



Our cautionary tale about online auctions will hopefully prevent you from getting burned. Meanwhile "human error" causes PC World to breach the Data Protection Act (again) and one reader only has good things to say about Tiscali's broadband service

Online auctions have become big business, providing shoppers with a place to buy and sell used books and CDs, pick up collectable items and perhaps even discover priceless antiques.

But the popularity of sites such as eBay, which attracts around 70 million users worldwide, has created a perfect opening for fraudsters. There are many ways in which buyers can be tricked – for example, con artists may send out goods worth far less than those advertised or provide false information.

On the whole, though, as long as goods are purchased through the auction site rather than privately they should be covered – in eBay's case you can claim for up to £105. The problem occurs when sales transactions take place away from the auction site, presumably to avoid paying eBay's charges.

Forum visitor Ade entered an eBay auction that had a restrictive bidding requirement – a process that is often used for more valuable items. "[The process]

allows the seller only to sell to those people who are genuinely interested," explains an eBay spokesperson.

Unfortunately Ade missed the deadline for authorisation so could not take part in the auction. But shortly afterwards the company, which claimed to be a large UK chip manufacturer, contacted him via email. It offered to sell Ade the goods

"If an offer sounds too good to be true it probably is. Always check the seller's history before you agree to the sale"

eBay spokesperson

privately and he paid for them by transferring funds directly to the company's bank account. It transpired that the business didn't exist and was just a fraudulent setup, leaving Ade with no way of getting his money back.

The police are looking into the matter but from eBay's point of view Ade was not a customer at time of purchase. "We would advise people to stay within the system if they want to be covered," says an eBay spokesperson. "If an offer sounds too good to be true it probably is. Always check the seller's history before you agree to the sale."

Meanwhile, several other forum visitors protested about the barrage of spam they had received since placing orders on eBay's site. The online auction site categorically states it does not publish email addresses to third parties, but it does allow buyers to view sellers' email addresses for communication purposes which is where the problem arises.

Unfortunately, eBay has no plans to alter this process.

"Due to the huge volume of sales there is no way we could act as a middleman between buyers and sellers. [The site] has been designed as [an open forum] where buyers and sellers trade directly with one another," says the company's spokesman.

Our advice? Set up a separate email account that will only be used for online transactions. That way, you'll avoid clogging up a more important account with spam.

A lack of data protection

High street retailer PC World gains itself another mention in ConsumerWatch this month. Staff at the chainstore accidentally handed out private customer information – a breach of the Data Protection Act.

PC Advisor reader Ron Gregson wrote to us after discovering his hard drive, which had been written off by PC World some months before, had ended up in another customer's machine. Mr Clayton discovered Ron's personal details (including photos, medical records and contact info) on his computer after it was returned from PC World's repair shop.

PC World blamed "human error" for the event. It said that one of its engineers had wrapped the wrong hard drive for destruction, so that Mr Clayton's device was disposed of instead of Ron's.

What we can't figure out is how Ron's disk was miraculously repaired for use in Mr Clayton's machine after the engineer had previously written the device off. PC World had no answer for this either.

Ron has since received vouchers to the value of his PC. At press time Mr Clayton still had possession of Ron's hard drive and was demanding better compensation from the company. He has suffered credit card fraud of around £800 during this time and is worried that PC World has passed on his hard drive to a third party.

PC World's litigation department is currently investigating his claim. The

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

company said that both complainants would be sent a written apology. Let's just hope it doesn't get those mixed up...

Stuck on my PC

Online forum user Erishkigal got an unpleasant surprise when he opened his Multivision computer to insert a new sound card. As he was looking at the PCI slots, he noticed that the graphics card and modem appeared to be glued into the motherboard. This left him slightly miffed – what if he wanted to change his graphics card? Was Multivision putting a cap on upgrading his machine?

Luckily the amassed experience of the ConsumerWatch forum soon allayed Erishkigal's fears. Several users suggested that the 'glue' was most likely a silicone gel that prevented components shaking themselves loose in transit. It should peel off quite easily. Erishkigal returned to inspect his PC's innards and found that this was indeed the case.

As a Multivision spokesman has confirmed, the gel keeps everything in

place on the rocky road from outlet to new home and can be removed easily once it's done its job. He also reassured us that removing the gel would not affect Erishkigal's warranty in any way.

Pat on the back

After signing up for Tiscali's broadband service, forum visitor Gandalf was up and running at 512Kbps (kilobits per second) within a week – a record compared to some people's waiting times.

This is probably the first time a reader or forum member has ever contacted us to champion a broadband service provider, so we just had to share the joy.

"Tiscali was top notch in its service, keeping me informed at every stage of the process. The order was also completed three days earlier than promised," enthuses Gandalf. ■



Got a problem with a vendor? Log on to the ConsumerWatch forum for instant help and advice www.pcadvisor.co.uk/consumerwatch

Going, going, gone: tips for online auctions

- **Read the small print** Check the website's rules before you bid – terms and conditions can change drastically between auction sites.
- **Know what you're buying** Contact the seller if necessary to confirm the details.
- **Shop around** Compare prices for similar products on other sites to ensure you're getting value for money.
- **Do your homework** Find out who pays the shipping charges and read through the seller's returns policy carefully. Ensure

that relevant paperwork such as warranties and guarantees are included before handing over your cash.

- **Protect yourself** What protection does the site offer against fraud, failure to deliver, late delivery and so on? Always take out insurance plans where available.
- **Set a limit** Don't go above your top price. Bidding can be fun so set yourself a limit to make sure you don't blow the budget.
- **Keep it public** Never pursue auction lots privately as you will not be covered by the site's insurance.

microsoft takes the hot seat

When it comes to the licensing agreement surrounding Windows XP Home Edition, confusion reigns in the PCA ConsumerWatch forum. In an attempt to shed some light on the subject, Peter Thomas speaks to Microsoft's UK licensing manager Sandra Woodley



Q What is OEM software and why were changes made to the operating system licensing agreement?

A OEM stands for 'original equipment manufacturer' and refers to software that can only be sold with hardware – in other words, you don't get Windows XP as a standalone product. Microsoft changed the licensing agreement in a bid to reduce piracy.

PC makers now ship OEM versions of Windows XP Home Edition preinstalled on their PCs and are forbidden from bundling full copies of the XP operating system on separate CDs.

Q Some PC vendors provide a free-of-charge Windows XP rescue disc that resets factory settings should any problems arise. Certain manufacturers charge up to £60 for the privilege of this disc, while others don't provide a disc at all. In short, our readers are confused. Shouldn't all PC vendors be compelled to supply a restore disc free of charge so that customers can revive sickly PCs to full working order?

A It's entirely a matter for OEM suppliers to decide whether or not to supply a Windows CD. Microsoft doesn't specify that this must be done and there are no plans to do so.

Q Let's imagine that a customer has bought an OEM licence with a computer. Later the customer decides to scrap the machine and build a new one. Is it legal to install the OEM software – which is licensed, but no longer used – on the new machine?

A No. The OEM licence lives and dies with the machine on which it was supplied. There are no exceptions to this rule.

Q Can an OEM licence be transferred with the machine if it's sold as secondhand?

A Yes it can, as long as the actual licence document goes with the machine as well.

Q Can an end-user legitimately make a copy of an OEM Windows installation from a partition on the hard drive to a CD, and later use this copy to reinstall the OS on a new drive in the same machine?

A Yes, provided it is the same PC apart from the new drive.

Q If a student buys an educational licence must she or he buy a new, full licence once they've started full-time employment?

A A student licence normally stays with the purchaser for life.

Q An end-user has a desktop and a laptop. Is it legal to install Windows XP on both machines?

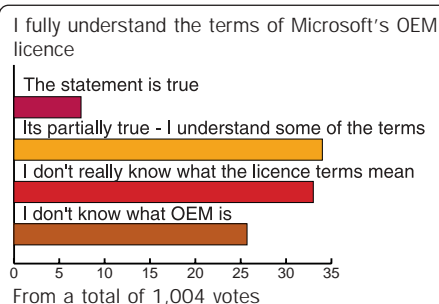
A Any attempt to activate a copy of Windows XP on two different machines is a serious breach of the Eula (end-user licence agreement). The XP licence is for one machine only, although a copy of Microsoft Office may be installed on both desktop and laptop.

Q We understand that OEM PC suppliers are supposed to provide support for the software they install on new machines. Are there any circumstances in which Microsoft will offer telephone assistance for an OEM installation of Windows XP – for example, if a supplier went into liquidation leaving the customer with nowhere to turn?

A The short answer is no, but Microsoft reviews each case on its merits. If support were to be provided it would be on an ad-hoc basis and not necessarily something the company would repeat. ■

Licence to confuse

In a recent online poll just 7.4 percent of PC Advisor readers indicated they understood the terms of Microsoft's Windows XP OEM licensing agreement. A third of the respondents (33 percent) confessed to not understanding the terms at all. A quarter (25.7 percent) didn't even know what OEM software was.



searching for help

The PC Advisor ConsumerWatch online forum now has more than 60,000 postings primed with comments about customer service and consumer rights, while numerous IT companies regularly check for comments. Guy Dixon takes it for a spin

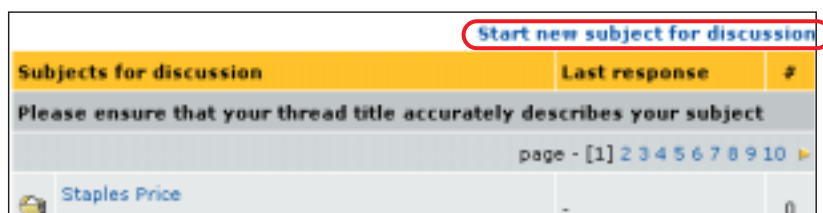
As regular readers will know, most of the stories we deal with in this section arise from issues aired in the online ConsumerWatch forum at www.pcadvisor.co.uk/consumerwatch. While we're more than happy to receive emails and letters from aggrieved readers, and do everything we can to help, a trip to the ConsumerWatch forum is more likely to result in a rapid and useful response.

Help yourself

We have a live walk-in consumer affairs clinic, which will automatically send you an email the moment that someone responds to your query. The ConsumerWatch forum is constantly checked by editorial members of staff, our forum editor, IT consultant Peter Thomas and the UK computer industry's leading vendors including Dell, Evesham, Mesh, Multivision, Time and many others.

Last, but not least, our online forum is manned by dozens of knowledgeable website regulars, ready and willing to lend a hand. Whether it's delivery problems, faulty goods or poor service you're experiencing, the ConsumerWatch forum is here to help. ■

Live clinic



- 1 To make a posting click on 'Start new subject for discussion'
- 2 Enter a description of your problem next to 'Title' – for example, 'Monitor keeps flickering: just three weeks old'. Enter a more detailed description in the dialog box next to 'Message' and click 'Begin new subject for discussion'



- 3 The posting appears at the top of the forum threads. When someone responds to your thread you're notified by email. Once your problem is successfully resolved click the resolved checkbox. Visitors can now sift answered queries from unanswered ones

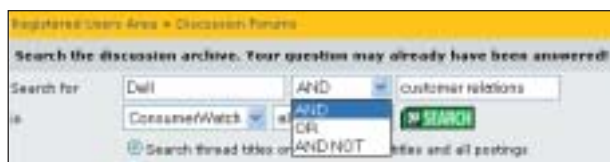


Search facilities

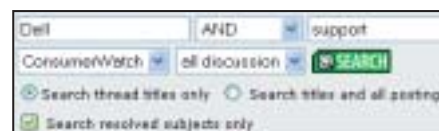
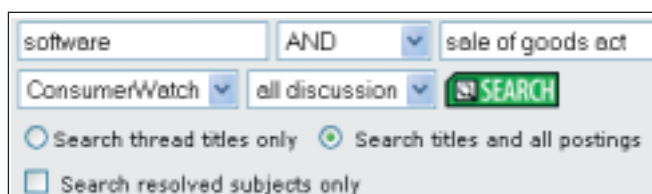
Visitors not only use the ConsumerWatch forum for live help, but also to get background

information using its impressive search facilities. There are over 60,000 messages sitting in the database, so you can check on the reputation of a manufacturer or retailer.

Alternatively, you can search for consumer rights issues under a specific term.



- 1 Search using Boolean logic terms in your search title, such as 'and', 'or' and 'and not'



- 2 There's different levels of targeting to choose from – for example, the most highly targeted is a request to search on resolved subjects only or thread titles only
- 3 Alternatively, search for obscure topics on a much broader level by opting for 'Search titles and all postings', such as a search on 'software' and 'Sale of Goods Act'