Michael Hewitt wonders whether to stay with his P150 or chase after something fast and flashy.

High fidelity

My relationship with computers has become a bit like that of Tony Curtis with women. Although he's old enough to be a grandad, he nevertheless persists in marrying the youngest, most glamorous twenty-somethings. Similarly, though I'm getting rather prune-like myself and ought by now to be happily settled with a reliable, if aged, Pentium 150, I still feel a compulsion to flirt with the newest and flashiest PCs. I don't actually need anything with a 400MHz Celeron processor or a 32Gb hard disk, but if I don't get one I'll probably have to see my doctor about taking hormone shots. So, I'm in the market — again — for a new, highly-specced PC. But which make this time?

Choosing a PC is like choosing a new car. For everyone who says a specific model is marvellous, there's always someone else who'll tell you that it's a heap of garbage, regardless of apparent pedigree. 'Ferrari Testarossa? Piece of crap, mate. The wheels fall off if you do more than 50…' So IBM, Compaq, Time, Tiny, Gateway, Fujitsu, *et al* all have their proponents and

> For everyone who says that a specific model is marvellous, **THERE'S ALWAYS SOMEONE ELSE WHO'LL TELL YOU** that it's a heap of garbage, regardless of apparent pedigree

detractors. Which makes life rather difficult. So, apart of course from following the prevailing wisdom and buying as highly specced a machine as your budget allows, what should your purchasing criteria be?

Computer magazines try to help but they, too, can often muddy the waters. Not as badly as a few years ago, though, when they all felt it was *de rigeur* to take apart every test machine and probe its guts with a screwdriver. To my mind, that was rather like choosing your husband or wife on the basis of an examination of their tonsils.

Today, thankfully, they've largely dispensed with that approach in favour of performance comparison charts. But even performance charts don't provide a true picture. All they really do — unless of course something entertainingly dodgy turns up in the test labs — is to turn a good PC into a bad one. I mean, who in the real world genuinely cares if, say, one hard disk has an access time that's 20 milliseconds faster than another? Or that the beige case of one machine isn't as aesthetically pleasing as the puce of its rival?

The fact is, most PCs advertised in *PCW* won't turn up DOA and will perform to spec. Therefore, for me, the choice comes down to just two questions: (a) how long will it continue performing to spec?; and (b) how efficiently will the manufacturer deal with the situation if or when it doesn't?

These days, 99.99 percent of all PCs, of whatever make, will work straight out of the box and carry on doing so unto obsolescence. But Sod's Law says that I'm going to end up with the 0.01 percent that self-destructs on initial boot-up, or shortly thereafter. Consequently, my choice of machine has to be based primarily on what I know about the quality of the after-sales service.

Sadly, this isn't something that most computer magazines take into account when assessing a PC. Like the quality of the lifeboat on a liner, it's something that most people only really find out about for themselves when they actually need it.

You hear plenty of horror stories. For instance, there was a recent Radio 2 phone-in which highlighted the fact that many PC-deficient consumers simply could not get through to customer support departments. Either the number was permanently engaged, or they were held in a permanent, static queue. When contacted by the BBC, most manufacturers apologised profusely, claiming that being overwhelmed in this way was actually a symptom of their success and they would do better in future, honestly. But one — a very high-profile manufacturer — didn't even deign to comment.

Anyhow, I shall now ask around and assess. I will not buy from a manufacturer that requires me to ring a premium-rate number for support, nor from any company whose number is repeatedly engaged. I will not buy from someone who holds me in a queue for more than five minutes. And I will not buy from anyone whose idea of 24-hour on-site support is to send an engineer round who says 'Your machine's broken, mate,' and who then leaves me in limbo for two weeks until he can order the replacement part.

And, with all those conditions, it could well turn out that I won't buy at all. We'll see.

Mike.hewitt@mjh1.demon.co.uk