Service & Reliability survey

Satisfied with your PC or ISP? The time has come to **reveal your opinions** in the industry's biggest independent user survey.

Whether you've spent well over the odds for the latest state-of-the-art PC or found yourself a bargain printer, the point of any such purchase is that it works and goes on working. The last thing you want to find yourself lumbered with is an unreliable piece of equipment that becomes a job in itself, rather than a way of easing your job load.

As computing forges ahead as a dominant part of modern life, both at work and at home, so have the expectations of you, the buyer. It is becoming paramount that scenarios such as the risk of losing important files if your PC crashes or missing a time-critical deadline while printing a document, because your printer jams, are jno longer acceptable. Unfortunately, though these are things we would rather not have to deal with, they still remain a normality of computer equipment usage.

Naturally, as you become a more knowledgeable buyer, you look to lessen the likelihood of such eventualities. Basing purchasing decisions on price and a whole gamut of specifications are important factors, but after-sales service and support are gaining ground as the heavyweights, in the "why I must buy" league table. And why not? You want the best deal you can get. You want value for your money.

But how do you know which manufacturer is providing the best technical support? Which brands out there can be trusted for product reliability? And the real test for any vendor — customer loyalty. Which vendors do buyers actually want to repurchase from and which brand would buyers be moved to recommend to others?

Trying to get such answers, that are both valid and accurate, can prove a daunting task. But what better way to get to the truth than to obtain first-hand experience and information from the

significant, vendor customer bases. Our survey asked you the typical questions about the make of PC and/or mobile you used, what brand of printer you had and which ISP you subscribed to. But it also widened the scope of the survey by asking you in-depth questions about service and support relationship elements. So we found out from you, for instance, what the print quality was like from your printer, how easy it was to upgrade your PC, the ability to connect when you wanted to via your ISP, and when something went wrong, how it was dealt with.

Depicting the outcome of our survey in our graphs, Maritz Research has shown the top-line results which give in each category an overall winner of reliability , the brand you would definitely repurchase from and which you would definitely recommend to others. The vendors have been placed into categories of significantly above average, average or below average. This method has been chosen, rather than simply saying what was scored by each manufacturer, because it overcomes reporting weaknesses where there is very little differentiation between the vendors.

Rather than list pages of figures for you to trawl through, we've done al the hard work: in each of the PC, mobile, printer and ISP sections, you'll find the facts required for you to make a confident purchasing decision. The reports that follow are as revealing as they are useful.

Respondents were given the options of stating they were either "Very satisfied", "Satisfied", "Neutral", "Dissatisfied" or "Very dissatisfied" with particular aspects of their equipment and/or support. The facts reported here will reflect only those answers which stated a respondent was "Very satisfied" or "Dissatisfied" and "Very dissatisfied" with these areas. We are not basing any of our survey report on answers from respondents who sat on the fence.

For us, "Very satisfied" means the product genuinely made users very happy — it delivered that little bit extra worth noting and praising. We excluded "Satisfied" answers because this simply reflects that your product has done what you expected it to do, which is not glowing praise and can only be interpreted as such in a time when consumers are used to being misled by advertising and are relieved to have something that works. "Dissatisfied" and "Very dissatisfied" both indicate the products and/or support were not up to scratch and did not fulfil the user's expectations.

Ever conscious to provide you with a complete picture, we have offered all vendors which are mentioned in our data the "Right to Reply"— putting in writing their responses to our survey's results.

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end-user — you, our readers. Carrying out our own lab tests on products gives us part of the picture, but to get the full view we have to know not only how the product performs, but also what the pluses (and the minuses) are when you buy into a particular brand.

So *PCW*, in tandem with Maritz Research [*see panel, right*] have sought to investigate, with your input, just which brands in the market are pulling their weight in service and reliability, and which ones are not.

In *PCW*'s first ever independent readership survey, you'll be getting results which present the facts that you 'want' to know about and the ultimate guide to the best brands for technical support, product efficiency and durability. In this survey we will of course be rating PCs, mobiles and printers. And for the first time ever in any such survey, *PCW* will undertake evaluating the performance of ISPs.

The survey questionnaire went out to our entire readership base in three issues of the magazine, including our 20th anniversary issue [PCW, May 98] which sold over £195,000 copies. The questionnaire was also available on our web site. This enabled us to have a broader-based data collection platform that encouraged greater participation and gave us more accurate targeting of some of the smaller, but still

DESKTOPS & MOBILES

BEFORE WE LAUNCH INTO OUR **DESKTOP & MOBILE CATEGORY,** let's set the picture. Out of all our respondents, 88% of you had just a PC, 1% had only a laptop, and 11% of you had both. (Surprisingly, 15% of the people who built their own computer didn't feel confident to call it either a desktop or a laptop. Perhaps they had engineered a PDA type.) The majority of users, 32%, bought equipment in 1997, while a scant 3% of you are using machines pre-dating 1992. But, as you would expect, most people have a three-year replacement cycle, and 70% of you had bought your equipment between 1996 and 1998.

Mail order and buying direct proved the most popular ways to purchase hardware: 62% of you said this was how you had bought your last piece

> Eyebrows were raised at **THE INADEQUACY OF VENDORS GETTING ALL THE RELEVANT KIT** in one go. One respondent received an empty box!

of computing equipment. While 18% opted for purchasing through retail, only 15% of respondents chose to go to their local reseller. Interestingly, 35% of mobiles were bought through dealers.

Choosing the best place to buy your equipment is one thing, but how good were vendors on the product availability front? Compaq satisfied only 40% of its customers in this area, while Dan Technology certainly pleased its public, leaving more than two thirds of its customers with absolutely no problems of getting hold of kit.

PCW queried the condition our readers hardware is in when it is delivered. Top scorer, Gateway, had a 75% satisfaction rating in this category, and Dan and Toshiba also did well, with 70 and 71% respectively. Compaq and Evesham scored the lowest marks with 55% each.

Eyebrows were raised, however, at the inadequacy of vendors getting all the relevant kit dispatched in one go. One respondent in our survey claimed to have received an empty box! It wasn't a Dan customer, though, because eight out of ten Dan buyers were very happy with this aspect of Dan's service, whereas only 55% of customers buying from Compaq could give the company top marks. This may be explained by the fact that 20% of Compaq customers use their machines for businesses compared to just 5% of Dan's. These business users may expect delivery completeness to be a reasonable expectation, whereas home users may be more open to giving high marks for just getting all the kit to them.

Installation

Ease of installation was the next area tackled by our survey. Gateway and Opus Tiny got top marks in this category – 65% of their users were completely satisfied with the installation process. Mobiles proved marginally easier than desktops to get going, with satisfaction scores of 56% against 52%. Notebook king Toshiba was the exception — it too ranked 65%. But, this satisfied installation figure of mobiles could also reflect the fact that the purchase of most of them was from dealers who would have installed them.

If you think all machines are alike, then check out the scores our survey uncovered when we looked at build quality. Packard Bell and Compaq could muster only 35% satisfaction scores from their users, and Opus Tiny gathered only 33%. but, Dan Technology managed to please 69% of its customers, and Toshiba kept the mobile end up with 62%. Unfortunately, Toshiba does let itself down somewhat when it comes to features, with only 38% of its customers getting exactly what they want. Packard Bell hits bottom with 24%, while no-name clones and other brands please less than a third of their buyers.

Compatibility

On the compatibility front, Compaq users have not found their machines the easiest to get along with other devices – only 38% were happy compared to 71% of Dan's customers, which is a good seven points clear of competition. Gateway stood in with 63%.

The standard of software included with machines also proved very disappointing to customers. Gateway led the pack, with 49% of its users satisfied, while Compaq languished at the bottom of the pile with 21%. A large number of you complained about Windows 95: it either kept crashing, was unstable, or there were upgrade problems. One respondent said: "Windows 95 is the pits," which is a lot more polite than *some* of the comments we received about it.

Speed & price/performance

Speed performance of kit is an issue across the board — only 30% of you were happy with this element. Compaq proved significantly less satisfying to its customers than the majority of brands. However, price/performance threw up some interesting winners. The home builders were very pleased with their efforts, and 60% of them felt they had got good value for money.

Coming in second were the clone builders: 42% of users were sure that not paying for a brand name had saved them money and not lost them anything in performance. Although no-one ever got fired for buying IBM, a rather measly 21% were pleased they had done it. The Packard Bell customers were even more miserable, with 22% of them dissatisfied with the company's price and performance.

PCs, though, seem to be a reasonably hardy bunch – 47% of desktops and 52% of mobiles did not suffer from any problems over the last six months, although 45% of desktops and 40% of mobiles succumbed to between one and five technical hiccups over the same period. The most common problem experienced was hanging/frozen PCs, which accounted for 39% of our respondents' computing headaches. Software glitches were a close second, with 30%. Compaq machines seemed particularly susceptible to these two problems: 55% of its users had trouble with PCs freezing, while 45% had encountered software stress.
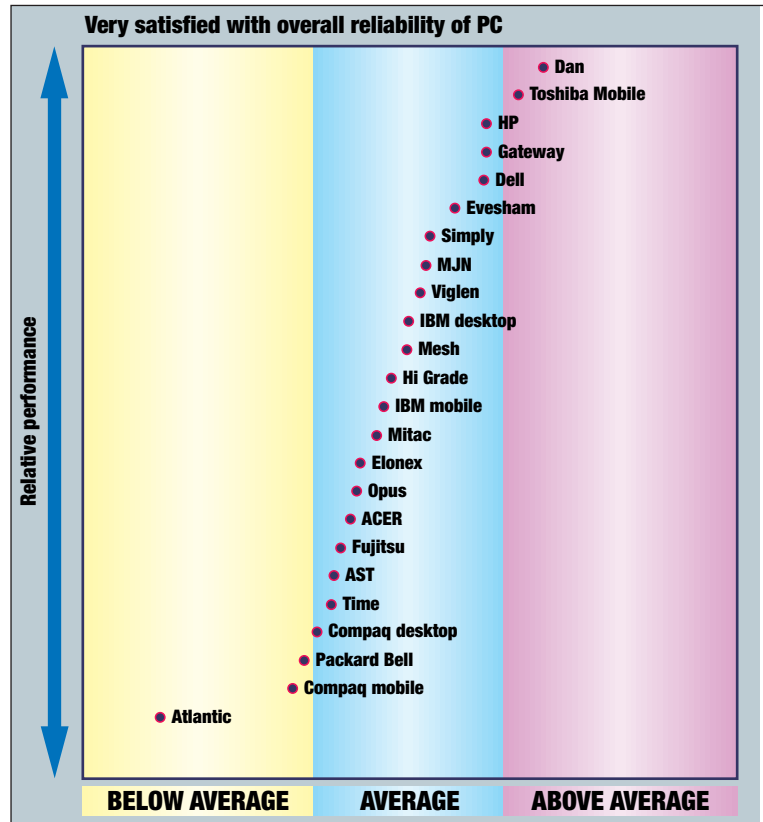
Help & support

The preferred method of solving a customer problem is by telephone and helpline support. The vendor helped 58% of you in this way, while 55% were helped through your place of purchase. Manufacturers solved 61% of all problems with desktops over the phone, compared to 27% for mobiles. Mobiles sent to base to be repaired accounted for 60%, whereas only 26% of desktops were fixed in this way.

Toshiba's reputation suffered a dent, as only 15% of its customers found its repair service totally satisfactory. This figure appears even more dismal compared to an industry average of 39% and an outstanding Dell performance of 53%. There were no high scorers when we looked at the time taken to carry out repairs.

Regarding the quality of repair, Dan did well, with 59% considering the job well done. Unlike Toshiba, which had 31% of its customers unhappy with its repair standards. Opus Tiny had only 17% of its customers go through its repair process very satisfied with the time taken, 33% very satisfied with the quality, and an enormous 86% thought the price was right for the cost of repair. Just over a third, 35%, of Compaq's customers felt the same.
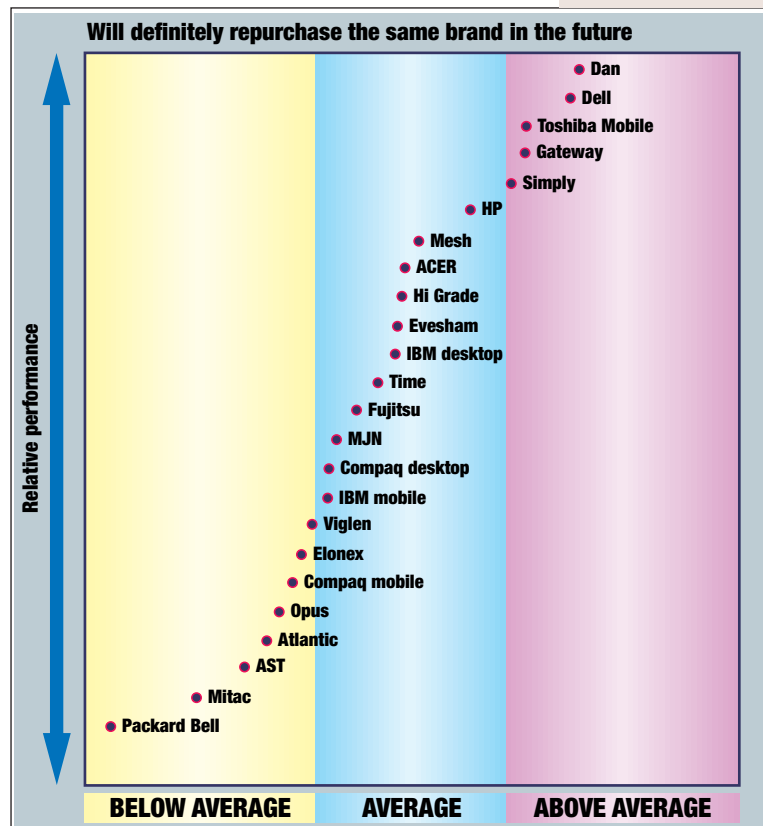
Recommendation

Dan can look forward to friends, relatives and colleagues of its customers making sales pitches on its behalf, as 63% will definitely give the hard sell, while 21% probably will. However, 19% of Packard Bell users will not recommend the brand, 8% of home builders will not recommend Compaq to others, and 12% definitely won't.

Very satisfied with overall reliability of PC

Relative performance

- Dan
- Toshiba Mobile
- HP
- Gateway
- Dell
- Evesham
- Simply
- MJN
- Viglen
- IBM desktop
- Mesh
- Hi Grade
- IBM mobile
- Mitac
- Elonex
- Opus
- ACER
- Fujitsu
- AST
- Time
- Compaq desktop
- Packard Bell
- Compaq mobile
- Atlantic

BELOW AVERAGE | **AVERAGE** | **ABOVE AVERAGE**

▲DAN CAME TOP IN THIS CATEGORY, TOSHIBA WAS A CLOSE SECOND, AND COMPAQ CAME VERY NEAR THE BOTTOM

▼DAN CUSTOMERS INTEND TO BUY DAN AGAIN, BUT IT'S A DIFFERENT STORY FOR PACKARD BELL, OPUS TINY AND COMPAQ

Will definitely repurchase the same brand in the future

Relative performance

- Dan
- Dell
- Toshiba Mobile
- Gateway
- Simply
- HP
- Mesh
- ACER
- Hi Grade
- Evesham
- IBM desktop
- Time
- Fujitsu
- MJN
- Compaq desktop
- IBM mobile
- Viglen
- Elonex
- Compaq mobile
- Opus
- Atlantic
- AST
- Mitac
- Packard Bell

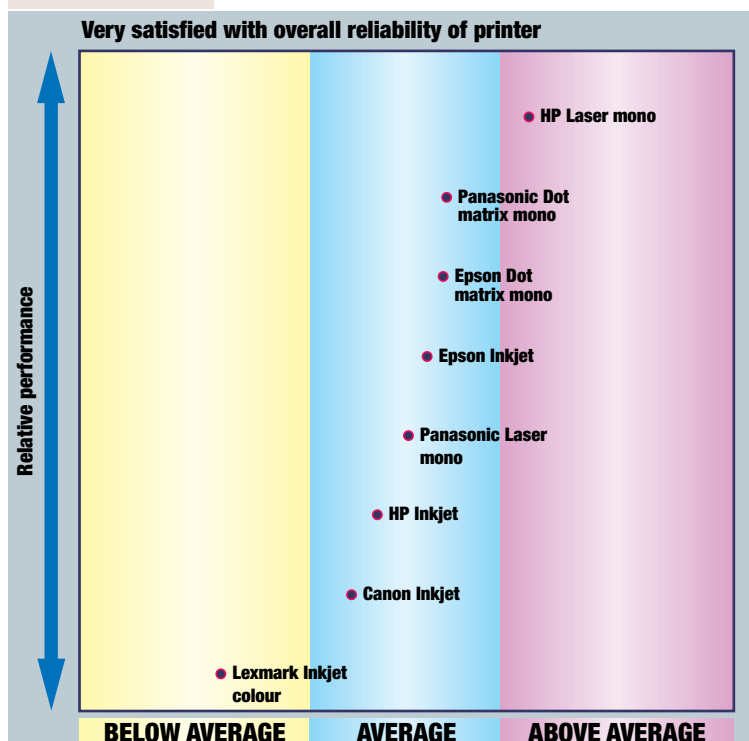**BELOW AVERAGE** | **AVERAGE** | **ABOVE AVERAGE**

PRINTERS

PRINTER QUALITY WAS AN ISSUE FOR THE MAJORITY. Less than half of the respondents said they rated their printer's build. For Lexmark, more than two thirds failed to give their kit the thumbs up. Exuberant advertising could have exacerbated this situation, because the features available to customers fell miserably short of expectations. Close to three quarters of Lexmark users wanted more or a higher standard, and Epson failed to please 55% of its users. Laser printers offered the best package, according to 44% of users.

stakes, with 69% of its customers getting instant printing action when they connected their devices. Hewlett-Packard (HP) and Canon weren't too far behind, both with just under 65%. Lexmark logged 53% high user satisfaction.

Print speed & quality

IT users always tend to feel the need for speed, but our respondents haven't been getting the adrenaline rush of watching hardcopy output at warp factor nine. Less than a quarter were pleased with the speed performance of their printer. A massive 85% of Canon users are suffering from cartridge crawl, and top performer HP has just 28% of patient users. Laser technology delivered satisfaction to only 36% of its backers.
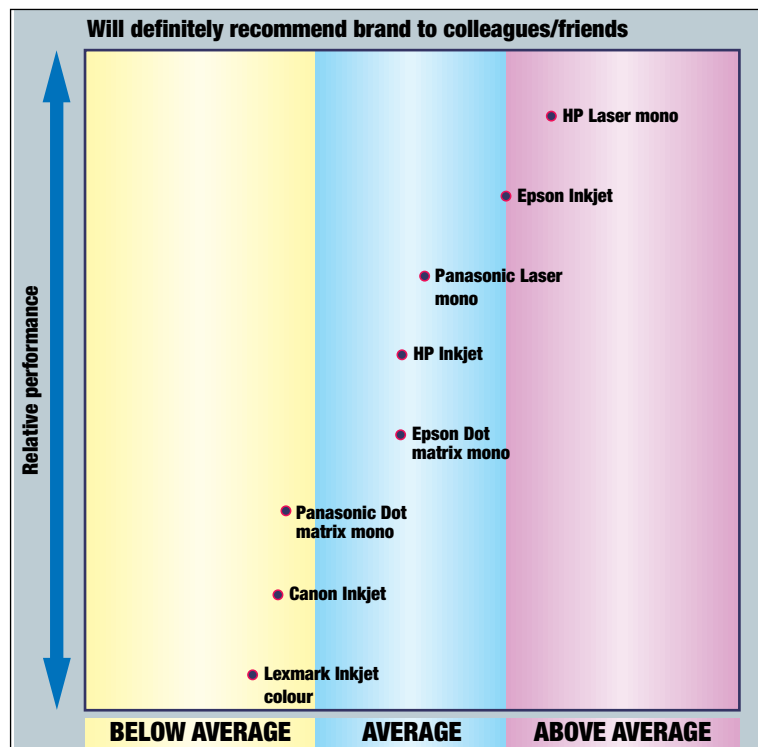
Getting to the crux of printer performance, we asked what the print quality was like. The overwhelming verdict is, it's not good enough. Almost two thirds of respondents who use laser printers, naturally think they produce the highest-quality output, but even 45% of the technology's users are not totally satisfied. Epson's customers were best satisfied, with 45% of them enjoying the clarity of ink on paper. But just over one third of users are happy with the performance of their printers.

Over a third of our respondents are angry that they cannot upgrade their printer – 43% of Canon users, the worst score, found this. Epson suffers from having only one in nine of its customers happy with its upgrade path. And more than two thirds of dot-matrix users feel lumbered with their printer choice. Laser technology, although seen as the most easily upgradable of all printer formats, gave satisfaction to only 13%.

Printer problems

Problems with printers, unsurprisingly, scored highly. We asked how many problems had been encountered by users over the last six months. All brands scored highly. HP users suffered the most in this category: 2% had over ten problems during the last six months, but 69% had enjoyed a trouble-free half year. Surprisingly, 90% of dot-matrix users, for all their objections, had experienced no problems in the last six months, compared with two thirds of laser users.

Paper jamming proved to be the biggest headache for users, affecting 37% of them. Lexmark stood out as the worst, though, causing nearly 63% of users this problem. Almost a quarter of printers failed, due to printer driver problems. But it was HP that topped this section, with 29% of its users suffering problems.

Users haven't been getting **THE ADRENALINE RUSH OF WATCHING HARDCOPY OUTPUT AT WARP FACTOR NINE** **Less than 25% were pleased with the speed**

Overall, customers were happy with the ease of printer installation. Lexmark performed the poorest in this category, with only 55% of its users being very satisfied. Less than half of dot-matrix technology users found installation a joy, compared with almost two thirds of inkjet users, and 6% of the dot-matrix respondents proved to be a very dissatisfied bunch. Inkjet users made up more than three quarters of the entire survey — maybe the dot-matrix devotees should think about joining them.

Epson topped the hardware compatibility

▼ **HEWLETT PACKARD LASER** MONOS MOST DEFINITELY HAVE THE UPPERHAND

Very satisfied with overall reliability of printer

Relative performance

- HP Laser mono
- Panasonic Dot matrix mono
- Epson Dot matrix mono
- Epson Inkjet
- Panasonic Laser mono
- HP Inkjet
- Canon Inkjet
- Lexmark Inkjet colour

BELOW AVERAGE | **AVERAGE** | **ABOVE AVERAGE**

Will definitely recommend brand to colleagues/friends

Relative performance

● HP Laser mono

● Epson Inkjet

● Panasonic Laser mono

● HP Inkjet

● Epson Dot matrix mono

● Panasonic Dot matrix mono

● Canon Inkjet

● Lexmark Inkjet colour

BELOW AVERAGE   AVERAGE   ABOVE AVERAGE

▲ RECOMMENDATION COMES HIGHLY FROM HEWLETT PACKARD LASER MONO USERS

▼ THE EPSON INKJET HANGS IN THERE, BUT HP'S LASER MONO WILL BE ON USERS' SHOPPING LISTS AGAIN

Will definitely repurchase the same brand in the future

Relative performance

● HP Laser mono

● Epson Inkjet

● HP Inkjet

● Epson Dot matrix mono

● Panasonic Laser mono

● Panasonic Dot matrix mono

● Canon Inkjet

● Lexmark Inkjet colour

BELOW AVERAGE   AVERAGE   ABOVE AVERAGE
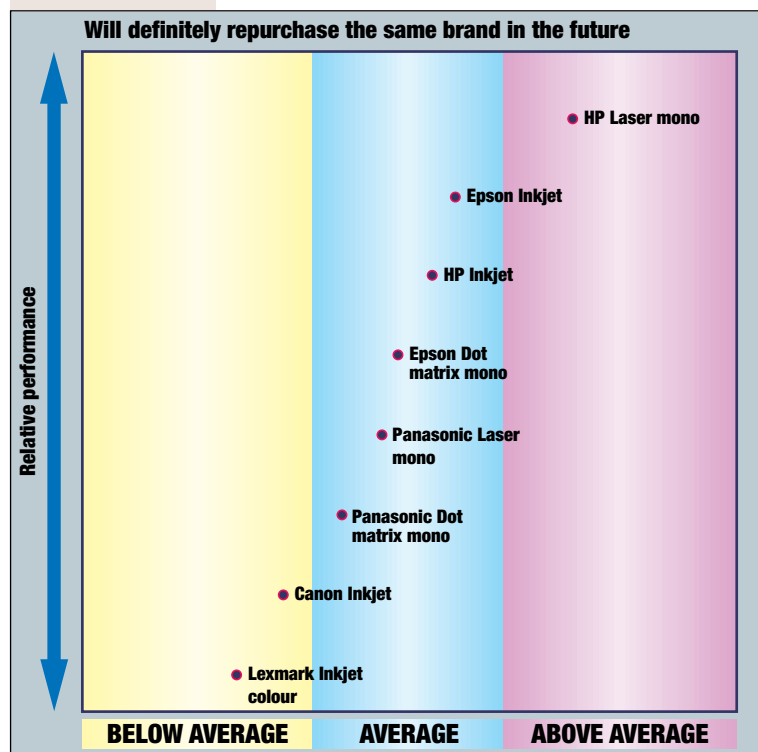
Phone support, though, solved over half of the printing problems, while 14% of users used email and web support. The same number had it replaced and a further 18% returned their machines for repair. About a third, 35%, of our respondents were happy with the repair job, but 20% were not.

The time taken for repairs shows that 50% of Epson users were very happy with the repair time, while a further 43% felt that their service was adequate. Lexmark had no customers dissatisfied with the time it took for repairs, unlike HP, which upset 17% of its users, and Canon, which crossed a staggering 29%. Almost half, 46%, of Epson customers were pleased with the quality of repair, but 14% felt the opposite. However, two fifths of Lexmark customers were very happy with the outcome.

Repair, reliability & pricing

Trouble-free printing is actually a reality for some users, though. Respondents have been reasonably satisfied with the reliability of their printers – just 50% of respondents were unhappy with their buys. Again, almost half, 48%, of Epson users and 47% of inkjet users were very satisfied with their printers' performance, compared with 54% of both dot-matrix and laser printer users.

Lexmark's repair pricing was pleasing to four in five respondents. Canon did less well here, with just 39% of its customers feeling that they had got a good deal, while 26% thought that they were overcharged. A quarter of dot-matrix customers thought they had got value for money, 60% of inkjet users were happy with the cost of repair, and 39% of laser buyers were satisfied with costs.

Users of the non-leading brands felt that they had a far better deal on cost of ownership than the users of named vendors. This may be because of the premium attached to leading brands and their high marketing costs. Almost half, 48%, of no-named printer users were satisfied with cost of ownership compared with the name brands. HP does best, with one in four of its users considering they had got value for money, and 51% of dot-matrix users felt the same, compared with 22% of inkjet users and 33% of laser users.

Also on the cost front, 28% of respondents felt they were being ripped off over the cost of consumables, such as ribbons, cartridges and toners. Feeling the financial sting the worse, though, were Canon customers: 42% believe they are being overcharged, while 33% of Epson users and 24% of HP feel the same. Nevertheless, three quarters of our respondents spend less than £20 per month on consumables – just 1% rack up bills of £80 or more.

RELIABILITY SURVEY
feature

INTERNET SERVICE PROVIDERS (ISPs)

A LARGE MAJORITY OF YOU, 81%, USE YOUR **ISP** CONNECTION FOR WEB ACCESS AND EMAIL. NetDirect was used most for this process, by 98% of its users, as did 93% of Demon's subscribers.

In terms of connection ability, all the ISPs in the survey scored average marks. U-net came out on top, with 48%, and Globalnet came second, with 42%. About one sixth, 15%, of NetDirect's customers were dissatisfied with this aspect of the provider.

Desired access speeds did not leave much for some of you to shout about. CompuServe failed to deliver desired access speeds to 26% of its subscribers, and only 7% of its users claimed to be pleased with its performance. This compared starkly with the 55% of happy U-net subscribers and 44% of NetDirect users.

CompuServe's direct competitors also faired better, with 16% of AOL's customers being very satisfied, and 24% of Demon users being happy with their access speed. But AOL did manage to notch up 15% of disgruntled users.

Set-up & connection

Ease of set-up proved a thorny problem for the larger ISPs. Only 20% of CompuServe's sub-scribers and 22% of Demon's found the whole process to be smooth-running, although AOL faired better with 33% of users being satisfied

with the set-up procedure. However, of the smaller operators, VirginNet walked away with the honour of having 53% of its users very satisfied with the set-up process, while one in two of NetDirect's subscribers were pleased. But BT came bottom in this category, with 16% of its customers unhappy.

Demon's UK coverage meant that 76% of its subscribers were very content with their ability to get connected at local rates. On the smaller scale, U-net did the business for 76% of its users. VirginNet also did well, with 72%, and was closely followed by Globalnet, with 67% of happy users. Enthusiasm for AOL was curiously muted, with just 44% of subscribers really rating this aspect of its service.

The large ISPs do not seem to have built up a huge amount of confidence within their subscriber base regarding their reliability: 14% of CompuServe's users, 19% of AOL's and 22% of Demon's, is all that can sing the praises of their chosen provider. Again, small is beautiful with U-net calling in the approval of 58% of its users, followed by 40% of VirginNet's.

Ease of installation is another area where the big players fall down, either because of their inadequacies or because, owing to the large number of customers, there's bound to be a greater proportion that complain about them. Only one in five of both CompuServe and Demon users found their product easy to install. AOL came out with 32%, but big-brand BT obviously hasn't got the formula right: just 14% of its users rated its installation procedure positively. VirginNet, though, is pleasing 48% of its customers, and U-net also scores highly in this area, with 53%.
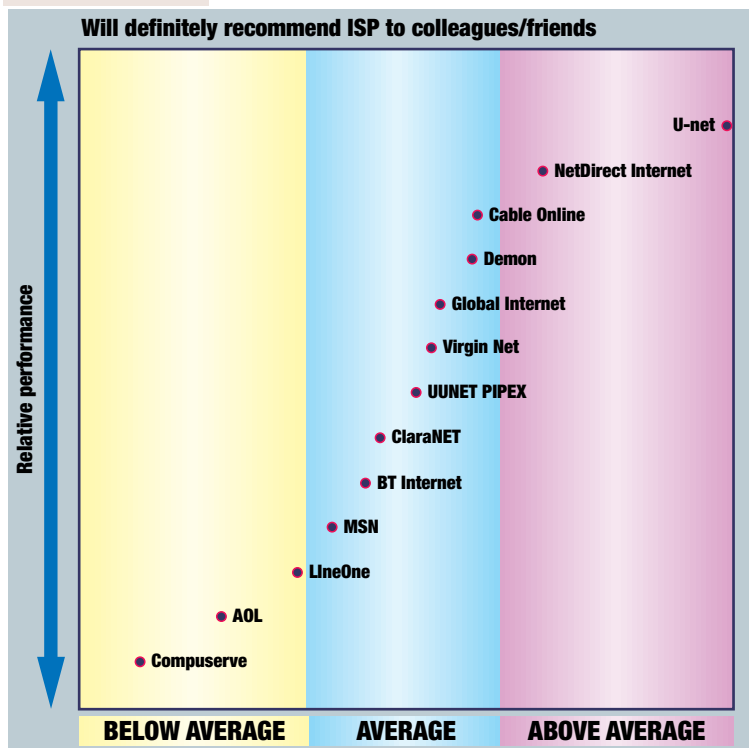
Users are definitely wanting more from the big players: 22% of AOL's customers and 21% of CompuServe's say they are not getting value for money. This is especially disappointing when you put these figures alongside U-net's happy band of supporters, of which 68% find every penny well spent. NetDirect also does well, with 59% of its users satisfied with their spend.
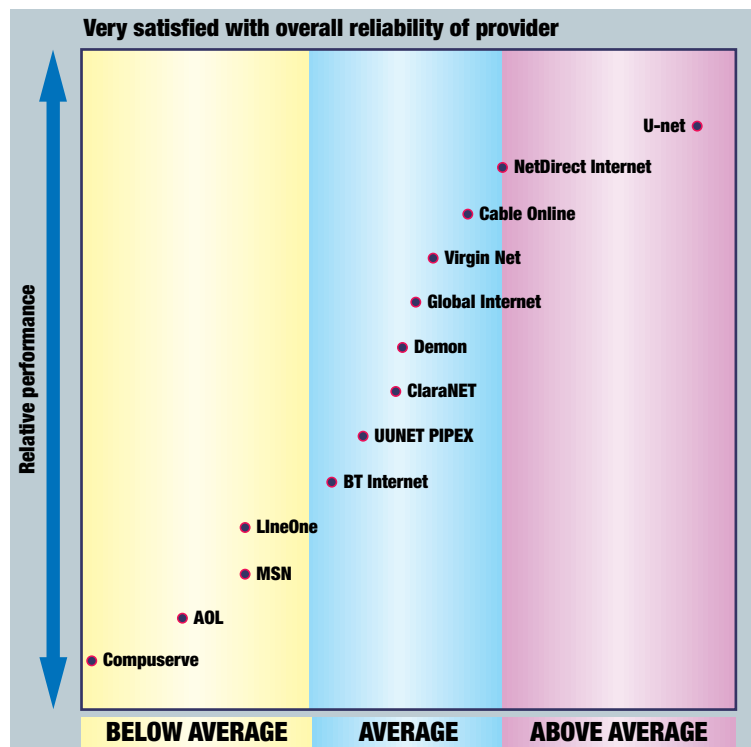
Yet quality of service is not really rated by 75% of internet users. Just 11% of CompuServe's customers and 15% of AOL's think they're on quality street. However, NetDirect is managing to please 45% of its customers, while U-net's gratifying 58%.

Connection speed

It could be the volume of users, but again the larger ISPs fall down on delivering what the users want in terms of connection speed. Only 6% of CompuServe subscribers get the speed they need

▼ THE BIG PLAYERS, LIKE **CompuServe** AND **AOL,** GET LOW RECOMMENDATION POINTS

Will definitely recommend ISP to colleagues/friends

Relative performance

U-net ●
● NetDirect Internet
● Cable Online
● Demon
● Global Internet
● Virgin Net
● UUNET PIPEX
● ClaraNET
● BT Internet
● MSN
● LineOne
● AOL
● Compuserve

| BELOW AVERAGE | AVERAGE | ABOVE AVERAGE |

Very satisfied with overall reliability of provider

Relative performance

- U-net
- NetDirect Internet
- Cable Online
- Virgin Net
- Global Internet
- Demon
- ClaraNET
- UUNET PIPEX
- BT Internet
- LIneOne
- MSN
- AOL
- Compuserve

BELOW AVERAGE   AVERAGE   ABOVE AVERAGE

▼ THERE ARE ONLY TWO ISPS ARE ABOVE AVERAGE IN OVERALL RELIABILITY

▼ SOME ISPS ARE FIND IT VERY DIFFICULT TO KEEP HOLD OF THEIR CUSTOMERS

Will definitely purchase the same ISP in the future

Relative performance

- U-net
- Virgin Net
- UUNET PIPEX
- NetDirect Internet
- Cable Online
- Global Internet
- LIneOne
- Demon
- MSN
- BT Internet
- ClaraNET
- AOL
- Compuserve

BELOW AVERAGE   AVERAGE   ABOVE AVERAGE
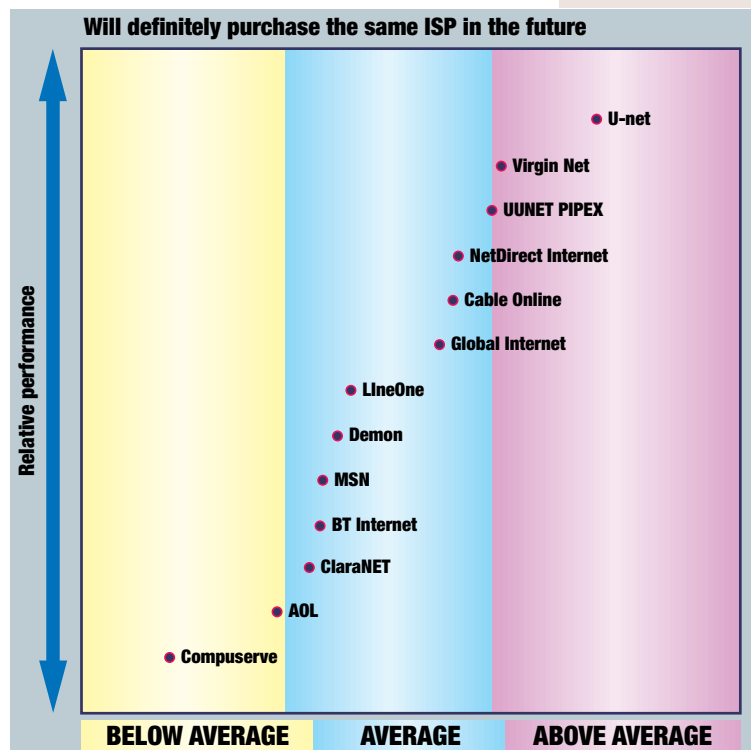
and 12% of AOL's feel the same. Maybe the customers of the smaller ISPs are less demanding or perhaps they are not competing for bandwidth with many others. Nevertheless, 45% of U-net users get themselves connected as fast as they like. NetDirect is close behind, with 42%, but 29% of CompuServe's users are outright disappointed in this aspect of its service, as are 23% of AOL customers.

Technical support

Response to problems mirrors the failings of ISPs in most other aspects of service. Over a fifth, 22%, of CompuServe's users are not happy, nor are 24% of Demon's users. Meanwhile, U-net satisfies, once again, 61% of its customers, and VirginNet does the business for 47% of its user base.

Less than a quarter of internet users think they get the technical support they want. The worse performers in this area are CompuServe, BT and Demon.

Quality of content

Quality online is abysmal across the board. Both the big and the small ISPs are doing it wrong, according to our respondents. Regarding online content, only 16% of both VirginNet and CompuServe users like what they see. Demon gets just 12% of satisfied subscribers, and 13% goes to BT. Top scorer is NetDirect, with 35% of its users enjoying the content it supplies.

The availability of search engines is another "could do better" area. Demon weighs in top of the larger players, with 36% of its subscribers getting to seek out what they want, and BT is close behind with 33%. On the other side of the business, U-net delivers the goods to 55% of its users, and NetDirect is in there with 43%.

CompuServe must be relying on the number of internet virgins trying to get online, as only 12% of its existing subscriber base will definitely repurchase from it in the future. Things aren't much better for AOL, which can boast a hardcore loyal following of just 16%. Demon does best, with 35% definitely sticking with its service, and 42% probably making the same decision. Almost three quarters of U-net customers plan to re-subscribe, as do 50% of NetDirect's.

Recommendation

The figures tell us a very similar story for user recommendations. CompuServe has 13% of its customers committed to spreading the word, as will 18% of AOL's. Demon will benefit from an unpaid sales force of 34% of its customers, while U-net's dedicated 75% of users will preach its gospel, as will 51% of NetDirect's subscribers.

THE CUSTOMERS CONCLUDE...

After reading and evaluating the information in our survey, the winners we have selected should come as no surprise to you. We have chosen overall winners – those which have come top in their area in the reliability, repurchase and recommendation stakes. And we have highly commended those that were just pipped to the post by the overall winners, but which we feel should be awarded some form of recognition for their consistently high standards.

The overall winners are:
Dan Technology for PCs
Hewlett Packard for printers
Toshiba for laptops
U-net for ISP

The company's which have been highly commended are:
NetDirect for ISP
Epson for printers
Dell for PCs

What makes a winner...

The results of the survey show some of the usual suspects have risen to the top, while for others there have been some surprising outcomes. Branding may be working for a number of the bigger names, but when it comes to the crunch, their product performance and after-sales practices need to be reassessed, because the smaller players are winning hands down on providing all-round value for money.

It is evident from the responses in our survey, that although price and specification are important parts of your buying decision, support and reliability are taking up a bigger wedge of your purchasing criteria. This is not only the case with hardware users, but is also apparent in the results our survey discovered in the ISP sector. Technical support is an extremely important area to the service subscriber; more so than content – although some ISPs seem to think it's the other way round.

However, there are opportunities for vendors to improve and become more user friendly – and it is happening. As our survey showed, most problems handled by manufacturers and points of sale were dealt with over the telephone. These outlets are developing call centres with more sophisticated problem-logging and problem-categorising systems, which make it easier for their engineers to address issues. And some vendors are working hard to educate the user and their sales force, working on the ethos that knowledge means prevention. But it can only be accelerated and guided by you, the customer.

Thank you...

We must take this opportunity to say thank you to all the *PCW* readers who took the time to respond to our questionnaire. Without your knowledge and experience of the market, we would not have been able to make *PCW*'s first ever readership survey as comprehensive and insightful as we believe it is.

It is not only an opportunity for you to distinguish the brands that offer you value for your money, and indicate which vendors give you the support and care you want; but your responses will also give the manufacturers a chance to understand what you the user see as important and how their products are performing at the cutting edge of real-world usage. The results of this survey will certainly give them food for thought. But most of all, we hope that it will prove an invaluable aid to you in making the best purchasing decisions.

WINNER ★ PC PERSONAL COMPUTER WORLD — SERVICE & RELIABILITY SURVEY 1998

dan technology

PETER HOBDAY, FINANCIAL DIRECTOR, DAN TECHNOLOGY:
"The service and support users will get is becoming more of a contributing factor to their purchase. We do get people saying to us we will never buy from certain companies, because they don't have good service and support.

Buyers should look at the total cost of ownership – it's like buying a Lada and being surprised when, 12 months later, you find you have to buy another one. We are trying to reinforce the view that there is differentiation between PCs, and we differentiate ourselves by concentrating on quality of product and service."

Company CV:
- ☛ Dan Technology founded 1988
- ☛ London-based head office
- ☛ Turnover: £46.73m for 1996/97
- ☛ 182 employees nationwide
- ☛ Offices in Leeds and Networking subsidiary in Buckinghamshire
- ☛ Supplies PCs, workstations etc
- ☛ Sells to end users direct

★ WINNER ★ PRINTER PERSONAL COMPUTER WORLD — SERVICE & RELIABILITY SURVEY 1998

HEWLETT PACKARD

JON VAN DUYNE, GENERAL MANAGER, CONSUMER PRODUCTS BUSINESS ORGANISATION:
"We are obviously delighted that HP is the winner in the printer category. Awards like *PCW*'s become ever more important, both to the customer and the industry. There are a large number of players in an increasingly competitive environment, and these awards provide a good indicator to how well everyone is performing according to the customer. The industry must respond to the consumer, and we at HP will analyse these results to make sure we are still in the number one position next year."

Company CV:
- ☛ Second largest provider of computing in the world
- ☛ UK's 26th largest exporter
- ☛ Turnover: £1.9bn (UK) for 1996
- ☛ UK offices have 5,400 employees
- ☛ HP has five UK-based R&D and manufacturing divisions
- ☛ Provides intranet solutions etc
- ☛ Sells through resellers/retailers

WINNER LAPTOP
PERSONAL COMPUTER WORLD
SERVICE & RELIABILITY SURVEY 1998

TOSHIBA

ALAN THOMPSON, DIRECTOR, TOSHIBA PC DIVISION:

"I'm delighted that we have won this award. For us it confirms our commitment to customer satisfaction. It's nice to see that some independent data from customers has put us out on top.

This award encourages us to redouble our efforts in improving our products, and what we will never do is just coast along because we're doing well. Our strive to design and produce better products gets more challenging as people request thinner and lighter laptops.

Our response is to improve our performance and be in tune with what the customers want."

Company CV :
- ☞ UK offices based in Weybridge
- ☞ Turnover in 1997: £650 million
- ☞ 1,500 employees in UK
- ☞ Toshiba has been present in Europe for 25 years
- ☞ Product include PCs, consumer products, electronic components and industrial equipment
- ☞ Sells products through resellers

WINNER ISP
PERSONAL COMPUTER WORLD
SERVICE & RELIABILITY SURVEY 1998

U-NET
Easy Internet Access

DR BILL UNSWORTH, MANAGING DIRECTOR, U-NET

"This is a remarkable result in what has been a remarkable year for us. It's always been our intention to become the UK's largest independent provider of internet services, and the results of this survey are a vindication of our policy of reinvestment in network infrastructure and customer support. It also tells us that we achieved this without losing sight of our customers needs.

We are obviously delighted to have come top in all areas of *PCW*'s survey."

Company CV :
- ☞ Funded in 1994
- ☞ HQ in Warrington www.u-net.net
- ☞ Annual revenue of £4 million
- ☞ 50 employees
- ☞ 25,000 subscribers
- ☞ Provides connection packages: Dialup, ISDN leased line and web hosting services

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COMMENDED PC
PERSONAL COMPUTER WORLD
SERVICE & RELIABILITY SURVEY 1998

DELL

MARTIN DAVIES, CUSTOMER SERVICES DIRECTOR, DELL DIRECT UK AND IRELAND.

"We are delighted to receive this service award. Customer satisfaction with our products and services is our No. 1 priority. Reader awards are valued, as they reflect what the people on the ground really think. Dell is committed to delivering the best customer experience, and we welcome the independent feedback these surveys give us.

We believe that there is an opportunity for us to further enhance the level of service we deliver to the small business sector and we will be working with that goal in mind."

Company CV:
- ☞ Company founded in 1984
- ☞ Dell UK set up in 1987
- ☞ HQ based in Berkshire
- ☞ 4,000 people employed in UK and Ireland
- ☞ Turnover in 1998: $12.3 billion
- ☞ Products includes desktops and laptop, servers and workstations
- ☞ Sells direct

COMMENDED PRINTER
PERSONAL COMPUTER WORLD
SERVICE & RELIABILITY SURVEY 1998

EPSON

TONY PETFORD, DIRECTOR OF MARKETING, EPSON UK:

"We are extremely pleased to accept this award from *PCW*, especially, as it is an award voted for by our customers and *PCW* readers.

We believe our unique MicroPiezo inkjet technology at the core of our product line is responsible for EPSON being voted the number one inkjet manufacturer. EPSON's MicroPiezo set the new gold standard at up to 1440dpi resolution. This survey also shows the demand for dot-matrix printers, which is why EPSON continues to release improved impact printers every year."

Company CV:
- ☞ UK offices set up in 1988
- ☞ UK headquarters in Hemel Hempstead
- ☞ Manufacturing plant in Telford
- ☞ 28,000+ employees world-wide
- ☞ Turnover worldwide: US $8bn, 1997/1998
- ☞ Products: range of printers
- ☞ Sells via retail and resellers

COMMENDED ISP
PERSONAL COMPUTER WORLD
SERVICE & RELIABILITY SURVEY 1998

NetDirect

CHRIS ANDERSON, MANAGING DIRECTOR, NETDIRECT:

"Our core values have always been quality of service, reliability and value for money. The *PCW* survey is an endorsement of this.

However, we have a policy of continual improvement, which means we will be looking to better these results in future."

NetDirect offers services and packages – including rapid response to technical and customer queries, business users getting full specialist technical support for single and multiple user connections, and the Dial business user connection package.

Company CV:
- ☞ Based in Greenwich www.netdirect.net.uk
- ☞ Company founded in 1995
- ☞ 50 employees
- ☞ 12,000+ subscribers
- ☞ Expertise in TotalDial business user connection package. Multiple connection packages. TotalNet packages, and much more

LETTERS
Right to Reply

FROM CAROLYN WORTH, SPOKESPERSON, EVESHAM MICROS

As a thoroughly British company, it is satisfying to see that our customers have voted Evesham Micros as one of the top ten computer companies.

Evesham Micros has worked hard over the last 15 years to provide what our customers want. We have invested heavily in research and development to bring cutting-edge technology to the market, but we have never forgotten that reliability is crucial to the end-user. We were first to offer two years on-site warranty as standard and we intend to keep improving in all those vital areas.

We never forget that buying a computer does not mean the relationship with our customers stops when we deliver the goods. By providing free lifetime technical support as well as the warranty, we can make sure that an EveshamVale computer will give sterling service for many years to come. We look forward to being featured again next year.

FROM NICOLA KIRBY, PR MANAGER, COMPUSERVE

Our own member satisfaction surveys do not reflect the results of your survey, neither does the latest Keynote/BoardWatch Survey which recently voted CompuServe No. 1 for the fastest web-page download time — twice as fast as the industry average! The real measure of the quality of our service is reflected by members voting with their feet – UK membership has increased every month for the past seven years.

In addition to internet access, we provide a range of exclusive high-value products/services, targeted at improving the productivity of professional people. We offer a very different product to a very different target market.

We recognise that the internet doesn't always meet users' expectations, [but] we can assure *PCW* readers that CompuServe is fully committed to addressing these issues and matching the needs of our members.

FROM RICHARD WOODS, SENIOR SPOKESPERSON, U-NET UK

What is very pleasing about this survey, especially to a business-focused ISP such as U-net UK, is that the response on the ISP questions was more than half the total overall. That shows how increasingly important the internet is to the world of computing.

It is also gratifying that the reliability factors once again reflect where we have been putting the focus of our work in recent months. As the internet is moving into areas of "mission critical" business activities, the demand for a reliable, quality service becomes increasingly important. That can only be achieved by significant investment by the provider and close understanding of the needs of its customers.

FROM MAGGIE GALLANT, HEAD OF PR, AOL UK

AOL UK now has 450,000 members, making it the number one internet online service in the UK. The fact that we have achieved this in only 30 months since our launch, means that the public clearly recognises that we deliver the best possible online experience for the whole family.

AOL members demand more than straight internet access. They are buying ease of use, relevance of content, unique features such as Buddy Lists and Instant Messenger, and outstanding service support.

We are committed to offering value for money, and in response to our members, we introduced new pricing plans in 1997, which gives the choice of unlimited usage or a light-user plan.

AOL is also actively testing new technologies and delivery platforms designed to improve the online experience.

FROM DAVID CLARKE, MANAGING DIRECTOR, VIRGINNET

We are delighted, but not surprised, by these results, as they reinforce the feedback we get from our subscribers every day.

The quality of our content, combined with an extremely reliable connection and round-the-clock customer support, results in a value-for-money service that other ISPs find hard to compete with. This is one of the main reasons why consumers love VirginNet and, as the survey shows, around 40 percent would recommend us to their friends. I was particularly pleased with this result, as word of mouth has been a very important factor in our growth to date.

We plan to keep growing, and we have recently increased our transatlantic bandwidth by more than 50 percent, to ensure faster searching and surfing, and our European bandwidth has been expanded by some 400 percent.

New content launching this year will include a travel channel (which will launch in July), more news, concerts, recruitment, shopping, banking, chats and events.

FROM CHRIS BAKOLAS, TECHNICAL & MARKETING DIRECTOR, DAN TECHNOLOGY

Dan recognises the importance of value for money – but our customers don't want us to sacrifice quality on the altar of low prices. Sticking to our founding principle of "quality first" requires continuous investment in efficient sales, support and production systems; it means maintaining

RELIABILITY SURVEY feature

good relations with the best component suppliers; and it means ensuring that every Dan employee makes a positive contribution to our customers' buying experience.

None of this comes cheap, so no-one could accuse Dan of operating at the bargain-basement end of the market. That's why we're cock-a-hoop at coming out so well in *PCW*'s 1998 Service and Reliability survey. It's a fantastic tribute to the professionalism of our workforce. It's also great to know that our constant pursuit of excellence is something Dan customers continue to value.

FROM PAUL BURWOOD, LASERJET PRODUCT MANAGER, HEWLETT PACKARD

We are extremely pleased to see that HP LaserJets have come out on top in the independent *PCW* survey. We put great emphasis on developing our products to a high specification, and it's good to see this has paid dividends for the consumer.

We have been building a strong preference for our products by ensuring they are of high quality and are easy to use, across the board. The consumer recognises this, which is highlighted by both their repurchase rate and recommendations to friends.

As a company we always strive to improve our products, and this is a constant process. Where we meet only average scores, we will seek to improve those, so we can maintain and strengthen our leadership position in the laser printer market.

We're COCK-A-HOOP AT COMING OUT SO WELL IN *PCW*'S 1998 SURVEY It's a fantastic tribute to the professionalism of our work force (*Dan Technology*)

FROM ANLIN TING-MASON, GENERAL MANAGER, BT INTERNET

Over the two years since our creation, BT Internet has been a very popular and reliable service. At the beginning of this year, BT Internet experienced an unprecedented increase in demand for the service. To address this, we implemented an extensive investment programme to increase capacity and service levels for customers. This programme took place during the same period your research was being conducted and, unfortunately, led to our level of service reliability being below the high standards that we offer our customers. This upgrade is now complete and BT Internet is once again a reliable service.

We now have capacity for 350,000 customers and have simplified our registration process to make it an easy task for new customers to sign up. This, allied to the 90 extra helpline operators and the redesigning of our home page and guest page, underlines our continuing efforts to make the internet a reliable and enjoyable experience for all our customers.

FROM PAUL KINSLER, GENERAL MANAGER, MESH COMPUTERS

There was a time when we looked at such surveys with a feeling of trepidation; not because we were in any doubt about the focus with which we regard customer service, but because we are aware of the time it takes for change to make an impact with the bulk of users. It is, therefore, gratifying that our considerable investment in support systems and personnel has dispelled any negatives about Mesh. However, this only serves to encourage us to redouble our efforts to lead the way in customer service standards.

We were surprised that, in spite of winning 47 hardware and service awards in the past year, we did not score more highly on features or price/performance value! We look forward to next year's survey results with interest.

FROM MARTIN DAVIES, CUSTOMER SERVICES DIRECTOR IN TECHNICAL SUPPORT, DELL

Your own April edition features research that rates Dell best in pre and post sales support.

In summary, the survey indicates to us that while Dell is perceived as delivering a higher than average level of service, there is an opportunity for us to further enhance the level of service we deliver to the small business sector. From a sales viewpoint, we segment our business around specific customer groupings, such as small business, corporate, public sector etc. This focus lets us concentrate on the specific requirements of individual market segments and to deliver an enhanced customer experience. The service and support organisation is aligned to these business segments so that we can ensure that the needs of these customers are addressed.

Dell welcomes the feedback this survey brings to your readers.

FROM FLORENCE MARCASTEL, MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS COORDINATOR, ClaraNET

Since the company was formed, ClaraNET has been constantly looking at providing the best possible service to its customers, and we are delighted to find all our hard work has been rewarded through the *PCW* survey results.

We have recently made substantial investment in all areas of the business, as we understand the importance of providing an excellent service with a human touch. We were particularly pleased to be rated highly for value for money, as we pride ourselves in our ability to offer packages to meet both our customers' budgets and needs.

The majority of our customers come through a personal recommendation from friends or colleagues, so it is especially gratifying to find us rated so highly by our customer base.