



# BUYING A COMPUTER

Essential advice for beginners and experienced computer users on buying the right PC for your needs without breaking the bank

**T**empting adverts for computers costing £300 from companies such as Dell may sound too good to be true, but if you will only ever use your computer for sending email, browsing the internet or writing letters, that's all you need to spend.

The only problem is that, although simple email and internet browsing is why most people initially buy their computers, once they have them, they branch out into more sophisticated tasks, such as digital photo editing and music downloads. So before buying the bare minimum, think about how you're likely to expand your use of your new machine. You may not plan to edit photos or download and store music now, but will you become interested in this in the next few months? If so, it's worth spending more.

Activities such as storing digital photos and music don't automatically require an expensive powerful computer. To make sure you don't pay more than necessary, plan your purchase. Think about how much hard-disk space you'll need to store the music and images, for example.

Begin by reading our advice and table on p45 to help you work out what type of computer user you are and the specification you need.

Once you have an idea of the specification you require, you need to consider which brand to buy and where to buy it from. To help you with this decision, we carried out a survey among 15,393 readers in June this year, asking them about the reliability of their computers, the support they received from the manufacturer and retailer, and whether they would recommend the brand they bought to a friend.

## BEST BRANDS

For reliability Apple, Dell and Hewlett-Packard stood out as above average. Evesham, Mesh and now-defunct Time came out significantly worse than the rest (see 'Reliability', p42). Oddly, despite its computers being reliable, Hewlett-Packard

owners didn't seem particularly satisfied with them. The percentage who'd recommend the brand to a friend was lower than average (see 'Recommend to a friend', p42). But Apple, Dell and Sony did well.

## PHONE, ONLINE AND RETAIL SUPPORT

If you've bought from a shop, it should be your first port of call if your computer goes wrong. Local independent retailers did the best job, both online and by phone (see 'Support', p43). MasterCare, which provides phone help for Dixons and PC World, did badly. Respondents found it neither helpful nor swift. One in four users was surprised by the cost: it's £1.50 a minute.

If you can't get to the retailer or it's outside shopping hours, you want to know that the manufacturer is at hand. Hewlett-Packard owners said it has excellent phone helpline support, better than Sony and Dell, but not quite as good as Apple. Apple also topped the online help section, but Dell was below par and Sony didn't distinguish itself. However, owners of both Dell and Sony were still keen to recommend the brands.

## TIME AND TINY COMPUTERS

The news in July that the Granville Technology Group, maker of Time and Tiny computers and owner of The Computer Shop retail outlets, had gone into administration wasn't entirely surprising to us given that Time and Tiny brands have consistently received poor feedback from members in our regular surveys. We've included them in our tables, overleaf, so you can see how they fare.

Poor sales advice, low reliability and sub-standard support meant that few owners of Time or Tiny PCs would definitely recommend their brand.

If you've been unlucky enough to lose money because you had an order with Time or Tiny that wasn't completed, read last month's story, 'Tiny collapse costs customers', p9, for advice.

## MONITOR AND GRAPHICS CARD

A conventional 21-inch CRT (cathode ray tube) screen costs about £220 while a 20-inch LCD (liquid crystal display) screen will cost at least £420. All but budget models include a 17-inch LCD screen.

Games that boast advanced 3D graphics, such as Doom III, require a top-range graphics card to look good on screen. There are two types – ATI and NVidia. For playing games, buy an ATI X850 Pro or an NVidia 6800 Ultra card or better. In general, the higher the number in the card's name, the faster it works.

## OPTICAL DRIVES

Most computers come with a CD drive that will play DVDs and burn CDs. If you want to edit your own videos and burn them to DVD, you'll need a DVD burner, and these are increasingly common on all but the cheapest models. If you opt for a DVD burner, it will boost the price of your computer by around £50 to £70. A DVD burner is also useful if you want to back up large amounts of data, because a DVD disc holds 4.5GB or 9GB of data, compared with a CD which holds 0.7GB, or 700MB.



## PC VERSUS APPLE

Apple users say their machines are easier to use than PCs, and easier to maintain because fewer viruses are written for Macs.

Apple bundles a good selection of software with its computers. But there's a smaller selection of software overall than for PCs, particularly games.

There's a perception that Macs are pricier than PCs but they're more competitively priced than they used to be.

## MEMORY AND STORAGE

Computers have two types of memory. The hard disk provides long-term memory – measured in gigabytes (GB). The short term memory is Ram – usually expressed in megabytes (MB).

You need at least a 120GB hard disk if you want to store lots of music, photos, or videos. As little as 40GB will suffice if you just email and browse the internet.

Ram is important for power-hungry tasks, such as playing games and video editing. The more Ram you have, the faster your computer will run. 512MB is OK for these tasks, but 1GB is preferable.

## PROCESSOR

The processor, or CPU, determines the speed of the computer. There are two brands in Windows-based models – Intel and AMD. Intel makes the Pentium 4 and the cheaper, less powerful Celeron. AMD offers the Athlon and budget Sempron.

A numbering system shows its speed. An AMD Athlon 64 3800 is faster and pricier than an Athlon 64 3200, and a Pentium 4 560 is faster and pricier than a Pentium 4 520. The bigger the number, the faster the chip. The speed is sometimes shown in gigahertz (GHz), too. But AMD and Intel chips are not directly comparable.

Apple uses G4 or G5 processors made by IBM.

# NEED TO KNOW

There are three basic ways of buying a computer – in a shop, by phone, or online – and each has its advantages.

## IN A SHOP

The main advantage of buying from a shop is that you can try out the model you're interested in and ask the sales staff questions. We've found that the quality of the answers varies – independents and John Lewis do best.

If you're new to computers, local independents are good because they're nearby if you have a problem.

## BY PHONE

Buying by phone means you can ask for advice and often get a more competitive price than from a shop.

## ONLINE

Online is where you'll find the real savings, but on the downside, you need to navigate the computer jargon yourself.

## EXTRAS

Be wary of freebies and extras. A free printer, for example, is tempting, but it may be a cheap model that is expensive to run, so it's worth checking the price of replacement ink cartridges before you buy.



## OUR SURVEY

We carried out a survey among 15,393 readers in June this year, asking them about the reliability of their computers, the support

they received from the manufacturer and retailer, and whether they would recommend the brand they bought to a friend.

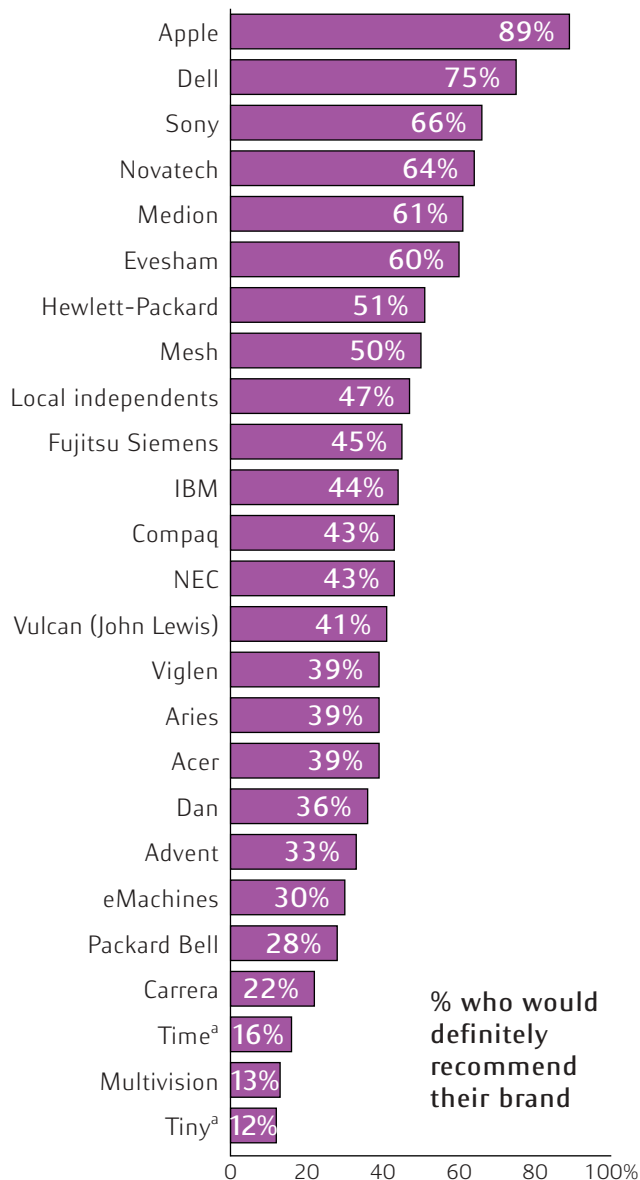
## Recommend to a friend

The chart shows the percentage of respondents who would definitely recommend their brand of computer to a friend.

This is a good overall test for which brand of computer to consider buying. Apple comes out top, and Dell and Sony owners are also very positive about their models of Windows-based PCs. Evesham, surprisingly, does

well here too, given its poor reliability rating (see 'Reliability', right).

Tiny and Time are at the bottom end of the table, reflecting the consistently poor feedback we have received about them.



## Reliability

The chart shows how reliable brands were, based on computers bought in 2005. To count as broken, a computer needs to have been unusable by the owner until repair.

Thirty-two per cent of Time computers bought this year have already needed repair, compared with just 10 per cent of Apple, Dell and Hewlett-Packard models.

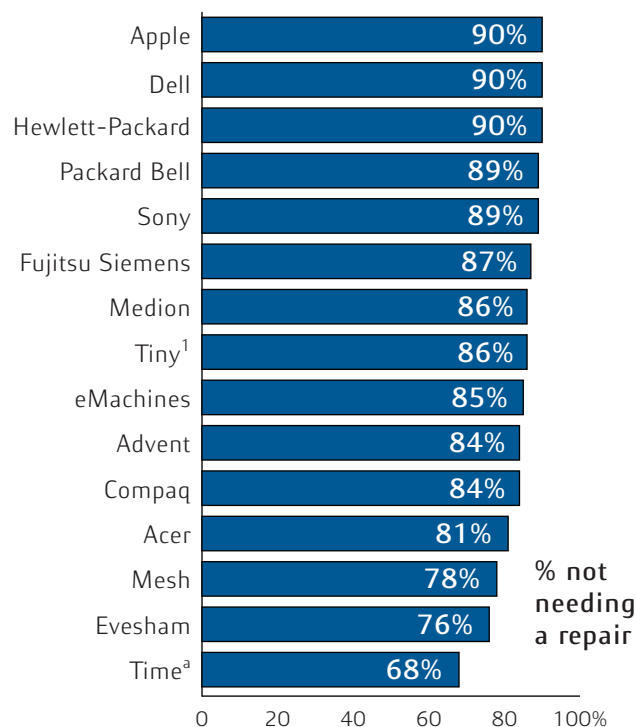
Looking at data from the past five years, we found that about half of all faults occurred within the first year of ownership and most of them were hardware-related. In other words, something physically went wrong and needed a repair or replacing.

In 68 per cent of cases, when a computer did have a fault, the problem was solved first time. But 10 per cent of those who had

problems had to have three or four separate repairs.

Under the Sale of Goods Act, consumers are protected if they buy faulty goods. In 2002 the act was strengthened so that if you buy a product and it goes wrong within six months, it is assumed that it was faulty when you bought it unless the retailer can prove otherwise. However, it is not clear how far the seller has to go to prove this.

After six months, you still have rights, but the onus is on you to prove the computer was faulty when you bought it.



## COMPUTING WHICH?

To receive two issues of *Computing Which?* free, plus a free mousemat, call 0800 252 100 quoting UERX05 or go to [www.computingwhich.co.uk](http://www.computingwhich.co.uk). Your payment details will be requested for when your free trial ends.



<sup>a</sup> Time, Tiny and The Computer Shop have ceased trading

# Support

We asked computer owners to rate the help they received from the manufacturer or retailer when they had a problem with their computer. The chart shows combined ratings for online and phone help.

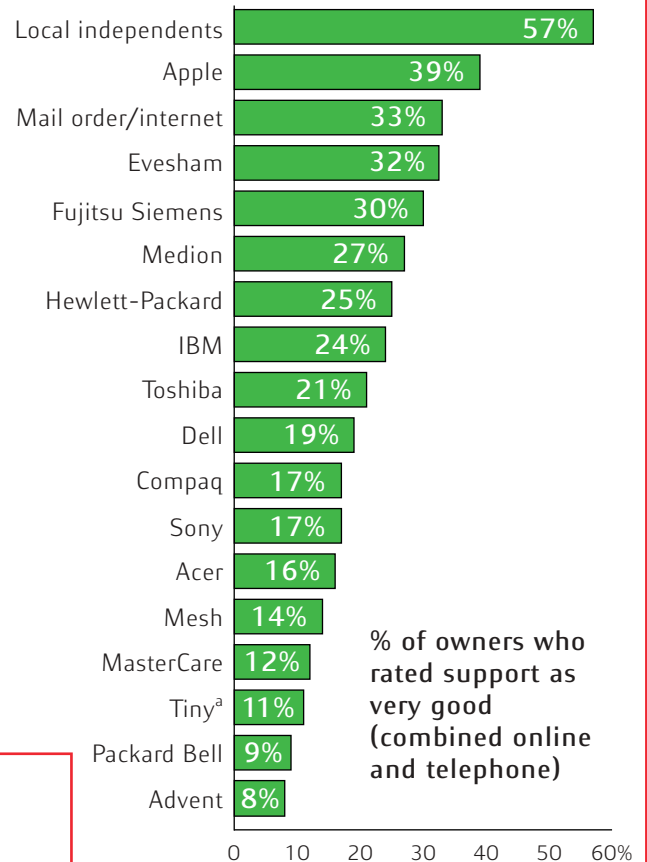
Local independents come out top, with 57 per cent being very good, followed by Apple with 39 per cent.

Drilling deeper into the figures we found that local independents did well for support services in general. In one in four of all cases the problem was solved during the first phone call and replacement hardware or software was needed in only a minority of cases.

Hewlett-Packard, which came out as reliable as a brand overall, did well for support, with one in five owners rating it very good.

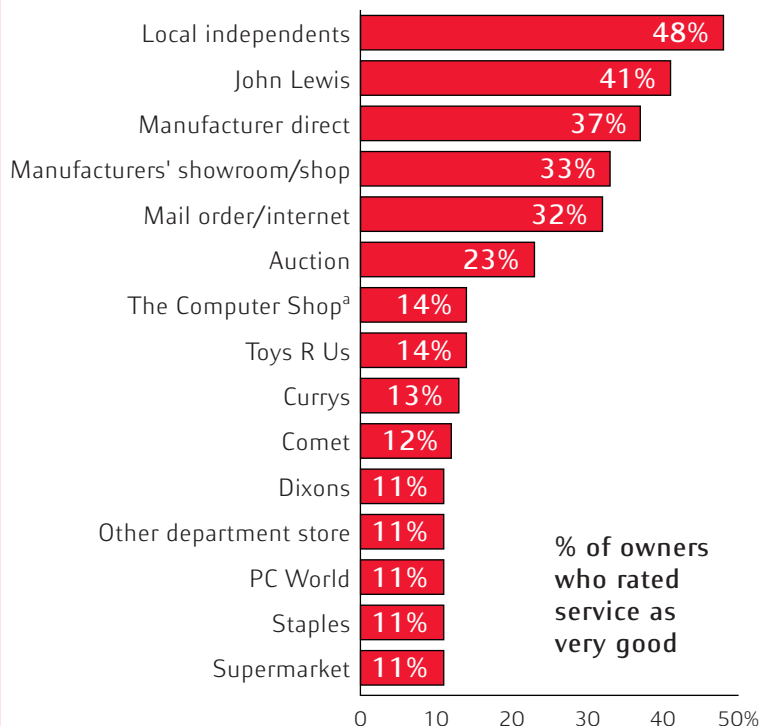
Although Dell is recommended as a brand by its owners, its phone and online support lets it down, with only one in five owners rating it as very good. This means that if think you might need support – say, you're a less experienced computer user – it might not be the brand to pick.

MasterCare, the customer care service from Dixons, was the only retailer support service to be below average in all the main areas we asked about – that is, the knowledge and politeness of staff, speed of response and overall service.



# Overall service

We asked people to rate their overall satisfaction with the service they received. Below is the ranking based on the percentage of people who described the service as 'very good'.



Local independents come top in the satisfaction table, followed by John Lewis. Satisfaction among those ordering direct from the manufacturer is also high. All three stand out as a sensible way to buy.

Worryingly, high-street stalwarts such as Dixons and Currys, and specialist computer retailer PC World, are no better than toy retailer Toys R Us.

Even online auction websites, such as eBay, had more very satisfied customers than PC World and Dixons.

We were surprised by the number of people who were satisfied after buying a computer through an online auction site. Sixty of the 15,393 people who completed the survey said

they used eBay. But it's a brave choice. If you do buy a computer on eBay, read its advice at <http://pages.ebay.co.uk/safetycentre> on buying and paying safely.

Check that the person you buy from has positive feedback and be aware of fraud. If you're buying from an individual, there's the risk that you'll never see the goods you've paid for. eBay will cover you up to £150 if this happens, but you can get better cover if you use eBay's PayPal payment service.

If you buy from a business that is selling on eBay, you are protected by the Sale of Goods Act. See 'Reliability', left, for more details.





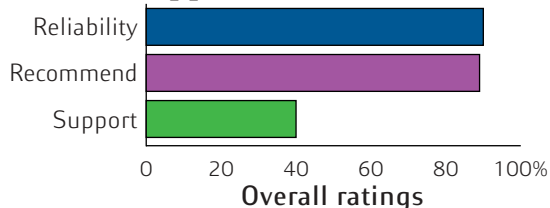
## Apple

For the basic user we suggest the **Mac Mini (1)**. It is designed to be used with existing PC screens, mice and keyboards so, if you need these, you'll have to pay an extra £54 for the mouse and keyboard and £549 for an Apple 20-inch monitor. You can buy cheaper monitors from Formac, an Apple specialist, at [www.formac.co.uk](http://www.formac.co.uk). We suggest an Oxygen 1900 19-inch screen at £235.

The **eMac Combo (2)** is also good for the basic user and has a monitor built in. Like the Mini (1), it will cope with emailing and internet access, but the G4 processor will be too slow for creative work such as image editing.

If you want to do typical office tasks, such as writing letters and creating spreadsheets, the **iMac G5 (5)** is a better bet. It has the more powerful G5 CPU. You might want to add 512MB of Ram (an extra £70) to get the best speed from the G5 chip.

### Apple



Adding a Superdrive DVD burner for £70 will make it a decent machine for creative users who want to create their own movies on DVD, for example.

**Apple Power Mac G5 (10)** is also excellent for creative users. Like the Mac Mini (1), it has no display. A 20-inch screen costs £549 from Apple, or the Formac Oxygen 1900 19-inch monitor is £235.

Apple has said it will start using the same Intel chips used in PCs, rather than its current IBM chips. There is no set date, but estimates suggest it will be in about two years. Apple users will have to upgrade software to work on new Intel-based computers. Still, two years is a long time in computing, so if you want to buy an Apple now, you shouldn't worry. Just don't buy one with an IBM chip in 20 months when the Intel chips are about to come in.

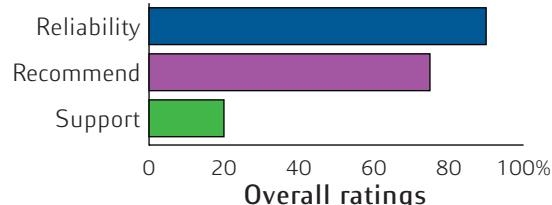
## Dell

You can buy Dell computers only online at [www.dell.co.uk](http://www.dell.co.uk) or by phone. Its machines are reliable but there's such a choice of specification that you might find it confusing, so these are our suggestions.

At £300 the **Dimension 3000 (3)** is fine for basic tasks. It has only a 40GB hard disk, so will need more if you want to store lots of music or photos, for example. An extra 80GB is £24. You can opt for a faster processor, too. A 3GHz Celeron adds £80.

But if you find your price getting closer to £500, consider a **Dimension 5100 (4)** instead. It's ideal

### Dell



for home users who want to run several pieces of software at once.

For gamers, we suggest the **Dimension XPS 600 (7)** or the slightly slower but cheaper **Dimension XPS Gen-5 (8)**. Both have 1GB of Ram, which helps power-hungry games run more smoothly.

For creative users, try a **Precision 380 (9)**, which is cheaper still, but has a fast enough processor for video and music editing, and 1GB Ram.

The flexibility to change the specification of Dell machines is a good feature, but remember that the fastest processors and other components are pricey compared with the extra performance they bring. Upgrading from a 3GHz to a 3.4GHz Pentium 4 costs £141, but is only just over 11 per cent faster.

Remember to consider the balance of a machine's specification. A fast 3.4 GHz processor will be impeded with less than 512MB of Ram, for example.

### 4 Dell DIMENSION 5100



## BEST BRANDS

There are three brands that stand out in the main areas of reliability, customer support, and whether people would recommend them to a friend – Apple, Dell and Sony.

Although we haven't tested individual desktop machines from these brands, we feel that these companies' computers can be safely recommended, provided that you buy the right model for your needs. See 'Using the table' for help on picking a model.

## USING THE CHARTS

**Reliability** Percentage of computers bought in 2005 not needing repair.

**Recommend** Percentage of owners who would definitely recommend the brand to a friend.

**Support** Combined online and telephone rating.

11 Sony  
VAIO RA

## Sony

You can buy Sony machines in conventional high-street shops, or direct from Sony's [www.sony-style.co.uk](http://www.sony-style.co.uk) website. It doesn't offer a cheap computer for the basic user and there are no specific models we recommend for gamers.

Home users should try the **VGC-V3M (6)**. This is half computer, half TV. It can record programmes on to its hard disk and burn them to DVD, but would be equally happy piling through a spreadsheet, thanks to a fast 3.2GHz Pentium 4 processor. But you pay more for small size and style.

Creative users with around £2,000 to spend should try the **Vaio RA 304 (11)**, which Sony calls a 'home server' because the computer includes software and hardware that let you record TV and beam music and video around the home wirelessly. It does normal computing chores too, and is good for video or photo editing. This is aided by a wide range of bundled software, including Photoshop Elements, which is excellent for photo editing.

## Local independent

If you're a beginner with no computer-literate friends or family nearby, buying from your local independent dealer is a good idea. Independents offer the best support bar none and, if they're close by, it's easier to take your computer in for repairs or help.

Independents will sell brands or put together a machine for you from different components, so get a rough idea about what you want before you go to the shop. Use the table below and the guide on p41 of this article to help you do this.

### USING THE TABLE

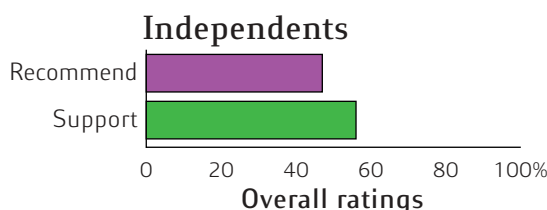
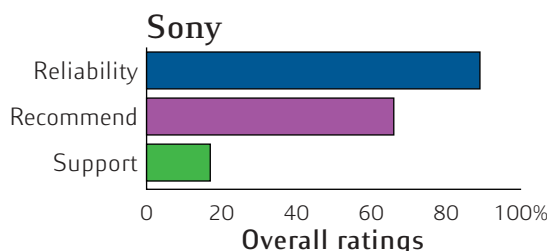
A **basic user** is interested only in email and web surfing. A **home user** will want to create spreadsheets or presentations as well as do photo or video editing. The **creative user** will want to do all of this quickly and often at once, so needs a pricier, more powerful model. A **gamer** will need a high-specification computer to play the latest games. These computers will also be suitable for creative work.

The computers in the table are a guide. In most cases you will be able to adjust the specification. If the model listed isn't available, ask for details of the replacement model, and check its features against the table.

### Specification

**Price** The price direct from the manufacturer's shop on 6 September 2005.

**Processor/Ram/Hard disk/Graphics processor** See boxes on p41.



### Personal computers

#### BASIC USER

	Price (£)	Processor	Ram	Hard disk (GB)	Graphics processor
1 Apple Mac Mini	359 <sup>a</sup>	G4 1.25GHz	512MB	40	ATI Radeon 9200 32MB
2 Apple eMac Combo	549	G4 1.42GHz	256MB	80	ATI Radeon 9600 64MB
3 Dell Dimension 3000	299	Celeron 320 (2.4GHz)	512MB	40	n/a

#### HOME USER

4 Dell Dimension 5100	542	Pentium 4 521 (2.8GHz)	512MB	160	ATI Radeon X300 128MB
5 Apple iMac G5	899	G5 1.8GHz	512MB	160	ATI Radeon 9600 128MB
6 Sony VGC-V3M	1,299	Pentium 4 540 (3.2GHz)	512MB	250	NVidia GeForce Go 5700 128MB

#### GAMERS

7 Dell Dimension XPS 600	1,624 <sup>b</sup>	Pentium 4 640 (3.2GHz)	1GB	250	NVidia GeForce 7800 GTX 256MB
8 Dell Dimension XPS Gen-5	1,366 <sup>b</sup>	Pentium 4 640 (3.0GHz)	1GB	160	NVidia GeForce 6800 256MB

#### CREATIVE USER

9 Dell Precision 380	1,291 <sup>b</sup>	Pentium 4 630 (3.0GHz)	1GB	160	NVidia Quadro NVS 285 54MB
10 Apple Power Mac G5	1,898 <sup>c</sup>	Dual G5 2GHz	1GB	200	ATI Radeon 9600 128MB
11 Sony Vaio RA304	1,918 <sup>d</sup>	Pentium 4 560 (3.6GHz)	1GB	500	NVidia GeForce 6600 256MB

<sup>a</sup> Price excludes monitor, keyboard and mouse <sup>b</sup> Price includes 19-inch 1905FP LCD monitor <sup>c</sup> Available without a monitor for £1,349 <sup>d</sup> Available without a monitor for £1,699