



PC World Healthcheck revisited

In our December issue we took a three-year-old system to PC World for what turned out to be a less-than-impressive Healthcheck. Six months on, Guy Dixon and Emma Northam tried the service again to see whether things had improved

London's Tottenham Court Road branch of PC World was the scene of *PC Advisor's* last Healthcheck, reported on in our December 02 issue. This was carried out incognito and we were less than impressed with the service we received – not because of the mere five minutes of 'consultation', having been promised an hour's worth by PC World's press materials.

We were also expecting the advertised PC World Healthcheck report, which should have been stored on our hard disk ready to be printed off. Again, we were disappointed. All we got for our £29.99 (Healthchecks are now £10 more) was a recommended RAM upgrade and the removal of a virus. Definitely not good value for money we concluded and said as much in our review.

We were even more disgruntled when we discovered how much PC World was making from its Healthcheck program after an employee kindly furnished us with store revenue figures – around £150,000 per store, per year.

In response to our feature we received a letter from PC World offering us a complimentary Healthcheck as recompense for the poor service we

experienced. We believe naughty leopards can change their spots and proceeded to take them up on their offer.

This time round our visit was arranged through the PC World PR office and we made no attempt to hide our *PC Advisor* identity. Though, as you'll see, we also took a trip to PC World's Croydon branch the same week and, pretending to be regular home PC users, went through the Healthcheck process there.

Diff'rent strokes for diff'rent folks

What a difference our second visit to the Tottenham Court Road store made. First we were met by Paul, the smooth-talking branch manager. We were whisked over to the Ikea-style consultation desks – more akin to what you'd find in a modern bank than the UK's leading high street boxshifter.

After unloading our 800MHz Duron-powered Carrera PC we were introduced to our genial Healthchecker, Matthew. An ex-bookmaker, Matthew chucked it all in to join PC World's growing ranks of Healthcheckers, after having been held at gunpoint by disappointed gamblers – which would go some way to explaining his somewhat

nervy disposition. Then it was a choice of tasty beverages: coffee, tea, water. "We even offer customers hot chocolate," explains Paul.

This time we got two hours worth of technician time. When you try and tie down PC World's actual policy on the length of Healthchecks, it's a bit like nailing jelly to a tree. Sources at PC World tell us Healthcheck technicians prefer to tell customers to come back after the check has been carried out. Apparently it's all a question of resources.

On an average day in an average store there are just four or five trained staff available to do the checks and the store is supposed to get through a minimum of 40 checks a week. This means the technicians can do without pesky customers asking awkward, time-consuming questions.

But sitting through the whole process with Matt and Paul helped us appreciate that most customers had better things to do than watch the interminable virus check do its stuff.

"Everyone should at least get the first 10 to 15 minutes as a one-on-one consultation," explains Paul. "Thereafter it depends on the customer." We took this to mean that it really depends on how pushy you are and how many general PC performance-related questions you can remember to scribble down before wandering in.

According to our Healthchecker, Matt, the majority of visitors to the PC clinic usually have a specific problem – often in



the form of screen freezes or a virus. Once these are fixed, customers are understandably grateful and, relieved their PC is working again, may not have a lengthy list of best practice queries with which to interrogate their technician.

What's more, around 90 percent of visitors to PC World's in-store clinics are home users so don't have a friendly IT manager to turn to when computing goes pear-shaped.

Textbook answer

Of course that doesn't mean novices will always be taken advantage of. When we asked Matt how he would explain defragging to a complete beginner he gave us a carefully rehearsed and professional explanation. "Hard disks are like filing cabinets," he explained. "If you randomly chuck documents into your cabinet, over time it will become increasingly hard work to find the file you're looking for. PCs face the same problem."

Nor was any attempt made to 'upsell' us further. Our antivirus software was working fine and fully up to date and our 256MB of RAM was sufficient to comfortably handle Windows XP. Paul was adamant that Healthcheck is definitely not about upselling the customer with antivirus software or extra memory. "It's all about owning the customer for a lifetime," explains Paul.

We also noticed a number of in-store promotions connected with our 50-point Healthcheck. At the time PC World was offering Healthcheck customers £20 off Windows XP Pro, £15 off Windows XP home, £10 off Symantec AntiVirus and 10 percent off any hard drive, memory or CD-RW drive. Add that lot together and

those prone to the comforts of retail therapy would argue that the check had paid for itself.

After running through the 50 points on the checklist we confirmed our report had been stored, declined the offer of bubble wrap and made our way back to Advisor Towers. Of course, it's impossible to say how representative our Healthcheck was given that it was in PC World's interests to show us the VIP treatment. So next we went undercover and paid a visit to PC World's Croydon store.

Purley gates

Croydon's Purley Way isn't the nicest place to wander around so when the PC World staff suggested we sit through the two-hour Healthcheck it seemed like an ideal solution. We could have the PC back the same day, plus we wouldn't have to visit south London's ugliest retail park twice in one week.

However, when we arrived for our PC's Healthcheck several members of staff actively discouraged our participation in the "long and boring" process. Our insistence eventually paid off though and after our allotted technician, Avi, had hoovered some 60 months worth of fluff and hair out of our Celeron 333MHz Gateway PC, he proceeded with the Healthcheck.

We told Avi the PC was prone to hanging on shutdown and, particularly concerning, had lately started to refuse to run McAfee VirusScan. So we were pleased Avi's first test was a virus check.

"Most PCs we see have a virus," he told us. "One guy here found 2,000 on a machine." Scary stuff. We counted ourselves lucky to have just four Bugbear-infected system files. PC World's DOS-based virus checker deleted one of the files. The other three were beyond help, according to Avi, who recommended we go home and perform a complete hard drive reformat followed the reinstallation of Windows, our applications and data.

That seemed a bit drastic – and anyway, couldn't Avi do it for us? Apparently not. A repeat trip to Purley Way threatening, we said we'd do the reinstall later so we could complete the Healthcheck now.

Sticking to the script

PC World's 50-point checklist runs through a series of questions about system maintenance, showing you how to use Windows' built-in tools such as ScanDisk, Defrag and Disk Clean. You also get shown how to empty the Recycle Bin, delete temporary internet files and erase Internet Explorer's History files. All basic but useful stuff if you're a PC newbie or a bit of a lazy housekeeper.

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We were taught to use Add/Remove Programs as well as other Control Panel items and Avi showed us how to stop unnecessary programs loading automatically at startup. So far, so good, but Avi was sticking doggedly to the script and that script didn't hold an answer to our shutdown problem.

Asking again finally elicited a solution, however. "There's a patch on Microsoft's website," said Avi. "It's a known problem." Shame it took the better part of an hour for him to tell us that.

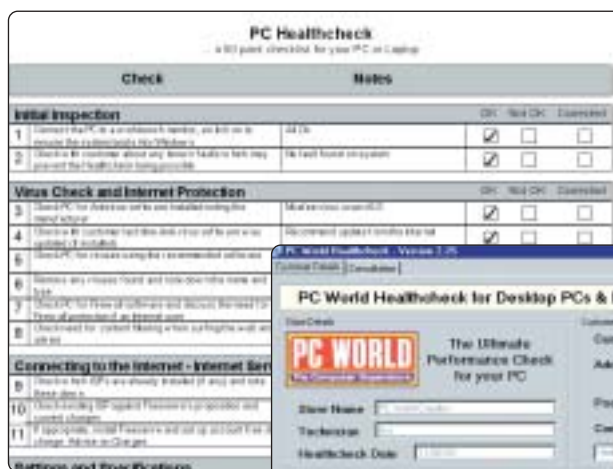
Hardware checks began with a look at our Gateway's specifications. Healthcheck's software correctly identified the Celeron 333 processor, while Avi insisted we had a Pentium II machine despite evidence to the contrary. "Celeron is a Pentium II," he told us. Funny, we thought Celeron was Intel's budget chip. "Nah," said Avi, "When the Pentium III came along, Intel just renamed the Pentium II to Celeron. Now that Pentium 4 has come along, it's the same for Pentium III."

Avi wasn't filling us with confidence. After a brief glance at Device Manager for any telltale exclamation marks, he pronounced all our PC's hardware fit. However, Avi didn't expand any of the device trees – if he had, he would have seen that all was not well with our plug-and-play Bios.

Next came the upgrade questions – surely a ripe opportunity for PC World to push a variety of expensive add-ons. We prepared for the hard sell, but it never came. Healthcheck showed our hard drive to be over 70 percent full, but Avi quickly noticed we had another partition with plenty of space on it.

An upgrade was recommended for our RAM, however. With only 64MB on board, we've known it's been necessary for a while yet Avi didn't launch into a long spiel about minimum requirements. He even suggested we leave the memory discussion until he'd finished the Healthcheck to see if we still thought it was a good idea.

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If we hadn't been keen to upgrade the RAM anyway, it would have been a missed sales opportunity. Fitting costs for new hardware are waived as part of the Healthcheck process, so we got Avi to slam in another 256MB of RAM for £35 all in.

Worth the money?

The most useful thing the Healthcheck did for our PC was clean it of fluff and keyboard debris – two things we could have done ourselves for much less than £40. Alerting us to the presence of a Bugbear infection was useful, but the suggested hard drive reformat and Windows reinstallation is over the top for the beginner audience Healthchecks are so clearly aimed at. Furthermore, we fixed the problem with a VirusScan update – a far less complex solution.

Technically, Avi had us worried. While his theory about Celerons being rebadged Pentiums was erroneous, it wasn't information which could harm our PC. The fact that the hardware error in Device Manager was missed is more concerning.

Insult was added to injury by the fact that someone in the PC World labs had trodden on our modem cable so that it wasn't working when we got it home. No one was prepared to take the blame when

← The Healthcheck report can be viewed on screen or printed as it's stored on your PC

↓ Is this a Celeron I see before me or a rebadged Pentium?



we marched back into the store (we tried phoning, but it just rang unanswered) so we had to splash out £8 on another cable.

Despite its bad aspects, Healthcheck isn't a waste of time for those with little or no PC knowledge. To get your money's worth, though, make sure you sit through the process. We asked a lot of questions, but the session still only lasted an hour and a half rather than the paid-for two hours.

Healthcheck is a useful way of getting to know how your PC works and how to keep it running smoothly. Once complete, maintenance information is retained in an HTML file on your PC so there's no need to write anything down – you can refer to it as and when tasks need carrying out. Our technician didn't tell us this, however.

Rather like an MoT, a Healthcheck should be viewed as a series of upkeep tasks to ensure PC 'road-worthiness'. Pay attention and, after one Healthcheck, you should be able to MoT it for yourself. But if your PC's experiencing errors, glitches or incompatibility issues, Healthcheck's not the best place to fix them.

What's the score?

Healthchecks are not for proficient PC users but beginners can get value for money. And the pushier you are the longer you are likely to get with a technician. Equally, if you are experiencing a specific PC difficulty and venture instore for assistance, take along all those queries you've been squirrelling up over the years. ■