

Supermarket sound and vision

The weekly shop: milk, bread, eggs – and a DVD player



Aisle of dreams? There are some decent electronic goods in supermarkets, but others are just cheap – and far from cheerful

Pop into the supermarket for some tomatoes and a packet of pasta, and you could end up leaving with a DVD player, digital radio or widescreen TV. For years, supermarkets have been steadily increasing the list of products and services they sell. We can rarely include audio-visual products sold by supermarkets in our regular tests because the products don't stay on the shelves long enough. This is because supermarkets don't buy their stocks of electronic products the way other retailers do: for example, they may place orders on short notice, or buy small batches or end-of-line products, which means they can't say how long items will be in stock.

But how good are their electronic wares? We set our expert testers loose on a range of audio-visual products from supermarkets and other non-electrical stores. What they found was a mixed bag: a few bargains, but some truly dreadful kit, which you should avoid, even at bargain-basement prices.

WHAT'S IN STORE?

Supermarkets are becoming big sellers of audio-visual products. Electrical goods account for about 16 per cent of non-food sales at Asda, and they've

been a factor in Tesco's recent growth. DVD players, TVs and the like have also started appearing regularly in stores better known for other products, such as Boots, Superdrug and Woolworths.

Even though the brands these stores sell are often unknown, people seem keen to buy because prices are so low, the environment is familiar and they trust the shop they're buying from. All the stores told us they test the products they sell to ensure they are of decent quality, safe to use and meet all relevant standards.

Supermarkets and other large chains have huge buying power, but that doesn't entirely explain how they can sell DVD players, for example, for as little as £25. Most of the shops source some products from the Far East, where labour may be cheaper (though they all told us they audit factories to ensure working conditions are acceptable). And these shops don't have the same overheads as electrical specialist shops; they can keep costs low because they often don't guarantee that they'll have certain products in certain stores. Nor do they print catalogues or pay for advertising for specific products.

After you buy

If what you've bought isn't what you expected, Asda, Sainsbury's, Tesco and Woolworths all say they'll give you a full refund for up to 28 days (longer if the product is faulty). Superdrug is more generous, giving you a year to get a refund, if you've got proof of purchase, whatever the reason. Boots didn't specify a time limit for an exchange or refund, if you have a receipt.

Regardless of what the stores say, you have rights under the Sale of Goods Act – you can make a claim on a faulty product for a 'reasonable' time after you've bought it (though what's reasonable depends on the product).

We also asked the shops if they can provide spare parts, such as replacement remote controls. Asda says that for its own-brand Pacific products, it can send replacement parts. But other stores would not make any promises that parts would be available. If you buy a well-known brand, you can contact the maker. But with lesser-known brands, it may depend on the type of product and how old it is. Boots said it would refer you to the supplier for parts, or exchange the item.

Buying advice



DIGITAL RADIOS We tested five digital radios costing £60 or less, all well-known brands except the Red model from Boots. All were decent, no-frills radios, which fared well in our tests, scoring at least 52 per cent – not much less than our Best Buys, which cost at least £90. The best model we tested was the Acoustic Solutions, still available from Tesco (but not Asda) for £60.

Verdict Worth considering, but they often lack the features of our Best Buys.



DVD PLAYERS We tested four DVD players, all basic budget models which had good picture quality and acceptable sound quality, though the Pacific model from Asda developed a fault during testing and refused to play any discs. The best on test by a small margin was the £30 Lodos from Sainsbury's, with a score of 71 per cent (though it's no longer in stock). Our current Best Buys have scores of 81 per cent or more, and cost £50 to £100 (see *Which?*, June 2005, p51).

Verdict Cheap DVD players can be worth considering, even those from lesser-known brands, but sound quality isn't up to the standard of our Best Buys.



DVD RECORDERS We tested five DVD recorders. The two best were from well-known brands: the Panasonic, £170 from Asda, and Philips, £160 from Tesco. The Panasonic is in fact a *Which?* Best Buy – we bought it at Asda for £30 less than the target price in our June 2005 test report, but unfortunately Asda now no longer has it in stock. The Philips isn't quite worthy of Best Buy status, but it is worth considering.

Verdict Stick with known brands when buying DVD recorders for the best chance of finding something decent.



HOME-CINEMA SYSTEMS The best model, the £50 Lodos from Sainsbury's, was a real bargain: amazingly, it matched our top Best Buy, a £500 Denon system (see September 2005, p34) – too bad Sainsbury's no longer has it in stock.

Verdict No clear guidelines here: you really need to try it out at home, so if you buy one, keep the receipt in case you need to take it back.



MINI HI-FIs The five systems we tested had a CD player and radio; the Philips and Technika had a cassette player, too. The £60 Philips, from Boots, was a clear winner, though it's no longer on sale. Sound quality wasn't in the same league as our Best Buys (see 'Beautiful music', November 2004, p36) – but their prices started at £245.

Verdict Stick with known brands, and steer clear of unknown brands – no matter how cheap they are.



WIDESCREEN TVs The four 28-inch models we tested were all fairly basic, with few features compared with our Best Buys. For example, they had the older-style rounder screens, instead of the 'pure flat' ones of our Best Buys. The Philips, £270 from Sainsbury's (no longer available), was the best, and scored 52 per cent. However, our Best Buys scored at least 63 per cent, and the cheapest of those is only £300.

Verdict Stick with well-known brands.



TV/DVD COMBOS We can't recommend either of the 14-inch TV/DVD combos we tested. Picture quality of both was OK but sound quality was poor, even for a budget model.

Verdict Give cheap unknown brands of TV/DVD combos a miss.

TESTING TIMES

Our experts are serious anoraks when it comes to audio-visual products. They've seen it all: a phone clock running at double speed and TVs that tune in wrongly and won't let you reorder the channels.

They got some surprises, pleasant and unpleasant, when they compared the products we bought at supermarkets with models from our regular tests.

Our experts said that, in general, all these products are assembled from standard components, so there's no reason why they shouldn't work as well as well-known brands. But they reckon that there often isn't much expertise or thought going into their design.

For example, our boffins said the Duraband TV/DVD combo was the most difficult-to-use product they'd seen in a long time. Its remote control had two modes: one for the TV and one for playing DVDs. However, it wasn't obvious which mode it was in, so buttons often appeared not to work. And the disc drawer on the machine didn't open very far, so inserting DVDs was awkward.

Cheaper audio-visual products usually have fewer features than branded models. Neither of the TV/DVD combos had Teletext. None of the digital radios had a rewind system or tone controls. The mini hi-fis lacked bass and treble controls and one didn't have a headphone socket. Only the Lodos and Digilogic DVD players came with Scart connector leads, and the Compacts and Avious DVD recorders didn't even have VideoPlus to make programming recordings easy.

In general, the audio-visual products had good picture quality but poor sound quality – the speakers with the Bush, ICES and Technika mini systems

were very light and had a cheap, plasticky feel.

Instructions for the products were often poor, too: confusingly laid out, badly translated or lacking in essential information to help you get started.

TRY BEFORE YOU BUY

It's clear that not all cheap products are a bargain, so how can you separate the wheat from the chaff? It helps to look at and listen to products before you buy. But this isn't always possible. At Asda, Sainsbury's and Woolworths you may be able to look at or listen to products, depending on, say, the particular store you visit or the type of product. But Boots, Tesco and Superdrug don't have products up and running in their stores. See 'After you buy', opposite, for your rights, as you may need to return something if you aren't able to try it out at the shop.

ALWAYS CHEAPER?

Picking up a TV or DVD player with your weekly shopping is certainly convenient – but it might not always be the cheapest way to buy electrical goods. We found that some of the products from well-known brands were available at lower or similar prices elsewhere. For example, we found a Philips TV we bought in Sainsbury's for £40 less online. And the Pure Elan digital radio we bought in Woolworths and the Panasonic DVD player from Asda were sold in other shops at similar prices.

So are supermarkets a good choice for audio-visual goods? From our tests, digital radios and DVD players and recorders are often a good bet (though you may sacrifice features for the low price). But many other products, such as mini hi-fis, TVs and TV/DVD combos, are mostly best left on the shelf.

USING THE TABLE

The table shows how the audio-visual products we bought in supermarkets and high-street stores fared in our tests. The price is how much we paid earlier this year – though most of the products are now no longer in the shops. We show the total test score, and pick out the decent performers, which would be worth considering, and the poor performers, which are to be avoided.

The test scores ignore price and are based on the following criteria:

Digital radios, mini hi-fis Sound quality, ease of use and features.
DVD players, DVD recorders, TVs Picture quality, sound quality, ease of use and features.
Home-cinema systems, TV/DVD combos Sound quality, picture quality and ease of use.

KEY

- Decent performers
- Poor performers

Bargain buys?	Stores					
	Asda	Boots	Sainsbury's	Superdrug	Tesco	Woolworths
DIGITAL RADIOS	Acoustic Solutions Portal 1 £40 57%	Roberts Gemini RD18 £60 53%	Red DB7 £50 55%		Acoustic Solutions Portal 1 £60 57%	Pure Elan Dx20 £60 52%
DVD PLAYERS	Pacific 900 £25 69%		Lodos KS2 £30 71%		Digilogic 4400 £25 69%	Compacts 800 £30 69%
DVD RECORDERS	Panasonic DMR-E55EB-S £170 73%		Mico Espejo R311i £100 63%	Avious DRW-1029 £150 55%	Philips DVDR70 £160 66%	Compacts DRW-101 £150 57%
HOME-CINEMA SYSTEMS	Pacific PHC203 £60 46%	Goodmans GDVD121 £80 48%	Lodos HT 100X £50 65%		Bush DVDV11K £60 28%	Daewoo DHCX150 £100 43%
MINI HI-FIs	Pacific PMC702 £19 25%	Philips MC150/25 £60 56%	Bush LSF04 £30 27%	ICES FMC-4100 £25 26%	Technika MC 104 £19 34%	
WIDESCREEN TVs	Pacific PTV 7017 £160 31%		Philips 28PW6008/25 £270 52%		Bush WS6680SIL £160 40%	Crown CTT2806SF £170 35%
TV/DVD COMBOS	Duraband DCT1481 £80 14%				Hikona TC-1400 £80 37%	