



Your guide to buying a new computer

We reveal the most reliable brands and the best places to buy them, and give you essential advice on what specification you need

SIGHTS SET ON VERSATILITY

Debbie Crowther 30, planning officer

Debbie wanted a laptop that she could use for work, to surf the internet, email, organise digital music and edit photos. 'I really love my iPod, which made me wonder about buying an Apple laptop', she told us.

An Apple MacBook 2.16GHz laptop is right up Debbie's street. It comes with 120GB of hard disk space to store all her photos and music and a 2.16GHz dual-core Intel processor. It usually comes with 1GB of Ram,

but for £110 Debbie increased this to 2GB.

She's a keen photographer and the extra memory makes a big difference when using the Best Buy Adobe Photoshop Elements 5 image-editing software we recommend (£75, available for both PCs and Macs – see *Computing Which?*, January 2007, p38). Debbie told us: 'The whole thing cost me just over £1,000, but it's money well spent – I'm very happy with it.'

OUR RESEARCH

In May 2007 we asked 6,718 *Which?* online panel members about their computers. The reliability index is based on the proportion of machines that required a repair. Scores for each brand are adjusted to account for sample size and product age. There must be at least 50 owners of a brand for it to receive a reliability score.

Even if you're currently happy with your computer, there will come a time when it starts to struggle with the latest software and you will need to buy a new one. You may dread the jargon and the incomprehensible sales patter that come with buying a new machine, but once you get a computer that's capable of much more than your old one, it will be worth it.

But what computer should you buy and where should you buy it? By surveying our members, we can tell you which they found to be the most reliable brands and most satisfactory retailers. And to help you through the buying process, we will also demystify the jargon and explain the main choices you need to make when choosing a new computer.

Best brands

If you're set on a laptop – and this year's survey revealed that laptops are more reliable than desktops overall – Toshiba came top in our survey, with an impressive score of 91 per cent (see p43 for the full results). This is better than the 88 per cent it scored last year (*Computing Which?*, September 2006, p18). And in a recent laptop test (*Computing Which?*, July 2007, p34), the Toshiba Satellite P200-140, £699, and the more powerful Toshiba Satellite A200-1Ai, £799, were both Best Buys. Choose either of these if you're looking for a desktop replacement with a good-sized screen.

Last year's frontrunner, Acer, slipped to second place with 88 per cent. No single laptop brand was revealed by our survey

as being particularly poor, which is good news for consumers.

If you want more raw specification and power for your money – although this really matters only if you're playing games or video editing – a desktop is for you. The most reliable desktop manufacturer was Dell, it was also one of the most reliable last year. As with laptops, no brand was poor.

Should I buy a Mac?

We were surprised that this year's survey showed that Apple reliability wasn't above average for desktops, as with previous surveys. It did score a reliability rating of 82 per cent for laptops when the average rating was 85 per cent, but that doesn't mean its reliability is poor. And this slip in reliability hasn't affected how members feel about their Macs as, according to our survey, 88 per cent of Mac owners would definitely recommend one to a friend. This is 26 per cent higher than the next best brand, Sony, and a very strong result overall.

So why are Macs so well loved? Build and design are plus points – Apple computers stand out from the crowd and have a quality feel, which gives owners a feel-good factor. Technical performance is impressive, too: in the *Computing Which?* laptop test, the £829 Apple MacBook 2.16GHz and £699 Apple MacBook 2.0GHz were both Best Buys and came first and second in the test, respectively.

The best way to see whether you would like a Mac is to try one at a shop. But if you want to play games, there are very few Mac-compatible ones on the market.

Where to buy

To find out which computer retailers are best, we asked our panel how likely they would be to buy from the same place again – see p43 for the results. The clear winner was John Lewis, the only retailer to get a five-star rating, with 61 per cent of customers saying they'd be very likely to return when they needed a new computer. High-street shops Currys, Comet and Staples did less well in our survey; PC World came last.

We were curious about what makes John Lewis so good, so we asked some survey participants for more detail. The overwhelming impression was that the staff knew what they were talking about: 'They really understand the products they are selling,' said Ray Sandilands. There was also little pressure to buy a more expensive machine than necessary. John Muzio was 'guided to a purchase that saved me money', while Peter Edmonds got £150 off to match a local discount store. The service doesn't stop when you leave the shop, either, as Roger Feesey explains: 'I used the free helpdesk service several times after setting up my PC and it was very good.'

The clear winner was John Lewis, the only retailer to get a five-star rating

Customising your order

Ordering a computer directly from the manufacturer was the second most-liked option. The advantage of doing this is that many manufacturers let you customise the machine you want to buy. It can often pay to increase the spec of your computer, like Russell Houghton did, p42, as it helps future-proof your machine. Be prepared to spend a little more but look for the sweet spot in terms of value for money.

For example, when we looked at Dell's website and boosted a basic processor from 1.86GHz to 2.4GHz, it cost an extra £70. Taking the next small step up to 2.66GHz cost £170. The first of these options is a lot kinder on your wallet. It's a similar story with Ram. 2GB is a worthwhile investment and at £47 wasn't too expensive. Just don't go mad and pay, say, £141 for 4GB. Unless you're doing some very advanced stuff, you won't need it.

Increasing the spec of a laptop costs even more. This is because the miniaturised Ram chips and hard disks that laptops need to keep slim are more expensive for the manufacturers to buy in the first place.

Most computers sold now are powerful enough to cope with most tasks users are likely to throw at them. Among those we surveyed, emailing, browsing the internet,

WHAT TO DO WITH YOUR OLD COMPUTER

Don't consign your old machine to the local landfill. Either recycle it or find someone who can still get some use out of it

In July, the Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment (or WEEE) directive came into force. So computer retailers and manufacturers now have to contribute towards having your computer recycled. Some companies offer a service where you can return your old computer for nothing – ask before you buy. If not, your council may run a scheme (but might charge for collection). For more details, go to www.environment.agency.gov.uk/weee or



contact your council.

You can also enter your postcode at the Recycle Now website (www.recyclenow.com) to see whether there's a recycling scheme near you. Alternatively, the Freecycle Network (www.freecycle.org) will help you give away your old machine. And Computer Aid

International (www.computeraid.org) sends computers to developing countries.

But don't forget to delete your personal data. Software such as VCOM SecurErase (£24.99) or Active@Killdisk (basic version free from www.killdisk.com) will erase it.

Specifications explained

We explain the main specification terms and why they matter



CPU Central processing unit, or processor. This is the main brain of your computer. CPUs are made by either Intel (which makes Celeron, Centrino and Pentium) or AMD (maker of Sempron, Athlon and Turion). Celeron and Sempron are usually found in lower-spec budget PCs. GHz (gigahertz) refers to the speed the chip runs at. In general, any chip of around 2GHz for desktops and 1.6GHz for laptops will be OK for average users. Most CPUs are now dual core, which means they are actually two processors on one chip that share the workload between them. You can even buy quad-core CPUs; once an expensive rarity, these are coming down in price and offer better performance.



GRAPHICS CARD (or graphics chip) This is responsible for displaying images. Integrated graphics means the chip shares the computer's Ram, which makes it slower. Graphics cards usually have their own dedicated Ram – the amount you need depends on what you plan to do but try to ensure you have at least 256MB if you're buying a desktop or 128MB for a laptop. The

graphics card is most important if you want to play games. To get the most out of games being released this year and next, make sure your graphics card is DX 10 compatible.



HARD DISK (or hard drive) This is where your computer stores all your software and files. The size is measured in gigabytes (GB). Try to ensure that any laptop you buy has at least 80GB. Most desktop PCs come with 300GB or more, which should be plenty. But bear in mind what you'll be using your computer for. Storing video, lots of music and high-resolution photos, and installing games use up space quickly. If in doubt, always go for more space.



OPERATING SYSTEM This is the software that runs your computer. Macs come with OS X and PCs usually come with Vista, the latest version of Windows (turn to p41 for more information).



RAM Random access memory (or memory). The more Ram a computer has, the better it will run. The minimum you should get these days is 1GB of Ram – although 2GB is advisable if you can afford it.



The way we were

In 1980 home computers were an expensive rarity, but the ZX80 from Sinclair changed all that, with a price of £79.95. The low cost was partially due to the fact that you had to solder the machine together yourself – for a pre-built one you'd have to pay another £20. The ZX80 came with just 1KB of Ram, which is a millionth of the one

gigabyte that's common today, and a processor that ran at a snail's pace of 3.25MHz.

There was no hard disk to store programs, so most had to be loaded via a connected cassette player, which took ages. Still, it was swifter than typing in the code yourself, line by line, which is what many users were reduced to doing.



Choosing Vista

Not sure which version of Vista is best for you? We help you to choose

Vista is the latest operating system (see 'Specifications explained', p39) for PCs and there are four versions: Home Basic, Home Premium, Business, and Ultimate. Each version has a slightly different set of features, and choosing the best one for you will depend on your needs. Most people will be best served with Home Premium – our guide, below, will help you decide which flavour of Vista is right for you.



Best for budget buyers

Home Basic (price if you upgrade from XP: £66) If you're on a tight budget – or you want to install Vista on a PC that isn't particularly powerful – Basic is your best option. The most obvious difference between Basic and other versions of Vista is that when you navigate through your folders you won't see sleek 3D graphics – called

Windows Aero. You also miss out on some of the more useful tools you get with the other, more expensive, versions of Vista. However, you do get some great new search functions and the Windows Photo Gallery, which helps you to manage your photos and do basic image editing, such as removing red eye.



Best for most people

Home Premium (price if you upgrade from XP: £120) This version is aimed at those who want to use their PC for a bit of everything, with an emphasis on entertainment. Home Premium comes with all the tools that Basic has and its Windows Media Center software lets you organise your music, photos and video footage.

If you have a TV-tuner card installed in your PC, it will even double up as a personal video recorder, as you will be able to use this version of Vista to record TV programmes. Home Premium also lets you make DVDs complete with menus and comes with software that will automatically back up your files.



Best for business

Vista Business (price if you upgrade from XP: £130) If you are using your computer for serious purposes, such as running your own business, this version of Vista is probably the one to go for. You don't get the media centre features of Home Premium and Ultimate, which should help you to focus on your work, but you do get more

advanced backing-up software thrown in – a real benefit if you are using your computer for critical work; this software comes with Ultimate, too. Vista Business also has a program that makes it easy for you to access applications and data stored on, say, your desktop PC when you're using a laptop and away from the office.

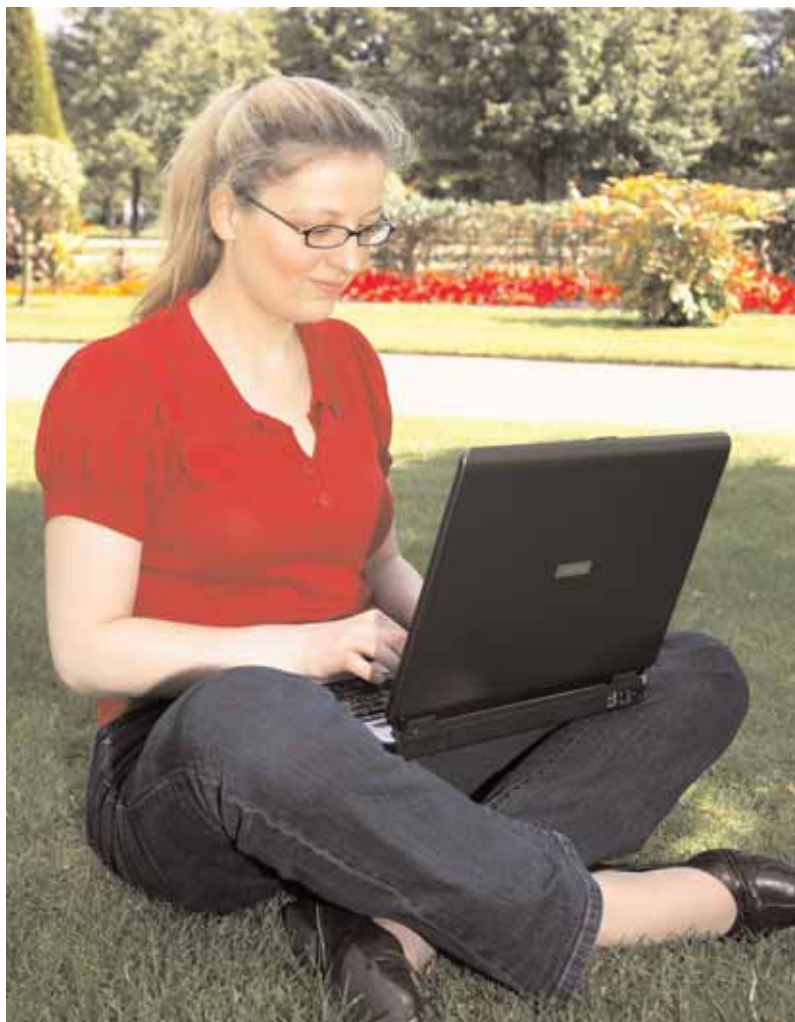


If money's no object

Vista Ultimate (price if you upgrade from XP: £188) Ultimate is the most expensive version of Vista and it has all the features of Business and Home Premium. It also comes with data encryption software to help protect your data, so if thieves were to steal your computer they wouldn't be able to access your files.

But for most, Home Premium is the version to go for. And although Ultimate's built-in backup software did well in a recent test (see *Computing Which?*, March 2007, p38), it's not worth spending an extra £68 on – particularly since the Best Buy back-up program, Symantec Norton Save and Restore, costs only £37.

Go to www.windowsvista.co.uk for more information about each version of Vista



HAPPY WITH A BASIC LAPTOP

Alena Kozakova 30, *economist*

Alena wanted a laptop for working at home (using Microsoft Word and Excel), looking at her digital photos, and downloading music to put on her iPod. 'I don't want to spend more than £500, but I want the screen and keyboard to be good quality,' she explained.

Because of Toshiba's strong reliability and good performance in our laptop tests, we recommended a £360 Toshiba Satellite L30-10V, which has a 1.73GHz dual-core CPU and 1GB of Ram. The 60GB hard disk is enough for Alena's needs, and with such a low price you would expect to compromise on spec. We advised Alena to try it out to make sure she was happy with the screen and keyboard. Alena did this but preferred the feel of the keyboard on a more expensive model.

John Lewis came out best in our survey, and when Alena went along to buy her laptop it didn't disappoint. John Lewis had a Toshiba Satellite A100-033 that a customer had returned and wanted only £360 instead of the normal £449. The spec was fine for Alena's needs (1GB Ram, a core-duo 1.6GHz CPU and 80GB hard disk), so she snapped it up. Alena found a copy of Microsoft Office on special offer for only £90 at PC World. If she hadn't been able to find such a good deal, she could have downloaded OpenOffice, a free office suite that did well in a recent *Computing Which?* test (see May 2007, p34), from www.openoffice.org. Her laptop's operating system, Windows Vista, comes with software that allows her to view and organise her photos.

£401 to £600 is enough to secure a computer that will be good for the most common applications

typing letters, online shopping and banking, and editing and printing photos were the most popular computing tasks. None of these require an expensive machine.

In fact, 26 per cent of respondents in our survey spent only £401 to £600 on their computer – enough to secure one that will be good for the most common applications. It's worth spending much more than this only if you want to edit video or play 3D games. For more details on what spec you need, see 'Specifications explained', p39.

All about Vista

If you buy a new PC rather than a Mac, it will come with Windows Vista – the latest operating system from Microsoft and the replacement for Windows XP. Some manufacturers, notably Dell, will still let you choose XP, although if you do this you risk being left behind, as future software and hardware will be designed to work with Vista. And at some point Microsoft will stop providing security updates for XP, but this won't happen for five years or more.

If you're not in the market for a new PC and are happy with your current operating system, you won't gain by upgrading to Vista; otherwise use our guide, opposite, to help you choose a version. If you are upgrading, Vista requires a more powerful PC than XP. To check whether your computer's up to the challenge, download the Upgrade Advisor from www.windowsvista.co.uk. This analyses your PC to see what versions of Vista – if any – it can run. Also check whether, say, your printer manufacturer's website has drivers – the software that makes the printer compatible with your computer – for Vista. If it doesn't, ask whether it's going to create one; otherwise you'll probably need to buy a new printer.

LEARN MORE

Try two issues of Computing Which? for £3

Computing Which? is the UK's only completely independent computing magazine. It offers impartial, jargon-free advice on everything from the absolute basics through to product reviews and step-by-step guides to perfect your know-how. Call **01992 822800** to try out two issues for only £3 or go to www.which.co.uk/cwtrial





IN SEARCH OF POWER

Russell Houghton 34, local government officer

'I want to be able to play games, record TV programmes, store music and edit photos,' Russell said. 'I want a really powerful computer so I don't have to upgrade it for a long time.'

A desktop PC will have the power that Russell needs. Dell's XPS machines are aimed at people who want a high spec. Russell played with the specifications until he had something he liked, but decided to buy from Mesh as he thought it was about £200 cheaper – although we warned him

that, according to our survey, Mesh's service isn't as good as Dell's.

Russell ordered an Elite Prestige SP. He upgraded the graphics card to a faster one with 320MB of memory and opted for 4GB of Ram and a 2.4GHz dual-core Intel processor. Russell needs a large hard disk, so he really pushed the boat out and went for a terabyte (1,000GB).

Although Russell's very pleased with his new PC, he's less happy with Mesh's service. The company failed to deliver on the day it said it would.

Help and support

Only 24 per cent of desktop and 16 per cent of laptop owners had experienced problems requiring repair. If something goes wrong with your computer, it's important to have access to good support.

Thankfully, the overall picture for support is good, although some brands were better than others. For example, Apple was the best and Evesham impressed – hopefully it will continue to do so, despite being taken over at the time of going to press. Mesh, however, wasn't well regarded and people who used PC World's support service were more likely to be dissatisfied than those who used other retailers' helplines.

Protect your data

But even the best helpdesk service can't always resuscitate your computer, which is why you should always regularly back up

your data. In fact, it's sometimes said that there are two types of computer user: those who back up their files and those who haven't yet lost important data. According to our survey, 17 per cent of members never back up, while a further 15 per cent do it only once a year or less. If this sounds like you, buying a new computer is a good chance to turn over a new leaf and protect yourself against future disaster.

You can burn files to blank CDs or DVDs (see *Which?*, July 2007, p50, for the results of our blank DVD test), but the best way to back up is to copy your files to an external hard disk that plugs into your computer. You can buy a 320GB hard disk for about £60, which is more than enough space for most people. If you need more space, the 500GB Seagate FreeAgent Desktop, £110, is a *Computing Which?* Best Buy (July 2007, p44).

Contacts

Manufacturers

Apple 0800 039 1010; www.apple.com/uk

Acer 0870 853 1005; www.acer.co.uk

Compaq 0870 010 4320; www.compaq.co.uk

Dell 0870 152 4699; www.dell.co.uk

eMachines www.uk.emachines.com

Evesham 0870 160 9500
www.evesham.com

Fujitsu-Siemens 0800 004003
www.fujitsu-siemens.co.uk

Hewlett-Packard 0845 270 4222
www.hp.co.uk

Medion 01793 715715; www.medion.co.uk

Mesh 0844 736 0440

www.meshcomputers.com

Packard Bell 0870 112 2334
www.packardbell.co.uk

Sony 0870 542 4424; www.sony.co.uk

Toshiba 0870 444 8944; www.toshiba.co.uk

Retailers

John Lewis 0845 604 9049
www.johnlewis.com

Comet 0870 542 5425; www.comet.co.uk

Currys 0870 609 7493; www.currys.co.uk

PC World 0870 242 0444; www.pcworld.co.uk

Staples 0844 456 7777; www.staples.co.uk

BEST BUY COMPETITION

Win a Best Buy laptop worth £699

Become the envy of your family and friends with a *Computing Which?* Best Buy Toshiba Satellite P200-140 laptop worth £699 – we have three to win

TO ENTER, SIMPLY ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTION

According to this report, how many *Which?* online panel members did we ask about their computers in May 2007?

(a) 50 (b) 2,352 (c) 6,718

The Toshiba Satellite P200-140 has a 120GB hard disk, 1GB Ram, 1.66GHz processor, a 17-inch screen and comes with Windows Vista Home Premium

To enter our Best Buy competition, go online to

www.which.co.uk/bestbuycompetition or send your entry on a postcard to 'Best Buy September 07; *Which?*, PO Box 44, Hertford X, SG14 1SH.

Include your name, address and postcode, a daytime phone number and your *Which?* membership number (you will find this on your *Which?* membership card as your user name).

Entries received by 26 September 2007 will be entered. Our competition is open only to current *Which?* members. Only one entry per household.

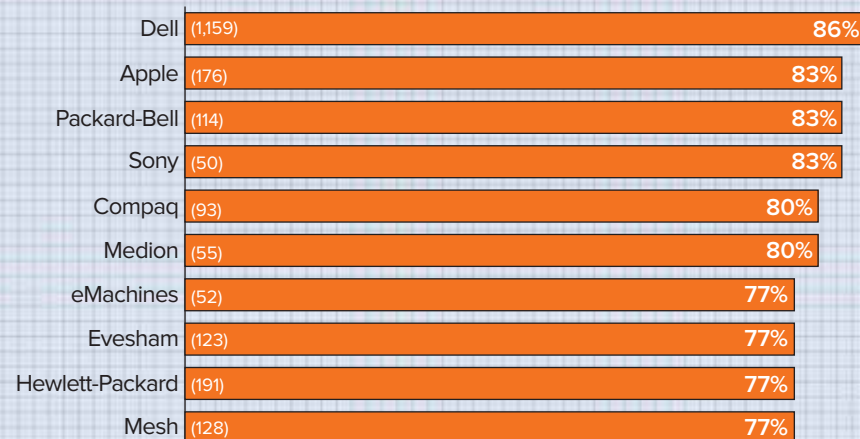
Usual rules apply. See www.which.co.uk/bestbuycompetition or *Which?*, June 2007, p49, for a full set of rules.



PHOTOGRAPHY: ROBIN BECKHAM, ALAMY

DESKTOP RELIABILITY

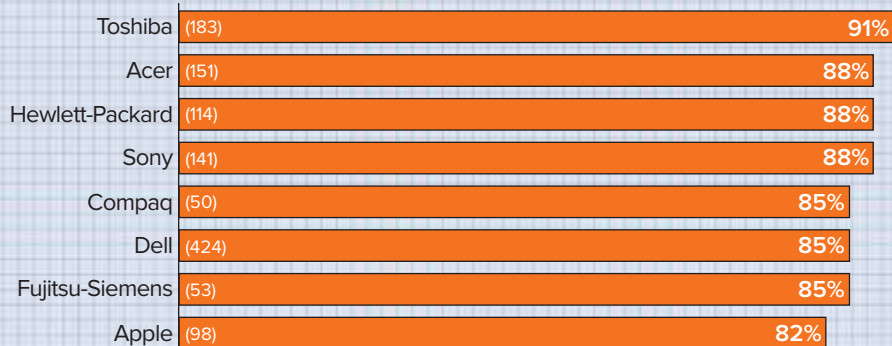
The most reliable desktop brand, and the only one to come out above average, was Dell. No brands were considered below average



Sample size in brackets, total sample 2,674

LAPTOP RELIABILITY

Laptops were 5 percentage points more reliable overall than desktops. Toshiba was the only brand to get above average. No brand came out as below average



Sample size in brackets, total sample 1,422

WHERE TO BUY

We reveal the shops where you're likely to buy a computer from again

John Lewis	★★★★★ (229)
Direct from manufacturer	★★★★★ (1880)
Mail order/internet	★★★★ (253)
Local independent shop	★★★★ (522)
Manufacturer's shop	★★★★ (176)
Supermarket	★★★★ (78)
Comet	★★★ (101)
Currys	★★★ (65)
Staples	★★★ (49)
PC World	★★★ (528)

Sample size in brackets

John Lewis is the clear winner when it comes to how likely you will buy from the same retailer again. The advantage of going to a shop like John Lewis is that you can try out any prospective purchase and make sure you



like the feel of it. Try to have a rough idea of what you need before you go in (use 'Specifications explained', p39, to help you) and of how much you want to spend.

Checklist

Your legal rights if you're having problems with your new computer

■ **Where to complain** The retailer's responsible for fixing or replacing a computer that is not of satisfactory quality. It may say you have to take the problem to the manufacturer. This is not true. If you prefer, you can ask the manufacturer to deal with the problem under its guarantee.

■ **When to reject** You are within your rights to reject goods that are faulty within a reasonable time period, typically three to four weeks.

■ **Onus of proof** If your computer goes wrong within the first six months, the onus is on the retailer to prove that this is not the result of any misuse on your part. So it's best to contact the retailer straightaway if you think something is wrong with your computer. Even if your computer has a minor fault, this may get worse over time or be an indicator of more serious problems to come.

■ **Get assessed** If you have problems after six months, and the seller is not being cooperative, you may need to prove that the computer is faulty. The easiest way to do this is to take it to a reputable local computer shop for a professional assessment – this will cost around £35.

■ **Outside of warranty** The law states that goods must last a reasonable amount of time. The warranty for your computer may last only a year or two, but if you have a problem after three or even four years, and it's reasonable not to expect to have that problem, it's worth pursuing. Expect to pay for the computer to be repaired and then try to claim this back from the retailer – you may have to take it to the small claims court.