

As product **specifications spiral skywards**, isn't it time to admit that **second-best is, actually, best?**

## Playing the numbers game



Modern consumerism is a wonderful thing. We're inundated with miraculous inventions to make our lives easier and new versions of existing technology equipped with extra features.

The consumer marketplace has become so cut-throat that companies know they have to convince customers to buy from them by offering something the competition doesn't have. Consequently, we as consumers will always veer towards a product that offers more, even if we won't use the extra features.

My watch is waterproof to a depth of 200m, but I can honestly say I will never take advantage of that fact, since the thought of being 200m below sea level is not a pleasant one to me. The average car will do well over 100mph, but the chances of ever taking advantage of this are pretty slim, too. Add to that the fact that many of us dream of owning a car that can do in excess of 200mph and the situation seems all the more ridiculous.

This desire for over-specified products is prevalent in all areas: mobile phones, VCRs, televisions and computers. Unfortunately, the computer industry seems to suffer from the worst case of over-specification and, more unfortunately, consumers amplify the issue.

**Almost everything in the PC world** is a numbers game, with the higher the number supposedly indicative of a better product. The first serious case of spiralling number syndrome reared its head a few years ago in the shape of the CD-ROM. It got to a stage where faster CD-ROM drives seemed to appear every couple of weeks and, as a result, PC consumers wanted the latest, fastest drive in their PC. Even today, the ever-increasing CD-ROM speed hasn't stopped, with 70-speed drives around the corner. Admittedly, the original single and double-speed CD-ROMs were painfully slow and had problems streaming video, but once performance went above 20-speed the situation got a bit silly. Also, the fast drives can suffer from excessive vibration caused by imperfectly pressed discs, and if you are only accessing a small amount of data from a disc you have to wait until the drive has 'spun up' before you can get what you want. Now DVD-ROM drives seem to be going the same way, with 10-speed drives fast

becoming the norm. With a maximum transfer rate of 13.5Mbytes/sec we shouldn't ever need a DVD-ROM drive faster than 10-speed, but I'm sure that in a few months 10-speed drives will seem decidedly archaic.

Of course, the real numbers game in the PC world is in the processor market, and AMD and Intel are in a fierce battle to produce the fastest. Recently at CeBIT, AMD showed off an engineering sample of a 1,200MHz CPU. Obviously, production parts won't be available for some time, but it goes to show where the ever-increasing CPU speeds are heading. Even so, we've now got Intel with 800MHz production parts and AMD with 850MHz units, with both chips offering the kind of performance the average user is unlikely to make full use of. That said, no-one wants a machine that's going to struggle with the next generation of applications or operating systems.

**What you should be looking for** is a happy medium that suits your present needs as well as your future expectations, but without paying through the nose for it. The key to this is to avoid being taken in by the hype telling you that you have to buy the latest

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technology to keep up with the times. If you are looking for a car, you can often find great bargains when a new model is released, as the dealers sell off the remaining stock of the old model and the same situation exists with PCs. Once a new, faster CPU becomes available, the price of the previous generation of processor will drop dramatically, while the gap between the latest chip and one two generations back will be even more significant. What makes the previous generation chips look even more attractive is that even though the price differential with the new one will be substantial, the performance difference is likely to be minimal.

So, before you rush out and buy the fastest PC you can get, see how much you can save by dropping the specification a little. Of course, if you still think the latest fastest chip is the only option, remember that there'll probably be a new fastest chip next month.

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