

- PC Science P150 + Power Multimedia
- IBM Aptiva L Series 442
- Packard Bell 9026D
- Compaq Presario 2110
- Performa 6400/180

The mission? To find a complete business system including a PC, printer and software, for £1,500. We investigated all the options from mail-order houses to PC superstores to find the best deals

# Beat the BUDGET

**B**uying a PC for the first time is always difficult, and trying to do it on a budget can be a nightmare. What most manufacturers call affordable, many of us call under-powered, and even if you find a machine you like, it could well use up all your funds. It can seem impossible to buy a

complete business package that's ready to roll, without it costing you a fortune.

This month, members of the *What PC?* team set out to see if they could buy a well-specified PC, together with a printer and business software, including

a word processor and spreadsheet, for just £1,500, including VAT. What's more, they tried all the buying channels to find the best deals, from mail-order houses through to PC superstores, high street retailers and specialist dealers. How did our intrepid researchers fare? Read on.



## Direct/mail order

**B**uying a PC package for the first time can be confusing. Not only that, but opt for the mail-order route and you'll find it can be very tiring as well.

The first problem is where do you start looking? Well, the obvious answer is in computer magazines such as *What PC?*, which play host to pages of glossy adverts placed by the numerous PC manufacturers that trade only by mail order.

After flipping between numerous adverts with tempting offers, the system that looked best was the P150+ Power Multimedia from PC Science. There wasn't one particular feature that grabbed our attention, but the all-round package it presented for the price was difficult to match. Along with the computer, PC Science bundled a Lexmark 1020 colour inkjet printer and ClarisWorks, a basic but practical suite of office software tools including a word processor and spreadsheet program.

The PC itself is built around a 6x86 PR150+ processor made by IBM (with a little help from Cyrix) and comes with 16Mb of RAM. Wouldn't an MMX-based machine have been a wiser choice? Well, the simple fact is that, although MMX (multimedia extensions) processors are undoubtedly powerful and have a bright future, for everyday business tasks such as word processing and spreadsheet manipulation, they offer little benefit and just increase the cost of the machine. Besides, it's quite straightforward to upgrade the machine with an MMX processor should the need arise.

The rest of the specifications,

though not exceptional, are sufficient for most people's needs. A 15in monitor was a 'must have' on our shopping list, and that was exactly what we got from PC Science. The 2.1Gb hard disk drive pleased us too - enough space to hold plenty of today's disk-hungry applications. Finally, a 16-speed CD-ROM drive, 2Mb ATI graphics card and a 32-bit Yamaha sound system (together with speakers) completed our check-list.

Including VAT, the PC Science system came to a total of £1,056.33, leaving several hundred pounds to invest in some useful extras.

We decided to go for a scanner, which would come in handy for converting some of our office documents to electronic form. Also, some members of the *What PC?* team have personal homepages on the Internet and they wanted the ability to scan photographs to put up on their sites. Naturally, the choice of scanners is very wide but, fortunately, choosing one is not as confusing as buying a PC. Bearing in mind our needs, a flatbed scanner seemed to be the most sensible option, providing a steady surface on which to perform scans. We went for Mustek's £159 Paragon 600IISP, because during our recent group test in June it proved itself as a fine low-cost model.

The fact that by this point we had more than £200 left might suggest we could have been more generous with our PC's specifications; however, this amount had been carefully budgeted for.

The idea is

simple: it's all very well having a great PC system in the office, but it's equally useful to be able to work on the move. Obviously, £284.67 wasn't going to get us a top-of-the-range notebook PC, but it was enough to buy a Psion Siena - a pocket-sized computer costing £158.62. Yes, Psion's machine has a small screen, and yes, the keyboard is elfish, but this doesn't detract from the Siena's power.

For a machine that can be easily pocketed it offers an impressive line-up of applications, and a multitude of other features. Given the machine's constraints, the spreadsheet and word processor are very powerful - as well as being compatible with the leading equivalent PC applications. Its Filofax-style agenda is easy to use and soon becomes indispensable. In order to exchange data with our PC, however, we had to shell out another £72.85 on a link cable and software.

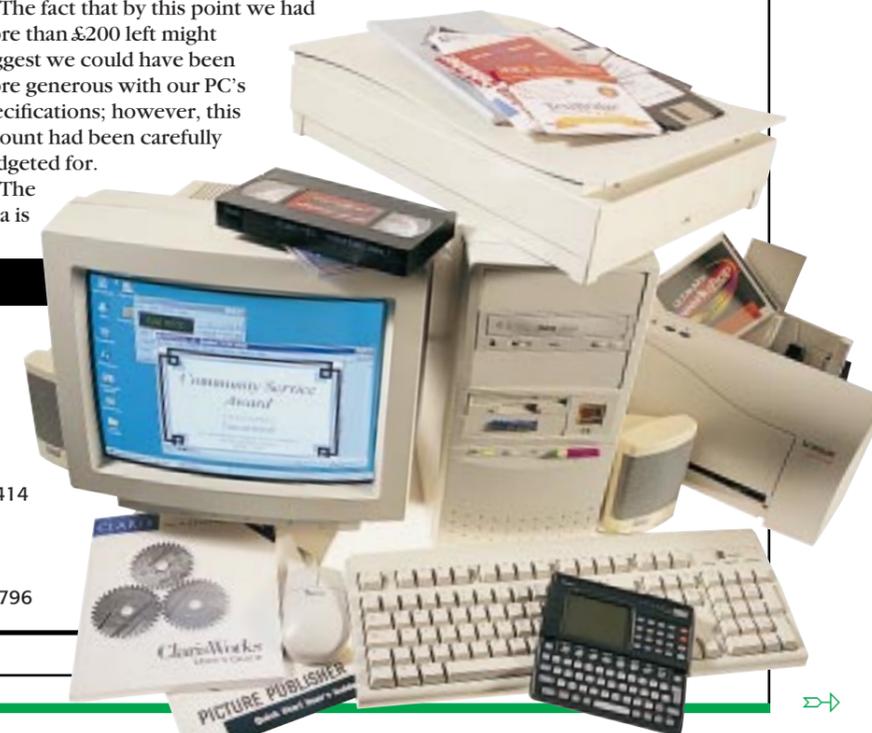
All told, the postage and packing for our various items came to about £52. Feeling jubilant about our shiny new system we thought we'd treat the office to a round of fizzy drinks and a giant bag of jelly babies. However, the 44 pence change we received from our budget of £1,500, was only enough for a bag of chocolate buttons.

Scott Colvey

## The system

- PC Science P150+ Power Multimedia and Lexmark 1020 colour printer package:** £1,056.33, P&P £45.83 (inc VAT)  
Purchased from PC Science: 01423 323386
- Mustek Paragon 600IISP scanner:** £159 (inc VAT/P&P)  
Purchased from Comtek Systems: 0121 693 1414
- Psion Siena 512Kb:** £158.62 (inc VAT)
- PsiWin link cable (Psion-PC) and software:** £72.85, P&P £6.93 (inc VAT).  
Purchased from Clove Technology: 01202 302796

**Total** £1,499.56 (inc VAT)



PC superstore

Theoretically, superstores ought to be the best places to go computer shopping. Instead of trawling blindly through hundreds of glossy pages full of impenetrable jargon, in a superstore you can try things out. At least, that was the idea in 1992 when PC World opened up its first outlet. It's since been joined by other chains, notably Byte and Tempo.

Surveying all three led to one conclusion: only one specification is available within the £1,500 budget while leaving enough for a few important extras. What £800 to £1,200 buys, depending on the bundled software and printer options, is a Pentium 133 with 16Mb of RAM and 1Gb to 2Gb of hard disk space together with sound board, CD-ROM, and maybe a modem. This is not a great configuration - it's under-supplied with memory, and 1Gb of hard drive space is miserly in an era of ever expanding software.

We couldn't have been more surprised by our ultimate choice. PC World's stores are still the biggest of the three chains and sport the most comprehensive selection, so it seemed the most logical place to find a machine. We found it in Tempo. We expected to pick a brand known for low price but chose an IBM Aptiva L Series 442. This is a Pentium 133 with 16Mb of RAM, 2Gb hard drive, sound board, 8x CD-ROM, and 14in monitor priced at £1,199.79.

First of all, the Aptiva is a mini-tower machine with room for expansion. After all, no-one knows what the near future holds for technology or how a newly computerised business's needs may change. It may be good

to have space for a network card or another hard drive. The lower-priced desktop machines typically have little free space inside them. Besides, the standard monitor-on-CPU configuration is ergonomically poor.

The Aptiva also had the best software bundle: included with the ubiquitous Microsoft Works was Lotus SmartSuite, which is a complete set of office software (word processor, database, presentation graphics, spreadsheet and personal information manager), plus a bunch of Internet software, Wall Street Money, IBM Antivirus (important), as well as a 28.8Kbits/s modem.

A 33.6Kbits/s modem would have been better, because a faster modem speed saves money on phone bills; and a 15in monitor would make it possible to run Windows at a higher resolution.

However, our second choice system, a Packard Bell from PC World - which would charge only £90 to upgrade to a 15in monitor - comes with a hard drive half the size and a weaker set of software (no database or personal information manager), which would end up costing more. This is one of the limitations of superstores - you don't get custom-configured systems. You would also probably pay less for the same machine or equivalent from a direct merchant, but you would not be able to take it home there and then.

As for the printer, the two most obvious choices, available in all the stores, are either a black and white Oki 4ppm (pages per minute) laser for £199 or a colour Hewlett-Packard Deskjet 400 for £149. Colour would have been nice, but lasers are much faster for long print jobs. Opting for the laser printer would bring the total to £1,398.79, leaving £102.21.

Other essential items for a good business system include a couple of books (at a scandalous £30 each) to explain the intricacies of the software, and possibly more memory or a backup device. More memory would make a major difference - more than increasing the speed of the processor, in fact. PC World sells 8Mb SIMMs (Single Inline Memory Modules) for £50 each, so a pair of those would bring the machine's memory up to a respectable 32Mb.

But poor performance costs you speed; lack of backups can cost you your business. Better, therefore, to opt for a Zip drive, preferably using a parallel interface so it can be moved onto another machine in a pinch. Unfortunately, these cost £129, which puts us £26.79 over the £1,500 limit. There's only one thing to do: accept slower but more colourful printing. That gives back £50 to put toward the Zip drive. Now, there's £24.21 left over. Anyone fancy a Chinese?

Wendy Grossman

The system

- IBM Aptiva L Series 442: £1,199.79 (inc VAT) from Tempo
Hewlett-Packard DeskJet 400: £149 from any superstore
Iomega Zip drive with parallel interface: £129 (inc VAT) from PC World

Total £1,477.79 (inc VAT)



Non-specialist retail store

If you find the business of buying a computer just too daunting, there's a lot to be said for popping into a general electrical shop in the high street or at your local retail park. The sight of kettles, videos and fridges can be reassuring and you can also try before you buy. Usually you can take your purchase away with you and, if you have any problems, it's easy to go back to the shop to sort things out.

The downside of buying through this channel is that you may not get the latest technology, you may not get very good value for money and you may be served by staff without specialist knowledge. There are good deals to be had, though - you just need to shop around to find the best option and good service.

One of the best deals to be found in high street electrical shops at present is at Currys, in the form of Packard Bell's 9026D, at £1,499. Along with the PC, you get a massive bundle of software and a printer thrown in for good measure.

The PC itself is a highly respectable looking model - the 200MHz Pentium processor is more than speedy enough for most applications and, while it lacks the benefit of MMX technology, this will not cause problems with business software. The hard disk is capacious at a full 2Gb and there are full multimedia capabilities. An 8x CD-ROM drive is built-in, while sound is provided courtesy of a Sound Blaster 3D card and speakers which attach to the sides of the monitor.

Another good feature of the 9026D is the modem, a 33.6Kbits/s model, but there are a couple of disappointments. First, there is only 16Mb of RAM and this is only just enough when it comes to more demanding applications. The second is the monitor - while the picture is fine, the screen is a rather small 14in and this could feel cramped if you do a lot of work with spreadsheets or desk-

top publishing. Despite the quibbles about specifications, this Packard Bell has a lot to recommend it - it is solidly built and easy to put together. It also has the usual Packard Bell Media Select buttons for easy access to things such as the modem, fax and CD-ROM drive. This makes it especially suitable for first-time buyers.

The bundle which accompanies the 9026D will also benefit those just starting out. There's an impressive collection of software titles - 35 in fact, which would normally set you back more than £1,000. Better still, many of these programs are ones you would actually want to use - Microsoft Word version 7 and Microsoft Works are both included, taking care of word processing and providing a simple spreadsheet and database. You also get Microsoft Publisher, which will be helpful for producing newsletters, leaflets and brochures.

Other useful titles include Money 95 and McAfee's VirusScan, the latter providing essential protection for a business system.

Home and entertainment titles are not forgotten and again the programs are of good quality - Encarta



and Microsoft Oceans are both enthralling, while youngsters should appreciate learning a language with Asterix or developing their logic skills with Thinkin' Things.

The bundled printer is the Epson 200 - it won't stand up to heavy office use, but it has an excellent pedigree and it produces good-quality prints. It will be fine to get you started, and will help you to assess your long-term printing needs.

The final bonus in this purchase is at the cash desk - it comes with a buy now, pay later deal. You only need to put down a 20 per cent deposit - £300 - then pay off the balance in nine months' time, with no interest incurred. A good plan would be to take the balance straight off to your building society and earn a bit of interest - you could put it towards a sturdier printer, some extra RAM or perhaps a scanner.

And the £1 change? Anyone who's scoured the shops looking for a good computer buy deserves a big, strong cup of coffee...

Sheila Hill

The system

- Packard Bell 9026D and Epson 200 package, with 35 software titles: £1,499 (inc VAT) Purchased from Currys

Total £1,499 (inc VAT)



## Dealer

**B**uying from a dealer has certain attractions. From the pre-sales point of view the dealer will know about the machines and be able to tell you what they can do. Dealers also have a longer-term commitment to their customers who might one day come back and punch them on the nose if they don't give good service.

On the downside, there are not many dealers around these days and there could be a lot of legwork involved in finding them and comparing what they have to offer. If you're on a limited budget, such as our £1,500 for a complete system, the chances are a dealer will only have one or two bottom-of-the-range systems to choose from.

Fortunately, the *What PC?* offices are only a stone's throw from London's Tottenham Court Road, so we had a good chance of finding something suitable.

We found a dealer specialising in IBM, Compaq and Hewlett-Packard PCs and, from the machines on offer at PC Deals of Tottenham Court Road, we chose a Compaq Presario 2110. It sells for the incredibly low price of £903.57 (inc VAT). We paired it with an Epson Stylus Color 600 inkjet printer, the winner of our inkjet printer award in June. The price of £280 is more than the cheapest mail-order firms are quoting, but it still keeps the total system cost down to £1,183.57. The balance of £316.43 could be spent on goodies such as Kodak's £199 DC20 digital camera, which would be a perfect partner for the Epson Stylus 600's near-photographic output, and you'd have plenty of cash left for glossy paper and extra ink cartridges. Colour cartridges cost £22.32 and black ones are priced at £17.62.

The Presario 2110 looks more like a piece of hi-fi equipment than a PC in both size and style. The system unit is a slim, black box with speakers

built into it and there's a matching black monitor, mouse and keyboard.

The processor inside is not a Pentium, but one of Cyrix's new MediaGX 133 chips. This incorporates the sound and graphics features normally provided by separate expansion cards and thus accounting for the system's low price. It's not as fast as a 133MHz Pentium (despite Cyrix's claims) and more like an older 100MHz Pentium. This level of performance is adequate for most purposes and certainly up to running the Microsoft software that is supplied: Works, Encarta 97 and Money.

As well as a capacious 2Gb hard disk and 16Mb of RAM, there's a built-in modem and an 8x CD-ROM drive. There are no expansion slots, so you can't add any extra hardware inside, but for general purposes you won't need to. The 14in monitor provides a sharp and stable picture, though its surface is more severely curved than the average 15in monitor.

Any work you do with Works or Money can be printed out on Epson's Stylus 600 printer in full colour at staggering resolutions of up to 1,440dpi (dots per inch) for photographic work. At this size each dot is barely visible to the human eye, so you are sure to be as pleased with

the sharpness of the results as with the vibrant colours.

Using 360 or 720dpi for text and simple graphics, you can churn out up to six pages per minute in black and white or four pages per minute in colour. Results are good even on cheap plain paper such as photocopier paper, but you can use specially coated paper or transparencies if you want to make a splash with a professional presentation.

The Stylus 600 is easy to set up and use, being operated almost exclusively through software on the PC. It comes with some useful extra software to complement the programs bundled with the Presario. There's Adobe PhotoShop for editing images before printing and Sierra Print Artist to help create your own graphics projects.

The Presario is ready to use as soon as you get it home. It's not a fast PC and it can't be expanded easily, but if it already fits your requirements this is not a problem. Epson's printer will cope superbly with anything the Presario can produce.

Paul Wardley

## The system

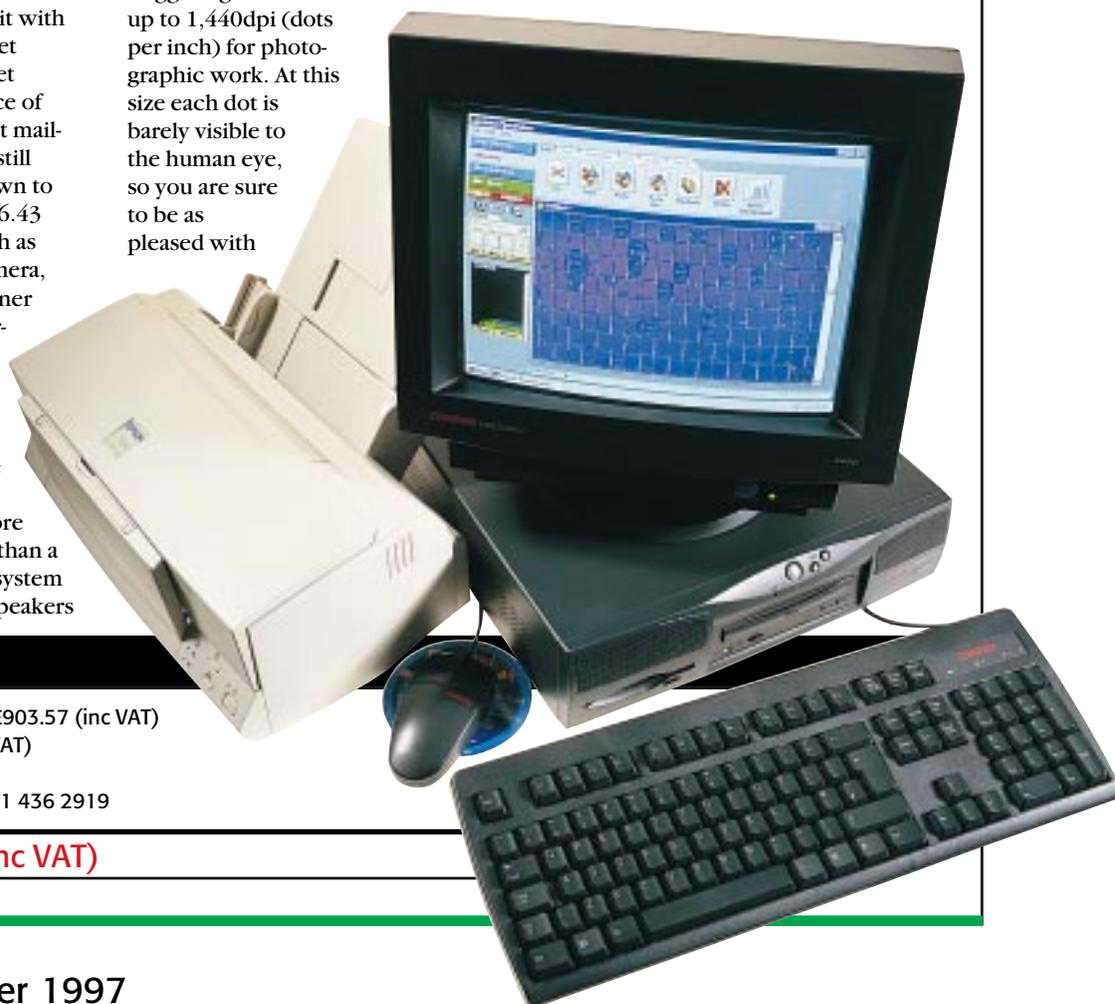
Compaq Presario 2110: and £903.57 (inc VAT)

Epson Stylus 600: £280 (inc VAT)

Kodak DC20: £199 (inc VAT)

Purchased from PC Deals: 0171 436 2919

**Total** £1,382.57 (inc VAT)



## The Apple alternative

**T**he alternative to buying a PC from one of the four main channels is to switch platforms altogether and go for an Apple Macintosh. Contrary to popular belief, Macs are perfectly suitable for small businesses as well as more creative endeavours.

Apple machines have dropped in price in recent years, and with pressure from the Mac clones increasing, you can now pick up a high-performance PowerMac system for less than £1,000. These come in both modular and all-in-one designs, depending on whether you want everything nice and tidy in one box or as separate units for that traditional computer system look.

Wading through the ads revealed a variety of affordable options, but it's obviously more convenient if you can buy everything in one go. After deciding exactly what was needed in terms of features and performance, and choosing a genuine Apple system rather than a clone, the ideal place to buy turned out to be The Mac Zone.

While stocks last, The Mac Zone will sell you a Performa 6400/180 Home Office system bundled with a Colour Stylewriter 2500 for £1,291.33 (inc VAT). Based on a PowerPC 603e processor running at 180MHz, it's ideal for general office tasks and anything else you throw at it. It also comes ready to run with some excellent software, including ClarisWorks 4.0.

The 6400 comes in a shapely tower

case complete with 16Mb of RAM, a 1.6Mb hard disk, 16-bit stereo sound, a 15in AV monitor and an 8x CD-ROM drive. The deal also gives you an internal 28.8Kbits/s data/voice/fax modem for Internet access and e-mail (Apple's Internet Connection Kit is included in the box). For graphics, there's 1Mb of video RAM which will support up to 32,000 colours on screen at 640x480 pixels, and 256 colours in either 832x624 or 1,024x768 pixels. While none of these specifications could be classed as state of the art, there's no denying you get a lot for your money.

Other software supplied includes Claris Organizer (which acts like an electronic Filofax), Dorling Kindersley's the Ultimate Human Body, The Grolier Multimedia Encyclopaedia and, for games fans, Descent, PowerPete and the great graphical adventure Full Throttle. There's also a collection of Disney titles for the younger members of the family to enjoy.

The Stylewriter 2500 is Apple's top-of-the-line two-cartridge colour inkjet printer, with a resolution of 720x360dpi (dots per inch) and 64 scalable TrueType fonts. It supports a wide range of media including colour photograde, plain, premium and glossy paper, transparencies, back-print film and envelopes.

After spending £1,291.33, this leaves £208.67. The only thing missing is a backup device. Often overlooked, this can mean the difference between temporarily losing data and permanently losing your business.

An Iomega Zip drive would fit the bill (the 6400 has a built-in SCSI interface which means it can use the fastest version), and The Mac Zone sells these for £117.45 (inc VAT). Add a pack of six disks at £70.45 and P&P, and the grand total comes to £1,490.95.

All that leaves £9.95 – enough for a half decent bottle of wine, a takeaway meal, a good night in the pub if you can avoid buying a round, or a flutter on the National Lottery.

Chris Cain



### The system

Performa 6400/180/15in AV + Colour Stylewriter 2500, external Zip drive and one box of Zip disks from The Mac Zone

**Total** £1,490.95 (inc VAT)

### Conclusion

**W**ell, there's no doubt about it, if you shop around you can get a complete business system up and running for £1,500 inc VAT, or less. You can buy respected brand names and, surprisingly, it doesn't really matter where you shop.

In general, buying direct by mail order gives you the most options and you've got a better chance to get more for your money. Not only did we manage to get a printer and ClarisWorks with our PC Science machine, but a very useful flatbed scanner and a Psion Siena pocket computer to boot. There are better

specified PCs available, but buying through this channel certainly delivered the most well-rounded package for our budget.

Having said this, the retail market is catching up and the options at PC World, PC Deals and Currys were surprisingly good. The latter offered a Pentium 200 system – the fastest machine here – along with a fast modem and 35 software titles.

Finally, it was nice to see that it's now possible to buy a decent genuine Apple Macintosh system, including monitor and keyboard, for an affordable price.