having to make an extra journey and cough up another £13, I cannot understand how Epson is able to get away with misrepresentation and omission on this scale – the cable amounts to 14 percent of the cost of the printer and is pretty vital.

Nowhere on the packing or literature that came with the machine does it state that an essential element which will enable the printer to function is missing. At the very least, there should be a legal requirement that the packaging refers to auxiliary items which need to be purchased to make it work.

I have emailed Epson twice telling it how disgusted I am and stating my dissatisfaction. Epson's only reply was to say it had never included a cable, totally side-stepping the matter of why it isn't indicated on the printer's box.
Mike Leonard, via email

Emma Northam replies: this will come as little consolation, but it's standard practice across the industry for printer manufacturers not to include cables. Janice Gibson from Epson PR told us, "USB and parallel connections are widely used and unfortunately it would be costly for all concerned to include two cables in the box."

Basically, it saves the manufacturer money not to include a cable, and it makes extra money for consumables vendors like PC World which sell printer

cables. We've addressed this issue in our ConsumerWatch *pages before because we don't think it's acceptable that everyone but the buyer ends up happy.*

The inches debate

The units quoted for the screen size of LCDs (liquid crystal displays) in your Top 10 Flat-panel displays chart make no sense to me. The LG FL563LE, on page 154 of the December 01 issue, has a pixel pitch of 0.297mm. No problem. Dimensions 389x182x362mm. No problem. Screen size 16in. Could this really be inches? Surely not.

Investigating in a dictionary, it turns out that 'in' is indeed the abbreviation for an archaic unit of linear measurement abandoned during the last century: the inch. Apparently there were 12 of them to the foot. I will not trouble you with the improbable conversions to other unlikely units, all of which are totally unbelievable – poles, perches, rods, yards, chains and so on.

I have not used inches as a unit of measurement for over 30 years, though I can still think in inches if I really must. I suspect that over 50 percent of the population would have to resort to a

conversion factor – which they would have to look up – to find out what 16in means in real terms.

Why are we still using inches to describe screen sizes? There are only three things left in this country measured in the archaic imperial measure: the pint (in a pub, God help them if I asked for a gill of wine), the mile and TV/computer screens. Isn't it about time we got shot of inches for measuring screen sizes and used rational units instead?
Adrian Ridley, Middlesex

Andrew Charlesworth replies: inches – they're not big and they're not clever; they're not even SI units. But they are universally recognised in this country to measure screen sizes for monitors and TVs, so we're sticking with them for now. In general, we use the most common dimensions, even if that is an inconsistent mix of metric and imperial. And by the way, the FL563LE is actually a 15in unit…

White water blasting

In response to Rupert Collins-White's reply to *Unmetered rant* (November 01 *Readers writes*), let me dispel a myth or two for him. First, there is no such thing as loss of water. There is not a drop more nor a drop less now than when the Earth was first created; the only water that has ever left this world was taken into space by those brave men in their flying machines and believe me it was all brought back.

So I ask in which era do you live Mr White? The era in which it was the working man's obligation to believe all the misinformation the politicians pushed in front of him? Well, thanks to computers those days are long gone – unlike all our water. Still I could be wrong, but then again, even a stopped clock is right twice a day.
John Perdu, via email

Rupert Collins-White replies: water can be lost from an area – if, for example, you waste water in an area that then suffers a drought, you could say that water had been 'lost'. In areas of desertification the water cycle in the medium to long term does not return 'lost' water to the area, thereby turning the area into arid desert.

The fundamental difference between bandwidth metering and water metering – the point of my original response – is that bandwidth is a resource that to a great extent is not limited by the workings of a closed-loop system, unlike water. Water needs to be stored and used because humans use water badly and at any one time the amount of water available in a place is finite.

The amount of bandwidth available at any one time, however, is so scalable as be effectively infinite, because it is possible to ensure that there is always more bandwidth available than you need.

Foolproof backups

Any technology is only as good as the procedures used to implement it. When my system crashed recently, I reloaded everything in from the backup CD-ROM only to find that my September backup was in fact September 2000. Yup – I'd had a clear out and disposed of last year's backups – but I'd ditched my 2001 versions instead. Luckily I had kept my wife's data in a separate file system, so at least my life was saved.

The message is clear: by all means use the best backup technology available, but most importantly have a foolproof procedure for data storage, verification, retrieval and disposal.
Brian Wadie, via email

Paul Rincon replies: as you've discovered, it's important to ensure you keep close tabs on where you store your backups, which means keeping an organised filing system. However, software backup packages could offer another solution to your problem, Brian. For instance, Dantz's Retrospect 5.5 and PowerQuest's DriveImage 5.0 allow you to schedule your PC to perform regular backups. Both use Windows interfaces to write an exact copy of your hard drive or partition to a CD-RW or another backup device. So if you lose your data through a system crash or a virus, you have a backup of your drive.

Reliable results?

A high percentage of computers sold are purchased by new or very inexperienced computer users. So where do customer service surveys get the data for 'reliability' from? If it comes solely from the

The other day I was poking about in the c:\Windows folder of my hard disk and I came across a shortcut to 'MS-DOS Mode for games with EMS and XMS support'. Without thinking that it might cause problems, I double-clicked on it. Windows proceeded to shut down and left me at a DOS prompt. When I used the 'Return to Windows' command, it restarted the computer and just brought me back to the DOS prompt – I could not get into Windows. Everything I could think of (ScanDisk, Norton Rescue and so on) could not or would not solve the problem. I went to bed, worried.

Next morning, after reading *Top 50 Helpline queries revealed* in the October 01 issue, I was able to access the Windows Startup menu and start Windows in Safe Mode. Eventually, I was lucky enough to be able to start Windows normally again – this time by reading the regular *Helpline* pages. My PC now starts up correctly, and possibly even faster than it did before. It was a useful experience in learning the workings of my PC, but one I would have rather done without, for now one of my MS-DOS programs fails to operate without all the text being all jumbled up.

So, the warning is clear: curiosity killed the cat, so don't mess with the system if you aren't totally sure what to do. I thought I knew enough about PCs, but look where self-confidence got me.
Liam Cromar, Herefordshire

The author of this month's star letter receives the Canon Bubble Jet S630 printer, which retails at £160 ex VAT and is currently our Best Buy model in the Top 10 Personal printers chart (see page 144). With an unbeatable actual print speed for both monochrome and colour pages, the Bubble Jet combines fast printing with well-defined images and clean text output. For more information, visit www.canon.co.uk. Please write to PC Advisor, *FREEPOST 20 LON8718, London, W1E 4AN, fax us on 020 7580 1935, or email to pcadvisor_letters@idg.com. Don't forget to mark your emails 'Readers writes' in the subject heading.*

customer, a lot of claims of 'unreliable' or 'faulty' computers, are in fact simply the result of confusion on the part of the user.

If a manufacturer has a high customer service rating, the new user will be less likely to come to the conclusion that their computer is faulty. I expect the manufacturer with the highest customer service vote also achieved the highest reliability vote.

It seems to me that the key to gaining top results in the surveys is having highly competent, friendly customer service and technical support staff. I'm sure it's amazing how much the problem worsens in the time a customer waits in a hold queue listening to Abba before a member of customer services picks up the phone.
Oliver Plante, Birmingham

Emma Northam replies: admittedly any survey is open to abuse, but we tried to eliminate possible inaccuracies in our recent Service & Reliability poll – the results of which were published in our November 01 issue – in several ways.

For a start, we only ranked manufacturers about whom we had received a minimum number of responses from owners and users of that brand of PC. We also used current data from our ConsumerWatch inbox: if we had a disproportionate number of complaints about one company, we made sure we investigated them further, contacting the users and PC maker involved for their sides of the story, thus expanding the scope of our survey. ∎