



It's more a case of blatant copy than mistaken identity with two similarly named companies this month. And when it comes to Dixons Stores Group, you are still having mixed experiences. We hear from yet another frustrated buyer as well as a delighted PC World customer

This month *ConsumerWatch* is indebted to Andrew Farley. He alerted us to a copycat vendor that was peddling a poor substitute (but a very good doppelganger) for a piece of software recommended in our Helpline section a few months ago.

Handybackup 3.9 is, as the name suggests, a useful archiving utility produced and marketed by Novosoft Inc on its website www.handybackup.com. Andrew describes the utility as a "great little piece", well worth the £25 he paid for it.

However, soon after buying the utility Andrew was sent an email from www.handybackup.net (note the different domain suffix), offering him an update to version 3.9.1 and some freebies. These he downloaded, but when he'd installed the new version his registration key wouldn't work. Still none the wiser he contacted the original [Handybackup.com](http://www.handybackup.com) company who informed him of his mistake.

Spot the difference

It was an easy one to make as well. Handybackup.net's website is practically identical in every aspect to Handybackup.com's. Only a few details

give it away: the copycat company is selling Handybackup 4.1 (rather than 3.9) and payment goes to Novosoft LLC (rather than Inc), whose office is in Novosibirsk, Russia, rather than Austin, Texas.

Handybackup.com informed Andrew that the Russian firm was a clone against which it was currently taking legal action. Andrew contacted us because he no longer knew who was telling him the truth, or whether he'd bought the right product.

With a little digging we were able to assure him that the original version (3.9) was the legitimate one. For a start our CD editor was familiar with Novosoft Inc, having spoken with the company on several occasions in the past. When we talked to Novosoft Inc about the situation, it provided us with full and frank information of its product and its case against its Russian rivals. Novosoft.net, on the other hand, has failed to respond to our emails and its telephone and fax numbers lead nowhere.

In addition, a Whois search on the two sites shows that Handybackup.com was created in December 01, while Handybackup.net sprang up in July this year – you would expect the original to

have come first. Although all circumstantial on their own, together these details confirmed to us that the .net site was mimicking the .com one.

Angela Samsonova of Novosoft Inc also tells us that its product is copyrighted so the .net version (which is a copy of an earlier version of Novosoft Inc's software) is illegal as well as substandard.

Luckily, then, Andrew had dealt with the right company. His browser could so easily have taken him to Handybackup.net or he could have taken the version 3.9.1 bait it offered, which was undoubtedly aimed at getting him to buy the bogus version 4.1.

Credit where credit's due

We were worried that Andrew had used his switch card to buy the software rather than a credit card. Although this £25 purchase wouldn't have been insured by a credit card (most insure transactions worth over £100), it is still better to be in the habit of exclusively using your credit card over the web. If an order is hacked by data pirates who want to use your card number to their advantage, you won't get anything back if you've use a bank card.

The moral of this story is far more important for those of you who sell goods over the web. It's all very well having a brilliant website, but you should guard against this kind of copycat activity by buying up as many as possible of your site's namesake domains – for example, .net, .biz, .org, .co.uk and so on.

Sergey Petrov of Novosoft Inc claims there are too many alternative domains to take this precaution but Ken Sorrie, director of web registrar Internetters is clear on the issue: "Is it worth spending a little more on registering those other domain names so that you don't lose out when someone tried to piggyback on your site? I think so."

Dixons disappoints again

It is with a weary sigh that we turn again to a story of shoddy service from Dixons. This time the complaint comes from Andy Bell, a regular user of our *ConsumerWatch* forums. He bought a Nikon 3100 digital camera from the Dixons website in May this year.

Prudently, or so he thought, Andy also purchased a CoverPlan warranty for the device, which would cover it after the manufacturer's one-year warranty elapsed and provide insurance against accidental damage for that initial year. Andy was glad he had paid this extra when he dropped the camera and damaged it about a month later. He left it to be dealt with at his local Dixons branch.

The CoverPlan states that it may take up to six weeks for repairs to be made. Despite the fact this was longer than Andy had actually owned the camera, he waited patiently for the set period to elapse then, not having heard anything, went back to see where his camera had got to.

It turned out that the staff at the store had taken their time sending the camera to the repair centre, so it had only just entered the evaluation stage of the service process at that point. As it was a case of accidental damage, though, Andy had the option of accepting Dixons vouchers to the value of his camera so he could purchase the device, or something like it, again. Andy thought at this point that since the CoverPlan service had proven so slow, it was better to take the vouchers and run.

Running was not going to come into it, though, as Dixons was equally slow in

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

producing the vouchers. Having been told by a member of staff that the vouchers would be with him in four or five days, Andy waited two weeks before becoming impatient. On the advice of another *ConsumerWatch* forum member, he called and emailed the CoverPlan centre. He was informed that his claim was being processed and that the vouchers should be with him in seven to 10 days, a timescale that could take up to four weeks after the vouchers were applied for.

It was at this point that we at *ConsumerWatch* attempted to get some sort of explanation from Dixons on Andy's behalf. A call to Ruth Adams at Dixons' press office elicited the response – ironically, after several days' delay – that the evaluation of the camera and the processing of the voucher application had both been instances of "internal delays", although in the case of the vouchers she couldn't tell us any more about the nature of the hold-up. All she would say is that they were delays "which wouldn't normally have happened".

In a statement on the matter, Adams says: "We have arranged for Mr Bell's vouchers to be delivered as a priority and have apologised to Mr Bell for the inconvenience caused. I hope this brings the matter to a satisfactory conclusion."

She also told us, on Wednesday 27 August, that the vouchers would be with Andy within six days. At the time of writing – Monday 1 September – a somewhat bitter Andy tells us that he still has no vouchers. This matter has not reached any kind of conclusion and the chances for a satisfactory one by this time seem slim indeed.

Redressing the balance?

Despite Ruth Adams' claims that the delays Andy experienced were the exception to the rule, any regular reader of these pages or the online *ConsumerWatch* forum will know that we hear similar complaints regularly. Indeed, when Andy posted his story on the web there were enough messages of agreement to suggest he was by no means alone.

However, we do sometimes receive praise for Dixons Stores Group. And when it's expressed in particularly glowing terms, as it was by Steve Tyrell of Hereford, we think it's only fair to print it.

Steve tells us that, as he shopped around for a new PC, he found PC World was the only online or real-world shop that came near to supplying what he wanted at a price he liked. Moreover, he was really impressed by the instore service he received: "What really swung it for me was the absolutely superb service offered by the assistant, John Dawson. He was pleasant, well informed, helpful and although he was very articulate about the extra warranty, he took no offence when I turned it down."

As Steve says, credit where it is due. So well done to Dixons Stores Group for employing a good member of staff, especially one who seems to have taken notice of the latest recommendations on the sale of extended warranties. And let's hope Steve's good opinion of the group isn't shaken any time soon. ■



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

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

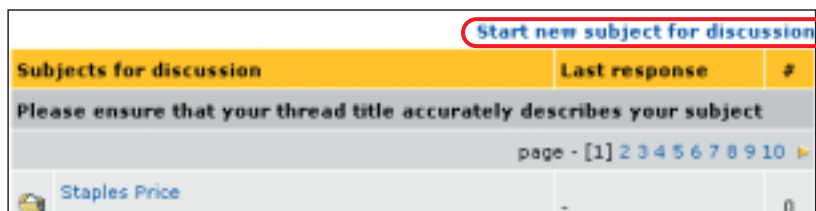
As regular readers will know, most of the stories we deal with in this section arise from issues aired in the online ConsumerWatch forum at www.pcadvisor.co.uk/consumerwatch. While we're more than happy to receive emails and letters from aggrieved readers, and do everything we can to help, a trip to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

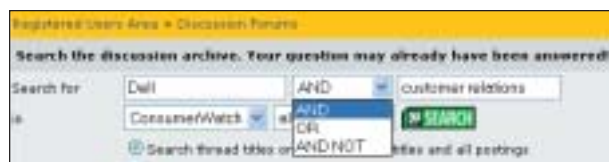


Search facilities

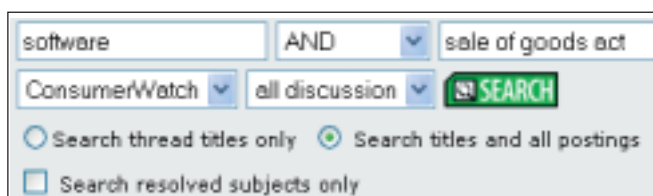
Visitors not only use the ConsumerWatch forum for live help, but also to get background

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'