

Battle of the brands

Our survey reveals the most reliable audiovisual products and the brands that you can trust

Home audiovisual products are cheaper than ever. It's possible to pick up a DVD player for less than £20, while the cost of MP3 players, once premium items owned only by committed music lovers, has tumbled.

The good news is that our latest survey of nine different types of audiovisual products reveals that, despite falling prices, they are still highly reliable.

We're also happy to report that the results of a separate Which? survey found that, of the 57% of members who had bought an audiovisual product in the past year, only 4% took out an extended warranty.

We've long argued that because audiovisual products are often cheap to buy and are unlikely to break down, extended

warranties provide little value. It's good news that so many members have taken this message on board, and in the process saved themselves unnecessary cost.

This year's reliability survey found that digital radios and DVD players are the most reliable products. An impressive 97% of respondents told us that their machines haven't needed repairs in the past six years. The least reliable are set-top boxes, yet even here only 11% of models had broken down over the same period.

The most consistently reliable brand is Panasonic – and it also gets the top honour of best audiovisual brand in our annual awards (see p12). Its products got five above-average and three average scores. Sony turns up in the highest number of categories – nine – although most of its scores are average.

OUR RESEARCH

In March 2008, we sent 35,000 questionnaires to Which? members asking about the reliability of their audiovisual goods up to six years old. A total of 9,291 members responded.

The Which? reliability index is based on the proportion of devices that have needed repair.

Scores for each brand are adjusted to account for sample size and product age – so a brand won't be unfairly penalised if a lot of owners have older

models. There must be at least 50 owners of a brand for it to receive a reliability score, but all brands are included in the category averages.

To accommodate newer brands for some products, we assess reliability over four years rather than six.

We also show whether each brand's reliability score is above average, average or below average in its product category.

For the first time, we also give a customer satisfaction score.

This takes into account members' overall satisfaction with the brand and whether they would recommend it to a friend, regardless of the product's age.

We also surveyed 2,500 Which? online panel members in February 2008 about the Weee Directive and extended warranties.

KEY TO RESULTS

- Above average
- Average
- Below average

Overall reliability The mean reliability for each category



CANON MISFIRES

Julia Edwards 37, financial controller, London

Julia was initially pleased with her Canon S1 digital camera. She'd bought the model because of its powerful x10 optical zoom lens and its built-in image stabilisation system.

She found that the photos she took with the digital camera looked great. But over two years, she says, problems slowly started to crop up.

The first thing to go wrong was the zoom lens, which would get stuck when zooming in or out. While that was frustrating, a much more serious fault developed.

'All of a sudden, the images seen through the viewfinder became

blurred and strangely coloured,' Julia says. 'And when I printed out my photos they had the same distortion.'

Faced with the prospect of a large repair bill to fix the broken Canon S1, Julia decided to buy another camera. She chose the Panasonic Lumix DMC-TZ3.

It's got the same powerful zoom that she enjoyed with her Canon camera but is also lighter, making it easier to carry when out shooting photos.

And, with Panasonic scoring an above-average reliability rating, her new digital camera should offer her years of happy snapping.

Digital camcorders

The overall reliability of digital camcorders has remained steady, with a score of 92%, which is in line with last year's survey. Sony's performance has slipped slightly since last year's survey, and has fallen to average.

Panasonic is the only digital camcorder brand to achieve an above-average score, although its score has fallen by two percentage points since 2007.

There's better news for owners of JVC camcorders – the rating of the company's models has improved from below average to average.

Best Buys

Our latest digital camcorders test (see p52) has revealed three new Panasonic Best Buy digital camcorders. There are two high-definition models – the Panasonic HDC-HS9 (£730) and HDC-SD9 (£650) – and a cheaper, standard-definition camcorder, the Panasonic SDR-H280 (£455).

Customer satisfaction

Sony, Panasonic and Canon are the three brands that give their owners the

highest levels of satisfaction, according to our survey.

This may explain why so many members in our survey buy digital camcorders from these three companies – three quarters of respondents who owned a camcorder had purchased a model from one of these three brands.



BREAKDOWN SUMMARY

The top three reasons why digital camcorders broke down

- 21% Not recording
- 14% Poor picture quality
- 12% Cassette jamming



TOP 3 CUSTOMER SATISFACTION SCORES

- 69% Sony (698)
- 68% Panasonic (397)
- 61% Canon (255)

Sample size in brackets



DIGITAL CAMCORDERS

Reliability of digital camcorders up to six years old

Panasonic	(238)	94%
Sony	(466)	93%
Canon	(163)	91%
JVC	(161)	91%

Sample size in brackets
Total sample: 1,823 owners
Overall reliability: 92%

DIGITAL CAMERAS

Reliability of digital cameras up to six years old

Panasonic	(436)	97%
Kodak	(221)	97%
Casio	(121)	96%
HP	(58)	96%
Sony	(547)	96%
Olympus	(583)	96%
Pentax	(162)	96%
Samsung	(180)	96%
Vivitar	(58)	96%
Canon	(1335)	95%
Fujifilm	(726)	95%
Nikon	(526)	95%

Sample size in brackets
Total sample: 6,908 owners
Overall reliability: 96%

Digital cameras

Digital cameras are growing in popularity – more members (74%) owned a digital camera than any other product in our survey. With their remarkable reliability score, it's easy to see the attraction – only 4% of them have needed a repair in the past six years.

Overall reliability has remained impressive at 96%, and this year two brands – Panasonic and Kodak – have managed to exceed this. We're also able to report on four more brands this year, with new entries from Casio, HP, Samsung and Vivitar. All recorded average ratings.

Best Buys

Panasonic has an impressive total of eight models on our list of Best Buy digital cameras. The best of these is the Panasonic Lumix DMC-FZ18 (£280).

A cheaper option is the Panasonic Lumix DMC-FS3 (£115). There are far fewer Best Buy digital single-lens reflex (SLR) cameras, and only one Best Buy SLR from Panasonic – the Lumix DMC-L10 (£649).

Customer satisfaction

Panasonic and Canon are the two most popular brands in our survey; both companies achieve very high satisfaction ratings from Which? members. Panasonic's satisfaction score of 85% is the second highest across the entire survey.

The Traveler brand is also popular with members, but we didn't receive enough responses about Traveler's digital cameras to give it a reliability score.



BREAKDOWN SUMMARY

The top three reasons why digital cameras broke down

- 17% Battery
- 14% Complete failure
- 9% Screen



TOP 3 CUSTOMER SATISFACTION SCORES

- 85% Panasonic (503)
- 79% Canon (1,602)
- 76% Traveler (37)

Sample size in brackets



Digital radios

Along with DVD players, digital radios are the most reliable products in our survey. Our age-adjusted score shows that an incredible 97% of them didn't need repairing in the past six years.

Two manufacturers managed to exceed this high average score. Both Panasonic and Roberts achieved scores of 98%, giving them above-average ratings.

Best Buys

Panasonic doesn't make many digital radios and doesn't have any Best Buys in the shops. There are two Roberts Best Buys, a table-top model and a portable one. The table-top radio is the Roberts RD-46. It might not be the most stylish model, but the sound quality is good, particularly given its low price (£70). The portable Roberts Gemini RD-21 (£80) is easy to use and has a remarkably long battery life.

Customer satisfaction

Satisfaction scores are also high, yet, perhaps surprisingly, neither Panasonic (60%) nor Roberts (66%) achieved the highest rating. Instead, that accolade falls to Bose (78%), which unfortunately received



BREAKDOWN SUMMARY

The top three reasons why digital radios broke down

17%	Auto tuning
16%	Complete failure
16%	Reception



TOP 3 CUSTOMER SATISFACTION SCORES

78%	Bose (30)
69%	Pure (1,155)
66%	Roberts (620)

Sample size in brackets

too few responses for us to assess its reliability.

Hitachi is bottom of the pile, and its score of 38% is one of the lowest in our survey.

Hitachi has the lowest satisfaction score of 38% for digital radios



DVD players

Unlike last year's survey, no single brand achieved perfect reliability scores this time round. Yet overall reliability scores remain very high for DVD players, with Philips' rating of 99% topping the reliability charts.

Even an average placing is good. Both Panasonic and Pacific slipped to an average rating – but their scores of 98% and 97%, respectively, are still outstanding. Despite the low prices of DVD players, it seems that the technology behind them is exceptionally reliable.

Best Buys

The versatile Philips DVP5980/05 (£70) is a Best Buy. It impressed our expert testers with its excellent picture quality. In addition, it has some innovative features that many other DVD players lack, including parental controls that allow up to 20 discs to be blocked, ensuring that children can't watch unsuitable content.



BREAKDOWN SUMMARY

The top three reasons why DVD players broke down

47%	Refuses to play discs
11%	Complete failure
11%	Picture problem



TOP 3 CUSTOMER SATISFACTION SCORES

73%	Denon (35)
71%	Pioneer (98)
70%	Panasonic (632)

Sample size in brackets

Customer satisfaction

Despite notching up an outstanding reliability score, Philips received a satisfaction score of only 60% from members in our survey. Instead, the brands that members are most satisfied with are Denon (73%), Pioneer (71%) and Panasonic (70%).

DVD PLAYERS

Reliability of DVD players up to six years old

Philips	(334)	99%
Panasonic	(499)	98%
Sony	(598)	98%
Alba/Bush	(263)	97%
LG	(63)	97%
Pacific	(116)	97%
Samsung	(133)	97%
Technika	(65)	97%
Toshiba	(228)	97%

Sample size in brackets. Total sample: 4,307 owners. Overall reliability: 97%

DIGITAL RADIOS

Reliability of digital radios up to six years old

Panasonic	(102)	98%
Roberts	(568)	98%
Goodmans	(95)	97%
Intempo	(84)	97%
Sony	(147)	97%
Pure	(1078)	96%

Sample size in brackets
Total sample: 3,111 owners
Overall reliability: 97%



SATISFACTION TO THE HUMAX

Gemma Floodgate 28, assistant manager at a firm of chartered accountants and business advisers, Milton Keynes

Gemma bought her Humax PVR (see p34) in 2007 after her DVD recorder broke, leaving her unable to record her favourite programmes.

She switched to a PVR because the incorporated Freeview box would reduce the clutter beneath her TV and, after reading our PVR reviews, she chose the Best Buy

Humax. She hasn't regretted the decision.

Gemma told us: 'I like the Humax because I can set it up to record whole series of programmes, which comes in handy when we go away. I like being able to record more than one show at a time. Overall, I have been very happy with the Humax.'

DVD recorders

DVD recorders are one of the newest technologies in our survey. In last year's report, they achieved an overall reliability score of 92%. We had hoped that, as the technology behind DVD players matured, the reliability scores would improve across the board.

Our 2008 survey has seen a modest improvement in reliability – the score has risen to 94%. This is still lower than the score achieved by DVD players, and possibly reflects the more complex nature of DVD recorders.

Best Buys

No manufacturer received above-average reliability scores in our survey, and our list of Best Buys is dominated by two companies that achieved average scores. Sony and Panasonic currently have six Best Buys each. Their best-performing models are the Panasonic DMR-EX95VEBS (£549) and the Sony RDRHXD860 (£306).

Customer satisfaction

Panasonic is the highest-rated brand, with 69%. JVC gets a thumbs down, scoring a lowly 41%.



BREAKDOWN SUMMARY

The top three reasons why DVD recorders broke down

- 24% Complete failure
- 18% Refuses to play discs
- 16% Does not record



TOP 3 CUSTOMER SATISFACTION SCORES

- 69% Panasonic (1,155)
- 64% Pioneer (35)
- 61% Sony (508)

Sample size in brackets

DVD RECORDERS

Reliability of DVD recorders up to four years old

Sony	(437)	95%
Toshiba	(77)	95%
Daewoo	(65)	94%
LG	(61)	94%
Liteon	(60)	94%
Panasonic	(964)	94%
Philips	(137)	94%
Samsung	(91)	94%



Sample size in brackets
Total sample: 2,581 owners
Overall reliability: 94%

MP3/MP4 players

MP3 and MP4 players are popular devices, with more than 100 manufacturers named in our survey. However, most have received too few responses to get a reliability score. Apple dominates the market, with more than one in three respondents owning an iPod. Its reliability is average – but when the average for this category has risen to 96% (up from 93% in 2007), that shouldn't be a problem. This year we are able to report on Samsung's players for the first time.

Best Buys

No manufacturer received above-average reliability scores. However, the three that received average scores (Samsung, Sony and Apple) all make Best Buy MP3 and MP4 players. The highest-scoring players from each are the Samsung YP-T9 (1GB, £58), the Sony NWZ-A815 (2GB, £80) and the Apple iPod nano (4GB, £99).

Customer satisfaction

Apple receives the highest satisfaction rating, but interestingly some of the smaller brands also perform well. We were unable to give reliability scores to Archos and iRiver, but both are well liked by owners of their products.



BREAKDOWN SUMMARY

The top four reasons why MP3 and MP4 players broke down

- 20% Display freezes
- 12% Complete failure
- 11% Battery life declined over time
- 11% Does not switch on



TOP 3 CUSTOMER SATISFACTION SCORES

- 80% Apple (1,000)
- 75% Archos (36)
- 67% iRiver (42)

Sample size in brackets

MP3/MP4 PLAYERS

Reliability of MP3/MP4 players up to four years old

Samsung	(103)	97%
Sony	(169)	96%
Apple	(881)	96%
Creative	(175)	95%

Sample size in brackets
Total sample: 2,065 owners
Overall reliability: 96%



PVRs

Reliability up to four years old

Panasonic	(122)	95%
Humax	(267)	94%
Sony	(77)	93%
Thomson	(69)	91%
Sky	(490)	90%

Sample size in brackets. Total sample: 2,675 owners. Overall reliability: 92%

BREAKDOWN SUMMARY

The top three reasons why PVRs broke down

19%	Complete failure
13%	Box freezing
11%	Does not record

TOP 3 CUSTOMER SATISFACTION SCORES

84%	Virgin V+ (35)
83%	Humax (290)
77%	Sky (637)

Sample size in brackets

PVRs

We've known for some time from our exhaustive testing that Humax produces the best personal video recorder (PVR) that you can buy. Until now, we've never been able to give you any information on its reliability. Happily, this year we're able to do so – and, reassuringly, it performs well.

Panasonic comes top, with another above-average rating, while Sky's rating is below average.

Reliability has improved since 2007. While PVRs are reasonably complex technical devices, the increase in the category's score suggests they are slowly improving.

Best Buys

We don't have any PVR Best Buys from Panasonic, but the Humax PVR-9200 is one of the highest scoring PVRs we've ever tested. It is available in two colours: the Humax PVR-9200TB (£180) comes in black, and the



Humax PVR-9200TS (£200) comes in silver.

didn't get enough responses for us to give it a reliability score.

Customer satisfaction

Virgin's V+ is the only PVR that can be used for cable television, and it receives the highest satisfaction rating in our survey – although it

Unsurprisingly, Humax rates very highly among members for overall satisfaction, although Sky's position in third place is somewhat at odds with its relatively low reliability score.

SET-TOP BOXES

Reliability of set-top boxes up to six years old

Matsui	(70)	94%
Goodmans	(103)	91%
Humax	(212)	91%
Philips	(247)	91%
Sagem	(140)	91%
Sony	(214)	91%
Panasonic	(254)	90%
Grundig	(83)	89%
Pace	(102)	89%
Samsung	(100)	87%
Thomson	(288)	86%
Amstrad	(58)	85%
Sky	(1127)	84%

Sample size in brackets. Total sample: 5,804 owners. Overall reliability: 89%

Set-top boxes

Philips remains above average, although its score of 91% is eight percentage points lower than last year. It's joined by Matsui, Goodmans, Humax, Sagem and Sony, which all get scores that put them above average.

Thomson, Amstrad and Sky bring up the rear with below-average ratings, though they are in a narrow range. Sky gets a score of 84%.

Best Buys

Unfortunately, there are no Best Buy set-top boxes currently avail-



able from any of the manufacturers that received above-average reliability scores.

The Humax MG-TU1 (£69) is the nearest best performer currently on sale, although even this is quite hard to find in shops. Our tests found that it is slightly let down by its electronic programme guide,

which is hard to read, but it is relatively cheap if you can track one down.

We didn't receive enough responses to give our two current Best Buys – the Logik Vesa Digital TV Adapter (£50) and Metronic Setanta Digital Receiver (£56) – reliability scores.



BREAKDOWN SUMMARY

The top three reasons why set-top boxes broke down

22%	Complete failure
17%	Picture freezing
16%	Box freezing

TOP 3 CUSTOMER SATISFACTION SCORES

71%	Sony (269)
67%	Sky (1,587)
66%	Logik (52)

Sample size in brackets

Customer satisfaction

Surprisingly, Sky achieves a high satisfaction score, despite its low reliability rating, showing that it does well on ease of use and performance. Sony comes out on top overall, but Nokia receives a dismal score of just 37% – the lowest we recorded in our survey.



Widescreen TVs

This year's results are impressive, with a generally high level of reliability scores. Samsung and Sony both receive above-average ratings and are joined by Panasonic.

At the bottom of the table, Philips receives a below-average rating, where it is joined by new entry Hitachi.

If you're unsure whether to choose a plasma screen or an LCD TV, our survey found that LCD models are slightly more reliable – this may be due to the fact that

LCD TVs are more popular than plasma TVs, so manufacturers are investing more in developing them.

Best Buys

Panasonic dominates the list of Best Buy widescreen TVs, and it consistently outperforms other brands. There are more than a dozen models; the newest Best Buy is the Panasonic Viera TX-32LZD80 (£850).

Samsung currently has no Best Buys available, while the best Sony is the Bravia KDL-32D3000 (£800).

Customer satisfaction

Pioneer may not produce many TVs, but it's well liked by Which? members – it received the highest satisfaction rating in the whole survey.

Unfortunately, however, we received too few responses to give it a reliability score. Our three above-average brands – Panasonic, Samsung and Sony – also do well.

WIDESCREEN TVs

Reliability of widescreen TVs up to six years old

Panasonic	(1389)	96%
Samsung	(348)	96%
Sony	(1092)	96%
Bush	(67)	94%
Goodmans	(51)	94%
JVC	(150)	94%
LG	(114)	94%
Sanyo	(52)	94%
Sharp	(90)	94%
Toshiba	(329)	93%
Hitachi	(73)	92%
Philips	(334)	92%

Sample size in brackets
Total sample: 5,778 owners Overall reliability: 94%



BREAKDOWN SUMMARY

The top reasons widescreen TVs broke down

- 27% General picture problem
- 22% Complete failure
- 12% On/off switch



TOP 3 CUSTOMER SATISFACTION SCORES

- 90% Pioneer (53)
- 85% Panasonic (1,739)
- 83% Loewe (42)

Sample size in brackets

Sky news **Sky's customer service response impresses us**

In our product reliability report last year, Sky was the worst-performing brand in the PVR category. However, while its product may not have impressed us, Sky's response to our survey results certainly did.

Sky asked us to contact members who had told us they'd had problems and offered to correct any faults they'd experienced.

However, Sky's set-top boxes are less impressive. This is the first time that we've rated these Sky products (we've previously just looked at Freeview models), so we hope to see an improvement in next year's survey.



Weee – one year on

How has the new Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment Directive affected us?

Last July, the Weee Directive came into force. Under these new regulations, stores selling electrical goods are obliged to take back customers' old goods on a like-for-like basis, or help to fund the expansion of a network of Weee collection points.

This was intended to change the way that we dispose of our old electrical goods, preventing them from ending up in landfill sites. Happily, it seems that we're all coming to terms with the new system. Our survey found that 60% of members have heard about Weee – and that retailers are doing their bit.

One member told us:

'I bought a kettle from Currys and at the till I handed in the old one. The assistant looked a bit startled and asked a senior if they could take back my kettle. The answer was yes, and they took it back.'

Weee man (right) made up from discarded products



Which? online

product reliability **Search**

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