



They're keen for your cash, but do **PC suppliers** deliver the goods?

## Stealth shopping

**So you're about to buy a PC.** What are your greatest worries? That the machine may not perform as well as you had hoped? That poor design and choice of components will result in a system which cannot be upgraded? These are certainly valid technical concerns, and ones which we address in every review and group test within *PCW*. However, there are other pressing issues which you may feel other magazines are neglecting — namely, customer relations. We've all dealt with companies which are inexplicably offhand, or even downright unhelpful, when you call to place an order. Then there are those which are eager for your business but not interested in following through with care or support once your cheque has been cashed.

**How can a magazine test** a company on these essential matters? How can an independent lab be sure they're being sent the same equipment under the

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same conditions as a genuine customer, and not some tweaked system delivered personally by the managing director? I'll tell you how: by going undercover and posing as real buyers.

**PCW secretly bought** PCs from ten direct mail-order

companies. They had no idea where their systems were going. We called them twice: to ask for advice on system configurations and to see whether they would try to sell us equipment we didn't want, and then to check whether they had remembered our call from the day before. Once the machine arrived, we tested it in our VNU Labs to see how it performed. Then we were back on the phone with an identical set of problems for each of the technical support lines to solve. Were they friendly? Were they helpful? Could the staff answer our problems? For all the answers, as well as the facts about buying a PC direct, turn to page 160.

**We've also put together** the ultimate guide to communications. Everyone wants to stay in touch with email and, of course, use the web. But what system should you choose? We've put every means of electronic communication we could find under the spotlight and advised whether your home or small business would be better off with an analogue modem, ISDN (be it BT's HomeHighway or otherwise), a high-bandwidth leased line, some kind of wireless or satellite system, or perhaps a forthcoming cable solution.

**Hardware's no good without** software to back it up, so we've also looked at packages for email, remote access, faxing, internet telephony. We've even examined how you can go about marketing and selling on your own web site. Everything you need to know about communications starts on page 208.

**With everyone talking** about the latest feature-complete beta of NT5 and the actual final release of NetWare 5, we thought it was time to pitch the two head-to-head, to see whether it's worth waiting up to a year for Microsoft or to plump for Novell right now. I suppose it depends on where you want to go today.

Gordon Laing, Editor