Watchdog

Welcome to Watchdog, designed specifically to protect your interests as a consumer. Over the page, we check out the latest PC prices on the high street and direct from manufacturers in Price Watch.

Dialling code catch

Telecoms giant Cable & Wireless is currently running a great weekend offer whereby customers can place a call to anywhere in the country, stay on the phone as long as desired and pay only 50 pence for the privilege. This would appear to be a dream come true for Internet surfers fed up with receiving big phone bills, but sharp-eyed *What PC?* reader Ken Wright has noticed a potentially costly catch to the deal.

The offer applies to all direct-dialled national and local calls but *not* to calls routed through special local-rate dialling codes, such as 0345 and 0645, which are offered by most Internet Service Providers (ISPs). The irony is that by dialling an apparently money-saving local-rate number, Web surfers could end up paying more than someone who is holding a long-distance phone conversation.

Fortunately, there is a work-around. When your modem dials an 0x45 number to connect to your ISP, the call is routed through to the ISP's call centre. The good news is that most of these call centres can also be direct-dialled using a standard national-rate telephone number. So, surfers wanting to take advantage of Cable & Wireless's limited-cost calls should find out a direct-dialled national-rate number for any one of their ISP's call centres and use that instead of the 0x45 number.

Bear in mind that this offer is only due to run until the end of 1997, so it's important to revert to dialling your ISP's local-rate number in 1998.

CABLE & WIRELESS

Update on Prove It 2000

In the November issue of *What PC?* we ran a story highlighting the misleading advertisements for Prove It 2000, placed by mail-order company Scotland Direct.

Shortly afterwards Watchdog was contacted by Catherine Bell, sales director of Prove It 2000. Catherine was concerned that those contacting Scotland Direct to order Prove It 2000 might not be receiving the full product, and she stressed that the two companies were in no way related.

The full version of Prove It 2000 checks a PC for year 2000 compliance and is able to report and correct a variety of problems. Purchasers of the product with any worries about its usefulness should contact Prove It direct on 099 099 1999.

CASE FILE

Gabriela Boultwood from London is just one of dozens of readers who have written in to complain about PC World's poor after-sales service.

Having invested nearly £2,000 in an Olivetti notebook computer to aid her business activities, Gabriela soon experienced problems with the hard drive. Following advice from her local PC World store, the machine was returned to Olivetti's servicing company, ADP, for repairs.

Several repair trips later and Gabriela's patience was spent. She returned to PC World and asked for a refund or a replacement; both requests were refused and the notebook was again sent for repair.
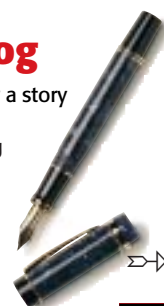
Watchdog contacted the Dixons Group for its side of the story. In its defence, the company issued a statement accepting some of Gabriela's complaints but denying others. In the final paragraph of the statement, Dixons assured us that if Gabriela's machine was not repaired satisfactorily within 28 days then a replacement would be arranged.

Correction

Last month we stated that Virgin Net had raised its monthly subscription from £11.75 to £14.09. The actual increase was from £10 to £11.99, and we apologise for inadvertently adding VAT to the already inclusive prices.

Write to Watchdog

If you have a case for us to solve or a story that needs investigating write to: Watchdog, *What PC?* Editorial, VNU Business Publications, 32-34 Broadwick Street, London W1A 2HG, or e-mail us on watchdog@whatpc.vnu.co.uk.

Price Watch

Many people will be looking to buy a multimedia PC for family use this Christmas. Those trawling the shop shelves would be well advised to request a demonstration of Compaq's Presario 4506. Admittedly it is a little pricey, but it has everything necessary for a joyous Yuletide, including a very generous software bundle. If you want better value for your money and you don't mind going the mail-order route then Dan's Xplora Plus could be the ideal machine. For just under £1,300 you'll receive a 200MHz MMX PC with 32Mb of memory and a 3.2Gb hard disk drive. The CD-ROM drive is only a 16-speed model but the modem runs at a swift 56Kbits/s.

High street

Model	Price from	Processor make	Processor speed/class	RAM	Hard disk	CD-ROM
Compaq						
Presario 4506	£1,399	Intel Pentium	200MHz MMX	16Mb	3.2Gb	16x
Presario 4810	£1,799	Intel Pentium	233MHz MMX	32Mb	4Gb	24x
Hewlett-Packard						
Pavilion 3110	£1,099	Intel Pentium	166MHz	16Mb	2Gb	16x
Pavilion 8110	£1,599	Intel Pentium	200MHz MMX	32Mb	2.5Gb	24x
Pavilion 8165	£1,899	Intel Pentium	233MHz MMX	32Mb	4.3Gb	24x
Packard Bell						
Pulsar 16	£1,299	Intel Pentium	166MHz MMX	16Mb	2Gb	20x
Pulsar 20	£1,599	Intel Pentium	200MHz MMX	16Mb	3.2Gb	24x
Pulsar 23	£1,899	Intel Pentium	233MHz MMX	32Mb	4.3Gb	24x
Tiny						
Tutor 166	£868.33	Intel Pentium	166MHz MMX	16Mb	1.7Gb	16x
Accelerator 200	£1,173.83	Intel Pentium	200MHz MMX	32Mb	3.5Gb	16x
Home Movie Centre	£2,701.32	Intel Pentium II	266MHz MMX	64Mb	4.2Gb	16x

Direct from manufacturer

Model	Price from	Processor make	Processor speed/class	RAM	Hard disk	CD-ROM
Dan Technology						
Dantum	£908.27	Intel Pentium	166 MHz MMX	16Mb	2Gb	24x
Home Plus	£1,326.57	Intel Pentium	166MHz MMX	32Mb	3.2Gb	24x
Xplora Plus	£1,245.50	Intel Pentium	200MHz MMX	32Mb	3.2Gb	16x
Elonex						
Dumina	£728.50	Cyrix Media GX	166MHz	16Mb	1.7Gb	16x
PT-6233/I	£1,462.88	Intel Pentium II	233MHz MMX	32Mb	3.2Gb	16x
NTX-6300/I	£2,191.38	Intel Pentium II	300MHz MMX	32Mb	3.2Gb	24x
Evesham Micros						
Vale Prima 686	£586.33	Cyrix 686	166+	16Mb	1Gb	❍
Vale Platinum P200 Media	£1,467.58	Intel	200MHz MMX	32Mb	3.2Gb	24x
Vale Platinum II SE 300	£2,442.83	Intel Pentium II	300MHz MMX	32Mb	6.4Gb	24x
Mesh						
Elite Professional	£908.69	Intel Pentium	200MHz MMX	16Mb	1.7Gb	24x
Elite Ultima Plus	£1,377.69	Intel Pentium	200MHz MMX	32Mb	3.5Gb	24x
Elite Fireblade	£1,377.69	Intel Pentium	200MHz MMX	32Mb	3.5Gb	24x
MJN						
200M	£1,173.83	Intel Pentium	200MHz MMX	32Mb	4.3Gb	24x
233M EX	£1,491.08	Intel Pentium	233MHz MMX	64Mb	6.4Gb	24x
300-2	£2,113.83	Intel Pentium II	300MHz MMX	64Mb	6.4Gb	24x
Viglen						
Home Value PC 166M	£1,003	Intel Pentium	166MHz MMX	16Mb	2.5Gb	24x
Ultimate PC	£1,544	Intel Pentium	233MHz MMX	32Mb	5Gb	24x
Awesome PC	£3,071	Intel Pentium II	300MHz MMX	64Mb	8.4Gb	DVD-ROM

With Christmas but a few frosty mornings away you might expect plenty of price movement and special offers, and indeed that's just the case. Interestingly, though, two of the biggest players in the market, Hewlett-Packard and Packard Bell, have made no alterations to the prices or specifications of their PCs.

The most noticeable change to this month's table is the absence of IBM machines. Despite numerous requests for updates, the company has not provided us with its latest information, so we've given the space to Elonex instead.

As a newcomer to the Price Watch table, Elonex has two entries that are noteworthy – but for unfortunate reasons. The mid-range PT-6233/I features a 233MHz Pentium II processor and, on the surface, the £1,462.88 price tag seems reasonable for such a powerful machine. Take a closer look, though, and

● = Yes ○ = No ● = Windows 95 ● = Lotus SmartSuite 97 ● = Microsoft Works ● = Serif Pageplus ● = Selection of Microsoft titles
● = Office 97 Small Business Edition **(os)** = On-site **(rtb)** = Return to base **(c&r)** = Collect and return **(n/s)** = Not specified

Sound card	Speakers	VRAM	3D Graphics	Monitor	Modem	Other	Warranty	Bundled software	Telephone
SB 16 (compat)	●	1Mb	n/s	15in	33.6	£1,000 soft. bundle	1 yr (os)	● + 10 titles	0845 270 4000
SB 16 (compat)	●	2Mb	n/s	15in	33.6	£1,000 soft. bundle	1 yr (os)	● + 14 titles	0845 270 4000
SB 16 (compat)	●	1Mb	n/s	14in	33.6	○	1 yr (os)	● + 4 titles	0990 474747
SB 16 (compat)	●	2Mb	n/s	14in	56	○	1 yr (os)	● + 4 titles	0990 474747
SB 16 (compat)	●	2Mb	n/s	15in	56	○	1 yr (os)	● + 4 titles	0990 474747
SB 16 (compat)	●	2Mb	n/s	15in	56	Fast Media	1 yr (os)	● + 30 titles	01628 508200
SB 16 (compat)	●	2Mb	n/s	15in	56	Fast Media	1 yr (os)	● + 30 titles	01628 508200
SB 16 (compat)	●	2Mb	n/s	15in	56	Fast Media	1 yr (os)	● + 30 titles	01628 508200
SB 16 (compat)	●	2Mb	●	14in	○	○	1 yr (rtb)	● + 8 titles	0800 821333
SB 32 (compat)	●	2Mb	●	14in	33.6	○	1 yr (rtb)	● + 17 titles	0800 821333
SB 32 (compat)	●	4Mb	●	○ TV only	56	DVD, TV tuner, projector	1 yr (rtb)	● + 16 titles, AGP games	0800 821333

Sound card	Speakers	VRAM	3D Graphics	Monitor	Modem	Other	Warranty	Bundled software	Number
SB 16 (compat)	●	2Mb	○	15in	○	○	1 yr (rtb)	● ● Quicken + MMX bundle	0181 830 1100
AWE 64 OEM	●	2Mb	●	15in	56	TV tuner, joystick	1 yr (rtb)	● + bundle	0181 830 1100
AWE 64 OEM	●	2Mb	○	15in	56	○	1 yr (rtb)	● ● Quicken	0181 830 1100
SB 16 (compat)	●	2Mb	n/s	14in	33.6	○	1 yr (os)	● ● + n/s bundle	0181 452 2444
○	○	4Mb	○	15in	○	○	1 yr (os)	● ●	0181 452 2444
SB 16 (compat)	○	4Mb	●	17in	○	○	1 yr (os)	NT4.0	0181 452 2444
○	○	2Mb	○	14in	○	○	1 yr (os)	●	01386 765500
SB 32	●	4Mb	●	17in	○	○	2 yrs (os)	● + 9 titles	01386 765500
AWE 64	●	8Mb	●	17in	56	○	2 yrs (os)	● + 9 titles	01386 765500
○	○	4Mb	○	14in	○	○	1 yr (rtb)	● ● ●	0181 452 1111
AWE 64	●	2Mb	●	15in	56	TV tuner	1 yr (rtb)	● ● + 7 titles	0181 452 1111
AWE 64	●	4Mb	●	15in	56	○	1 yr (rtb)	● ● ●	0181 452 1111
SB 16	●	4Mb	●	14in	56	TV tuner	1 yr (rtb)	● + ● + n/s bundle	01282 777555
SB 16	●	4Mb	●	15in	56	TV tuner	1 yr (rtb)	● + ● + n/s bundle	01282 777555
SB 16	●	8Mb	●	15in	56	TV tuner	1 yr (rtb)	● + ● + n/s bundle	01282 777555
SB 16 (compat)	●	2Mb	○	14in	33.6	○	1 yr (c&r)	● ●	0990 944944
SB 16 (compat)	●	4Mb	●	15in	33.6	○	1 yr (c&r)	● + ● + 5 MMX titles	0990 944944
SB 16 (compat)	●	4Mb	●	17in	33.6	LS-120 120Mb floppy drive, TV tuner, A4 colour scanner, joystick, remote control	1 yr (c&r)	● ● + 5 MMX titles + others	0990 944944

you'll notice that the system lacks sound card and speakers – features that are seen as all but standard nowadays.

As its 300MHz NTX-6300/I is pitched as a high-end system, it is hard to criticise Elonex for shipping Windows NT 4.0 with the machine, but we imagine that most consumers would expect to receive Windows 95.

And finally to Tiny, which has taken the unusual step of offering a PC without a monitor. Its Home Movie Centre has a fine set of specifications, including a 266MHz processor, 64Mb of memory, a DVD-ROM drive, TV tuner and – of all things – a projector, screen and Dolby surround-sound speakers. On that kind of evidence, we assume that it's intended to be the complete home entertainment solution for those with extensive front rooms and bank accounts to match. ●