

# Bargain brand electronics

Own-brand electronics can be an attractive alternative to more costly, big-brand TVs, radios and set-top boxes – but are they any good?

**S**upermarkets and high-street stores are stacked with sometimes unfamiliar electronics brands nestling alongside those with a more familiar pedigree – and the potential to bag a bargain has seemingly never been greater. Why buy a new Panasonic TV for £600 when you can buy one that looks almost the same and has similar specifications for half the cost? Sadly, our extensive and rigorous testing has found that low prices don't always equal value for money.

As our tests are blind – we conceal the brand names from the expert testing panels – you can be sure that the results aren't biased against own-brand models or towards big brands. If you want a cheap TV, our advice is that it's usually best to steer clear of budget models or ones with an unfamiliar brand name. Almost all the budget and own-brand models that we've tested in the last two years have performed significantly below the average.

However, this doesn't mean you can't still bag a bargain. On the following pages, we've chosen typical examples of bargain brands and compared their test results where possible to a similarly priced Best Buy model from a big name brand. And if you're willing to invest some time tracking down end-of-line models, fantastic deals abound – check out [www.which.co.uk/discounts](http://www.which.co.uk/discounts) for tips on how to do this.

It's certainly not all bad news for budget brands. If you want a set-top box or DAB radio, there are plenty of decent own-brand models that cost a lot less than our Best Buys (see opposite and p55).

The story behind brand names on electronics products is intriguing. High-street retailers typically do not have the ability to manufacture their own products, so they source and re-badge them with their own-brand names. For instance, Wharfedale TVs are not built by speaker manufacturer Wharfedale – instead, they are produced by third parties for Argos, which uses the Wharfedale brand with its approval.

Brand names also change hands – meaning a brand can pass through a parade of different owners. And some manufacturers, such as digital box maker TVonics, will market products under its own brand name, and make retailer-branded products as well. And many models from familiar brand names are actually supplied by third parties. Check our summary of some of the key brands used by retailers below.



## Brand guide Our guide to understanding who owns which brand

High-street electrical retailers and the leading supermarkets all stock a variety of big-brand names that are instantly recognisable. But in among the Roberts radios and Sony TVs is a collection of own-brands at typically rock-bottom prices.

**Argos** **Main brands:** Wharfedale, Alba, Acoustic Solutions, Bush  
Argos stocks numerous brands 'only at Argos' including Alba, Acoustic Solutions, Bush and Wharfedale. Several of these brands appear across a range

of audio visual products – including TVs, DAB radios and set-top boxes – but they're not always exclusive to Argos. Some of these own-brand products are also stocked in Homebase – both retailers are owned by Home Retail Group.

**ASDA** **Main brands:** Onn, Smart Price, Asda  
Asda own brands include Onn, Smart Price and just plain Asda. The latter pair tend to cover portable audio products, while the Onn brand is more commonly found on TVs.

**COMET** **Main brands:** Proline, Goodmans, Ferguson  
Proline is the key Comet own brand. It includes products ranging from kettles to DAB radios and set-top boxes. It also sells TVs and radios with the Goodmans and Ferguson brand names.

**Currys** **Main brands:** Matsui, Logik  
Matsui and Logik are the main own-brand labels for Currys and Dixons Store Group, which includes Dixons and PC World. Logik covers a range of audiovisual products, including

TVs, DAB radios and Freeview boxes. Matsui includes electronics and white goods, such as freezers and dishwashers.

**Sainsbury's** **Main brand:** Red  
The Sainsbury's own-brand label Red offers TVs, DAB radios and Freeview boxes.

**TESCO** **Main brand:** Technika  
Tesco's own brand, Technika, covers a wide range of audio-visual equipment including TVs, Freeview boxes and DAB radios.



### Which.co.uk Technology email

Keep your finger on the pulse of digital technology with the weekly email from the Which? Technology team. Every Tuesday we'll send you the latest news, reviews, advice and deals on MP3 players, digital radios, cameras, TVs and other gadgets. Can you afford not to be the first to find out? To sign up, or for more details, visit [www.which.co.uk/technologyemail](http://www.which.co.uk/technologyemail).

## Set-top boxes – Own brand versus Best Buy



**53% Proline**  
**DFV152L** £18, Comet

Features ★★★★★ TV Guide ★★ Ease of use ★★  
Power ★★★★★ Scarts One Scart link Yes  
Use with old TV No Timer Yes



**74% TVonics MDR-**  
**250** £48, TVonics

Features ★★★★★ TV Guide ★★★★★  
Ease of use ★★★★★ Power ★★★★★ Scarts Two  
Scart link Yes Use with old TV Yes Timer Yes

VS

You can get digital TV for less than £20 with the Comet own-brand Proline set-top box. For the price, it's not a bad choice. The only equivalent Best Buy currently available is from little-known UK brand TVonics. It's more than twice the price, but the extra cost delivers some additional features and better usability.

The TVonics box has two Scart sockets compared with the Proline's one, and it will also work with older TVs that don't have Scart inputs.

But the main difference between the two is ease of use. The TVonics remote is intelligently laid out with clear labels, and the instruction manual is easy to navigate. Though the Proline is easy to set up, its instruction manual lacks detail, and buttons on the remote are small, spongy and poorly laid out.



# HDTVs – Own brand versus Best Buy

## 32-inch HDTV

**T**esco lives up to its cheap price promise with the Technika branded LCD32-209, a 32-inch HD-ready LCD TV for a wallet-friendly £280. It has a couple of interesting features, but the overall quality of the Technika is a let down, with the picture quality failing to impress our expert viewing panel. Smearly motion sequences and weak, insipid colours are all too obvious when watching standard and high-definition programming. The viewing angle is poor and the picture is generally too soft.

Compare that with the LG 32LG5000, a Best Buy 32-inch LCD that we found for just £60 more using [www.whichcompare.co.uk](http://www.whichcompare.co.uk). It is also HD-ready, and has the same screen resolution as the Tesco TV, but the picture quality scored a lot better in our viewing tests, despite some minor quibbles about a slightly soft and dull picture.

One of the most impressive aspects of the LG, and a telling comparison with the Tesco model, is the very effective ambient light sensor. This can lower power consumption from more than 100 watts to just 44 watts when watching the screen in a dimly lit room.



**35% Technika LCD 32-209** £280, Tesco

SD Picture ★★ HD Picture ★★★★★ Sound ★★  
Ease of Use ★★ Power ★★ Features ★★ Resolution  
1,366x768 HDMI sockets Two Scart sockets Two (one RGB)

By contrast, there is mention of an 'auto backlight' in the Technika menu system, but we're not sure what it's for, as it doesn't appear to do anything when selected.

The Technika does feature one or two surprises that may signal some promise



**65% LG 32LG5000** £340, Amazon

SD Picture ★★★★★ HD Picture ★★★★★ Sound ★★★★★  
Ease of Use ★★★★★ Power ★★★★★ Features ★★ Resolution  
1,366x768 HDMI sockets Three Scart sockets Two (one RGB)

for the future. Headphones volume can be adjusted independently of the main speakers and it supports audio description (an additional narrative for visually-impaired people). Both of these features are more common to Panasonic Best Buys, and are not available on the LG.

## 42-inch HDTV

**A**udio performance fails to impress on either of these TVs – but that's where the similarities end between the Argos exclusive Wharfedale LCD and Panasonic plasma Best Buy. The Panasonic is an end-of-line model that we found online for just £50 more than the Wharfedale. The price difference may be small, but the gulf in picture quality is huge.

The Wharfedale's 1080p specification looks good on paper, but our tests tell a different story. The SD picture lacks detail and features an unusual pink/brown tint. HD 1080p Blu-ray motion sequences suffer from a noticeable jerkiness, and poorly engineered HDMI inputs mean that the glitches don't stop there. The centre audio channel is missing when viewing DVDs with surround sound, and the picture is distorted and jerky if the common setting used with PS3/Xbox 360 games is selected.

Despite a lower screen resolution and absence of any Full 1080p HD claims, the 42-inch Panasonic plasma is streets ahead. The clarity, depth, richness and detail of both standard and HD pictures are impressive.



**33% Wharfedale LTF 42K1CB** £550, Argos

SD Picture ★★ HD Picture ★★★★★ Sound ★★  
Ease of Use ★★ Power ★★ Features ★★ Resolution  
1,920x1,080 HDMI sockets Three Scart sockets Two (one RGB)

It's also simple to use – the good, tactile feedback and clear labelling of the remote are a sharp contrast to the wobbly and oddly labelled buttons on the cluttered Wharfedale remote.

Even in our power consumption tests – where we'd expect better results from an LCD



**65% Panasonic Viera TH-42PX80** £600, Online

SD Picture ★★★★★ HD Picture ★★★★★ Sound ★★ Ease of Use ★★★★★  
Power ★★★★★ Features ★★★★★ Resolution  
1,024x768 HDMI sockets Three Scart sockets Two (both RGB)

TV – the Wharfedale comes up short. The Panasonic plasma uses marginally more power, but features an effective ambient light sensor. The Wharfedale has an adjustable backlight that alters the brightness on screen, but this doesn't actually save any power.

# DAB radio – Own brand versus Best Buy



**52% Audiowave**  
**DAB-907** £22, Tesco

Features ★★★★★ Ease of use ★★★★★ Power ★★  
Listening ★★★ FM Yes Presets 20 RDS Yes  
Clock timer No

**66% Dualit Lite**  
**DLR-1** £85, John Lewis

Features ★★★★★ Ease of use ★★★★★ Power ★★  
Listening ★★★★★ FM Yes Presets 20 RDS Yes  
Clock timer Yes

**Y**ou can buy the Audiowave DAB-907 from Tesco for around a quarter of the price of the Best Buy Dualit Lite. Both radios are similarly low on advanced features – neither has an electronic programme guide (EPG) or the ability to pause and rewind live radio – but both have 20 presets and a built-in clock.

The Dualit has great sound quality, and this is what sets it apart from the Audiowave. We found that both models are similarly easy to use, though some of our testers thought that the Dualit would be a lot more suitable for those who are partially sighted or have low levels of manual dexterity. The Dualit is clearly the better radio. It has better sound quality, and slightly better ease of use for some users.

**But if you want a basic radio without the shiny finish and you don't mind average sound quality, the Audiowave isn't a bad buy and will save £63.**



## THE WORST OFFENDERS

Own brands have featured heavily in our Don't Buy lists – but bigger brands and pricier products aren't immune from our testers' wrath



### Matsui MAT15L1618D

This indescribably bad 15-inch LCD TV with built-in DVD player took the award for being our lowest-scoring TV ever, with a test score of 15%. Picture quality and sound quality were both awful, and the speakers delivered horrible distortion and buzz even when the volume was relatively low. See *Which?*, Nov 2008, p42.



### Marks & Spencer MS 3251DVB001

M&S did itself no favours by sticking its brand name on this woeful HD-ready 32-inch TV. It's the second M&S TV we've tested in the past couple of years (see *Which?*, Nov 2007, p11) – both ended up as Don't Buys.



### Polaroid TLU-03723B

Retailer own brands aren't the only offenders we've come across. Now, whenever our viewing panel come across a really bad model they ask themselves: 'But is it as bad as the Polaroid?'. See *Which?*, Sept 2008, p56.



### Logik LOGR118D

Cheap digital radios tend to fare better in our tests than cheap digital TVs. But this Currys own-brand model plunged into Don't Buy territory due to its very poor sound quality. For a full review, go to [www.which.co.uk/digitalradios](http://www.which.co.uk/digitalradios) or read the full DAB radio report in next month's *Which?*

## Blu-ray bargains?



Logik DV-BD1000



Technika BM01

**Prices of Blu-ray players and Blu-ray discs are on the slide and sales are on the rise**

Blu-ray, the high-definition DVD format, is becoming a more affordable alternative to standard-definition DVD. The price of players has plummeted – in August 2008 we tested models with prices ranging from £300 to £900, but in our current tests we have players starting at just £130.

At the vanguard is the Logik DV-BD1000 from

Currys and PC World (£130), and from Tesco the first Technika-branded Blu-ray player for £147. The average price of the big-brand players is also much lower than a year ago – but at £270 is still roughly double these own-brand prices. Results for all new models are due online in May at [www.which.co.uk/blu-ray](http://www.which.co.uk/blu-ray).

## Expert views

### Dave Holes, Which? set-top boxes expert

'Cheap set-top boxes costing £25 or less are available, but you do need to be wary – we've seen some terrible examples of power-hungry models with ease-of-use problems, such as a missing EPG.'



'But these issues aren't exclusive to own brands – well-known brands have been culprits, too. We've also had an own-brand Best Buy – the (Currys) Logik Vesa digital TV adaptor – which was built by TVonics, the same company behind the excellent MDR-250 Best Buy.'

### Lizzy Payne, Which? digital radios expert

'The key with a digital radio is to consider where you're going to use it and what you're going to listen to. Though we've never awarded an own-brand model a Best Buy rating, when it comes to occasional use or listening for very short periods, they can be good for those on a tight budget.'



'Fans of classical music should be wary, though, as complex music can sound awful on cheaper models with poor-quality speakers – though just spending more money isn't a guarantee that you'll avoid this problem.'

### Michael Briggs, Which? TVs expert

'In the past two years we've tested 240 televisions. Almost 20% were own-brand models or from smaller, mostly budget brands. None of these have been good enough to be rated a Best Buy, and have never remotely threatened the top spots of, usually more expensive, branded rivals.'



'TVs are complex products, involving several components brought together in an integrated package – and that means there's more opportunity for something to go wrong. More often than not the results are poor picture quality and ergonomics.'

OWN-BRAND AV PRODUCTS RATED				SCORE (%)	
MODEL	PRODUCT TYPE	STORE	PRICE (£)	AVAILABLE TO BUY	
TECHNIKA DAB-407	DAB radio	Tesco	45	✓	60
TECHNIKA DAB-307	DAB radio	Tesco	40	✓	57
HITACHI HDB72 532/1715	Set-top box	Argos	25	✓	57
ASDA DAB Clock Radio	DAB radio	Asda	24	✓	56
TECHNIKA AESTBS7	Set-top box	Tesco	16	✓	56
PROLINE DFV152L	Set-top box	Comet	18	✓	53
WHARFEDALE DAB FM Radio 500/5880	DAB radio	Argos	30	✓	53
AUDIOWAVE DAB-907 Mono DAB Radio	DAB radio	Tesco	22	✓	52
WHARFEDALE LPDV832HDMI 532/1368	Set-top box	Argos	40		51
BUSH 32-inch HD-ready 529/4134	TV	Argos	323	✓	49
PROLINE DIGITAL DAB401	DAB radio	Comet	40	✓	45
GOODMANS LD3265D2	TV	Comet	300		43
ARGOS Value FM DAB Radio 500/5567	DAB radio	Argos	25	✓	42
PROLINE LD2215D	TV	Comet	230		41
WORTHIT Set Top Box	Set-top box	Woolworths	34		40
BUSH 42-inch 1080P 536/6574	TV	Argos	500	✓	39
ACOUSTIC SOLUTIONS 37-inch HD1080P 536/6598	TV	Argos	440	✓	38
GOODMANS LD3266D	TV	Comet	300	✓	38
TECHNIKA LCD32-209	TV	Tesco	280	✓	35
LOGIK LOGR118D	DAB radio	Currys	40	✓	34
WHARFEDALE 32-inch HD LCD 529/4093	TV	Argos	342	✓	33
WHARFEDALE 42-inch 1080p 536/6495	TV	Argos	550	✓	33
TECHNIKA LCD22-308	TV	Tesco	196		32
ACOUSTIC SOLUTIONS 22-inch HD-ready 529/2403	TV	Argos	180	✓	29
WHARFEDALE 19-inch HD-ready LCD 529/2806	TV	Argos	177	✓	25
MARKS & SPENCER MS 3251DVB001	TV	M&S	499		23
MATSUI MAT15L1618	TV	Currys	150		15

## HOW OWN-BRAND AV KIT STACKS UP ON AVERAGE

	OWN-BRAND AVERAGE	OVERALL AVERAGE	BEST BUYS SCORE
SET-TOP BOX	51%	52%	70% and above
TV	32%	50%	65% and above
DAB RADIO	50%	53%	66% and above