

consumerwatch



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Dixons apologises for a paedophile porn scandal, an independent retailer goes the extra mile, a PCA knight rides into battle with Dell, and Epson and A&P Computers get it right

The inadequate returns procedure at DSG (Dixons Stores Group) which owns Dixons, Currys, PC World and The Link has slipped up the company again, causing perhaps its most odious error so far.

Just before Christmas, Ray Dickson bought a £200 CD-RW drive from the Dixons outlet in Erdington, Birmingham. After attaching the drive and turning his PC on, Ray was shocked to discover a CD featuring video clippings of child rape and other horrific sexual images of young children loaded in the drive. Ray said the images could easily have been seen by his nine-year-old son.

According to Ray, he was assured by Dixons sales staff at the time of purchase that the product was brand new, even though the package had clearly been tampered with.

It turns out that the drive had a previous owner. The original purchaser had taken the CD-RW home where he proceeded to copy material on to a disc, including his CV and an amount of pornographic images and film clips of young children. The first buyer then apparently returned the drive to the store, but forgot to remove the offending disc from the drive.

An "inexperienced" member of staff, according to the DSG press office, "inadvertently stuck it back on the shelf" to be sold as new. He had apparently checked inside the box and saw that none of the five CDs that came bundled with the drive had been opened and therefore assumed that the product was new, despite the fact it was missing the



cellophane wrapper. Had the employee correctly followed DSG's recently refined set of returns procedures this would not have happened, says a DSG official.

In a bid to reduce the number of secondhand goods being sold as new, DSG has introduced a strict set of procedures. Once an open package is returned it gets a sticker with a seven-figure number and a barcode, whereupon it is sent back to the warehouse. According to a Dixons spokesman this specific incident will be treated by a stiff dose of training.

The severity of the case provoked an apologetic phone call to the Dickson family from Dixons MD Chris Langley. Meanwhile, a 34-year old man from the Bordsley Green area of Birmingham is believed to be helping police with their inquiries.

To regular readers of ConsumerWatch this returns procedure cock-up won't

come as any great surprise. Over the past few years *PC Advisor* has regularly uncovered incidents involving DSG outlets selling secondhand kit as new, often inadvertently passing on the personal details of the previous owner in the process. However, we're always keen for a leopard to change its spots. DSG claims it's got a new set of procedures in place and we'd like to put them to the test, so we're running our personal data privacy campaign again (see the boxout on the opposite page).

Web Trader bites the dust

Last month saw the Consumers Association announce it would be closing its Which? Web Trader scheme, a code of practice for online retailers in the UK. The logo, which adorns hundreds of trader's websites, was launched back in July 99 to promote consumer confidence in e-commerce and to "provide an

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independent code of practice with teeth". Traders agreeing to a series of guidelines could display the logo on its website.

It is with some regret that *PC Advisor* bids adieu to the scheme. In the past we have worked closely with Which? Web Trader, keeping tabs on wayward online retailers that have left our readers high and dry. Despite its success a lack of funds has led to a closure of the scheme.

"Since Which? Web Trader launched three-and-a-half years ago it has received over 8,000 applications from e-traders, of which 2,700 were accepted," says Paul Kitchen, head of online at the Consumers Association. "It has also successfully resolved over 2,000 disputes on behalf of consumers.

But providing such an effective and well monitored code costs a significant amount of money each year, as Which? has protected its independence by keeping Web Trader free to traders. As a charity and campaigning organisation we need to use resources in the most efficient way possible."

However, the group's work in this field is far from over. It has taken part in the negotiations between European consumer watchdog BEUC (Bureau European des Unions de Consommateurs) and European business watchdog Unice in developing standards for Europe-wide trustmarks.

"There is still a need to increase consumer confidence about shopping online. We think it is now up to businesses and the government to set up an alternative scheme to build on [our] successful work," adds Kitchen.

Our knight jousts with Dell

Last September *PC Advisor* reader Sir Peter Large accidentally spilt wine on his Dell Inspiron 8000 notebook. After a

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couple of days' frustration finding the right person to talk to at Dell, the notebook was collected, successfully detoxed and returned. So that he could make a house contents insurance claim, Peter emailed Dell requesting the £705 repair invoice.

He received a copy of his original purchase invoice, so he emailed again. No reply. And again. No reply. So his wife phoned, and phoned, and phoned. Dell staff repeatedly promised the invoice would be posted or emailed but it never arrived. Eventually, after Peter had written to *PC Advisor* and some high-level Dell executives, a repair invoice was emailed in November.

So what can we learn? That steady, reasonable persistence pays off; sarcastic letters and aggressive phone calls do not.

Serving you right

This month we have pats on the back for Epson and A&P Computers. First up is reader Peter Jackson who bought a £30 secondhand Epson C40 Plus printer from Cash Generator in Norwich. When he got the device home he connected it to his PC and tried to print. The result? Plenty of noise but no printout.

Peter rang the Epson helpline and explained the situation. The technician told him that the Epson Stylus C40 Plus was a badged model only available from PC World. Even though all he wanted was

the old printer back (without any boxes, discs, leads or ink cartridges), the technician offered to send him a replacement. We think that's above and beyond the call of vendor duty and raise a glass of saki to the Japanese printer manufacturer.

Our second accolade this month is for A&P Computers. Reader Paul Robinson was impressed by the service he received from the Guildford-based computer retailer after a violent bang was heard from one of the cooling slots of his Samsung SM957P.

Paul had bought the monitor just 11 months previously and turned to the ConsumerWatch forum for some level-headed advice. He was correctly informed that though the product was likely to still be within the Samsung's warranty period, contractually the onus of responsibility for repairs or a replacement was on the retailer as stipulated under the Sale of Goods Act (1979).

On returning the monitor to A&P Computers Paul discovered the product was indeed still within its three-year warranty period, entitling him to a direct replacement. A&P Computers offered to handle the whole process and, completely unprompted, lent him the only 19in monitor they had in stock while he waited for a replacement from Samsung. "That's what I call service," exclaims Paul. ■

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 a previous customer's data on a PC purchased from the 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



internet issues

UK firms are faced with an internet minefield complete with its own acronym, EIM, which stands for Employee Internet Management. Guy Dixon investigates

Q Exactly what is EIM?

A EIM is a response to the way in which the internet has invaded office life, creating negative as well as positive results. Lost productivity and legal action from employees offended by the pornographic surfing habits of co-workers are costing British business dear. As such, the UK's firms are being urged to develop a code of internet behaviour that hammers home the penalties of internet abuse without stymieing its more beneficial uses.

Q Is internet abuse at work really such a problem?

A The figures speak for themselves. One in four of all UK firms are believed to have fired staff because of misconduct when using the internet. Meanwhile, according to a recent survey by Websense, nearly three quarters (72 percent) of British firms indicated that they have had to deal with internet misuse in the workplace. The survey also revealed that some 69 percent of all dismissals are related to online pornography.

Q What's prompting such web abuse during work hours?

A People work longer hours, with work invading almost all aspects of our daily lives. Balancing work and play is an increasingly difficult juggling act. According to a recent study by research company Web@Work, which covered the UK, France, Germany and Italy, 41 percent of employees confessed to visiting sites that were completely non-work-related during office hours. Private surfing on company time amounted to more than three hours a week.

Q So what do bosses need to do?

A Managers are being encouraged to come up with a 'Code of Internet Behaviour' that goes beyond



a one-off web access policy. Such a code should be included in the terms and conditions of employment.

Q How easy is it to monitor employee internet behaviour?

A Employers are fighting back with technology that enables them to monitor employees' every working moment. For £1,500 a company can purchase software such as Webspy, which monitors staff email and web activities. The program sends a message to the network administrator whenever a set of predetermined rules is broken. It analyses email and produces sophisticated reports on each employee's surfing habits.

Q How in-depth are these monitoring tools?

A Bosses can record every keystroke that is made on an individual's keyboard. This is done remotely and can be unknown to the employee, though current legislation demands that employees are informed of all 'snooping' activities.

Q Can the software tell if an employee is forwarding sensitive company information to a rival firm?

A Applications like Webspy can be set up to watch for mail going to certain addresses or even to look for keywords. This should stop sensitive information from ever reaching its intended destination.

Q What sort of punishment should be meted out to employees who abuse internet access in the workplace?

A According to the majority of *PC Advisor* readers, employees should be given an immediate formal warning if caught surfing pornography or other unsuitable websites during work hours. A recent *PC Advisor* online poll indicated that 59 percent of respondents were in favour of a 'two strikes and you're out' policy, while more than a quarter (26 percent) reckoned employees should be given their marching orders on the spot.

Providing a pretty conclusive result for our poll, some 71 percent of voters agreed to the statement 'Bosses are fully entitled to monitor all employee net usage during work hours'. ■



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innocent until proven guilty

When paedophile porn rings are broken we all applaud the police, but what happens when they bust the wrong person? Forum editor Peter Thomas examines just such a case

Regular *PC Advisor* reader William Jones lives in Crumlin, Northern Ireland, and is registered disabled. He took up computing to enhance his quality of life and has since successfully obtained several diplomas.

Shortly before 8am on 20 August 02 William and his wife were awoken by a loud banging on the door. It was officers from the Police Service for Northern Ireland's computer crime unit. They told William that they were acting on information received in an anonymous phone call and had reason to believe that he'd been downloading child pornography.

William was deeply shocked but readily offered up both his machines' hard drives for inspection. To his surprise, a detective constable confessed that he had "little to no computer knowledge", so the PCs were confiscated for examination elsewhere. William stressed that he was innocent and that at no time did he view or download pornography of any description.

The PCs were duly bundled into the back of a police car, along with William's floppy disks and CDs, leaving him dazed and angry. His enquiries about how long the analysis would take were met with silence.

Information age

The events that followed would be laughable if their implications weren't so serious. William's computers were retained by the police for 108 days – almost three-and-a-half months – during which time William had no information about when the systems would be returned. He rang the computer crime unit on numerous occasions and was given no help. At the end of November an officer told him that the data recovery personnel had said they would examine the PCs "whenever they got around to it".

By this time members of William's family and his local community had begun shunning both him and his wife. In William's words: "So many fools believe there's no smoke without fire. I found myself trying to prove my innocence to people who should know better."



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Desperate to bring the nightmare to an end, William contacted his local newspaper, *The Belfast Telegraph*. Within 24 hours the police rang to tell William that his computers were being examined. Two days later they rang to say that there was no trace of any pornography on either PC and that they would be returned "as soon as possible".

William placed another call to *The Belfast Telegraph*. Almost immediately the police rang back to say that the computers would be returned within 40 minutes. They duly arrived, but not a single word of apology was offered by the police. On starting up his PCs William found that a DVD drive and USB ports on one machine no longer functioned. Unfortunately it's likely the warranties are now invalid owing to these clumsy investigations.

Error message

This sorry tale raises some serious issues. The police can and do make mistakes. All the more reason, we say, to tread sensitively. Even the mention of

the word 'paedophile' has a powerful effect on the average person and to live in a close-knit community with suspicion hanging over your head must be a true nightmare. If William hadn't summoned the courage and initiative to enlist the help of the local press he might still be waiting for his PCs.

On the 18 December 02, the police finally wrote to William confirming that no suspect files had been found. Detective Inspector McConville closed by saying, "I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your co-operation in this matter and to wish you well for the future."

We say that's too little, too late, Inspector. Our reader deserves no less than a public apology and he deserves it now. *The Belfast Telegraph* might be a good place to start with a published apology, followed by an appearance here in the pages of ConsumerWatch.

William is an innocent man and he is entitled to lead his life without the fear of whispering, innuendo and ostracism. Watch this space. ■