



# Stay tuned

Our reliability survey reveals the audio-visual brands you can trust – and the brands to avoid

**G**ot a DVD player that's refusing to play your children's favourite movie? Or a personal video recorder that misses more big matches than a footballer with a broken metatarsal? Perhaps it's time to switch to a more reliable brand.

Thanks to the thousands of you who completed our survey (see right), we can tell you which audio-visual brands are most and least likely to get you reaching for the phone book to find a repairer.

## The PVR problem

The good news is that, except for personal video recorders (PVRs), all the home-audio products we asked you about in our survey – DVD players and recorders, TVs, VCRs, set-top boxes, digital camcorders and digital cameras – have a breakdown rate of 11 per cent or less.

This is the first time we have investigated the reliability of DVD recorders and PVRs. They are too new for us to bring you full six-year data but we are able to paint a picture of their reliability for up to two years

**The worst-performing brand in any category is cable TV operator NTL**

after purchase. For owners of PVRs, the outlook is not good. Around 17 per cent of models up to two years old have already broken down – a poor performance over such a short time span.

## DVD players that never break

Sony stands out from the crowd, with above-average ratings in four of the eight categories we've looked at – TVs, set-top boxes, camcorders and digital cameras. Not surprisingly, it's also a brand that those of you who own one will consistently recommend to your friends.

Humax is the most reliable brand in digital TV, with above-average ratings for both set-top boxes and PVRs. Aiwa and Hitachi get top marks for the performance of their DVD players – both brands achieved a remarkable 100 per cent reliability rating.

For the second year running, Philips TVs get a poor reliability rating. Its DVD recorders also get a below-average score but its DVD players were better than most.

The worst performing brand in any category is cable TV operator NTL. Its set-top boxes up to four years old have a breakdown rate of around a quarter. We hope the firm's recently announced job cuts don't include any repairers.

## OUR SURVEY

In November and December 2005 and January and February 2006 we sent two online questionnaires to 19,409 *Which?* readers. We received 13,754 and 12,505 replies respectively.

We asked readers who had bought audio-visual products in the last six years whether they had needed a repair. If they had, we asked why the breakdown had occurred. We also asked whether readers would recommend their brand to a friend.

For some newer product categories, such as DVD recorders, we don't have six years' worth of results, so we've assessed reliability over the longest period possible.

## KEY TO RESULTS

- Good reliability
- Average reliability
- Poor reliability



## THE VIDEO CASSETTE RECORDER THAT NEVER SLEEPS

### Bhavjit Kaila

*28, airport operations supervisor*

Bhavjit Kaila bought his Panasonic HD650b video cassette recorder back in the spring of 1996.

'I knew Panasonic had a sound history and when I saw the build quality it just looked liked it would last,' said Bhavjit. In its ten years of service it has never broken down and Bhavjit hasn't even

needed to clean the tape heads in that time.

Bhavjit originally bought his VCR for watching films, recording from television and editing home videos.

But since then, DVD technology has arrived and Bhavjit is no longer using his VCR for its original purpose.

'I've connected it to my closed-circuit television security system instead,' he says,

'so it's basically on all the time now and it's still working brilliantly. I've always kept to premium brands – I once bought a cheap VCR but it lasted only six months.' Since then, Bhavjit has always bought Sony and Panasonic.

Our survey shows that Panasonic VCRs up to six years old have an average reliability rate of 94 per cent and Sony VCRs a reliability rate of 93 per cent (see p40).

# DVD players



DVD players are the most reliable of all the audio-visual products included in our survey. The average breakdown rate is just 4 per cent for players up to six years old. Two brands stand out from the pack – Aiwa and Hitachi. Both achieved a remarkable 100 per cent reliability rating. Philips also did well, with a breakdown rate of just 1 per cent for players up to six years old.

None of the 16 brands covered by our survey got a poor rating from *Which?* readers, all achieving at least 95 per cent reliability.

## Best Buys

There are no current Best Buys from the three most reliable brands – Aiwa, Hitachi and Philips – but

there are Best Buys still available from Panasonic, Pioneer and Sony, all of which boast a 96 per cent reliability rate at least.

Top of the pile are two Panasonics – the DVD-S49, £120, and the DVD-S29 (shown), £50. Both can play back all types of recordable DVD discs. The Sony DVP-NS30, £64, has fewer features than the Panasonic models but offers good picture and sound quality. The Pioneer DV-380-S, £70, has a multiple five-disc resume feature – useful if you want it to start playing discs from where you previously left off. The Toshiba SD-150E, £35 online, is a cheap option if you want a basic DVD player.

## You recommend

The most popular brands among *Which?* readers are Panasonic, Sony, Pioneer and Toshiba – 40 to 50 per cent would definitely recommend them to their friends.

At the other end of the scale, between 13 and 28 per cent of Goodmans, Hitachi, LG, Pacific, Philips, Sharp, Technika, Samsung, Matsui and Alba/Bush owners would definitely recommend them.

## BREAKDOWN SUMMARY

The top three reasons why your machines broke down

- 49% Refuses to play disc
- 13% Sound problem
- 9% Picture problem

## DVD PLAYERS

Reliability of DVD players up to six years old. Average = 96%

Aiwa	(51)	100%
Hitachi	(77)	100%
Philips	(340)	99%
Goodmans	(109)	98%
JVC	(240)	98%
Pioneer	(195)	98%
Samsung	(142)	98%
Panasonic	(847)	96%
Sharp	(72)	96%
Sony	(894)	96%
Technika	(52)	96%
Toshiba	(534)	96%
Alba/Bush	(199)	95%
LG	(114)	95%
Matsui	(51)	95%
Pacific	(133)	95%

Sample size in brackets. Total sample: 5,078 owners

# DVD recorders



This is the first time we have collected reliability data from *Which?* readers who own DVD recorders.

The good news is that most brands are pretty reliable, with an average breakdown rate of just 7 per cent for machines up to two years old. There is bad news, though, for owners of Philips and JVCs – they have a breakdown rate during the first two years after purchase of around one in eight. Both brands get a below-average rating.

## BREAKDOWN SUMMARY

The top two reasons why your machines broke down

- 33% Refuses to play disc
- 18% Does not record

## Best Buys

Panasonic and Sony are two of the brands to look out for. The Panasonic DMR-ES20DEBS (above), £187, comes with a built-in tuner for picking up Freeview channels and has good picture and sound quality. The Sony RDR-GX310, £253 online, is pricey but is one of the best you can buy for both picture and sound quality. It also has a built-in Freeview tuner.

Pioneer also produces a great DVD recorder – the DVR-230-S, £150), which offers exceptional picture quality, though it doesn't have a Freeview tuner. Our survey didn't give us enough information to include a rating for the reliability of Pioneer recorders.

## You recommend

Sony and Panasonic are the most popular brands with *Which?* readers – around 60 per cent of owners would definitely recommend them to their chums. With its poor reliability record, it's no surprise that Philips comes bottom of the pile – only around a quarter of you would definitely tell your friends to get one. Liteon also gets a poor rating.

## DVD RECORDERS

Reliability of recorders up to two years old. Average = 93%

Liteon	(50)	96%
Panasonic	(503)	93%
Sony	(165)	93%
Toshiba	(51)	90%
JVC	(81)	87%
Philips	(110)	87%

Sample size in brackets.  
Total sample: 1,202 owners

## BEYOND REPAIR?



■ Even the most reliable TV or DVD player will eventually need to be replaced. If you're someone who automatically heads for the high street for this sort of item, our research suggests you could be wasting a small fortune.

■ We compared the best high-street and internet prices for a range of *Which?* Best Buys (see 'Net savings', *Which?*, November 2005, p28) and found that digital cameras were on average 26 per cent cheaper online, widescreen TVs were 23 per cent cheaper and you could save 17 per cent on PVRs.

# Widescreen TVs



LCD televisions are more reliable than plasmas – just 7 per cent of LCDs up to six years old need repairs, compared with 9 per cent of plasma TVs. Both formats are more reliable than traditional cathode-ray tube (CRT) TVs, which have a 10 per cent breakdown rate.

Our survey suggests that buying a Sony or a Toshiba TV will help you stay tuned for longer. Both suffer a breakdown rate of just 5 per cent up to their sixth birthday.

The picture is not quite so rosy at the other end of the TV table, however. Sharp TVs up to six years old have an alarming 17 per cent breakdown rate, while Loewe, Philip and Hitachi are only marginally better. If the prospect of missing your favourite programmes fills you with horror, avoid these brands.

## WIDESCREEN TVs

Reliability of widescreen TVs up to six years old. Average = 90%

Sony	(1583)	95%
Toshiba	(538)	95%
Panasonic	(1555)	91%
JVC	(341)	90%
Thomson	(84)	90%
Bush	(103)	88%
Sanyo	(99)	88%
Loewe	(109)	85%
Philips	(726)	85%
Hitachi	(153)	85%
Sharp	(89)	83%

Sample size in brackets. Total sample: 6,000 owners

### BREAKDOWN SUMMARY

The top three reasons why your machines broke down

35%	Problems with the picture (excluding fuzzy or snowy screen)
11%	Problem with sound
8%	On/off switch broke

### Best Buys

If you are looking for a conventional CRT television, the Toshiba 32Z532, £400, is a good choice. Its 50Hz picture got top marks in our tests for scrolling and panning, which means it gives great pictures when you are watching sport and fast-moving action movies.

If you want a slimline LCD television and your budget will extend to £1,600, the Sony KDL-V32A 12U is a Best Buy. It impressed our viewing panel in both standard and high-definition modes and also has a Freeview receiver built in.

If you prefer plasma TVs, the Toshiba 42WP56P (above), £1,300, which has a huge 42-inch screen, is a Best Buy. It offers consistently good quality pictures, whatever you're watching. If you find television controls daunting, this one could be for you – it has large, clear, on-screen menus and a well laid-out remote control. On the downside, this one is not compatible with high-definition TV.

### You recommend

Nearly two thirds of Sony owners would definitely recommend their television brand to their friends. Over 60 per cent of Panasonic owners would also recommend their brand, as would a similar proportion of Loewe owners, despite this brand having a poor reliability rating.

# Video cassette recorders

DVD recorders and PVRs (see right) may offer superior picture quality when you're recording from TV but traditional VCRs are more reliable. Just 7 per cent of VCRs up to six years old need a repair, according to our survey – compare that with the 17 per cent breakdown rate for PVRs up to two years old.

None of the brands in our survey really stood out from the crowd except Toshiba – and that was for the wrong reasons. It is the least reliable brand you told us about, with a breakdown rate of one in ten.

### Best Buys

With fewer and fewer VCRs being sold in high-street stores, the pool from which to choose a good one is getting smaller. Fortunately, there are a couple of excellent Best Buy Panasonic's still available. The NV-HV61EB (below), £70, is one of the easiest VCRs to use. Its

picture quality is good and it has excellent sound, too. The NV-SV121EBS, £150, has excellent picture and good sound quality and can also record to S-VHS for superior picture quality.

### You recommend

Just over half of Panasonic owners would definitely recommend their VCR to their friends. Sony also gets an above-average rating in our survey.

However, there is a long list of brands that you would not recommend to friends: Alba/Bush, Daewoo, Hitachi, LG, Matsui, Philips, Sanyo, Sharp and Toshiba all get ratings below 30 per cent.

### BREAKDOWN SUMMARY

The top three reasons why your machines broke down

21%	Does not record
16%	Object (eg tape) caught inside
15%	Tracking problem



## VCRs

Reliability of VCRs up to six years old. Average = 93%

Alba/Bush	(138)	95%
Samsung	(135)	95%
Sharp	(410)	95%
Panasonic	(1561)	94%
Daewoo	(89)	93%
Hitachi	(190)	93%
LG	(128)	93%
Matsui	(106)	93%
Philips	(314)	93%
Sanyo	(156)	93%
Sony	(1076)	93%
JVC	(426)	92%
Toshiba	(367)	90%

Sample size in brackets. Total sample: 5,563 owners

# Set-top boxes

More than 70 per cent of UK homes now have digital television – and the bulk of them receive their pictures via a set-top box. Just one in ten boxes up to four years old needs a repair, according to our survey, but the more basic Freeview box is far more reliable than those supplied by satellite and cable operators such as Sky or NTL.

Overall, Freeview boxes have a reliability rate of 93 per cent, but those made by Grundig and Sagem stand out from the crowd, with breakdown rates of just 3 and 4 per cent respectively. Other trustworthy brands are Humax, Daewoo, Ferguson, Panasonic, Philips, Pioneer and Sony.

Cable operator NTL supplies the most unreliable set-top boxes, according to our survey, with a 24 per cent breakdown rate for models up to four years old. The only crumb of comfort is that NTL will replace or fix your box for free. This is because NTL only leases it to you as part of your contract.

Satellite broadcaster Sky also scored badly in our survey, with an unimpressive 85 per cent reliability rate. Sky gives you a box when you take out a subscription and will fix it free of charge during the first 12 months but, after that, if a repair is needed, you will have to pay a £60 call-out fee.

Picture freezing and a loss of channels are by far the most common reasons for your set-top boxes grinding to a halt, according to our survey. The boxes use software to update the electronic programme guide and decode digital channels and this software is prone to crashing or freezing. In many cases simply unplugging the box and rebooting can fix this.

If that doesn't work, it's always worth speaking to your cable or satellite provider (if you have a contract) or calling the manufacturers' helpline if you have a Freeview box before handing over your hard-earned cash to a local repairer.

A quick fix may be achieved over the phone at no cost, as the 'repair' may consist of no more than a software update that you can download yourself.

## BREAKDOWN SUMMARY

The top three reasons why your machines broke down

- 31% No channels
- 27% Picture freezes
- 9% Weak/bad signal/interference



## Best Buys

The Sony VTXD800 (above), £99, is a stylish box that can be used horizontally or in an upright position. It's got plenty of features, a decent electronic programme guide and a remote that can also control other makes of TV. The Philips DTR320 is half the price but is not as easy to use.

## You recommend

Sony again heads the list of brands you would definitely recommend to a friend, along with Humax. Less than a quarter of Daewoo, Goodmans, Grundig, Nokia, NTL, Pace, Samsung and Thomson owners would recommend their brand.

## SET-TOP BOXES

Reliability of set-top boxes up to four years old. Average = 89%

Grundig	(108)	97%
Sagem	(90)	96%
Humax	(316)	94%
Daewoo	(77)	93%
Ferguson	(75)	93%
Panasonic	(286)	93%
Philips	(200)	93%
Pioneer	(61)	93%
Sony	(342)	93%
Samsung	(63)	91%
Thomson	(213)	91%
Goodmans	(229)	87%
Nokia	(363)	87%
Pace	(243)	87%
Sky	(1152)	85%
NTL	(84)	76%

Sample size in brackets. Total sample: 4,417 owners

# Personal video recorders

When they are working, personal video recorders (PVRs) are brilliant at recording from television, with virtually no degradation of picture and sound quality. Unfortunately, they suffer more than their share of problems, according to our survey. PVRs are relatively new products and we have data for only the last two years, but over that time one in six has needed a repair.

To put that figure in context, washer-dryers, which are the least reliable domestic appliances in our studies (see *Which?*, June 2006, p33), have a breakdown rate of one in nine among machines which are up to two years old.

There is one shining light amid the gloom. Humax completely trumps the rest of the field with an impressive 93 per cent reliability rate, compared with an average of just 79 per cent for all other brands.

Failure to record favourite shows was the main cause of frustration, accounting for a quarter of all PVR breakdowns. Other problems include the pic-

ture freezing and poor playback.

Like set-top boxes, PVRs can be prone to software problems, so if unplugging your box and rebooting doesn't fix it, your first stop should be the maker or service provider to see if the issue can easily be resolved.

## Best Buys

At present there isn't a Best Buy Humax PVR. The Sky+ (below) is an excellent model and the best we've tested. It can record subtitles and has two tuners, so you can watch from one digital channel while recording another. It costs £89 including installation (£199 + £60 installation for existing customers). The best of the Freeview models we've tested are both from Sagem: the PVR6680T, £184, and the PVR7280T, £178.

## You recommend

Given their superior reliability, it is no surprise to find that more Humax owners (65 per cent) would definitely recommend their brand to a friend than owners of any other PVR.



## PVRs

Reliability of PVRs up to two years old. Average = 83%

Humax	(137)	93%
Digifusion	(61)	79%
Sky	(325)	79%
Thomson	(73)	79%

Sample size in brackets. Total sample: 814 owners

## BREAKDOWN SUMMARY

The top four reasons why your machines broke down

- 61% Does not record
- 42% Picture freezes
- 25% Doesn't play back
- 24% No channels

Panasonic makes the most reliable digital cameras on the market

# Digital camcorders

Imagine your trusty camcorder conking out just as you are about to capture baby's first steps. It's not a happy thought. Fortunately, our survey suggests that most digital camcorders are pretty durable. Average reliability in this market is an impressive 93 per cent, with Sony once again outperforming the field. It has a breakdown rate of just 4 per cent on models up to four years old.

Canon and JVC get below-average ratings in our survey, but, even so, fewer than one in ten of their camcorders need fixing in the first four years and there is a Canon Best Buy in our latest test (p50).

## Best Buys

Panasonic has a reliability rate of 95 per cent and there are two good Best Buys from this brand. The ultra-compact SDR-S100 (right), £1,000, is pricey but produces really sharp video images and takes great action shots indoors and out. The footage we shot with this one looked particularly good when played back on television. It records images on to SD memory cards, which can be

expensive to buy if you want to record a lot of footage.

The NV-GS250B, £600, offers excellent overall image quality and works well in poor light. It has the advantage of recording on to Mini-DV tapes, which means you have a great choice of editing options when you get home.

## You recommend

Sony is the most highly rated brand among readers, with around 60 per cent saying that they would definitely recommend it to a friend. The worst rated is JVC – only a third of owners would definitely recommend this brand to their friends.



# Digital cameras

Your digital camera shouldn't let you down – just 5 per cent of them up to four years old need repairing, according to our survey. The pick of the bunch is Panasonic, which achieves a remarkable 99 per cent reliability rate. Sony also gets a good rating – just 2 per cent of its cameras had to be taken to a repairer in their first four years.

The only major brand with a below-average reliability rating is Fujifilm.

## Best Buys

If you are looking for a great camera that won't let you down, there are two outstanding Panasonic Best Buys.

The DMC-FZ5 (above right), £260 online, is one of a small but growing breed of cameras with image stabilisation, to alleviate camera shake. Flash pictures are excellent and, although image quality isn't outstanding, this feature-rich camera offers a great overall package. It has 4.9 megapixels, which means it's suitable for shooting all but the largest pictures.

The DMC-FZ30 (£381 online) is one of the best cameras we've ever tested. It combines impressive image quality with an



excellent array of features. It is particularly good for photographing fast-moving objects and produces images you can print at top quality all the way up to A4 size.

## You recommend

Over 70 per cent of you would definitely recommend a Canon camera. Around two thirds of Panasonic and Sony owners would recommend their brands. Only a quarter of Samsung owners would do the same.

## DIGITAL CAMERAS

Reliability of digital cameras up to four years old. Average = 95%

Panasonic	(182)	99%
Sony	(841)	98%
Canon	(1838)	95%
HP	(90)	95%
Kodak	(297)	95%
Nikon	(1071)	95%
Olympus	(1061)	95%
Samsung	(77)	95%
Casio	(163)	94%
Konica Minolta	(359)	94%
Pentax	(249)	94%
Fujifilm	(1034)	92%

Sample size in brackets. Total sample: 7,579 owners

## BREAKDOWN SUMMARY

The top four reasons why your machines broke down

31%	Failure to record
10%	Poor picture quality
9%	Cassette jam problems
9%	Battery failure

## DIGITAL CAMCORDERS

Reliability of digital camcorders up to four years old. Average = 93%

Sony	(850)	96%
Panasonic	(333)	95%
Canon	(282)	90%
JVC	(242)	90%

Sample size in brackets. Total sample: 1,825 owners

# Survey extra: cookers and ovens

The *Which?* reliability survey has traditionally focused on domestic appliances and home audio equipment. This year we also included cooking devices. Here are the highlights

■ Freestanding cookers are the cooking appliances that are most likely to break down. Models up to six years old have a reliability rating of just 77 per cent, according to our survey. Creda and Parkinson Cowan are the most reliable brands. Smeg is the one you're most likely to recommend to a friend. Failure of the oven to heat up is the most common reason for repairs.

■ Built-in ovens up to six years old have a reliability rating of 81 per cent. Brands with better than average reliability are Bosch/Siemens, Hotpoint and Whirlpool. Owners of Bosch/Siemens and Neff are most likely to recommend them to their friends. Failure to heat up properly was again the number one reason for calling out a repairer.

■ Built-in hobs up to six years old are pretty reliable – they have a breakdown rate of only around 7 per cent, according to our survey. Hotpoint is the only brand with better-than-average reliability. Around half of all Bosch, De Dietrich, Miele and Neff owners would definitely recommend them to a friend. Problems with dials and switches are the most common faults.