

WHICH? AWARDS 2005

The last 12 months have seen some great new products and services arrive. Here's our pick of the best companies in 2005

PRODUCTS

BEST DOMESTIC APPLIANCE BRAND Bosch

Two good reasons to turn to Bosch first when you want a new appliance for your kitchen: its products are more reliable than others in this category and it has more Best Buys.

For reliability, it's unbeaten in all categories except cylinder vacuum cleaners and fridge-freezers – and even there it puts up a good show.

It was such commitment to quality that gave it the only Best Buy upright vacuum cleaner in recent memory. That's now sadly discontinued, but Bosch has also knocked up another 12 Best Buys over the last year across five categories – washing machines, dishwashers, vacuum cleaners, fridges and tumble driers.

Its Best Buys always turn out great results. And a good eye for design detail is often apparent. For example, in our September fridge test, its KTR18425GB fridge received a special commendation for its neat 'Easy Access' system – the shelves slide out smoothly with the lightest touch, even when they're full.

But what's most surprising, looking back on the last 12 months, is how often Bosch has offered the best value for money. In washing machine, dishwasher and vacuum cleaner reports, it's come up with the cheapest Best Buys without compromising on quality. A very deserving winner.

Runners-up

Miele Miele's products, it has to be said, are expensive – this year's tests have featured a £730 dishwasher and a £600 washing machine, among other pricey items. But they're frequently the tops: in 2005, Miele nabbed the Best on Test award in tumble driers, vacuum cleaners and dishwashers.

It offers a similarly high level of reliability to Bosch but you're usually paying a fair bit more for that extra finesse.

AEG-Electrolux AEG-Electrolux has managed eight Best Buys in the last year. Its dishwashers and tumble driers do particularly well and offer good value.

BEST AUDIO-VISUAL BRAND

Sony

It's been a good year for Sony, packed with unique successes.

In May, its smart phone was the only one to make a Best Buy in our mobiles report. August saw its first stab at a tabletop digital radio walking to Best Buy status. And in September, it turned up with possibly the best digital camera we've tested. Straight after that, in October, readers voted it one of their favourite computer brands.

Then last month there was a bumper crop of Best Buys. It produced the first-ever Best Buy flat-panel TVs as well as picking up four widescreen TV Best Buys, including the best integrated digital TV we've seen for ages. And it finally upped its game to compete with the Apple iPod – its new MP3 player is easy to use, smaller and lighter than the iPod, and has a much longer battery life (24 hours, as opposed to 11 hours).

All those Best Buys are just a few of the 21 Sony has produced this year. Along with the fact that it's easily the most reliable brand in our annual survey of repair rates, this makes it a shoo-in for the best audio-visual brand.

Runners-up

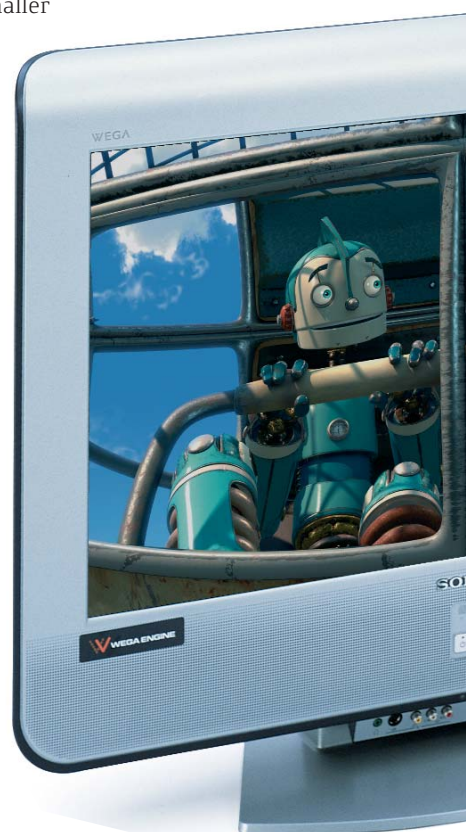
Panasonic Panasonic is another reliable brand, notching up 17 Best Buys in 2005. In this issue, it produces the top two DVD players and embarrasses other manufacturers with a DVD recorder that's easier to use than the others.

Other Panasonic highlights from the year include an excellent Best on Test TV projector and complete domination of the digital camcorders Best Buys.

Canon Canon produces a fairly narrow range of products, but where it crops up, it does well. For yet another year, it has sidelined every other printer manufacturer.



A top TV projector from Panasonic – one of our favourite products of the year



Bosch is the most reliable brand around – its dishwashers are particularly dependable



Apple Similarly, Apple doesn't make many products but those it does come up with are consistently breathtaking. The iPod remains unbeaten four years after we first declared it the best MP3 player; its laptops swept the board in April's laptops report; and in October's reader survey it took its habitual place as the favourite brand of computer.

MOST INNOVATIVE NEW PRODUCT Nintendo DS

The world of computer games is in a state of wild flux at the moment, with Microsoft, Sony and Nintendo all readying important releases. But in the midst of it all, it's Nintendo that's kept its eye on the most important thing in games: fun.

Its philosophy of imaginative games for all was crystallised in the May release of the portable Nintendo DS (£100). The DS has two screens, one of which is touch-sensitive. You can use a stylus or your finger to draw on the screen and control the action.

Within hours of our DS arriving, the important work of measuring kettles and weighing wet laundry was cast aside: we were too busy drawing trampolines on the screen to juggle an army of somersaulting plumbers. Touch-screen gaming is an innovation with remarkably wide appeal; you don't have to memorise the functions of umpteen buttons before playing.

It's classic Nintendo, thinking of left-field ideas to keep things accessible – Sony's new PlayStation Portable is fine on its own terms but appeals to the same old demographic with the same old tricks.

And the innovation looks set to continue with Nintendo's next release. The Revolution home console will boast a controller that you use by

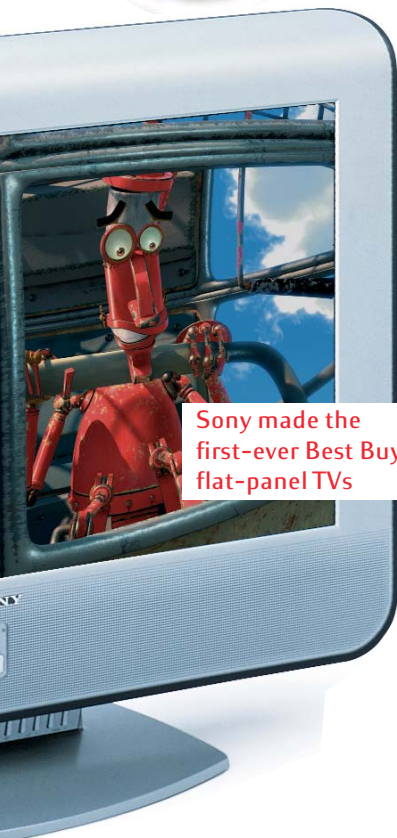
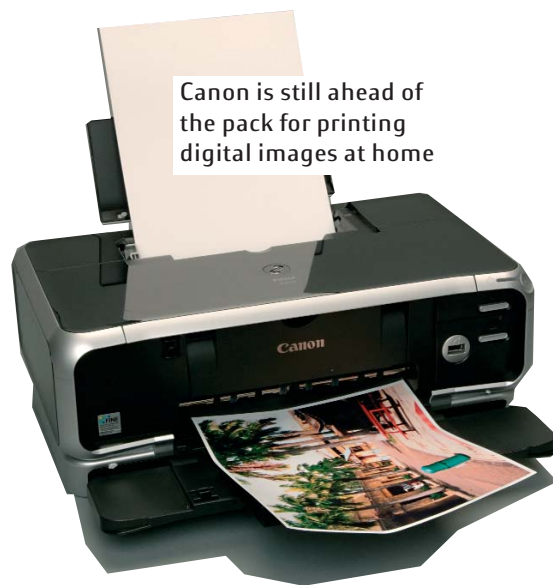
moving it around in three-dimensional space. Start placing your bets for next year's award now.

Honourable mentions

However mundane, any innovations that can improve any aspect of domestic drudgery – such as the growing trend for bigger capacities in washing machines – must be applauded. In the vacs world, two new products tried to make it easier and more fun to use their appliances.

Dyson's Ball vacuum cleaner tried a new take on steering and control. We also – finally – saw the release of the Air Rider hovercraft vac, repeating the idea, if not the cleaning success, of its 1956 Hoover Constellation predecessor.

Canon is still ahead of the pack for printing digital images at home



Sony made the first-ever Best Buy flat-panel TVs



Nintendo's DS uses a touch-sensitive screen to make games more fun and accessible



Apple's iPod made it a strong runner-up

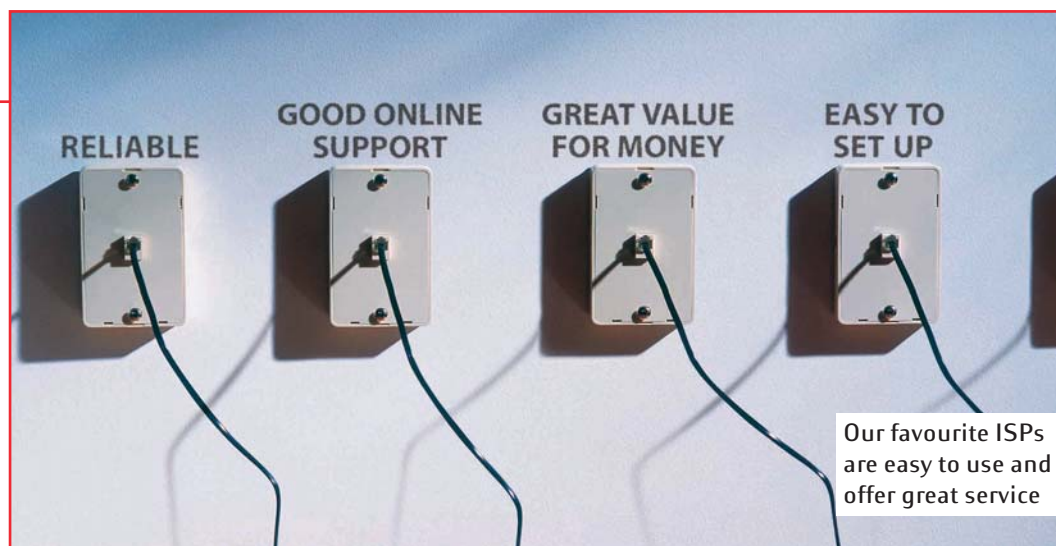
SERVICES

BEST INTERNET SERVICE PROVIDERS

If you're looking for better service from your ISP, there were two outstanding performances by ISPs in this year's survey of *Which?* members.

Best broadband ISP: Metronet

Metronet's broadband service is a clear winner. It received incredible ratings from its customers, with an impressive nine out of ten very satisfied. In fact, it can't be faulted for any aspect of its service, with customers overwhelmingly positive about everything, from online support to reliability. Metronet offers a pay-as-you-go service that starts from £10 a month, which no doubt explains why 95 per cent of its customers think it's great value for money.



Best dial-up ISP: Waitrose

Waitrose is your favourite ISP for dial-up internet access. Overall, almost three quarters of its customers are very satisfied. In particular, it's head and shoulders above the rest when it comes to customer service, telephone support and value for money. For £14.99 a month, you get unlimited internet access, free technical support and great service.

BEST HOME PHONE SUPPLIERS

It was thumbs up for a new breed of phone suppliers in our 2005 survey.

Best for line and calls: Utility Warehouse

Utility Warehouse is top of the league of phone companies offering line rental and calls, with six out of ten of its customers very satisfied overall. Accuracy of

billing in particular received high praise.

Best for calls only: Call 18866 and Toucan

Call 18866 and Toucan offer a great service for those who don't mind paying for line rental and calls separately. Readers rated them as the leading providers for overall satisfaction and also gave them top marks for making their bills easy to understand.

MONEY

BEST CURRENT ACCOUNT Smile

No doubt about this one. The Best Current Account award goes to an account that's a model of consistency. For the fifth year in a row, Smile received the top rating in our current account satisfaction survey.

This year a massive 91 per cent of Smile customers said they were 'very happy' with their account. And the remaining 9 per cent were simply 'happy' – no one has a bad word to say.

We think it's down to the combination of a high credit interest rate, a decent overdraft rate and excellent service.

Runners-up

First Direct The best account if you do most of your banking by telephone. The First Direct Bank Account combines good interest rates with an excellent telephone banking service.

Nationwide Building Society The Nationwide FlexAccount proves that accounts with branch access don't have to be the poor relation. Good rates, good

customer satisfaction and a good account do Nationwide credit.

BEST CREDIT CARD Yorkshire Building Society Base Rate Tracker Credit Card

Good levels of cashback on purchases and a low interest rate make this a rarity – a Best Buy that's good whether you borrow on your card or always pay your bills in full.

We like the way the interest rate tracks the Bank of England base rate; you pay more if it goes up but less when it goes down. It's a fair way of doing things and we'd like to see more companies following Yorkshire Building Society's excellent example.

Runner-up

Nationwide For its lone holding-out against the temptation to sneakily take a little more of our cash. Most cards charge

you an extra 2.75 per cent on all foreign purchases. Nationwide doesn't. Everyone spending money abroad should get one.

BEST MONEY INNOVATION Egg Money

The Egg Money account combines the best features of a savings account and a credit card.

Put money into your account and you get a decent 4 per cent interest rate. Spend money using your Egg Money card and you get a nice 1 per cent cashback. Borrow money on it and you pay a low typical rate of 6.9 per cent. This makes Egg Money a Best Buy, no matter what type of borrower you are.

A combination of a good savings rate and low borrowing costs makes Egg Money an important innovation – too many banks seem to forget about their customers when they bring out new products.



Best car brand

Toyota is a worthy winner because of its ground-breaking performance across the board, including reliability: if you buy a Toyota, you can assume it's unlikely to break down.

Toyota recently upped the ante on safety. The Avensis was the first car fitted with knee-airbags – designed to reduce knee and lower-leg injuries. The new Yaris, out next year, will be the first supermini with knee-airbags.

For security, Toyotas are generally quite middling (though none is unduly poor). That said, the Toyota-made Lexus LS430 is the most secure car we've ever seen.



Toyota Corolla

Toyota's Prius led the way as the first genuinely practical, mass-produced hybrid family car – a combination of a petrol engine and electric motor that makes fuel savings of around 30 per cent. While others deride hybrids as an 'interim step', Toyota is preparing to use its mature hybrid technology with alternatives to petrol. It's already in its second phase with the much-improved Prius II.

MOTORING

MOST POPULAR CAR

Toyota Yaris Verso

'It reminds me of Postman Pat's car, but I love it.' That owner's comment, from our first look at the Yaris Verso in 2000, still holds true: a whopping 92 per cent of owners would recommend it to a friend.

Much of that is down to its impressive reliability – owners report few problems with their Yaris Verso. It's based on a stretched version of the outgoing Yaris, so it will carry more than most superminis. That also explains the unusual appearance – true to that original quote, it won't win any beauty contests.

Among the few criticisms is a bumpy ride. But with so much going for it – an easy drive and comfortable position, plenty of space inside – owners don't care.

The Yaris is due to be replaced in 2006, so a used model is the best you can hope for. But owners like them so much, they may be thin on the ground.



Your belongings are more secure in the Lexus LS430

The airbags use the latest technology, adjusting the rate of inflation to the severity of the crash. And the seat belts are similarly advanced – all five sense a crash happening and remove slack from the belt in the split second before you're thrown forward; they also monitor belt tension and reduce it if it becomes dangerous.

Runners-up

Renault Modus This car is the first supermini to gain the maximum five-star rating in crash.

VW Golf V The Golf is the safest medium-sized car thanks to features such as active head restraints.

To reduce whiplash, these move closer to your head if the car is shunted from behind.

Volvo S40 The S40's design creates more safety for occupants than even the Audi A8 – the A8 wins out only because it's heavier, so it will come to a less violent halt in many crashes. The S40 is the safest model in the large-car class.



Audi A8 wins our award for the safest car

SAFEST CAR

Audi A8

It's attention to detail that makes the A8 so safe. A great example of this is the driver's head restraint. Set it to the right position for your height and the car will remember it even after another driver alters it. You simply press a button on the dashboard.

Audi has thought carefully about the layout of the leg and knee area in the front of the cabin. Far too many cars still have the hard steering lock near this area, which can seriously damage your legs in a crash – not so with the A8.



From top left anticlockwise:
Renault Modus;
VW Golf V;
Volvo S40; Mazda 3;
Citroën C3 Pluriel

MOST SECURE CAR

Lexus LS430

The Lexus LS430 is the most secure car we've seen. Its locks fought off our experts' break-in attempts for a full five minutes – by this time, even the most hardened thief is likely to have moved on to easier pickings.

But perhaps the most noteworthy aspect of its security is the laminated glass in the side windows. This is much more effective than the toughened glass used in most cars; a thief will make more noise to break in, and take more time. Laminated glass can withstand an attack for around 35 seconds, as opposed to seven seconds for toughened glass.

Unfortunately, you have to pay about £57,000 to experience such good security. However, Lexus has set an admirable example for others to follow.

Runners-up

Citroën C3 Pluriel The Pluriel beats its supermini competitors hands-down. In fact, it's more secure than any car we've seen in the more expensive medium class, too.

Mazda 3 The Mazda 3 (which is also a Best Buy car) just pips the Renault Mégane and the VW Beetle as the most secure medium car.

Volvo S40 A lucky break for Volvo – the most secure large car we've seen, the outgoing BMW 3 series, was phased out this year. Still, the S40 is remarkably secure.