

Microsoft has little to fear from **Apple's iMac**, says Barry Fox. Its bark is worse than its bite.

Close, but no cigar



I have lost count of the number of times I have asked Apple UK and its PR people to keep me up to speed on new developments. I still only get press releases when I phone and nag for them. Apple's statement on Year 2000 issues

was downright dangerous in advising PC users to try resetting and see what happens. It can delete date-sensitive data, like wastebin and diary files. And all the time I get a steady stream of emails from self-styled Apple evangelists, whose neo-religious mission in life is to point out all that's wrong with Windows, Microsoft and Bill Gates. I only reply if the writer has the clout to improve Apple's communication.

Meanwhile, criticism continues to run off Microsoft like water off the proverbial duck [*Straight Talking passim*]. When David Weeks, Microsoft's Windows Marketing Manager, responded to my ongoing reminders that Anne Mitchard had failed to give her promised comments on how Microsoft had launched Windows 98 in such an unready state, a lot became clear. Weeks claimed to know nothing of the many articles or faxes I've written since and before Windows 98 was launched in June. Get your PR company to give you a pile and read them so we can talk sensibly, I said. I never heard back. It's not hard to see why Microsoft can behave in such a cavalier fashion. When I showed the Advertising Standards Authority how Microsoft's web site was still saying Windows 98 lets a PC play DVD movies discs, long after Dixons' PC World had withdrawn its misleading Microsoft-approved adverts, the ASA wrote me a letter which showed that they could not distinguish a printout of Microsoft's web site from a PC World store advert.

Initially the iMac launch looked as though it would give Microsoft pause for thought, by providing a low-cost, sexily packaged and easy-to-use PC. Like early Amstrad PCs, the iMac integrates the screen and electronics into a single casing, which connects by cable to a keyboard and mouse, all made of translucent, coloured plastic. This gives the unit a toyish look. But the price is certainly not toyish; at £999, the iMac is on a par with a high-spec Pentium PC. There is no floppy-disk drive, just a very flimsy CD-ROM drive. The mouse

and keyboard have a budget feel. There are no serial or parallel ports, only USB (Universal Serial Bus). So most existing printers and other peripherals will not plug in. I phoned Apple to ask about peripherals. After a grand display of ducking and diving I learned that only Epson and Hewlett-Packard will be making USB printers, and a smart cable that connects existing serial/parallel peripherals to a USB port. Imation (formerly 3M) will be making an add-on floppy-disk drive. Nick Graves, Apple's European Marketing Consumables Manager, kept telling me the prices and availability were nothing to do with Apple. But these peripherals are essential only because Apple has failed to provide conventional ports.

The clear message is that anyone seriously wanting to be an iMac customer should insist on a full working package; not have to buy the iMac and then have to hunt for matching peripherals. There are no expansion slots, but the RAM is upgradeable to 128Mb. Nick Graves says he has "not a clue" how much additional RAM will cost. Graves also told me that the iMac is assembled in Cork; but the pre-production unit I saw a day or so before the launch was labelled Korean.

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It was also very slow to start up, taking 90 seconds from switch-on. This, says Graves, may be because pre-release versions had some BIOS software on the hard disk, rather than in ROM.

Apple reckons the floppy disk is dead. So do a lot of the Apple evangelists. I doubt it. Lack of a floppy drive makes it more awkward to transport data: the user must rely on the built-in modem to send files via the internet. The floppy is the VHS of computing: outdated, but still the best method for carrying text files, especially now that virus scares have stopped many of us daring to open email attachments. A final thought: much has been made of the iMac's easy access to the internet. What allows this? iMac comes bundled with Microsoft's Internet Explorer.

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